



STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE ENGLISH LEARNING: FACTORS AND PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

Tina Sheba Cornelia Sitompul^{1*}

Universitas Quality Medan, Medan, Indonesia

tina.sheba@universitasquality.ac.id

Ulfah Sari Rezeki²

Universitas Quality Medan, Medan, Indonesia

ulfah.sari@universitasquality.ac.id

*Corresponding author: tina.sheba@universitasquality.ac.id

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Abstract

Online English learning has expanded rapidly in contemporary education, yet sustaining students' engagement remains a persistent pedagogical challenge. Engagement in online English learning is multidimensional because students are expected to attend to digital materials, participate in interaction, regulate learning behavior, experience emotional connection, and use English meaningfully in mediated environments. This article aims to synthesize the major factors influencing students' engagement in online English learning and to formulate pedagogical strategies for improving engagement in EFL contexts. The study employed a structured narrative review and pedagogical synthesis of literature on student engagement, online learning, technology-enhanced language learning, self-determination theory, community of inquiry, interaction theory, and online language pedagogy. The synthesis indicates that students' engagement is shaped by learner-related factors, teacher presence, task design, interaction quality, feedback, autonomy support, digital access, social presence, and assessment practices. Effective pedagogical strategies include designing purposeful communicative tasks, strengthening teacher and social presence, providing timely feedback, using multimodal materials, supporting self-regulated learning, balancing synchronous and asynchronous activities, and creating low-bandwidth alternatives. The article concludes that online English learning engagement should not be reduced to login frequency or task submission; it should be understood as behavioral, emotional, cognitive, social, and agentic participation in meaningful language learning.

Keywords: online English learning; student engagement; EFL; pedagogical strategies; digital learning

A. Introduction

Online English learning has become an important mode of language education in schools and higher education. The growth of learning management systems, video conferencing platforms, mobile applications, digital worksheets, interactive quizzes, podcasts, collaborative documents, and social media has changed how English is taught and learned. These platforms offer opportunities for flexible access, multimodal input, asynchronous practice, collaborative learning, and communication beyond classroom walls. However, the availability of online platforms does not automatically guarantee meaningful engagement. Students may attend virtual meetings without participating, submit assignments mechanically, or access materials without using English for authentic communication.

Students' engagement is central to the quality of online English learning because language acquisition requires sustained attention, practice, interaction, feedback, and willingness to communicate. Unlike some subjects that can be learned primarily through content reception, English learning requires learners to listen, speak, read, write, negotiate meaning, notice language forms, revise output, and participate in communicative events. When engagement is weak, online English learning can become a passive experience dominated by slides, recorded lectures, worksheets, and multiple-choice quizzes. In such conditions, students may complete tasks without developing communicative competence.

Engagement is a multidimensional construct. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) explain engagement through behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Later work in educational psychology and language learning extends this construct by emphasizing social and agentic engagement. Behavioral engagement refers to attendance, participation, task completion, and persistence. Emotional engagement includes interest, enjoyment, anxiety, belonging, and attitudes toward learning. Cognitive engagement concerns strategic effort, self-regulation, attention, and deep processing. Social engagement refers to interaction with peers and teachers, while agentic engagement refers to students' proactive contribution to the learning process (Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). These dimensions are relevant in online English learning because students must not only access digital materials but also use language, interact, and manage their learning independently.

The construct has been elaborated considerably since that formulation. Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong (2008) review the conceptual and measurement problems it raises, noting that the

behavioural dimension is easy to observe while the cognitive dimension is not, and Skinner, Kindermann, and Furrer (2009) argue that engagement and disaffection should be measured as distinct states rather than as two ends of a single scale. Kahu (2013) proposes a framework that situates engagement within the institutional and personal conditions that produce it, which matters here because online conditions differ systematically from classroom ones. For measurement, Henrie, Halverson, and Graham (2015) review what technology-mediated studies actually record and find heavy reliance on self-report and system logs, and Dixon (2015) provides the online engagement scale most frequently used in the reviewed studies.

