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STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN TEST PREPARATION COURSES: A CASE STUDY OF AN ENGLISH CENTER IN VIETNAM

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Abstract

Numerous studies emphasize the impact of student engagement on academic performance within formal English educational settings. However, student engagement in informal education, such as English-language centers, remains underexplored. This study examines factors influencing student engagement and their impact on student learning experiences in test preparation courses. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Fredricks et al.'s (2004) three-dimensional model of student engagement. The findings highlight three key factors: (1) institutional policies and student care staff; (2) peers and personal characteristics; and (3) teaching methods, communication skills, and classroom management. In particular, institutions have the most effect on behavioral engagement, mainly through tuition benefits and mock test activities. Teachers primarily foster emotional engagement, which then enhances both behavioral and cognitive engagement. In this setting, cognitive engagement is best supported by the 3T approach (testing, teaching, and testing), as students prefer a structured learning process focusing solely on test-related content.

Keywords: Informal English education, student engagement, test preparation course, TOEIC listening and reading.

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SỰ THAM KẾT CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC TRONG CÁC KHÓA LUYỆN THI: NGHIÊN CỨU TRƯỜNG HỢP TẠI MỘT TRUNG TÂM ANH NGỮ Ở VIỆT NAM

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Tóm tắt

Nhiều nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh ảnh hưởng của sự gắn kết người học với kết quả học tập trong việc dạy tiếng Anh trong nhà trường. Dù vậy, sự gắn kết người học trong giáo dục ngoài nhà trường vẫn chưa được nghiên cứu nhiều. Do đó, nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến sự gắn kết của sinh viên và phân tích cách những yếu tố đó tác động đến trải nghiệm học tập trong các khóa luyện thi. Dữ liệu được thu thập qua phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc và phân tích theo mô hình ba chiều về sự gắn kết người học của Fredricks và cộng sự (2004). Kết quả nhấn mạnh ba yếu tố chính: (1) chính sách khóa học và đội ngũ chăm sóc sinh viên; (2) bạn cùng học và đặc điểm cá nhân; và (3) phương pháp giảng dạy, kỹ năng giao tiếp và quản lý lớp học. Cơ sở đào tạo có ảnh hưởng lớn nhất đến sự gắn kết hành vi, đặc biệt thông qua chính sách học phí và các kỳ thi thử. Giảng viên chủ yếu thúc đẩy sự gắn kết cảm xúc, từ đó nâng cao cả sự gắn kết hành vi và nhận thức. Đặc biệt, sự gắn kết nhận thức được hỗ trợ tốt nhất bởi cách tiếp cận 3T (thi – dạy – thi), vì sinh viên ưa chuộng việc học tập trung vào các nội dung liên quan đến kỳ thi.

Từ khóa: Dạy học tiếng Anh ngoài nhà trường, khóa luyện thi, sự gắn kết người học, TOEIC Nghe và Đọc.

1. Introduction

As Vietnam becomes more involved with the global community, effective communication in English has become increasingly vital. This is especially important in areas such as tourism, trade, and education, where good English skills are essential for international interaction and achieving high-quality results. Therefore, improving English proficiency among Vietnamese university students is now a priority (Van, 2013). Therefore, the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has mandated universities to ensure that their students meet the English exit standards outlined in the 2017-2025 English Education Policy before graduation (Nguyen & Gu, 2020).

Even though MOET does not mandate a particular exam, numerous universities encourage students to submit results from international standardized tests to meet the requirement (Nguyen, 2015). According to MOET officials, the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) has been selected over other international standardized tests (Nguyen, 2015), due to its effectiveness in assessing workplace language skills, its relative ease compared to IELTS and TOEFL, and its affordability.

However, taking the test places considerable pressure on students because most enroll in universities with low levels of English proficiency and universities often do not provide sufficient training to meet English graduation standards (Nhan, 2013), requiring students to exert much effort in self-study. In fact, since students find self-preparation for English-standardized tests challenging, most of them prefer to enroll in test preparation courses (Dang et al., 2024). As a result, an essential focus of these courses is to help students achieve their target scores, with student engagement being a crucial factor in attaining this goal.

