

# Analyzing learner emotional engagement in game activities in EFL lessons

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes learner emotional engagement in EFL lessons in state primary schools in a province in Vietnam. Nine teachers and nine grade 5 classes took part in the study. Data were collected from classroom observations and were examined to find how students emotionally engaged in game activities. The finding showed that students' emotional engagement in game activities was not high in term of positive interdependence and group accountability.

**Keywords:** Learner engagement, emotional engagement, positive interdependence, group accountability.

## 1. Introduction

In 2018, a primary English language curriculum together with the new national general education curriculum (MOET, 2018) was issued in Vietnam. The goal of the curriculum is to improve young learners' communicative competencies. The 2018 curriculum states that interactive and meaningful contexts should be created for language use. In addition, the curriculum requires students to become less dependent on teachers, and to be cooperatively active and creative in learning. It also highlights the importance of learner participation in learning.

The quality of a learner's participation in classroom activities can be measured through an analysis on learner engagement (Reschly, Pohl, & Christenson, 2020). The analysis can improve an understanding on how students join in the lessons, and on whether they are active and creative in learning as requested in the 2018 general national curriculum. Learner engagement is a multifaceted construct which has three main dimensions such as cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and behavioral engagement (Fisher et al., 2018). They have a strong effect on one another. Due to the length limitation, only emotional engagement is presented in this paper.

## 2. Learner emotional engagement

### 2.1. Emotional engagement

Emotional engagement refers to how students feel when take parts in activities such as a sense of belongingness in the classroom and an interest, curiosity or enthusiasm on specific topics or activities. Emotional engagement can expressed though a feeling of *positive interdependence* and

*group accountability* (Frey, Fisher, & Everlove, 2009; Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, & Johnson, 2005). *Positive interdependence* is a feeling that their individual success depends on the success of all members in the group; that is, group members must work as a team toward a shared goal and be truly cooperative, not in competition with each other. *Low interdependence* shows that members do not need to cooperate and take loose responsibility because they do not cooperatively work toward the group's outcome. *High positive interdependence* shows that members need to cooperate to complete the task. *Group accountability* refers to the feeling of being responsible for the success of the group and that group success depends on all members' contributions. *Weak group accountability* shows little commitment to each other's learning and *strong accountability* indicates strong commitment for high-quality work in which members promote each other's success, helping and supporting each other's effort to learn, and building the feeling of competence.

### 2.2. Method and participants

The research was a qualitative study to examine learner engagement in game activities. Data were collected from classroom observations and teacher and student interviews. This article just presents the results of classroom observations. Nine teachers (each taught two lessons) and nine grade 5 classes, in eight state primary schools in a province in the South of Vietnam, participated in the study in the academic year of 2021-2022. *Tieng Anh* for Grade 5 (Hoang et al., 2015), volume 1, was used in teaching and learning English in the participated

primary schools. In this study, 18 speaking lessons were observed.

### 2.3. Results and Discussion

Each lesson, from observations, always started with a game and games were mostly found after teaching vocabulary and after teaching a new grammatical structure. Most of the games were vocabulary games such as matching (the students were asked to match pictures with the correct English words or match English words with Vietnamese words) and slap the board (the teachers wrote some English/Vietnamese words on the board and asked the students to listen and touch the words). Some structured games were employed such as lucky matching parts of sentences and lucky numbers (the teacher showed some covered pictures with numbers on the board, two students in a team chose a number, the teachers uncovered the picture, these two students used the structures learned in previous lessons to ask and answer about the picture; if they accidentally chose a lucky number, they got a score without doing anything).

The following game description was from Unit 6 lesson 1 and the focus was on the language “How many lessons do you have today? I have ...”.

The teacher divided the class into two groups, A and B. The teacher stuck some pictures of book covers with words on school subjects in English: Art, English, Science, IT, music, PE, Maths. The students were asked to read the English words. Then Vietnamese and word cards with the same school subjects in Vietnamese were stuck on the board. The students were asked to do the matching of English words and Vietnamese words. Four volunteers from each group did the matching (each, in turn, marched one subject and its meaning with four subjects on the board as fast as they liked in a relay running race). The faster group that won the game received two flowers, and the other received one flower.

