



AN EXPLORATION OF STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to explore students' behavioral engagement in the classroom and the factors that affect it. This research was approached using an explorative descriptive qualitative study., involving teachers and students in two classes at the first grade of a senior high school in Langsa, Indonesia. The classes were taught by two English teachers, and 57 students were involved. The instruments used in this research were observations, questionnaires and focus group discussions with teachers and students. The results of this study indicate that most students paid serious attention to the lesson, put their best effort to focus on the teaching and learning process, and complete assignments. In addition, the students were active in asking questions, giving opinions, and participating in group discussion. The results of this study also show that the most dominant factor in influencing students 'engagement was the teachers' support factor, followed by class structure and school level factors. Therefore, it is suggested that English teachers and school provide best support to students, and they establish good class structure in terms of class size and situation to improve students' engagement.

Keywords: *EFL classrooms, learning process, student behavior, student engagement*

INTRODUCTION

The classroom environment is a situation where the learning process occurs and the teacher and students are the main characters of

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the process (Gherasim et al., 2011). Teachers have a very important role in guiding, motivating, directing and building character as well as student knowledge so that they become individuals who are useful to others and have good abilities. And also vice versa students are expected to be able to understand and apply the knowledge that has been given by the teacher in the classroom. According to Gherasim et al. (2011) The classroom environment can affect student motivation and learning goals so that it affects student learning performance and achievement or what is commonly called a goal orientation. Goal orientation is largely determined by how the structure of a class is composed. The classroom structure designed by the school and the teacher plays an important role in actively involving students in the learning process. Therefore schools and teachers are very important stakeholders and are the main figures in increasing student engagement in the learning process.

Interaction is something that really needs to be done in the classroom between teachers and students. The interaction between teachers and students largely determines a positive classroom environment and a negative classroom environment. When teachers and students have good interactions, a good or conducive classroom environment will also be created. A conducive classroom environment will make the learning process interesting and teachers and students will feel satisfied and will lead to effective learning (Abdullah et al., 2012). In the English Foreign Language (EFL) class, teachers experience various problems teaching English. From the results of research conducted by Setiawan et al. (2019), many students have difficulty in learning English vocabulary, so these students are reluctant to be active in learning English. Many of the students do not understand what the teacher says when learning English. So as a result, students cannot meet the objectives of teaching English because of the lack of engagement that these students have in the teaching and learning process. Lim (2003) conducted research in the EFL classroom and stated that most of the students studied were silent and waiting for the material to be delivered by the teacher.

Zepke and Leach (2010) explain that student engagement in the learning process is a matter of how a good classroom atmosphere or learning atmosphere is created by involving the participation of students in the active learning process. Fredricks et al. (2004) also define student engagement as the active participation of students in obeying regulations, being serious in doing something, concentrating, trying and paying attention in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, cooperation between teachers and students is needed in terms of creating a positive classroom atmosphere. Taylor and Parson (2011) explained that in the teaching and learning process, deep togetherness is needed to increase student engagement. Teachers and also schools in designing the learning process must actually see the needs of students. Students in the learning process, especially in the EFL class, may want to play an active role, but because the learning design provided by the school and also the teacher does not involve students to take an active role in the learning process (Anita & Susilawati, 2018). The involvement of students in learning is very crucial that must be fully paid attention to by schools and teachers. In addition, research on engagement in an EFL classroom in Indonesian context is rare. Therefore, the present study is aimed at exploring the engagement in learning English and its affecting factors among students at a secondary school. The results of this study are expected to provide a comprehensive insight into learning process in an Indonesian EFL classroom in terms of students' engagement and factors affecting it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Engagement

Fredricks et al. (2004) define student engagement as the active participation of students in obeying rules, eagerly doing something, concentrating, trying and paying attention in the teaching and learning process. Newmann et al. (1992) explain the definition of student engagement as a psychological investment and effort given by students to the learning process, whether students understand the knowledge being taught and also the results of the learning process in the form of works and which is the purpose of academic activities.

Handelsman et al. (2005) stated that overall student engagement can be seen from four factors. The four factors are performance engagement, emotional engagement, skill engagement and participation engagement. Fredricks et al. (2004) divides student engagement into three dimensions, namely behavioral engagement which is participation or involvement, emotional engagement includes reactions given by students to schools, teachers and friends then cognitive engagement is an effort given to understand and master difficult material.

