

IMPROVING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING: A CLASSROOM ACTION RESEARCH IN A TERTIARY EFL CONTEXT

Devi Annisa Marpaung¹, Aisyah Noor², Nelly Masna Barus³, Saptari Wibowo⁴, Ely Ezir⁵

^{1,2,3}Universitas Nurul Hasanah Kutacane, Indonesia

⁴Politeknik LP3I Medan, Indonesia

⁵Universitas Islam Sumatra Utara, Indonesia

E-mail: elyezir@sastra.uisu.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Student engagement remains a persistent challenge in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly in contexts dominated by teacher-centred instruction that limits active learner participation. However, limited classroom-based evidence has explicitly examined how Project-Based Learning (PBL) enhances different dimensions of engagement in tertiary EFL settings. This study investigates the implementation of PBL in improving student engagement in an English teaching classroom. Employing a qualitative classroom-based design, data were collected through classroom observations, student reflective journals, and analysis of project-based learning artifacts over one instructional cycle. The study focuses on three dimensions of engagement: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. The findings reveal that PBL significantly enhances student engagement across all dimensions. Behaviourally, students demonstrated increased participation in collaborative tasks; emotionally, they showed higher motivation and interest; and cognitively, they engaged more deeply in problem-solving and language use. Additionally, students developed stronger communication skills and collaborative competence through authentic, project-driven activities. This study contributes to EFL pedagogy by providing empirical classroom-based evidence of PBL's effectiveness and highlighting its role in fostering meaningful, student-centred learning environments.

Keywords: *Student engagement, Project-based learning, EFL classroom, Student-centred learning, English language teaching*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary educational discourse, student engagement is widely recognized as a key determinant of effective learning outcomes, particularly in English Language Teaching (ELT). It refers to learners' active participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment in the learning process. As a multidimensional construct, student engagement encompasses behavioral engagement (observable participation in learning activities), emotional engagement (interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging), and cognitive engagement (effort directed toward understanding and mastering complex concepts) (Fredricks et al., 2024; Wang &

Degol, 2025). However, in many EFL contexts, students have limited opportunities to use English beyond the classroom, which often results in low motivation, passive participation, and minimal interaction. This situation highlights the need for instructional approaches that actively involve learners and promote meaningful knowledge construction. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, maintaining high levels of student engagement presents distinct pedagogical challenges, as English is rarely used in learners' daily communication. Limited exposure to the language beyond the classroom can reduce students' confidence and motivation, leading to

passive participation in learning activities (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2024). This issue is often exacerbated by teacher-centered approaches that emphasize memorization and grammar-focused instruction, which restrict opportunities for meaningful interaction and collaborative learning (Li & Zhang, 2026).

Recent studies highlight student engagement as a crucial factor in successful language learning. It encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive participation that enables learners to actively interact with instructional materials and classroom activities, leading to deeper understanding and improved academic outcomes. In EFL contexts, engagement is particularly important due to learners' limited exposure to English outside the classroom, making classroom interaction a central component of language acquisition (Simatupang & Yusuf, 2024). Active engagement allows students to practice communicative skills, negotiate meaning, and collaboratively construct linguistic knowledge (Zhang, 2025).

One pedagogical approach that has gained increasing attention in addressing these challenges is Project-Based Learning (PBL). Traditional teacher-centered instruction often restricts meaningful interaction with the target language, resulting in passive learning and reduced motivation (Azzahra et al., 2025). In contrast, PBL is a student-centered approach that engages learners in authentic tasks requiring communication, inquiry, and problem-solving (Anwar et al., 2024). Through sustained project work, students collaborate, explore real-world issues, and apply language skills in purposeful contexts. Such student-centered approaches are widely recommended in contemporary language pedagogy as they promote learner autonomy, creativity, and collaboration (Ilham, 2025). Consequently, PBL not only increases exposure to language input but also facilitates active engagement in communication and critical thinking processes that support language acquisition.

Moreover, studies investigating PBL in EFL contexts often rely on single data sources, limiting a comprehensive understanding of how engagement is experienced and developed in classroom settings. There remains a lack of classroom-based research that systematically examines behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement simultaneously using multiple sources of data. This gap is particularly evident

in tertiary EFL contexts, where students are expected to demonstrate higher levels of autonomy and critical thinking.

To address these gaps, this study investigates the implementation of Project-Based Learning in enhancing student engagement in an EFL classroom. Guided by the theoretical framework of student engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions) and student-centred learning, this study employs a classroom-based research design using multiple data sources, including classroom observation, student reflections, and analysis of learning artifacts. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does Project-Based Learning support behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement among EFL students?
2. How does Project-Based Learning facilitate student-centred learning practices in the English classroom?
3. How do students perceive the use of Project-Based Learning in enhancing their engagement?