The following game was from Unit 8 Lesson 1, after practicing the structures: What are you reading? I am reading \_\_\_\_\_, a Musical Ball game was played.

The class was divided the class into two groups and each group was given a small soft ball. The teacher played a song and the students, in turn, moved the balls from one student to another. When the teacher stopped the music, the two students who were holding the ball had to stand up and one student asked: What are you reading? The other student

answered: I am reading \_\_\_\_\_. For each correct answer, each group would get a score; then the scores were added up to find the winning team.

The following game was Review lesson 1, part 2 and the focus was on the language items learned from Unit 1 to Unit 5.

The students were asked to play a matching game: matching the questions with their correct answers to review the target structures. (This is Activity 6 in the *Tieng Anh* textbook). First, they were asked to do the matching individually. Then the class was divided into two large groups. Volunteers of each group wrote their answers on the board (each group gained a star for good work).

The games, to some extent, could engage the students; however, how much they emotionally engaged is a concern. As in most games, the whole class was divided into two teams; each consisting of more than 12 students. To ensure being in the winning team, good students volunteered to join the game. Some teachers chose the players, but the weaker students felt reluctant to take part in the game because they were afraid of being blamed for the team's loss. It is clear that there was no “commitment for high-quality work in which members promote each other's success, helping and supporting each other's effort to learn, and building the feeling of competence” as mentioned in 2.1. In other words, little commitment to each other's learning, so only weak group accountability is found.

In most of the games, the students did not have a chance to discuss with their friends or worked together for the group's product. Furthermore, good students wanted to perform to gain points for the group and weak students became less confident as they were afraid of being blamed for losing the group's points. I saw some happy students when they were in the winning groups and also some disappointed faces in the losing teams. Some students felt they lost face as they were blamed for the group's failure, which increased their fear of making a mistake and being laughed at. It is apparent that there was no cooperation in their own team. The students did not need to cooperate and take loose responsibility because they did not cooperatively work toward the group's outcome. The group's points were primarily based on the students' memory, not from the real groupwork and cooperation. Therefore, the students' feeling in game activities is determined as low interdependence.

Using uncooperative games against how young learners learn (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990). Instead, cooperation is better for young learners' language development: "Avoid rewards and prizes. Other forms of encouragement are much more effective .... Make room for shared experiences – they are an invaluable source of language work and create an atmosphere of involvement and togetherness. Most of us enjoy the feeling of belonging and this is particularly true of young children" (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 6).

Games added excitement but little communicativeness and meaningfulness were found in these activities; therefore, the atmosphere of the classroom appeared to be enjoyable but opportunities for cooperation and learning seemed to be limited. There were rare opportunities for the feeling of belongings in the games. They were employed mainly just to check the students' memorization of the meanings of words or structures whereas games should create contexts where learners cooperatively engage in the use of the target language for interaction in the classroom.

Many educators have argued that games have a great educational value. Most language games make learners use the language instead of thinking about learning the correct forms and games should help the teacher to create learning contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful (Wright, Betteridge & Buckby, 2006). Games provide children with classroom experiences in which students cooperate to construct knowledge in an atmosphere of involvement and togetherness. These constructive interactions help transform superficial into deep engagement with language, making learning more constructive and active, which is more appropriate for young learners (Cameron, 2001). The observed games seemed not to reflect this. The competition, winning and losing, of these games mainly made the students concerned rather than the language use. Therefore, it is necessary to find a different way of designing games so that they could facilitate the development of language acquisition.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study analyzed how primary school learners in nine classes emotionally took part in game activities. The finding presents that emotional engagement were found in the students' learning process in the classroom but no very high

commitment in the group work were found. This is due to no real cooperation in group work activities in the lessons. As a result, the students' indicators of emotional engagement were identified as low positive interdependence and weak group accountability. As referred earlier, emotional engagement is just one of the three main dimensions of learner engagement but they are mutually affected. To improve learning, given tasks should provide genuine social interaction and cooperation to improve young's learners high positive interdependence and strong group accountability.

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