Student engagement is crucial in an EFL classroom because student engagement shows the level of focus, attention, effort, persistence, emotion and commitment that students have in the learning

process (Skinner & Blemont, 1993). Reyes et al. (2012) explained that when students have high student engagement in the learning process, they will exert all their efforts to understand the material and be actively involved in learning activities and will also show interest in learning. In learning, student engagement can determine how good student learning is and can also be a reference for effective learning (Guthrie & Anderson, 1999).

Dimensions of Student Engagement

Fredricks et al. (2004) in their literature study divides student engagement into three dimensions, i.e. behavioral engegament, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. Behavioral engagement is defined as participation provided by students in learning, student involvement in academic activities, social activities and also student participation in extracurricular activities (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioral engagement is divided into three parts by Conner (2016), i.e. positive behavior, involvement in learning activities, and involvement in school activities. Furthermore, emotional engagement is a reaction that students give to schools, teachers and their friends, and it includes feelings of pleasure and satisfaction in academic activities (Fredricks et al., 2004). Finally, cognitive engagement is an effort given by students psychologically towards an academic aspect that tends to be difficult so that students try hard to produce complex understandings of material that are difficult to understand and also master it (Conner, 2016). This dimension combines the willingness and attention that is exerted by students in order to understand academic material which tends to be difficult.

Factors Affecting Student Engagement

There are some factors which influence students' engagement. According to Zepke and Leach (2010), the first factor is student motivation because, according to Deci and Ryan (2000), it has a very clear relationship to student competence. The second factor is student and teacher interaction. The interaction between teachers and students is the most important factor in increasing student engagement to achieve good performance (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Therefore, teachers must prepare learning well, be interesting, fun and can be understood by students to increase student involvement in learning (Russell & Slater, 2011). In addition, interaction among students is also a factor which influences student engagement. Zepke and Leach (2010) state that active and collaborative learning can provide an increase in student engagement because students will be faced with learning that involves all connected students so that they are separated from isolation. Finally, student engagement is also influenced by institutional support. Student engagement can also be improved by how schools treat students and how the facilities provided by the school for students (Zepke & Leach, 2010). The provision of facilities needed by students must be prepared by the school such as the provision of libraries, learning systems, good and quality guidance and planning.

Furthermore, Fredricks et al. (2004) proposed three factors which influence student engagement. The first factor is school level factor. The characteristics possessed by each school can influence students such as increasing student involvement and integration in the school and also decreasing the alienation of students in the school. Some of the characteristics of a school are school size, consistent and clear objectives of the school, school policy and management, student involvement with existing staff and also the academic process that develops student abilities. The second factor is classroom context, which is divided into several parts, i.e. including teacher support, peer support, class structure, autonomy support and task characteristics. Finally, the third factor is individual needs, which are related to psychological needs, basic psychological needs are divided into three parts, namely need for autonomy, need for competence and need for relatedness. Connell and Wellborn (1991) states that general psychological needs are a mediator that can determine student involvement in learning.

Related Research on Student Engagement

Rahayu (2018) found that there must be collaboration between teachers and students in the learning process in order to get optimal learning. Student engagement in the EFL Classroom is greatly influenced by the teacher's teaching style. Setiawan et al. (2019) concluded that the interest and involvement of student behavior in learning English can be increased by using creative teaching. Another study by MacKenzie (2015) states that in order for students to understand the importance of being actively involved in the EFL class, it is very important for educators to provide appropriate action, reinforcement, and motivation to students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is an explorative descriptive qualitative study because this study was to describe how is student engagement at secondary school and the factors that influence it. According to Creswell and Clark (2007) qualitative research is a method used to explore and understand the meaning that some individuals or groups of people think come from social or humanitarian problems.

Participants

The participants in this study were students of first grade of a junior high school in Langsa, Indonesia, and teachers teaching the classes. The researcher selected two English classes with different English teachers to collect data at the time of observation and distribute questionnaires. The number of students in the first class is 32 students, and 25 students in the second class.