Numerous studies have indicated a strong relationship between student engagement levels and academic performance (see, e.g., Delfino, 2019; Gunuc, 2014; Karabiyik, 2019; Öz & Boyacı, 2021). Although student engagement has received attention, limited research has addressed it in the informal English education context. Therefore, this research aims to explore student engagement in this context, focusing on the key influences identified by students and the role of teachers in promoting student engagement in TOEIC test preparation courses in an English center in Vietnam.

(1) Which factors do students perceive as influencing their engagement in TOEIC Listening and Reading preparation courses?

(2) In what ways do these factors shape the level and nature of student engagement?

2. Theoretical overview, research history and hypothesis development

2.1. English language education in Vietnam

English education in Vietnam primarily takes place in two forms: formal and informal. Formal education encompasses general education (K-12) and tertiary education, while informal education involves organizations that provide services tailored to learners' needs.

2.1.1. English in formal education

According to Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (2018), the general education system comprises three levels with 12 grades: primary (grades 1-5), lower secondary (grades 6-9), and upper secondary (grades 10-12). English is considered a mandatory foreign language from grades 3 to 12; however, it can be introduced as early as grade 1, depending on the students' needs and the current school situation. The MOET aims to help students achieve English proficiency at the B1 level under the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), acquire a vocabulary of 2,500 words, and develop an understanding of

English-American culture. However, the results did not align with these expectations because English teaching and learning still focus on reading comprehension and grammar over communication goals (Nguyen, 2017), the lack of qualified teachers, crowded classes, lack of appropriate teaching resources, and focus on passing exams rather than practical communication skills (Van Van, 2010).

At the tertiary level, English is considered both a compulsory subject and a major. The former indicates that English accounts for approximately 10% of the total credit in non-English majors, while the latter means that students can pursue a bachelor's degree related to the English language to become teachers, translators, interpreters, or employees in multinational companies after graduating from high school (Van Van, 2010). English education at this level encounters challenges similar to those within the general education system. This implies that teachers still use traditional methods in large classes, lack access to modern resources, face Confucian cultural influences, and manage diverse levels of student English proficiency (Hien & Loan, 2018). Furthermore, the emphasis on test performance over proficiency leads to a gap between classroom learning and real-world application, compounded by teachers having limited exposure to authentic English usage, hindering their ability to prepare their students adequately .

2.1.2. English in informal education

English education in Vietnam has grown rapidly, especially in the informal sector, with many private organizations opening English centers (Van Van, 2010). These centers offer various courses, including general English, business communication, and test preparation for exams like IELTS, TOEIC, and PTE. Recognizing their role, MOET (2017) encouraged private institutions to work alongside the formal education system through the national project “Implementing the Teaching and Learning of Foreign Languages in the National Education System 2017-2025” to improve English proficiency in Vietnam.

According to Dang et al. (2024), many students choose English centers for test preparation because they provide structured courses, experienced instructors, and targeted strategies for achieving high scores. Unlike self-study or formal education, these centers focus specifically on exam techniques, offering practice tests, personalized feedback, and intensive training. Additionally, their flexible schedules and fast-track programs allow students to prepare efficiently within a short period (Phuong, 2022).

English language centers provide important benefits. They offer flexible learning options, help students achieve required test scores, and create an English-speaking environment (Lan & Vu, 2024) . However, these centers face several challenges. As noted by Truong (2021), teaching quality varies, as some institutions focus more on profits than education. High tuition fees can make courses unaffordable to many students. In addition, a strong emphasis on test preparation often leads to memorization rather than practical language use. Despite their growing influence, research on the impact of English centers remains limited. More studies are needed to assess its effectiveness beyond test results and explore ways to enhance its contribution to English education in Vietnam.

2.2. Student engagement

2.2.1. A review of student engagement

Student engagement has been defined in various ways. According to Newmann (1992), “student engagement in academic work” refers to the psychological investment and effort made by a student to study, understand, or master the knowledge, skills, or craft that academic work aims to foster. “Student engagement” may be understood as the extent to which learners actively participate in classroom learning activities (Wellborn, 1992), or “the extent to which

students are engaging in activities that higher education research has shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes” (Krause & Coates, 2008, p. 493).