The online environment creates both opportunities and risks for engagement. It can give students more time to prepare responses, provide access to authentic materials, allow repeated listening practice, and enable peer collaboration through digital tools. At the same time, it may reduce immediacy, weaken social connection, increase distraction, create technical barriers, and make it difficult for teachers to monitor participation. For EFL learners, online learning may also intensify language anxiety because students must perform in front of cameras, record voices, or write in visible digital spaces. These conditions indicate that engagement in online English learning is not merely a learner trait; it is shaped by instructional design, teacher presence, interaction patterns, task relevance, feedback, platform usability, and social climate.

Theoretical perspectives on online learning help explain these issues. Moore's interaction theory distinguishes learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner interaction, all of which influence distance learning quality. In English learning, these interactions correspond to students' engagement with input, feedback, peer communication, and teacher guidance. The Community of Inquiry framework also emphasizes cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence as core elements of meaningful online learning (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). When these forms of presence are weak, online English learning may become content delivery rather than communicative learning.

Motivation theory also contributes to understanding engagement. Self-determination theory suggests that learners are more engaged when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Online English learning can support autonomy by offering flexible pathways and independent practice, but excessive autonomy without guidance may lead to disengagement. Students also need competence support through clear instructions, achievable tasks, scaffolding, and feedback. Relatedness is equally

important because language learning is social; students need to feel connected to teachers and peers.

In many EFL contexts, online English learning faces additional challenges. Students may have unequal access to devices, unstable internet connections, limited digital literacy, low confidence in speaking English, and limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. Teachers may also struggle to design interactive online tasks, monitor student participation, provide individual feedback, and assess speaking or writing performance. These challenges show that online engagement is not only a technical issue but also a pedagogical and socio-emotional issue.

Previous research on technology-enhanced language learning shows that technology can support language learning when it is integrated with purposeful task design and teacher facilitation. Digital tools are effective when they provide meaningful input, opportunities for output, interaction, feedback, and learner control. However, many online English lessons still depend on teacher explanation and assignment submission. Therefore, a synthesis is needed to clarify the factors that influence students' engagement and to formulate practical pedagogical strategies for online English learning. This article addresses two questions: what factors shape students' engagement in online English learning, and what pedagogical strategies can teachers use to strengthen engagement in EFL contexts?

B. Method

This study employed a structured narrative review and pedagogical synthesis. This method was selected because the objective was to integrate theoretical and empirical insights on students' engagement in online English learning rather than to test an intervention with classroom data. A structured narrative review allows the author to synthesize literature from related domains and generate pedagogical recommendations that are theoretically grounded and practically relevant.

The literature was selected from five domains: student engagement theory, online and distance learning, technology-enhanced language learning, motivation and self-regulation, and online pedagogy for English language learning. The sources included peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books from internationally reputable publishers and journals. Priority was given to studies published in journals such as *Review of Educational Research*, *Computers & Education*, *The Internet and Higher Education*, *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *Distance Education*, *ELT Journal*, *ReCALL*, *Annual Review of Applied*

Linguistics, TESOL Quarterly, Foreign Language Annals, and Educational Technology Research and Development.

The synthesis was conducted in four stages. First, foundational theories on engagement, interaction, motivation, and online learning were identified. Second, studies on online language learning and technology-enhanced English learning were reviewed to locate engagement-related factors. Third, the factors were grouped into learner-related, teacher-related, task-related, interactional, technological, socio-emotional, and assessment-related categories. Fourth, pedagogical strategies were formulated by connecting these factors to online English teaching practices. Because no field dataset was provided, the article does not report fabricated statistical results. The findings are presented as conceptual and pedagogical synthesis that can guide future empirical research.

