

Maintaining Engagement in a Large EFL Classroom

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Submitted

09/12/2025

Accepted

20/03/2026

Published

01/06/2026

Abstract: This study explores the primary factors influencing student engagement in large English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, focusing on differences across academic levels and the perceived impact of teacher interaction style. A total of 177 undergraduate EFL students (L1, L2, L3) participated in an online questionnaire, providing both quantitative and qualitative data. The results indicate that preferences for classroom activities and teacher strategies differ according to academic level, with advanced students showing greater interest in interactive games and technology-based approaches. Additionally, a positive relationship was found between students perceived importance of the teacher's interaction style and their reported engagement frequency. Qualitative analysis highlighted the value of interactive activities, clear communication, effective classroom management, and encouragement. The findings suggest that varied, adaptive instructional methods and positive teacher-student relationships are essential for maintaining engagement in large EFL classes.

Keywords: EFL; Instructional Strategies; Student Engagement; Large Classes; Teacher Interaction

1. INTRODUCTION

Student engagement is widely recognised as a critical factor in successful language learning, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Engagement not only influences language acquisition and proficiency but also contributes to student motivation, classroom participation, and overall academic achievement (Fredricks et al, 2004). However, maintaining high levels of engagement can be especially challenging in large classroom settings, where individual attention is limited, classroom management is more complex, and opportunities for active participation may be reduced.

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Large EFL classes are a common reality in many educational institutions, often resulting from resource constraints, increased student enrolment, or curriculum requirements. In such environments, teachers must address diverse learning needs and preferences while navigating issues such as noise, distractions, and varying degrees of student motivation (Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). These challenges can have a direct impact on the extent to which students feel engaged, connected, and capable of contributing meaningfully to the learning process.

Existing research has highlighted the importance of employing interactive, student-centred teaching strategies in large classrooms to foster engagement (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Methods such as group discussions, collaborative projects, and technology integration have been shown to enhance student involvement and learning outcomes. Furthermore, the teacher's interaction style including their approachability, use of humour, clarity of instruction, and responsiveness to student needs has been identified as a key determinant of classroom engagement (Wentzel, 2009).

Despite the recognition of these factors, less is known about how engagement challenges and preferred strategies may differ across academic levels within large EFL classrooms. Additionally, the specific role of the teacher's interaction style in shaping student engagement warrants further investigation, particularly from the perspective of students themselves.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by examining the primary factors influencing engagement in large EFL classes across different academic levels and exploring students' perceptions of teacher practices that support engagement. By analysing quantitative and qualitative data collected from undergraduate EFL students, this research aims to provide practical insights for educators seeking to create more engaging and effective learning environments in large-class contexts.

Research Questions

1. What are the primary factors that influence student engagement in large EFL classrooms across different academic levels (L1, L2, L3)?
2. How do students perceive the role of the teacher's interaction style in maintaining engagement in large EFL classrooms, and what strategies do they find most effective?

Hypotheses

1. Preferences for classroom activities and teacher strategies are associated with academic level.

2. There is a positive relationship between the perceived importance of the teacher's interaction style and students' reported engagement frequency.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Student Engagement in EFL Classrooms

Student engagement is a multi-dimensional construct that encompasses behavioural, emotional, and cognitive involvement in the learning process (Fredricks et al, 2004).

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, engagement has been consistently linked to improved language proficiency, motivation, and academic achievement (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Jin, 2024).

Active participation in classroom activities, willingness to communicate, and positive attitudes toward learning are all considered markers of engaged EFL learners (Skinner et al., 2008).

2.2 The Role of Classroom Activities

A considerable body of research suggests that the types of classroom activities implemented can significantly influence student engagement, especially in large EFL settings. Interactive and student-centred activities such as group discussions, debates, role-playing, and collaborative projects are associated with higher levels of engagement and language development (Gillies, 2016; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

The integration of educational technology has become essential for enhancing student engagement and supporting differentiated instruction. Digital tools such as interactive whiteboards, language learning apps, and online collaborative platforms provide diverse opportunities for students to participate actively, practice language skills, and receive individualized feedback (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). Additionally, technology facilitates authentic communication and expands access to resources beyond the traditional classroom, contributing to improved motivation and language proficiency (Chen & Hsu, 2020).

2.3 Strategies and Interaction Style

Teacher strategies and interaction style play a pivotal role in shaping student engagement and learning outcomes in EFL classrooms. Effective strategies include the use of scaffolding, differentiated instruction, and formative assessment, which allow teachers to address diverse learner needs and foster active participation (Tomlinson, 2014).