Student engagement is essential in language education, which has attracted significant attention from researchers and practitioners. Research on this topic has evolved in three phases: initial investigations, the emergence of psychological perspectives, and the impact of technological advancements. From the 1960s to the 1980s, studies explored factors influencing student engagement, such as teacher presentation (Brophy et al., 1983), classroom management (McGarity Jr & Butts, 1984), and corrective feedback (Wilczenski et al., 1987). In the 1990s and 2000s, educational psychology introduced a three-dimensional model of engagement – behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks et al., 2004) – which became the foundation for later research (see, e.g., Alvarez & Frey, 2012; Gunuc & Kuzu, 2015; Kahu, 2013). Since the mid-2000s, technological advancements have reshaped student engagement, with studies examining how digital tools and online learning influence motivation, collaboration, and participation (Chen et al., 2010; Dumford & Miller, 2018; Salhab & Daher, 2023). This ongoing research reflects the dynamic nature of student engagement and its growing connection to technological innovations in education.

In the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), research has explored both positive and negative influences on student engagement. On the negative side, Mekki et al. (2022) found that second-year EFL learners disengaged due to a lack of relevance in the real world, low enjoyment, and age-related factors. In online classrooms, unstable internet connections and limited access to devices were major obstacles (Phuc, 2022). Furthermore, anxiety and fear of making mistakes discouraged active participation (Susanti, 2020). On the positive side, teachers play a vital role in enhancing engagement. Zhang and Yang (2021) found that enthusiastic teachers inspired students, while Wang et al. (2022) reported that constructive feedback fostered a supportive learning environment. In the preparation of language tests, participation research remains scarce. Pearson (2022) found that IELTS students valued feedback, but often felt frustrated when they did not understand its purpose. Similarly, Saeli and Cheng (2021) noted that peer content feedback encouraged engagement, while grammar feedback did not. In Vietnam, most studies focus on public education (see, e.g., Huong, 2022; Ngo, 2021), leaving engagement outside formal institutions underexplored.

2.2.2. Theoretical framework for student engagement

The three-dimensional model of student engagement, proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004), is widely employed in research (see, e.g., Carter et al., 2012; Lei et al., 2018; Sinatra et al., 2015; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012) due to its structured approach in organizing and analyzing data, guiding research, and ensuring consistency in findings. The model defines student engagement through three dimensions: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement, as shown in Figure 1.

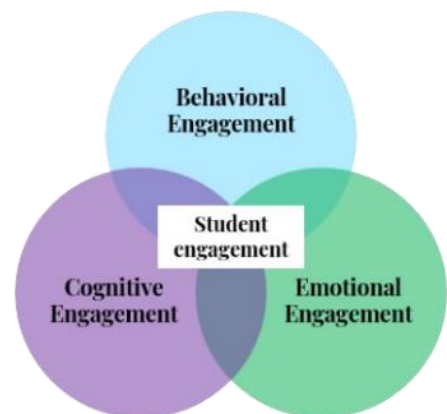


Figure 1. The three-dimension model of student engagement

Fredricks et al., 2004, p.62-65.

According to Groccia (2018), behavioral engagement refers to the observable actions and behaviors of students in the learning process, which involve active and consistent participation in academic activities. Moving forward, emotional engagement involves the affective reactions and feelings that students express in their learning experiences, which are closely related to motivation and the emotional aspects of learning. Lastly, cognitive engagement focuses on the mental effort and investment that students put into their learning, which involves the intellectual aspects of learning and links with previous experiences.

Fredricks et al. (2004, p. 62) exemplified behavioral engagement through positive conduct, such as following classroom rules and norms, not skipping classes, or getting into trouble. For example, students who are present and arrive on time demonstrate a willingness to engage in the learning experience fully. Active participation in class discussions, asking questions, and responding to teachers also demonstrate behavioral engagement. Furthermore, participating in extracurricular activities, such as athletic activities, is another form of behavioral engagement.

Regarding emotional engagement (*ibid*), it involves affective reactions and a feeling of belonging. The first element includes various emotions, such as interest, boredom, and sadness, that students experience in the classroom. This aspect requires measuring student reactions to the school environment and their interactions with teachers. The second component involves a sense of belonging and recognition of achievement in school-related outcomes, fostering a strong emotional connection that promotes a positive learning environment.

