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Exploring Strategies for Promoting Engagement in EFL Classes at Primary Schools: Insights from Vietnamese Teachers

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Abstract

This study explores the strategies used by English as a foreign language (EFL) primary school teachers to promote engagement among young learners in the classroom and examines how these strategies manifest across the behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of learner engagement. Six EFL teachers from five primary schools in the South of Vietnam participated in this study. Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods, including classroom observations (two 35–40-minute full-length lesson videos per teacher), field notes, stimulated recall sessions, and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns in teacher practices aimed at promoting engagement. This process involved systematic coding of the data using an inductive approach. Triangulation of multiple data sources revealed a wide range of strategies employed by teachers to enhance different aspects of engagement among young EFL learners, with a predominant focus on the behavioral and emotional dimensions and comparatively less attention to cognitive and social dimensions. These results provide insights into the practices of teachers in engaging young learners in primary school classrooms and highlight the need for a balanced use of strategies across all dimensions of engagement. The findings suggest that teacher training programs should emphasize the importance of addressing all dimensions of learner engagement, encouraging a more comprehensive approach to fostering engagement in the classroom.

Keywords: Engagement-promoting strategies, learner engagement, primary schools, Vietnam, young learners.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Many stakeholders would agree that learners are unlikely to achieve high proficiency in a second language (L2) if they do not actively participate in a meaningful interaction and devote their dedication, enthusiasm, and effort to the language learning process (Mercer, 2019; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). A surge in research interest among L2 scholars concerning engaging language learners in classrooms, driven partly by the increase in digital and social media distractions, has been witnessed in recent years (Teravainen-Goff, 2022; Vo, 2023). Moreover, educators, particularly those in East Asian contexts, struggle with motivational issues, notably in encouraging English language speaking among young language learners (Copland et al., 2014; Garton et al., 2011). This has led to a greater focus on identifying teaching strategies that effectively promote learner engagement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020), especially with young learners (YLS). Therefore, understanding the specific strategies teachers use to promote learner engagement in classrooms is essential for enhancing the quality of language instruction and fostering a more engaging learning environment for young learners.

The significance of learner engagement in language learning has driven research into teachers' perceptions of engagement and the strategies they employ to enhance it in various classroom settings (e.g., Aliabadi & Weisi, 2023; H. P. T. Le & Macalister, 2024; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2022; Sulis & Philp, 2021; Zulfikar et al., 2022). Recently, there has been a growing interest in investigating engagement-promoting strategies specifically within primary school classrooms in East Asian EFL contexts. Various engagement-promoting strategies used in classrooms at primary schools have been documented in the literature, such as those in Japan (e.g., Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2020) and in Vietnam (e.g., Dao et al., 2024). While these studies provide valuable insights, they primarily document strategies to enhance overall classroom engagement, such as using varied and interactive activities, giving clear instructions, balancing warmth and discipline, providing immediate rewards, and offering verbal praise. However, only few studies have offered a thorough, systematic analysis of how these strategies are applied throughout the entire lessons for EFL learners, and how they manifest across the various dimensions of engagement (e.g., Aliabadi & Weisi, 2023; Zulfikar et al., 2022).

There is, thus, a clear need for more empirical evidence from EFL classrooms that delves into the specific strategies used to foster engagement across intact, full-length lessons. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the strategies employed by primary school teachers in their EFL classes to promote engagement and by analyzing how these strategies manifest across the dimensions of engagement identified in the existing literature (Hiver et al., 2024; Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Sang & Hiver, 2021). By systematically examining classroom practices, this study aims to provide deeper insights into how engagement is cultivated among young learners throughout the complete lessons. More specifically, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What engagement-promoting strategies do teachers employ in their EFL classes at primary schools?
2. How do these strategies manifest across dimensions of engagement?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Learner Engagement in L2 Classrooms

Learner engagement, as a vital antecedent of learning outcomes, has been extensively explored in educational psychology and has quite recently caught the attention of language acquisition scholars (Mercer, 2019; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). In the field of applied linguistics, earlier conceptualizations of the engagement construct have only acknowledged one or more of its components: behavioral engagement, which is operationalized in terms of learners' talk quantity (e.g., Bygate & Samuda, 2009; Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000) and cognitive engagement, which is operationalized in terms of language-related episodes (e.g.,

Storch, 2008). However, more recent studies (e.g., Lambert et al., 2017; Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Svalberg, 2009) acknowledged that this construct could be operationalized in a more sophisticated way, with several interconnected components (behavioral, cognitive, social, and emotional). Svalberg (2009) conceptualized engagement with language (EWL) as “a cognitive, and/or affective, and/or social state and a process in which the learner is the agent, and the language is the object and maybe the vehicle or a means of communication” (p. 244). Recently, Philp and Duchesne (2016, p. 51), informed by the educational psychology, defined task engagement as “a state of heightened attention and involvement in which participation is reflected not only in the cognitive dimension, but in social, behavioral, and affective dimensions as well”.