Teachers who employ a communicative and supportive interaction style characterized by open-ended questions, encouragement, and responsiveness promote a positive classroom climate and greater student willingness to communicate (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Skinner et al., 2008). Furthermore, strategic grouping, interactive activities, and feedback-rich environments enable teachers to maximize engagement, especially in large or heterogeneous classes (Harmer, 2007; Gillies, 2016). Ultimately, the combination of adaptive strategies and an interactive, learner-centred style leads to improved motivation, confidence, and language proficiency among EFL students.

2.4 EFL large classroom

The definition of a "large classroom" in EFL contexts varies, with researchers identifying the minimum threshold between 40 and 65 students (Baker, 1976; Hayes, 1997; Finocchiaro, 1989). Most frequently, class sizes of 50 and above are considered large (Hayes, 1997; Holliday, 1996; Li, 1998).

2.5 Challenges in Large EFL Classrooms

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in large classrooms presents several significant challenges. Key issues include difficulties in maintaining discipline and managing diverse student needs in terms of age, ability, and learning pace, which complicate individual feedback and assessment (Jupri & Arante, 2015). Overcrowded classrooms also hinder effective interaction, reduce student motivation and concentration, and limit opportunities for practicing speaking skills, as immovable desks and large class sizes restrict movement and communication (Mokeddem, 2023; Desta, 2019; Jupri & Arante, 2015). Interactive activities such as group and pair work, vital for language practice, become logistically challenging and often unmanageable (Hayes, 1997). Students in large classes may feel anxious or shy about participating, particularly in speaking activities, limiting their language practice (King, 2013). These challenges demand strategic adaptations such as varied activities and classroom management techniques to enhance engagement and learning in large EFL classes (Jupri & Arante, 2015; Harmer, 2000 as cited in Desta, 2019).

While the negative effects of large classes such as reduced individual attention and increased classroom management difficulties are widely documented (Mokeddem, 2023), a significant gap remains in the literature concerning the direct relationship between class size and strategies for maintaining student engagement. Although scholars acknowledge that engagement declines as class size increases, there is limited empirical research that systematically investigates

which instructional techniques most effectively promote active participation in large EFL classes. As a result, there is a need for studies that explicitly connect class size to evidence-based engagement strategies and measurable student outcomes in EFL environments.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to explore factors influencing student engagement in large English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire, enabling descriptive, comparative, and thematic analysis.

3.2 Participants

Participants included undergraduate students enrolled in EFL courses at different academic levels (L1 = First year, L2 = Second year, L3 = Third year) at the department of letters and English language, University of Ain Temouchent, Algeria. A total of 177 students completed the questionnaire: 75 from L1, 47 from L2, and 55 from L3. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was implied by completion of the survey.

3.3 Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher and administered online “google form”. The questionnaire consisted of seven main items:

- Demographic question: Level of study (L1, L2, L3).
- Engagement frequency: One item on a 5-point linear scale (1 = Never engaged; 5 = Always engaged).
- Challenges to engagement: Multiple-response item (checkboxes) with options such as "Large class size makes participation difficult," "Teacher's lecture style is not interactive," "Noise and distractions in the classroom," "Lack of opportunities to speak or participate," "Unclear instructions or lesson objectives," and an "Other" option.
- Engaging classroom activities: Multiple-response item (checkboxes) including "Group discussions and debates," "Pair work or collaborative tasks," "Interactive games and quizzes," "Technology-based activities," "Storytelling or role-playing," and an "Other" option.
- Importance of teacher's interaction style: One item on a 5-point linear

scale (1 = Not important; 5 = Very important).

- Helpful teacher strategies: Multiple-response item (checkboxes) with options such as "Encouraging student participation," "Using humour and storytelling," "Providing clear instructions and structured lessons," "Using technology and multimedia resources," "Giving individual feedback and support," and an "Other" option.
- Open-ended question: "What could teachers do to make large EFL classes more engaging?"

The instrument was distributed online, and responses were automatically compiled into a spreadsheet (Excel format) for analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

Closed-ended questions were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, medians, standard deviations). Data were disaggregated by academic level (L1, L2, L3) for comparative analysis. Relationships between variables (e.g., engagement frequency and importance of teacher interaction style) were examined using correlational analysis. Differences in preferences or challenges by level were explored using cross-tabulations and, where appropriate, inferential statistics.

Open-ended responses were analysed thematically. Responses were read, coded, and grouped into recurring themes such as classroom management, interactive activities, use of technology, encouragement, and feedback. Frequencies of each theme were reported, and illustrative quotes were selected to highlight student perspectives.