The last dimension is cognitive engagement, which includes two main aspects: learning investment and self-regulation (*ibid*). The former refers to the preference for challenges and the desire to go beyond the classroom requirement, while the latter indicates learning strategies to organize, track and assess their cognition when performing tasks. For example, students use various learning techniques such as rehearsal, summarizing, and elaboration to remember, organize, and comprehend material.

3. Data and research methods

3.1. Research locale and participants

3.1.1. Learning settings

The Ocean English Center (pseudonym) in Thu Duc City, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, is well known for its TOEIC listening and reading preparation courses, attracting students from nearby universities. Each 14-week course runs three times a week with a fixed schedule to ensure consistency, as one instructor leads each class, monitors progress, and provides support. The curriculum, developed by TOEIC Division teachers, focuses on essential vocabulary, grammar, and test strategies. To help students prepare effectively, mock tests are held every two weeks under real exam conditions, allowing teachers to assess progress and offer guidance. Classes take place in a traditional setting with a blackboard, structured seating, and speakers for listening practice.

3.1.2. Participants

Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling to ensure that they met specific criteria relevant to the study, as shown in Table 1. First, participants completed TOEIC listening and reading preparation courses at the Ocean English Center. Second, they have an intermediate English level, as determined by the results of the actual TOEIC listening and reading test. Third, participants had no prior experience with English test preparation courses.

The number of participants was considered to ensure sufficient data for meaningful analysis, resulting in the recruitment of six participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021c).

Table 1. Participant profile overview

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Major	Proficiency level
Alexander	Male	21	Information Technology	B2 (850)
Amelia	Female	21	Industrial Management	B1 (715)
Aurelia	Female	21	International Business	B1 (700)
Emma	Female	20	Industrial Management	B1 (700)
Iris	Female	22	Business English	B1 (550)
Isabella	Female	20	International Business	B1 (580)

3.2. Data collection and analysis

3.2.1. Data collection

This study collected data through semi-structured interviews using two sets of open-ended questions. The first set, comprising seven questions, aims to gather information on the participants' English learning background, their perspectives on the TOEIC listening and reading preparation courses, and their reasons for choosing the center. The second set, consisting of eight questions, is formulated on the three-dimension model of student engagement by Fredricks et al. (2004). It includes two general questions to determine the overall experience of the participants and six questions to explore factors identified by the students and the role of teachers in fostering engagement in the classroom.

The data collection process was designed to ensure accuracy, completeness, and data saturation. First, participants received an email explaining the purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their rights, which included informed consent. They also had the opportunity to ask questions before the interviews. Second, each interview lasted 60 minutes to achieve data saturation and was conducted in Vietnamese via Skype, which minimized language barriers and created a comfortable setting for participants to share detailed responses. All interviews were recorded on video to ensure accuracy. Finally, the researcher transcribed 360 minutes of recorded data and anonymized the transcripts to protect the participants' identities.

3.2.2. Data analysis

Thematic analysis effectively identifies recurring themes in interviews and aligns with the three dimensions of student engagement, in which predefined categories focus on key themes while allowing subthemes to emerge for deeper analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). The process involved six steps: reading transcripts, coding patterns, grouping themes, reviewing and refining them, defining names, and reporting findings with data extracts (Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Institutional factors

4.1.1. Institutional policies

The center's policies were established based on students' concerns about learning benefits that would primarily impact behavioral engagement. According to six informants, students who missed more than five sessions without a valid reason or prior notice might not be guaranteed to achieve the expected results and are not eligible for a free retake. The center

also offered two main activities: mock exams and a TOEIC competition. The mock exam, held once every two weeks, helps students practice for the actual test and is attended by most students. In contrast, the TOEIC competition, held twice a year, offers rewards such as an official exam fee or cash prizes, and mainly attracts students who enjoy competitions.

Six participants agreed that the policies on attendance and extracurricular activities had some influence on their behavior. They considered the attendance policy before leaving class and did the same with mock tests, as they felt these policies affected their learning. However, the actual impact remained unclear. Some students skipped class without informing the center of their personal reasons, such as attending a farewell party, which were valid to them but not recognized by the center. One participant (Emma) noted that:

“Yeah, there were times I skipped class to attend a colleague’s farewell party at my part-time job, and I didn’t bother explaining why. I knew the center wouldn’t accept my reason as valid, so I just skipped a class without notifying them.”