Instrument

The data were collected using observation, questionnaire and focus group discussion. In this study, researchers used non-participant observation, and thus the researcher was not involved in teaching and learning activities in the classroom. Observation sheet was used to record the results of the observation. Meanwhile, a questionnaire based on Fredricks et al. (2004) was used. The questionnaire consists of 24 items in four-point Likert scale. The Likert scale was used to measure behavior, opinion and perception of the social phenomenon (Sugiyono, 2015). Finally, a focus group discussion was used to seek confirmation for the questionnaire.

Data Collection

The researchers observed three classes for the purpose of this research. The researchers made five observations during learning activities. Researchers observed each student about their behavioral engagement and the factors that affected their engagement using field notes that had been prepared. At the same time the researchers also recorded the videos of students learning English in the classroom. Meanwhile, the researchers distributed a questionnaire to the students to obtain detailed information on the factors that influenced student engagement. Finally, to further explore the factors affecting student engagement, at the focus group discussion stage the researcher conducted discussions with twelve students from the two classes. The researcher also held discussions with the two English teachers to clarify how student engagement was in their class.

Data Analysis

The results of the observations were analyzed descriptively according to the activities that occurred in the classrooms. The researchers noted the factors observed such as school level factors, class context, and individual needs. After analyzing data from the observation, the researcher analyzed the data obtained from the questionnaire by calculating the average of answers to each question to all respondents using a percentage formula. In analyzing the data from the focus group discussion, after conducting the discussion the researcher elaborated the results of the focus group discussion (FGD) and analyzed the results of the discussion. The researcher reported the results of the focus group discussion (FGD) in a narrative form.

After the results of the data have been obtained through observation, documents and focus group discussion, the researcher drew conclusions in order to achieve the purpose of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

Students' engagement in EFL classrooms - observation

This research deals with two objectives. First, the research was intended to find out how is the students' engagement in EFL classroom. This objective was achieved through observations and focus group discussions with the English teachers. The following was an explanation of the students' engagement obtained during the research process.

In the preliminary stage, the English teachers of the first class greeted students and prayed with them before starting the lessin. After that the teacher checked the attendance. Furthermore, the teacher asked about the assignment or homework given in the previous meeting and the student's response was very satisfactory, and they turned in the assignment given by the teacher. Before starting the lesson, the teacher gave a quiz about "vocabulary". The teacher asks students to translate the words that he uttered into Indonesian. The response given by the

students was very good, and they followed the instructions given by the teacher.

At the core activity stage, the teacher invited students to open their book on a certain page for the material. The teacher also asked what material to be studied next. The teacher informed the class that they would cover Chapter 6 for this lesson. The teacher explained the topic to be discussed from the material. Afterwards, the teacher wrote on the blackboard an explanation of the material about the professions and jobs then asked students to record the material in their notebooks. Then the teacher invited students to read conversations about the professions in their books in turn. Then the teacher asked each student what their parent's profession was. Some students understood the teacher and answered the questions, but some did not. Instead, they asked the teacher the English version for their parent's profession. Then the students were asked to complete the exercises, i.e. to ask and write about the work of their friends' parents.

At the closing stage, the teacher resumed the previously presented material. The teacher briefly repeated about the profession or work and asked whether the students understood the material that has been presented. Then the teacher concluded the lesson by reminding students to keep revising about lessons at home, and then the teacher ended the meeting.

When the researcher made observations, many students obeyed rules such as arriving on time and having a good attendance rate, but there was one student who came late, and one student was absent. When starting the lesson, the teacher gave a quiz, and the students were very enthusiastic and answer the quiz correctly. Students also put their effort to participate in the learning process. When the teacher invited students to have conversations in English, students who had difficulty in reading English words tried and persistently read the conversation even though they had to pronoun words incorrectly. During the learning process, especially when the teacher delivered the material, all students kept their focus and gave full attention to the learning process.

However, there were some students who were less active. They only listened to their teacher without giving any opinions or answering any questions raised by the teacher. However, some students asked questions when they did not understand the material provided by the teacher, such as when the teacher asked their parents for their work, there were students who did not know what English the word "civil servants" and the teacher answered the question by writing it on the blackboard. In addition, some students also gave their opinion if the teacher asked them. Students were also very active in discussions.