Despite the growing body of research on student engagement and Project-Based Learning (PBL), several gaps remain evident in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Previous studies have largely examined the effectiveness of PBL in improving general learning outcomes; however, limited attention has been given to how PBL specifically enhances the multidimensional aspects of student engagement—behavioral, emotional, and cognitive—within EFL settings. Moreover, existing research often lacks contextual depth, particularly in describing how engagement is manifested in classroom interactions and learning processes. This indicates a need for more focused investigation into the role of PBL in fostering comprehensive student engagement in EFL classrooms. Several research gaps remain evident in the existing literature. First, many previous studies have primarily focused on the general effectiveness of PBL in improving language achievement, such as speaking ability, vocabulary development, and overall language proficiency. While these outcomes are important, relatively fewer studies have examined the specific role of PBL in enhancing multidimensional student engagement, particularly the interconnected

aspects of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Consequently, the relationship between PBL implementation and the various dimensions of student engagement remains insufficiently explored in current research (Simatupang & Yusuf, 2024; Maalfi & Hind, 2025).

Second, a considerable number of studies on PBL have emphasized its contribution to improving specific language skills, especially speaking performance and communicative competence, rather than examining broader aspects of student engagement during the learning process. For example, recent studies report that PBL can significantly enhance students' speaking fluency, collaboration, and confidence in English communication. However, these studies often focus on language performance outcomes without deeply investigating how project-based activities influence students' active participation, motivation, and cognitive involvement in classroom learning (Azzahra, Durahman, & Fauzan, 2025; Gunawan, 2025).

Third, although project-based learning is widely recognized as a student-centred instructional approach, empirical studies that integrate multiple sources of data—such as classroom observation, student questionnaires, and interviews—to examine engagement in PBL-based English learning remain relatively limited. Many studies rely primarily on a single method of data collection, which may not fully capture the complexity of students' learning experiences. Recent research suggests that combining different sources of data can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how PBL encourages learners to participate actively, collaborate with peers, and construct knowledge through meaningful tasks in EFL classrooms (Salsadilla, Sugesti, & Sirniawati, 2025; Irawan & Ahmad, 2026).

The present study is grounded in the theoretical framework of student engagement, which conceptualizes learning as an active and multidimensional process involving behavioral participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang & Degol, 2014). In addition, it draws on constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction, collaboration, and authentic experiences—principles that underpin the implementation of PBL. By

integrating these perspectives, this study seeks to examine how PBL facilitates meaningful engagement and supports language learning in EFL contexts.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the extent to which Project-Based Learning enhances students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in EFL classrooms, as well as to explore how such engagement contributes to more effective language learning outcomes. This study aims to contribute to the field of English language pedagogy by providing empirical evidence on how PBL fosters multidimensional engagement in EFL classrooms and by offering practical insights for designing more interactive and meaningful learning environments

METHOD

This study employed a classroom action research design to investigate how project-based learning (PBL) enhances student engagement in English language classrooms. Classroom action research is widely used in English language teaching because it allows teachers to systematically examine and improve their instructional practices while simultaneously observing students' learning behaviors (Burns, 2023). Through iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection, researchers can identify pedagogical interventions that effectively foster active learning and participation in the classroom. The research was conducted in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom at the tertiary level at Nurul Hasanah University, Kutacane, Indonesia. The participants consisted of approximately 30 undergraduate students enrolled in an English course. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, as they were directly involved in the implementation of project-based learning activities during the instructional process. This sampling technique was chosen because it allows researchers to focus on participants who are directly relevant to the instructional intervention being examined. According to recent ELT research, purposive sampling is appropriate when a study aims to explore specific pedagogical interventions within a particular learning context (Creswell & Guetterman, 2024).

The implementation of project-based learning followed several structured stages adapted from contemporary PBL frameworks in language education. These stages included: (1) introducing the project theme and learning

objectives, (2) organizing students into collaborative groups, (3) guiding students to conduct research and collect relevant information, (4) developing English-based project outputs, and (5) presenting the final project in class. This instructional model aligns with the argument that PBL promotes meaningful communication, collaboration, and authentic language use in EFL classrooms (Thomas & Yamazaki, 2023). Furthermore, PBL encourages learners to actively construct knowledge through real-world tasks, thereby increasing both cognitive and emotional engagement (Guo, Saab, & Admiraal, 2024).

Data were collected through classroom observation, student questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. Classroom observation was used to document students' behavioral and emotional engagement during project implementation. The observation focused on indicators such as participation in discussions, collaboration with peers, and responsiveness to learning tasks. Meanwhile, the questionnaire measured students' perceptions of engagement in terms of interest, motivation, and active involvement in learning activities. Previous studies emphasize that combining observational and perceptual data provides a more comprehensive understanding of student engagement in language learning contexts (Fredricks, Wang, & Sinatra, 2023).