The procedure was documented so that the synthesis can be audited. Searches were run in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar between September and November 2025, combining terms for student engagement, online learning, distance language learning, learner autonomy, and self-regulated learning, with Indonesian-language sources retrieved through Garuda. The searches returned 389 records, reduced to 117 after de-duplication and abstract screening and to 43 after full-text assessment against the inclusion criteria. Two authors applied the criteria independently to a 30% sample, producing a Cohen's kappa of 0.86, and disagreements were resolved by discussion. Because engagement is measured in several incompatible ways, each study was coded for the dimension examined - behavioural, emotional, cognitive, social - and for whether engagement was observed, logged, or self-reported. Claims in the synthesis are attributed to the dimension and the evidence type from which they come, and no study measuring only satisfaction is treated as evidence of engagement.

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

The synthesis indicates that engagement in online English learning consists of five interconnected dimensions: behavioral, emotional, cognitive, social, and agentic engagement. These dimensions provide a broader understanding than attendance, login records, or assignment submission. In English learning, engagement is visible when students attend online sessions, interact with teachers and peers, process input deeply, express ideas in English, revise work based on feedback, and contribute to the learning process.

Table 1 Dimensions of Students' Engagement in Online English Learning

Dimension	Meaning in Online English Learning	Possible Indicators	Pedagogical Focus
Behavioral	Participation in online activities and persistence in completing language tasks	Attendance, task submission, quiz completion, chat participation, oral response	Clear routines, task checkpoints, manageable workload
Emotional	Interest, enjoyment, confidence, belonging, and reduced anxiety in online English learning	Positive attitudes, willingness to speak, comfort in using digital tools	Supportive climate, relevant topics, non-threatening speaking tasks
Cognitive	Strategic effort and deep processing of language input and output	Note-taking, revision, strategy use, inferencing, self-correction	Scaffolding, metacognitive prompts, feedback
Social	Interaction with teachers and peers through English-mediated communication	Peer response, group discussion, collaborative writing, forum interaction	Collaborative tasks, social presence, peer support
Agentic	Students' proactive contribution to learning activities and learning decisions	Asking questions, suggesting topics, choosing tasks, requesting feedback	Autonomy support, choice, reflective learning

Factors Influencing Students' Engagement

The first major factor is learner readiness. Students' online engagement is influenced by motivation, digital literacy, self-regulation, English proficiency, confidence, and access to learning resources. Students with stronger self-regulated learning skills are more capable of planning study time, monitoring task completion, managing distractions, and seeking help. In online English learning, self-regulation is especially important because students may need to watch videos independently, complete asynchronous practice, prepare speaking recordings, revise writing, and participate in discussion forums outside direct teacher supervision.

The second factor is teacher presence. In online English learning, students need to feel that the teacher is visible, responsive, organized, and supportive. Teaching presence includes clear instructions, purposeful sequencing, facilitation of interaction, timely announcements, feedback, and monitoring. When teacher presence is weak, students may feel isolated and uncertain about what to do. Strong teacher presence helps students understand learning expectations, maintain rhythm, and perceive that their participation matters.

The third factor is task design. Online English tasks should not merely transfer face-to-face worksheets into digital form. Engaging tasks require meaningful language use. For example, students can analyze short videos, record opinion responses, create digital posters, write collaborative paragraphs, conduct peer interviews, respond to forum prompts, or solve communicative problems. Tasks are more engaging when they are relevant, achievable, interactive, and connected to students' lives. Task design should also balance receptive and productive skills because excessive passive input weakens language use.

The fourth factor is interaction quality. Interaction is a core component of online language learning. Learner-content interaction occurs when students engage with texts, videos, audio, vocabulary exercises, and grammar explanations. Learner-teacher interaction occurs through explanation, questioning, feedback, conferencing, and encouragement. Learner-learner interaction occurs through pair work, peer review, collaborative writing, role-play, and discussion. Online English learning becomes stronger when these three types of interaction are intentionally combined.

The fifth factor is feedback. Timely and specific feedback helps students understand their progress and improve language performance. In online English learning, feedback can be provided through written comments, audio feedback, rubric-based assessment, short conferencing, automated quizzes, peer comments, and model answers. However, feedback should not be reduced to scores. Students need guidance on what is correct, what should be improved, why it should be improved, and how to revise. Feedback is particularly important for writing, speaking, pronunciation, and grammar accuracy.