When researcher conducted the observation in the second class, many students obeyed the rules made by the school or by their English teacher. The level of attendance of students in this was high. There was only one student who was not present when the researcher was doing the observation. In the preliminary stage, the teacher opened the lesson with greetings and asked about the news from the students and then recorded their attendance. When starting the learning process, the teacher invited students to read together the material to be presented. Students in this class were also very active in the process of learning English. They actively followed the teacher in reading the material to be taught, namely about "Profession". They discussed with friends and provided their responses or opinions if the teacher asked them. They showed a dedicative attitude, and they were very engaged with the learning process. When the teacher explained what professions were around them in English, they paid close attention and concentrated on the teacher's explanation although there were some students who were not confident to actively speak or answered the questions raised by the teacher.

Students' engagement in EFL classrooms – focus group discussion

Discussions conducted with the teacher were used to clarify the student engagement in their respective classes. First, the researcher asked whether the students obeyed the rules made by the school or the teacher in the classroom. The English teacher in both classes reported that some students obeyed the rules, but some did not. Regarding the students' attendance, the teachers said that the attendance was almost perfect, and students' absence was rare without explanation. Furthermore, the researcher asked the teachers whether there were students from the two classes who were involved in negative behavior. They responded that some students were caught cheating, but serious mischief never happened.

In terms of learning process, the researcher asked the teachers about students' motivation, attention and effort in learning process. The first teacher reported that their students were rather active in the class, and 90% of the students in the class paid attention to the learning process. The second teacher explained that the students' interest in learning was high, and they never neglected any assignment. In addition, the first

teachers said that their students would ask questions if they did not understand the materials of the teacher explanation. However, the second teacher reported that some students would ask questions, but others were hesitant to ask questions when they did not understand the material.

Furthermore, the researcher also asked whether the students were active in discussion and whether they gave opinions during the learning process. The first teacher stated that the students were active in discussion and would give opinions during the learning process in the classroom. The second teacher said that some students were active, but others were not. They did not know what to said during the discussion. In terms of giving opinions, the second teacher believed that the students give opinion.

Factors affecting students' engagement

Another focus of this study was the factors which influence the students' engagement. The data for this research focus were obtained from the questionnaire and focus group discussion. In this case, the factors are divided into six factors based on Fredricks et al. (2004).

Factors	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
School level factors	50.9%	46.6%	2.5%	0.0%
Teacher support	54.2%	44.4%	1.4%	0.0%
Peers	30.9%	41.5%	24.2%	3.4%
Class structure	58.8%	38.4%	2.8%	0.0%
Autonomy support	30.9%	56.8%	11%	1.3%
Task characteristic	47.5%	47%	4.7%	0.8%

Table 1. Factors affecting students' engagement

The table above shows that class structure are the most dominant factors affecting students' engagement, followed by teacher support and school level factors. Meanwhile, peers were not considered as significant for students' engagement. The results of the focus group discussion with students have also provided additional information regarding the factors affecting students' engagement in a English as a foreign language classroom.

For school level factors, the students said that they were increasingly active in studying because the school are always trying to meet the needs of students such as desks, benches, classrooms and a library for reading. However, they gave different answers when asked whether they obeyed the rules in school. Some students said that they always complied with the existing rules in school, but some students said that they did not always sticked to the rule. In terms of teacher support, the students mentioned that the teacher played an important role in the learning process. They also students said that they liked teachers who were fun, interesting and showed a caring attitude. They reported that their English teachers were very interesting when they taught. Finally, in terms of class structure, which was dominant based on the questionnaire, students expected that the classes have as little noise as possible and to be not crowded. They reported that they were not allowed to make noises or disturb other students during the English lesson.

For task characteristic, the students claimed that they could not answer some of the questions and some were even very difficult. They reported that some tasks were quite challenging, but they were confident that they could complete them. For autonomy supports, students spoke that their parents would support them, but they were not very happy when their children got bad grade for English lesson. In addition, the students mentioned that they were not very comfortable studying at home. Finally, students claimed that peers were found to be irritating. They reported that they would be angry if their peers laughed at them when they answered or gave an opinion.

Discussions

Based on the results of observations made in the two selected classes, teachers used teaching techniques that made students take part in the learning process. Students were active in asking questions and discussing, and they also gave their efforts to understand the learning that is being conveyed. The English teacher from each class explained that students obeyed the rules made by the school or the teacher in the classroom, they had a high attendance rate even one of the teachers gave 90% for the level, and none of the students were involved in negative conducts.