In addition, not all students were interested in the benefits of restudying the course without paying tuition fees again; many aimed to succeed in their initial attempt. For example, Aurelia stated that:

“I was willing to skip a class, if necessary, like when my work schedule changed unexpectedly. How could I have known in advance? I didn’t want to retake the course because it felt like a waste of time and was not aligned with my goals.”

These policies and activities helped students stay consistent initially, but their impact decreased over time as students began to prioritize personal needs over attending classes.

4.1.2. Student care staff

Among the institutional factors that influence student engagement, the student care staff played a key role in fostering emotional engagement by offering support throughout the course. All six participants reported positive experiences, highlighting that in sensitive situations where they felt uncomfortable asking for help from teachers or peers, they instead turned to student care staff. One participant (Amelia) shared in the interview:

“When things get a bit touchy and I cannot just bring them up with the teacher, I am more comfortable or not judged to go to the student care staff for advice”

According to two interesting cases, student care staff should regulate their energy when supporting students. Amelia, an introvert, preferred to sit in silence, but at times the staff greeted her with excessive enthusiasm, such as *“HELLO, AMELIA!”*, drawing attention and making her uncomfortable. This led her to avoid similar interactions in the future. On the contrary, Alexander felt disappointed with his first student care staff, who seemed indifferent and focused only on completing tasks rather than offering meaningful support. These experiences highlight the importance of adjusting interactions to meet the needs of students. Alexander expressed his disappointment, stating that:

“She only called me sometimes and told me that I had missed more than the allowed number of sessions, that I would not be supported to restudy. To be honest, I don’t really care about that benefit, but the way she did it, you know, it’s not that nice.”

All participants agreed that student care staff provided support to make them feel less lost, ignored, or unmotivated. However, they also noted that the main purpose of this support was to encourage regular attendance, which is a key institutional factor.

4.1.3. Other institutional factors

In addition to policies and student support, travel distance and university schedule conflicts also negatively affected behavioral engagement by reducing attendance and participation. As reported by the six participants, while distance was not usually a problem, factors such as heavy rain, traffic jams, or late classes made commutes difficult, especially during rush hour in Ho Chi Minh City. Poor drainage often caused flooding, making it unsafe to travel on a scooter. These challenges, along with travel distance, affected punctuality and attendance when conditions were bad. In addition, university schedules and assignments were another issue, as students prioritized them over test preparation courses. If a university lecture lasted longer than planned, students were more likely to miss or arrive late to class, believing that university studies were more important for their future. One participant (Aurelia) reported that:

“...if my teacher [the university teacher] lectures longer than expected, I just have to sit there, listen, and then head to the center to study. Well, I find it weird to stand up and leave when my teacher [the university teacher] isn't finished.”

4.2. Student-related factors

4.2.1. Peers

Students with university friends experience stronger behavioral and emotional engagement early on. Of the six participants, five enrolled alone, while Alexander joined university friends. This difference was most evident at the beginning of the course. Those with friends reminded each other to be punctual and attend regularly, while those without relied on self-management strategies such as setting attendance goals or prioritizing academics. As the course progressed, friends could also influence inconsistent attendance. If one lost motivation and skipped class, others might follow. In group discussions, students who had friends felt more comfortable, which increased their emotional engagement and confidence in sharing opinions. In contrast, those who enrolled alone initially hesitated to participate, feeling uneasy about drawing attention from unfamiliar classmates.

For students who enroll alone, desk neighbors, whom they get to know during the course, play a key role in emotional engagement as they gradually build connections during the course. While students felt more comfortable participating in discussions when attending with friends as these friendships fostered a sense of belonging, those who joined alone lacked this initial support. However, as the course progressed, five participants who enrolled alone recognized the need to form new friendships, especially in a small-size class setting, highlighting the role of emotional engagement. At this stage, having a supportive desk neighbor became essential, as frequent interactions helped them feel less isolated and more connected. It was shown that in the case of Iris, she said that:

“When I went to class the first time, I was arranged to sit next to a girl. That girl was very funny, she was crazy like me, I really like her and we really enjoy gossiping.”