Multi-response (checkbox) questions were parsed so that all selected options were counted individually, allowing for accurate frequency analysis of multiple preferences per student.

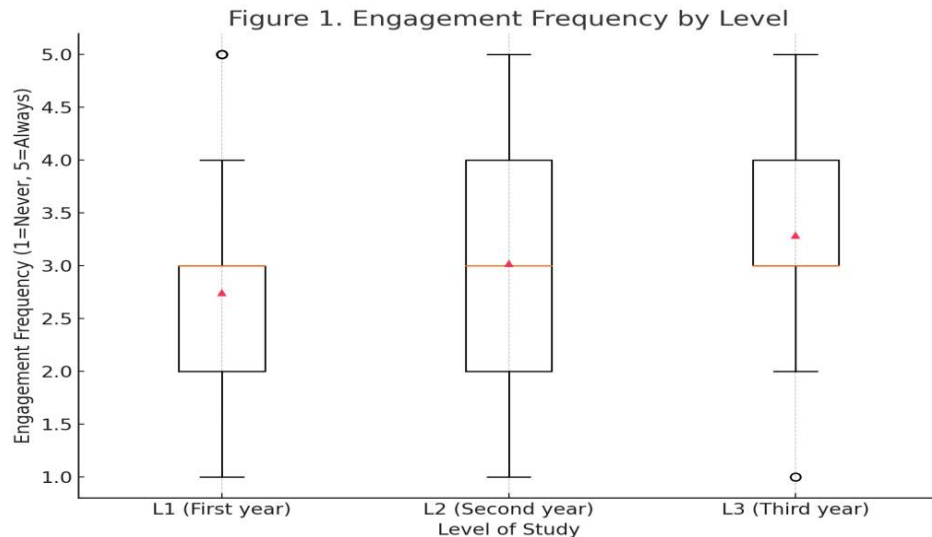
All analyses were conducted using Microsoft Excel and Python.

4. Results

A total of 177 students responded to the questionnaire, distributed across three academic levels: L1 (First year, $n = 75$), L2 (Second year, $n = 47$), and L3 (Third year, $n = 55$). The mean engagement frequency in large EFL classrooms was lowest for L1 ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.23$) and increased across levels (L2: $M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.19$; L3: $M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.07$). A boxplot showed that the median engagement was 3 for all groups, with L3 displaying a higher overall tendency toward frequent engagement.

Figure 1

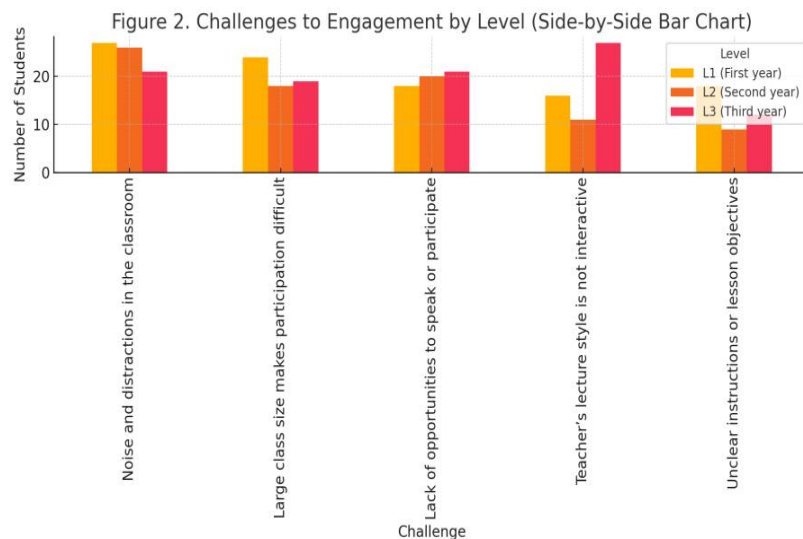
Engagement Frequency by Level.



The most commonly reported challenges to engagement were "Noise and distractions in the classroom" (n = 74), "Large class size makes participation difficult" (n = 61), "Lack of opportunities to speak or participate" (n = 59), "Teacher's lecture style is not interactive" (n = 54), and "Unclear instructions or lesson objectives" (n = 39). The frequency of these challenges was relatively consistent across levels, though L3 students were more likely to report the teacher's lecture style as a barrier.

Figure 2.