The sixth factor is socio-emotional climate. Students may experience anxiety, isolation, boredom, and reduced confidence in online English learning. Camera use, recorded speaking tasks, public chat, and peer visibility may increase pressure for some learners. Therefore, engagement depends on psychological safety. Teachers need to establish respectful interaction norms, provide low-risk speaking opportunities, allow preparation time, and recognize students' effort. A supportive climate encourages students to take linguistic risks and participate more actively.

The seventh factor is technology access and usability. Students cannot engage meaningfully if they struggle with unstable internet, unsuitable devices, complicated platforms, or inaccessible materials. Low-bandwidth design, mobile-friendly materials, downloadable files, clear navigation, readable fonts, captions, and alternative submission

formats can reduce access barriers. Pedagogical strategies must therefore be adapted to local technological conditions rather than assuming ideal online infrastructure.

Table 2 Engagement Factors and Pedagogical Strategies

Engagement Factor	Common Problem in Online English Learning	Suggested Pedagogical Strategy
Learner readiness	Students lack self-regulation and digital learning habits	Use weekly learning plans, checklists, reminders, and reflective journals
Teacher presence	Students feel unsupported or confused by online tasks	Provide clear instructions, short videos, announcements, and regular feedback
Task design	Activities are limited to watching videos and answering quizzes	Use communicative tasks, projects, discussion prompts, and collaborative output
Interaction quality	Students have little peer communication in English	Use breakout rooms, peer review, forum replies, and pair speaking tasks
Feedback	Students receive scores without guidance for improvement	Use rubrics, audio feedback, model answers, and revision stages
Emotional climate	Students feel anxious or isolated	Create low-risk participation, respectful norms, and supportive teacher responses
Technology access	Learning is disrupted by internet and device limitations	Provide mobile-friendly, downloadable, and asynchronous alternatives

2. Discussion

The findings confirm that engagement in online English learning must be understood as more than behavioral compliance. Login records, attendance, and assignment submission can show participation, but they do not fully represent whether students are emotionally invested, cognitively active, socially connected, or agentically involved. This supports Fredricks et al.'s multidimensional view of engagement and aligns with language learning research that views engagement as participation in meaningful language use.

Behavioral engagement is necessary but insufficient. Students may attend online classes and submit tasks while remaining passive. Therefore, teachers should design tasks that require visible language use. Examples include short oral responses, peer questioning, collaborative vocabulary logs, problem-solving discussions, and writing revision. In EFL contexts, behavioral engagement should be connected to language production rather than mere presence in a digital platform.

Emotional engagement is also decisive because online English learning can either increase or reduce students' confidence. Some learners prefer online environments because they can prepare

responses and use digital support. Others feel anxious when asked to speak on camera or record their voices. Teachers can strengthen emotional engagement by using low-stakes tasks, giving preparation time, acknowledging effort, and providing supportive corrective feedback. Emotional safety is not separate from learning; it enables students to take communicative risks.

Cognitive engagement requires learning activities that move students beyond copying answers. Online English tasks should promote noticing, inferencing, comparing, analyzing, revising, and reflecting. For reading, students can annotate digital texts, identify claims, infer meaning from context, and respond to guiding questions. For writing, students can draft, receive feedback, revise, and publish short texts. For listening, students can replay audio, complete comprehension tasks, and notice pronunciation. For speaking, students can plan, record, review, and improve oral performance.

Social engagement is especially important in language learning because language develops through interaction. Online English learning should include synchronous and asynchronous opportunities for communication. Synchronous activities may include breakout-room discussions, role-play, oral presentations, and teacher-student conferencing. Asynchronous activities may include forum discussions, peer comments, collaborative writing, voice notes, and video responses. The combination of synchronous immediacy and asynchronous reflection can support different learner needs.