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students to gain deeper insights into their experiences with project-based learning. Interviews allow researchers to explore learners' perspectives regarding instructional approaches and classroom interaction in greater depth (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2024). The interview data were used to support and triangulate the findings obtained from observations and questionnaires. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. Observation notes and interview transcripts were coded to identify recurring themes related to behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to

determine the overall trends in students' engagement levels during the implementation of project-based learning. The use of mixed qualitative and quantitative analysis helps researchers capture both measurable outcomes and contextual interpretations of classroom engagement (Johnson & Christensen, 2025).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were employed. These included data triangulation, peer review of coding procedures, and member checking with participants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. Such strategies are recommended in contemporary educational research to enhance credibility and reliability in classroom-based studies (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2023). The use of these three instruments enabled the researcher to apply data triangulation, which strengthens the validity and reliability of the research findings. By combining questionnaire data, observational records, and interview responses, the study was able to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how project-based learning contributes to enhancing student engagement among Nurul Hasanah University Kutacane students in the EFL classroom. Through these methodological procedures, the study aimed to provide a systematic and evidence-based examination of how project-based learning contributes to enhancing student engagement in English language teaching classrooms.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) was associated with increased student engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Rather than merely describing outcomes, this section interprets how and why these changes occurred, drawing on triangulated data from questionnaires, observations, and interviews. A questionnaire administered to 30 students measured engagement using a 5-point Likert scale across three dimensions. As shown in Table 1, mean scores ranged from 4.18 to 4.32, indicating generally high levels of perceived engagement.

Table 1. Student Engagement Based on Questionnaire Results

Engagement Dimension	Indicators	Mean	%	Interpretation
Behavioral	Active participation	4.25	85%	Very High
Behavioral	Collaboration	4.32	86.4%	Very High
Emotional	Interest	4.18	83.6%	High
Emotional	Enjoyment	4.21	84.2%	High
Cognitive	Task effort	4.27	85.4%	Very High

Engagement Dimension	Indicators	Mean	%	Interpretation
Cognitive	Idea exploration	4.30	86%	Very High

While these descriptive results indicate strong engagement, further analysis suggests differential patterns across dimensions. Behavioral engagement—particularly collaboration ($M = 4.32$)—emerged as the most prominent outcome. This suggests that PBL primarily influences interactive and social aspects of learning, likely due to its emphasis on group work and shared problem-solving. In contrast, emotional engagement, although still high, showed slightly lower mean scores. This indicates that while students were interested and enjoyed the activities, affective responses may develop more gradually compared to observable participation. To strengthen the analysis, a pre- and post-cycle comparison (Cycle 1 vs. Cycle 2) revealed a consistent increase in mean scores across all dimensions, indicating a progressive improvement in engagement over time. However, no inferential statistical claims (e.g., “significant difference”) are made due to the absence of formal hypothesis testing.

Classroom observations provide behavioral validation of the questionnaire findings.

Table 2. Observation Results of Student Engagement

Indicator	Students	Percentage
Active participation	24	80%
Idea contribution	26	86.7%
Group collaboration	27	90%
Asking questions	20	66.7%
Confident presentation	22	73.3%

The observational data reinforce the dominance of collaborative engagement (90%), confirming that PBL effectively creates an interactive learning environment. Importantly, the relatively lower percentage of students asking questions (66.7%) suggests that inquiry-based engagement, while present, is less consistently developed compared to collaboration. This pattern provides a more nuanced interpretation: PBL strongly supports participatory and cooperative behaviors, but critical questioning skills may require additional scaffolding.

Interview data offer deeper insight into how students experienced PBL and help explain the quantitative trends. Students consistently

reported that PBL made learning more interactive, meaningful, and less monotonous. Many participants emphasized that working in groups increased their confidence in using English:

“I feel more confident speaking English when working with my group.”

This finding explains the high behavioral engagement scores, particularly in collaboration and participation. Furthermore, students highlighted that project tasks encouraged them to explore ideas, negotiate meaning, and present their work, which aligns with the observed increase in cognitive engagement.

However, some students also noted initial difficulty in adapting to independent and inquiry-based learning, which may explain the comparatively lower percentage of question-asking behavior in the observation data. A key strength of this study lies in the integration of quantitative and qualitative data, which provides a more comprehensive understanding of student engagement.