Desk neighbors also contributed significantly to cognitive engagement, especially when students encounter difficult questions. They were encouraged to solve problems independently using prior knowledge, but if unsuccessful, they turn to their desk neighbor for support. Since desk neighbors often share a similar way of thinking, their explanations are sometimes easier to understand than those of teachers. However, students only seek help from desk neighbors who have the same or a higher level of proficiency.

The participants noted that peers have a clear positive or negative influence. If a university friend is responsible, students tend to adopt good study habits, but if not, they can

develop bad habits. Similarly, a compatible desk neighbor makes learning more enjoyable, while an incompatible one can make studying difficult.

4.2.2. Personal characteristics

In addition to peer influence, individual personalities also had an impact on emotional engagement, as personal traits determined how quickly or slowly one overcame the initial sense of unfamiliarity. In fact, extroverts tended to overcome the feeling more quickly than introverts. Two participants, Amelia and Emma, who identified themselves as more introverted, mentioned that it took them approximately two weeks, or about six lessons, to feel completely at ease in the classroom. However, Iris, a more extroverted individual, only required a few lessons during the first week to feel like a part of the class.

When considering the influence of students on cognitive engagement, it was derived from the individual learning method. Although the participants had different learning strategies, they agreed that students could benefit from not using phones in class unless the teacher specifically asked them to look up new words. Additionally, actively listening and taking notes could also help students focus better during the lesson. Additionally, students had to actively engage in raising their hands to answer questions, as this practice not only improved focus but also helped teachers assess the level of student comprehension.

“If I sit and listen to a lecture, I’m not sure what I grasp and what the teacher intends to do might not align. So, to ensure this, just raise my hand to speak up. If it’s correct, that’s great, but if not, the teacher will help me get it right.” (Emma)

4.3. Teachers

4.3.1. From emotional engagement to behavioral and cognitive Engagement

Teachers had the most significant impact on emotional engagement, which formed the basis for behavioral and cognitive engagement. To create a positive classroom atmosphere, several effective strategies were identified. One key approach was to incorporate games to make lessons more engaging and effective. Given the repetitive nature of test preparation, where students primarily answered exam-like questions, the class environment often felt monotonous. To counteract this, students preferred interactive and fun activities to maintain interest and reduce boredom. Since the students wanted to achieve their target scores, Emma suggested that the games should focus on vocabulary related to TOEIC listening and reading. Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of using both verbal and nonverbal positive reinforcement to motivate students. When they correctly answered or asked insightful questions, teachers offered praise, such as “*Good job*” or “*Excellent*,” and sometimes small rewards, like applause or stickers. These gestures made the students feel recognized, boosted their motivation, and encouraged continued effort. Furthermore, a participant (Alexander) mentioned the importance of humor, stating:

“Sometimes, it’s enjoyable to see my teacher play jokes. Honestly, my teacher is not good at telling jokes, but when he does try his best to be funny, I find it amusing. It makes me feel really comfortable and relaxed when my teacher does that.”

To strengthen the sense of belonging among students, participants found group work effective, as it encouraged discussion, fostered friendships, and created a supportive learning environment. They also emphasized the importance of teachers addressing students by name rather than using generic terms such as “*you*” or “*the boy in black*”, as this made students feel recognized. Most importantly, the six interviewees emphasized the importance of casual conversations as a key communication skill, as these interactions made students feel heard and

helped build a stronger connection with their teachers. One participant (Isabella) referred to casual conversations as “a therapy session” saying that:

“I enjoy those moments when I confide in my teacher; I feel heard. You know, it’s like you’re in a therapy session ... I don’t know how to express it to you but it’s really comforting, like being home.”

Although casual conversations helped create a sense of belonging, the students noted some limitations that teachers should consider. Since many of the instructors were young and had limited life experience, their discussions sometimes lacked depth. As a result, they carefully selected topics with which they felt comfortable. Furthermore, while these interactions fostered a supportive atmosphere, maintaining authority was essential to ensure students respected boundaries and followed classroom expectations.