Challenges to Engagement by Level

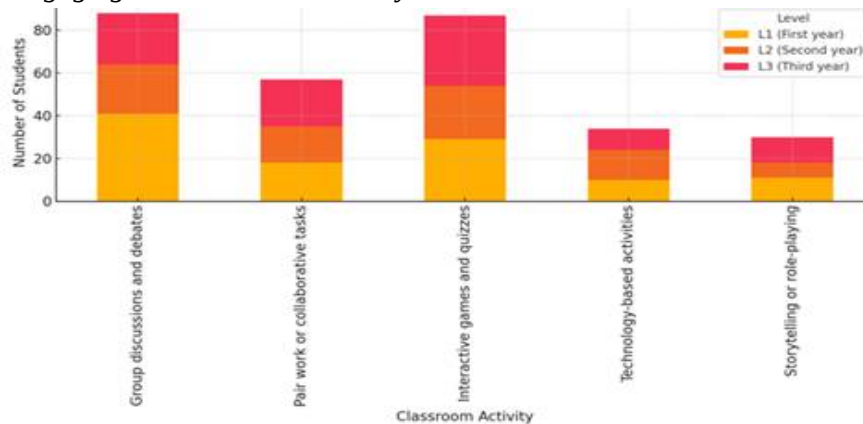


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Preferred classroom activities included "Group discussions and debates" (n = 88) and "Interactive games and quizzes" (n = 87), with other popular choices being "Pair work or collaborative tasks" (n = 57), "Technology-based activities" (n = 34), and "Storytelling or role-playing" (n = 30). These trends were stable across levels, though L3 students selected "Interactive games and quizzes" most frequently.

Figure 3.

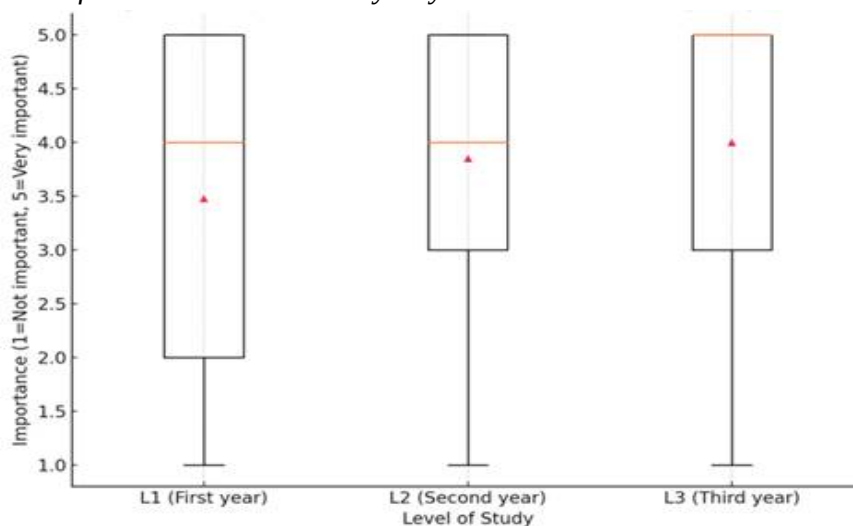
Most Engaging Classroom Activities by Level.



Regarding the perceived importance of the teacher's interaction style, mean ratings were 3.48 (SD = 1.38) for L1, 3.85 (SD = 1.29) for L2, and 4.00 (SD = 1.23) for L3, indicating increasing importance at higher academic levels. Boxplot analysis revealed that the median response for L3 was at the highest scale point.

Figure 4.

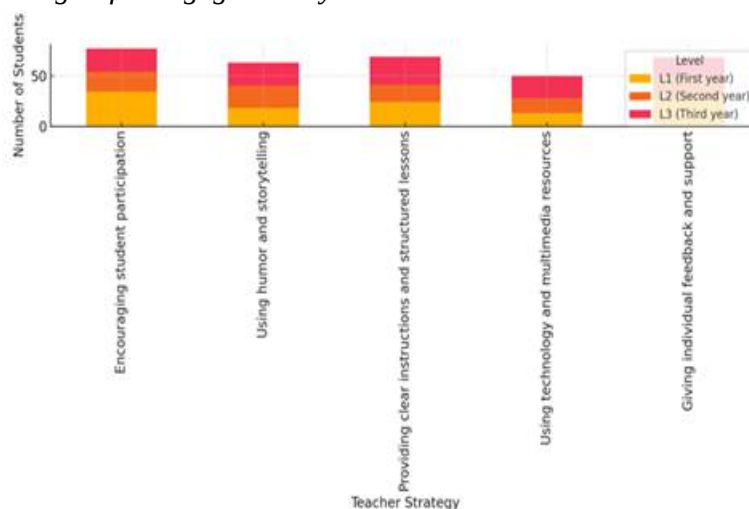
Importance of Teacher's Interaction Style by Level.