Based on the results of the focus group discussion with the teachers, the level of student engagement was high. This is evident from the results of observations supported by the results of discussions with the teacher. Based on these results, students in the English class put serious effort in learning process, and they gave paid close attention to the teachers when they explained the materials in front of the class. They were also active in asking questions if they did not understand the materials. In addition, some students gave their opinions when they were asked. Students in the class also participated actively in discussion when

they were assigned to sit in groups. Only few students were not as active in discussion, but they still paid serious attention to the learning process.

Conner (2016) explained that examples of students who can be said to be behaviorally involved are those who respond in the learning process such as asking questions about the material presented, solving problems in the learning process and also participating in group discussions. According to Abdullah et al. (2012), in terms of behavioral aspect, students are considered active if they ask questions, give opinions and are involved with the topics taught by the teacher. Meanwhile, students are considered passive when they sit quietly, only listen, take notes and use a mobile phone during the learning process.

The current study also shows the factors affecting students' engagement. After the data has been analyzed, it can be concluded that there were several factors that significantly influenced student engagement in the classroom, especially in the EFL classroom. The most dominant factor was teachers' support, where 98.6% of the students agree that that teacher support can increase student involvement in the learning process. This result is also supported by the results of discussions conducted with the two English teachers from each class. The result shows that the most important factor for increasing student engagement in the classroom was the teacher support factor, that is how the teacher interacts with students and the learning media used affects student engagement in the classroom.

Fredricks et al. (2004) stated that a classroom environment where students receive support from the teacher will increase their involvement in the learning process and students are also likely to drop out of school if they do not receive support from the teacher. Conner (2016) also explained that the level of students' behavioral engagement is based on the quality of classroom experiences. Nguyen et al. (2016) explained that the interaction and a positive relationship between teachers and students are very important and able to increase students' engagement behaviorally. From the results of discussions with students, it was also found that they liked teachers who were fun and caring for them, and who supported them in the learning process.

Another factor that affects student engagement was the school level factor, where 97.5% of students choose to agree that the school level factor affects student engagement. The discussion with the teachers also reveals that the students had access to facilities and support from the school, which made them active in learning in the classroom. The theory from Newmann (1981) states that clear school objectives, school size,

school regulations and the relationship between school employees and students affect student involvement in the learning process. Conner (2016) also clarified that schools must connect with students so that students can identify themselves with their school and have inner motivation to be involved in the learning process.

Another factor affecting student engagement in the learning process was the class structure. The data from the questionnaire show that 97.2% of students agree that the class structure could influence their involvement in the learning process. Focus group discussions with students reveals that effective and creative classroom arrangements increases their involvement in the learning process. Connell and Wellborn (1991) states that teachers who are able to provide clear expectations for the class they teach can influence student engagement. Furthermore, the characteristic of task was considered as a significant factor for student engagement by 94.5% of students based on the questionnaire, as in the focus group discussion. Fredricks et al. (2004) explained that authentic assignments, which provide opportunities for collaboration, which provide opportunities for fun affect student engagement in the learning process.

Another factor is autonomy support where as many as 87.7% of students agreed to this factor in the questionnaire. Focus group discussion also confirmed this finding. Finally, the factor includes peers (72%), as also confirmed though a focus group discussion. Fredricks et al. (2004) explained that peer acceptance and peer rejection between fellow students will affect student behavioral engagement in the classroom.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Based on research conducted in two different classes, it was found that the level of student engagement in those classes was quite high. Students from both classes were mostly active in the process of learning English. They actively asked questions when they did not understand and gave their opinion when the teacher asked. Students were also active in group discussions when they worked in groups. However, there were also some students who were still reluctant to ask questions or give their opinions in the classroom.

Furthermore, based on the results of a questionnaire, supported by the results of focus group discussion with several students, the factors that most supported the increase in student engagement was the teachers' support factor, the school level factor, and class structure. Other factors include the characteristic of tasks, the involvement of the family, and peer support.

Based on the results, English teachers are strongly recommended to recognize the factors that can increase students' engagement because they are very useful to overcome problems in teaching and learning process, such as lack of participation and negative behavior. Students are advised to respect rules imposed either by the teachers or school to create a comfortable environment for learning. Finally, other researchers are suggested to investigate what teachers should do to improve increase students' engagement in an English classroom.

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