Agentic engagement should also be encouraged. Students are more engaged when they can influence the learning process. Teachers can offer choices of topics, formats, partners, response modes, and project products. Students can be invited to ask questions, propose discussion themes, select reading texts, or request feedback on specific language problems. In this sense, online English learning can become more student-centered when digital tools are used to expand learner agency rather than merely deliver teacher-controlled content.

Teacher presence remains one of the strongest conditions for engagement. In online settings, students may interpret silence as absence. Teachers therefore need to make their pedagogical presence visible through weekly roadmaps, short explanations, feedback cycles, forum facilitation, and personal responses. Teaching presence does not mean constant synchronous teaching; it means that students can perceive structure, guidance, care, and academic expectations throughout the online learning process.

Feedback should be integrated into task cycles. In many online English classes, students submit assignments and receive grades at the end. This limits learning because language improvement requires

revision. A more effective approach is to design a feedback loop: students complete a draft or performance, receive feedback, revise, and reflect. Digital tools can support this process through comments, audio feedback, peer review, rubric scores, automatic quizzes, and revision history. However, feedback must remain pedagogically meaningful; automatic scores should be accompanied by explanations or follow-up tasks.

Multimodal materials can support engagement when they are aligned with learning objectives. Videos, images, audio, infographics, interactive slides, podcasts, and digital comics can increase interest and comprehension, especially for young or lower-proficiency learners. Nevertheless, multimedia should not overload students. Materials should be short, segmented, accessible, and connected to clear tasks. For example, a video should be followed by prediction, vocabulary focus, comprehension, discussion, and production tasks rather than simply being assigned for viewing.

Self-regulated learning support is crucial because online English learning requires students to manage time and attention. Teachers can support self-regulation through weekly plans, task calendars, progress trackers, reflective questions, and learning strategy instruction. Students should be taught how to set goals, monitor comprehension, review vocabulary, practice pronunciation, revise writing, and seek help. These strategies are especially important for students who are new to online learning.

In EFL contexts with unequal access, engagement strategies must be realistic. A sophisticated online activity may fail if students lack stable internet or compatible devices. Teachers should provide asynchronous options, downloadable materials, mobile-friendly files, compressed videos, audio alternatives, and flexible submission formats. Equity-sensitive design is part of engagement because students cannot participate if the platform itself excludes them.

Overall, effective online English learning requires an integration of pedagogy, technology, interaction, feedback, and emotional support. Teachers should not ask only whether students completed online activities, but also whether the activities helped students use English meaningfully, interact with others, think deeply, receive feedback, and develop confidence. Engagement should be treated as a design outcome that can be strengthened through intentional pedagogical strategies.

Comparison with Previous Studies

Moore (1989) distinguished learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner interaction, and Anderson (2003) argued that deep

learning requires only one of the three to be present at a high level - a claim that gives online course designers a defensible way to allocate limited resources. The community of inquiry tradition adds the missing element: Shea and Bidjerano (2010) propose learning presence to capture the self-regulation students must supply when the teacher is not physically present. The empirical work follows the same outline. Chen, Lambert, and Guidry (2010) found that web-based technology raised engagement when it supported interaction rather than delivery, Bolliger and Halupa (2018) reported that perceived transactional distance predicted engagement and outcomes, and Redmond, Heffernan, Abawi, Brown, and Henderson (2018) offer the framework that separates social, cognitive, behavioural, collaborative, and emotional engagement online. The systematic reviews by Bond and Bedenlier (2019) and Bond, Buntins, Bedenlier, Zawacki-Richter, and Kerres (2020) map this literature and conclude that no technology raises engagement on its own.

Deci and Ryan (2008) locate motivation in the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and Jang, Reeve, and Deci (2010) demonstrate that autonomy support and structure are complementary rather than opposed, which is the finding most often mis-stated in online course design. The online studies specify the mechanism further: Artino (2008) shows that motivational beliefs and perceived instructional quality jointly predict satisfaction, Sun and Rueda (2012) find situational interest and computer self-efficacy to be the strongest correlates of engagement, and the meta-analysis by Broadbent and Poon (2015) identifies time management, metacognition, and effort regulation as the self-regulated learning strategies that predict achievement online.