The teacher strategies most often cited as helpful for engagement were "Encouraging student participation" (n = 77), "Providing clear instructions and structured lessons" (n = 69), "Giving individual feedback and support" (n = 68), "Using humour and storytelling" (n = 63), and "Using technology and multimedia resources" (n = 50). These preferences were consistent across all levels.

Figure 5.

Teacher Strategies for Engagement by Level.



Responses to the open-ended question, "What could teachers do to make large EFL classes more engaging?" clustered into nine major themes. The most frequently coded theme was interactive/group activities (n=59), followed by technology/visual aids (n=33), encouragement/positive feedback (n=28).

Moreover, clear/simplified explanations (n=24), humour/storytelling (n=17), classroom management/control (n = 9), teacher movement/engagement (n =8), and resource recommendation (n=1). In addition, a substantial number of responses (n=65) offered unique or multifaceted suggestions that did not fit clearly into the other categories.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine factors influencing student engagement in large EFL classrooms, with a specific focus on differences across academic levels and the impact of teacher interaction style. The findings were evaluated in relation to two primary hypotheses.

The first hypothesis stated that preferences for classroom activities and teacher strategies are associated with academic level. The results provided support for this hypothesis. Analysis of the survey data indicated significant variation in

preferred classroom activities and teacher engagement strategies among students at different academic levels. For example, third-year (L3) students were more likely to report a preference for interactive games, technology-based activities, and structured lessons, whereas first-year (L1) students more frequently selected group discussions and debates as the most engaging classroom activities. Similarly, preferences for teacher strategies such as providing clear instructions, using humour, and offering individual feedback analysed showed notable differences across levels. These results suggest that as students' progress academically, their engagement needs and preferred instructional approaches evolve, highlighting the importance of adapting teaching strategies to student experience and maturity.

The second hypothesis proposed a positive relationship between the perceived importance of the teacher's interaction style and students' reported engagement frequency. This hypothesis was also supported by the data. There was a clear positive correlation between students' ratings of the importance of teacher interaction style and their self-reported engagement in large EFL classes. Students who placed a high value on the teacher's interaction style (e.g., approachability, encouragement, and use of engaging methods) were more likely to report frequent engagement in classroom activities. This finding underscores the pivotal role of teacher-student interaction in sustaining engagement, especially in large class contexts where individual attention is more challenging to provide.

In addition to quantitative findings, thematic analysis of open-ended responses revealed that students desire a mix of interactive/group activities, the integration of technology and visual aids, encouragement and positive feedback, clear and simplified explanations, humour, and effective classroom management. These preferences reinforce the quantitative trends and further emphasize the need for varied, student-centred teaching practices.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the factors influencing student engagement in large EFL classrooms, with particular attention to differences across academic levels and the impact of teacher interaction style. The results revealed that student preferences for classroom activities and teacher strategies vary according to academic level, underscoring the importance of adapting instructional methods to meet the evolving needs of learners. Notably, third-year students expressed a greater preference for interactive games, technology integration, and structured lessons, while first-year students favoured group discussions and debates. These findings highlight the necessity for teachers to employ a range of strategies and

activities that are responsive to students' developmental stages and learning preferences.

Furthermore, the data demonstrated a positive relationship between students' perceptions of the importance of the teacher's interaction style and their reported frequency of engagement.

Students who valued supportive, engaging, and approachable teaching were more likely to participate actively in class, emphasising the central role of the teacher in fostering a productive learning environment. Qualitative responses reinforced these trends, with students consistently advocating for interactive learning, effective classroom management, the use of technology, and clear, encouraging communication from instructors.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that teachers in large EFL classrooms strive to diversify their teaching approaches by incorporating more interactive and collaborative activities, making effective use of technology and visual aids, and maintaining clear, encouraging communication. Professional development programs for EFL instructors should emphasize adaptive teaching strategies and the cultivation of positive teacher-student relationships to enhance engagement in large-group contexts. Additionally, institutions should consider providing resources and support that enable teachers to implement varied instructional techniques and manage large classes effectively.

Future research could build on these insights by exploring the long-term impact of specific engagement strategies across different educational settings and cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies may also help clarify how student preferences and engagement levels evolve over time. Expanding the sample to include additional institutions and a broader range of proficiency levels would further enhance the generalizability of these findings. Ultimately, sustained attention to student engagement and the factors that promote it will contribute to more effective and inclusive EFL education.

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