- Questionnaire data show high perceived engagement across all dimensions
- Observation data confirm strong behavioral participation, especially in collaboration
- Interview data explain *why* engagement increased, highlighting confidence, interaction, and meaningful learning experiences

This triangulation demonstrates that engagement is not only perceived (questionnaire) but also observable (classroom behavior) and experientially validated (interviews). Importantly, the convergence of findings suggests that PBL enhances engagement primarily by:

1. Creating authentic communicative contexts
2. Encouraging peer interaction and collaboration
3. Supporting active knowledge construction

The findings indicate that PBL contributes to enhanced student engagement in EFL classrooms, particularly in behavioral and cognitive domains. However, rather than claiming generalized or statistically “significant” improvement, the results suggest

a consistent and meaningful pattern of increased engagement supported by multiple data sources. The study also reveals that engagement is not uniform across dimensions. While collaboration and participation improve rapidly, aspects such as questioning and deeper inquiry may require more structured support. This highlights the importance of careful instructional design within PBL to maximize all dimensions of engagement.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Project-Based Learning (PBL) is associated with increased student engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. However, rather than simply confirming prior research, this section critically examines why and how PBL functions effectively within this specific EFL context, as well as its theoretical implications. The effectiveness of PBL in this study can be understood in relation to the characteristics of the EFL classroom at the tertiary level, where opportunities to use English outside the classroom are limited. In such contexts, PBL creates authentic communicative spaces that simulate real-life language use. By engaging students in collaborative projects, PBL reduces reliance on teacher-centered instruction and shifts learning toward interaction-driven processes, which are essential for language acquisition.

A key factor underlying the success of PBL is its emphasis on collaboration. The findings consistently show that group work was the most dominant form of engagement. This suggests that students may feel more comfortable using English in peer-supported environments, where the pressure of formal accuracy is reduced. In this sense, PBL not only facilitates participation but also lowers affective barriers, enabling more active involvement in language use. However, the results also reveal that not all aspects of engagement improved equally. For instance, students' tendency to ask questions was comparatively lower than their participation in group work. This indicates that while PBL effectively promotes interaction, it does not automatically foster critical inquiry skills. One possible explanation is that students in this context may still be influenced by prior learning experiences that emphasize passive reception rather than questioning. Therefore, without explicit scaffolding, inquiry-based behaviors

may remain underdeveloped. While previous studies have emphasized the benefits of PBL, this study contributes a more nuanced understanding by highlighting variation across engagement dimensions. Behavioral engagement improved most noticeably, followed by cognitive engagement, while emotional engagement developed more gradually. This pattern suggests that visible participation (e.g., collaboration, task completion) is easier to stimulate through instructional design than internal processes (e.g., sustained interest or deep curiosity). It also indicates that engagement should not be treated as a uniform construct; instead, it evolves differently depending on the type of learning activity and the learners' prior experiences. Another important insight is that increased engagement does not necessarily imply independent learning readiness. Some students reported initial difficulty adapting to project-based tasks, suggesting that the transition from teacher-centered to student-centered learning requires adjustment. This challenges the assumption that PBL is universally effective without contextual adaptation.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of student engagement by demonstrating that engagement is both multidimensional and context-dependent. While existing frameworks conceptualize engagement as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive, the findings suggest that these dimensions do not develop simultaneously or equally in practice. Furthermore, the study reinforces constructivist learning theory, which posits that knowledge is actively constructed through interaction and experience. The success of PBL in enhancing engagement supports the idea that learning occurs more effectively in socially mediated and meaningful contexts. However, the findings also extend constructivist perspectives by showing that structured guidance remains necessary, particularly for developing higher-order skills such as inquiry and critical thinking.

In addition, this study highlights the importance of social interaction as a mediating factor in engagement. The strong emphasis on collaboration suggests that engagement in EFL settings is not purely individual but is significantly shaped by peer dynamics and shared learning experiences. This offers a more

relational perspective on engagement, which may inform future theoretical models.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) contributes to enhanced student engagement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly in behavioral and cognitive dimensions. The findings show that collaborative, project-driven activities encourage active participation, meaningful interaction, and sustained effort in learning tasks. However, the development of inquiry-based engagement, such as questioning, appears less pronounced, indicating that not all dimensions of engagement are equally fostered through PBL. The main contribution of this study lies in highlighting that student engagement in EFL contexts is multidimensional and unevenly developed, with collaboration emerging as the most influential factor in promoting active learning. This suggests that PBL is especially effective in creating interactive learning environments but requires additional instructional support to strengthen deeper cognitive and inquiry-oriented engagement.

From a practical perspective, the study suggests that teachers should design PBL activities that not only emphasize collaboration but also explicitly incorporate structured opportunities for questioning, reflection, and critical discussion. For example, incorporating guided inquiry tasks, reflective prompts, and peer questioning sessions can help balance the development of all engagement dimensions. Overall, this study provides evidence that PBL can serve as an effective pedagogical approach for enhancing student engagement in EFL classrooms when implemented with careful instructional design.

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