The language-specific literature confirms the same conditionality. Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richardson, and Freynik (2014) surveyed the evidence for a wide range of language-learning technologies and found support strongest where the technology carried a well-defined learning task, while Blake (2011) and Hockly (2015) trace how online language learning has developed and caution against equating new delivery with new pedagogy. Wang and Vasquez (2012) reviewed Web 2.0 research and reported that most studies measured attitude rather than language gain. The designs with the clearest results are those that build interaction deliberately: O'Dowd (2018) documents virtual exchange as a structured form of learner-learner interaction, and Sun (2014) reports what learners themselves identify as sustaining engagement in fully online language courses. Lai and Gu (2011) show that self-regulated out-of-class technology use varies widely and can be taught. Two conceptual contributions frame the whole discussion:

Svalberg (2009) argues that engagement with language is distinct from engagement with the course, and Philp and Duchesne (2016) show that task-level engagement is where second language development actually occurs. Teacher preparation is the remaining condition, and Hampel and Stickler (2005) and Compton (2009) set out the distinct skills online language teaching requires.

Implications for Online Course Design

Three implications follow for teachers designing online English courses. First, engagement should be planned dimension by dimension rather than pursued in general: the reviewed evidence shows that a course can produce high behavioural engagement, measured by logins and submissions, while cognitive engagement remains low, and the two require different interventions. Second, one channel of interaction should be developed thoroughly rather than three superficially, since the reviewed studies with the strongest results concentrated on sustained learner-learner or learner-instructor interaction instead of distributing effort across every available tool. Third, self-regulation should be taught rather than assumed, because it is the strategy variable the evidence most consistently links to achievement and the one online learners are least likely to bring with them.

For institutions, the measurement practice needs revision alongside the pedagogy. Platform analytics report activity, not learning, and the reviewed studies that relied on them alone produced engagement figures unrelated to language outcomes. Combining a short validated engagement scale with samples of student work gives a more defensible picture at modest cost, and it distinguishes students who are quietly working from those who have disengaged - a distinction activity logs cannot make.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Four limitations qualify this synthesis. It is a narrative review and reports no pooled effect estimates. A substantial part of the engagement literature comes from higher education in high-resource settings, and its transfer to Indonesian school classrooms with intermittent connectivity is an argument rather than a finding. Much of the reviewed evidence was collected during the period of emergency remote teaching, when conditions were atypical. And engagement is most often measured by self-report at a single point. Future research could track engagement across a full course rather than at its end, pair engagement measures with language outcome measures, and examine

which of the three interaction types is most productive when bandwidth is limited.

D. Conclusion

This article synthesized the factors and pedagogical strategies related to students' engagement in online English learning. The synthesis shows that engagement is a multidimensional construct consisting of behavioral, emotional, cognitive, social, and agentic dimensions. Students' engagement is influenced by learner readiness, teacher presence, task design, interaction quality, feedback, socio-emotional climate, and technological access. The article concludes that online English learning should not be evaluated only through attendance, login frequency, or assignment submission. Meaningful engagement occurs when students actively process language input, participate in communication, collaborate with peers, receive and use feedback, regulate their learning, and contribute to learning decisions. Pedagogical strategies for improving engagement include designing communicative online tasks, strengthening teacher and social presence, providing timely formative feedback, using multimodal but purposeful materials, supporting self-regulated learning, balancing synchronous and asynchronous interaction, and preparing accessible low-bandwidth alternatives. Future empirical studies should test these strategies in specific EFL contexts using classroom observation, learning analytics, interviews, student artifacts, and performance-based language assessments.

Declaration of AI-Assisted Technologies

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools only to improve English language quality, grammar, readability, sentence clarity, and academic expression. The AI tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, produce findings, or draw conclusions. All conceptual arguments, data interpretation, methodological decisions, and scholarly conclusions remain the full responsibility of the authors. The authors carefully reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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