4.3.2. Behavioral engagement: moving from emotion to action

When teachers use praise, rewards, group work, and casual conversations to foster a sense of belonging, they not only enhance emotional engagement but also influence behavior. Participants noted that these strategies reduced absenteeism, improved homework completion, and encouraged class participation by making students feel included. At the beginning of the course, teachers and institutions established clear rules for punctuality, attendance, and mock tests to ensure that students adhered to expectations. However, students acknowledged that these rules became less effective after the first half of the course, as those determined to skip class or tests prioritized their own needs over teacher expectations.

“Most students need to reach their target scores, so we often take mock tests. Of course, my teacher is really serious about it and keeps reminding my class when to take the mock tests, but you know, it’s only “fake” mandatory.” (Iris)

To maintain consistent classroom rules, Iris and Aurelia suggested that teachers use gentle reminders and a positive reward system, such as awarding points for punctuality or giving small stickers for regular attendance, rather than scolding or imposing strict punishments. This approach encouraged a more positive learning environment, motivating students to attend classes willingly rather than simply avoiding penalties.

Furthermore, five out of six participants attended the class alone, as mentioned previously, so they found active participation in class discussions challenging due to feeling timid and uncomfortable at the beginning of the course. Therefore, teachers should organize group work instead of placing students on the spot by forcing them to answer questions. One student (Iris) offered the following explanation:

“Working in groups makes me feel more confident because I have prepared in advance and discussed with my friends, making my answers more certain.”

When students worked in groups, as Isabella suggested, teachers moved around the classroom to provide support to students as needed. In case a student appeared unable to answer a question even after group work, the teacher provided hints or selected a confident student who was likely to answer correctly to respond first, serving as an example for others.

4.3.3. Cognitive engagement: A progression from emotional engagement

For cognitive engagement, the use of humor, simple examples, and gamified vocabulary by teachers not only created a positive learning experience but also improved knowledge retention. Alexander, Iris, and Isabella emphasized that gamification and humor, which positively influenced emotional engagement, also played a key role in cognitive engagement. By making lessons more engaging and relatable, these strategies helped students better

understand the connections between topics and real life, ultimately improving their ability to retain information over time.

Regarding cognitive engagement, the students highlighted two key points: they primarily need relevant knowledge for the test and prefer the 3T method (testing, teaching, testing) in test preparation courses. This preference was shared by the six participants, with only Aurelia and Isabella occasionally seeking additional information related to their interests or internships.

“... yeah, I remember that I did my internship at that time in an HR Department. I sometimes had to deal with HR terms, so if my teacher mentioned it in the class, I also found more information on it, but you know, it happens once in a while.”

However, since the main goal was to acquire essential vocabulary, grammar, and test-taking skills, students expect their teachers to stay on track with the course content, focusing on essential vocabulary, grammar, and test-taking strategies rather than encouraging exploration beyond the test requirements.

The 3T method was particularly favored because it effectively helps students achieve their target scores in the TOEIC reading and listening test. This approach involves three steps: First, students attempt a task independently to identify gaps in their understanding. The teachers then explain missing knowledge, emphasizing essential vocabulary, grammar, and test strategies. Finally, the students apply what they have learned by completing another task. This method promotes active learning, enhances problem-solving skills, and allows students to correct mistakes. By practicing without assistance, students gain confidence and become better prepared for the actual test. Aurelia reinforced this point, emphasizing that without general strategies for similar questions, it would be challenging to solve them independently during the test, where no external help was available.

“If my teacher just provides the explanation for a specific question without general procedures, it’s difficult for me to solve similar questions independently when taking actual tests in the future. No one helps me in the testing room, you know.” (Aurelia)

5. Conclusion and policy implications

In conclusion, student engagement in English test preparation courses is shaped by three key factors: the institution, students, and teachers. Although these factors are present in most language education settings, their impact in test preparation courses differs in specific ways. In particular, institutional factors, such as tuition policies and extracurricular activities, have a direct impact on behavioral engagement, including attendance, punctuality, and participation in extracurricular activities. Meanwhile, student personal traits and peer interactions influence all aspects of engagement. Similarly, teachers have a significant impact on engagement across these areas, with the most decisive influence on emotional engagement, which in turn supports both behavioral and cognitive engagement. For cognitive engagement, students expect teachers to focus only on test-related content and use the 3T method (testing, teaching, testing).

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