Despite variations in the definition of L2 engagement, there exists a consensus among L2 engagement researchers regarding its multidimensional and interrelated nature, which is comprising at least three components of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement (Zhou et al., 2021). Behavioral engagement involves observable behaviors while learners are on-task as well as the quantity and quality of their participation and involvement in L2 learning activities (Hiver et al., 2020; Skinner et al., 2008, 2009). Cognitive engagement is related to the mental effort learners invest in the learning process, demonstrated through deliberate and sustained attention, as well as the mental energy they applied to achieve learning goals (Reeve, 2012; Sang & Hiver, 2021). Emotional engagement refers to positive emotions, such as interest, enjoyment, and willingness to participate (Hiver et al., 2024; Skinner et al., 2009; Svalberg, 2009). Within the context of language learning, the social dimension assumes an important role in learners’ language learning process. Social engagement includes participation and interaction with interlocutors and the quality of such social interaction (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2011; Mercer, 2019). It constitutes the fourth dimension in Philp and Duchesne’s (2016) multidimensional framework, alongside cognitive, behavioral, and emotional dimensions. Although the level of each engagement component varies with respect to each individual learner and context, Mercer (2019, p. 4) proposed that “true engagement necessitates all three components”, thereby characterizing how students act, think, and feel in the L2 classroom.

2.2 Teachers’ Strategies for Promoting Learner Engagement in L2 Classrooms

The importance of learner engagement for language learning has triggered investigations into teachers’ perceptions of engagement and the strategies they use to enhance engagement. Such research has identified various strategies teachers employed to promote general engagement and to address factors that hinder it in the classrooms. For example, Sulis and Philp (2021) investigated French learners in a British university and found that teachers used multiple strategies to promote learner engagement in L2 classrooms. These strategies included, for example, designing tasks that require interaction, collaboration, and cognitive challenges as well as providing support and guidance to address those task-built-in challenges.

Other studies have investigated strategies teachers employed to promote learner engagement in response to factors that were found to hinder it in L2 classrooms (e.g., Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2022; Teravainen-Goff, 2022). Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2022) found that Polish teachers believed adult learner engagement was influenced by both internal factors (e.g., personality and characteristic) and external factors (e.g., teachers’ approach and teaching style). To enhance engagement, teachers recommended various strategies, such as manipulating task design (e.g., breaking activities into smaller steps and ensuring tasks with active participation), adjusting task implementation (e.g., using small groups and allowing for preparation time), as well as employing social strategies (e.g., showing respect and offering praise). Similarly, Teravainen-Goff (2022) interviewed teachers from England and Finland to identify factors preventing motivated learners from engaging in classroom activities, so that engagement-promoting strategies built around those factors could be suggested. The study suggested that engagement-promoting strategies could address six major areas: task designs (i.e., recognizing disengaging tasks and creating engaging tasks), inherent difficulty of language learning, low self-efficacy and confidence, conflicting priorities, peer and teacher influences, and teaching styles.

While the above studies investigated strategies to enhance overall classroom engagement and identified engagement-promoting strategies to address hindering factors, only a few studies examined typical teaching practices to identify strategies used to promote classroom engagement. [Aliabadi and Weisi \(2023\)](#) analyzed strategies used by Iranian EFL teachers at three language institutes to enhance learner engagement through teachers' talk. Video recordings of whole-class sessions revealed diverse strategies across multiple dimensions. For behavioral engagement, teachers used encouraging language, rewards, and motivational techniques. Emotional engagement was promoted through positive thinking, goal setting, self-talk, and self-assessment. Cognitive engagement strategies included implementing a collaborative approach, engaging in self-assessment, seeking information about learning strategies, and promoting learner autonomy. For agentic engagement, teachers considered language learning needs, discussed these needs with learners, and respected their input. [Zulfikar et al. \(2022\)](#) analyzed Indonesian EFL teachers' use of questioning strategies to promote secondary school students' engagement. The results revealed that teachers used various questioning strategies, such as icebreaking activities and simple quizzes to attract learners' attention. Other effective strategies found by both teachers and students for promoting productive language learning included using repetition, simplifying content, breaking tasks into smaller parts, structuring questions, responding to students' answers with rewards or compliments, using the native language, and providing wait time.

Although much research has investigated strategies to foster engagement across diverse contexts, there remains a notable gap in understanding engagement promotion with young learners in intact classrooms. [Oga-Baldwin and Nakata's \(2020\)](#) study emerged as a pioneering effort in this regard, delving into teachers' perspectives and strategies aimed at fostering engagement among primary EFL learners in intact classrooms. Using a survey and classroom observations, they found that the engagement of young Japanese learners of English varied across classes and that teachers used various strategies to engage them. These engagement-promoting strategies included, for example, maintaining appropriate pacing, using interactive routines and short activities, balancing diverse classroom tasks across multiple modalities, ensuring instructional clarity, demonstrating a warm but strict teacher presence during activities, and involving homeroom teachers. A more recent study by [Dao et al. \(2024\)](#) identified three key strategies used by EFL primary school teachers in Vietnam to promote classroom engagement. The strategies included creating excitement for learning, rewarding children often and immediately, and giving children verbal praises.

While studies like [Oga-Baldwin and Nakata \(2020\)](#) and [Dao et al. \(2024\)](#) shed light on strategies for promoting overall classroom engagement, they did not thoroughly examine the comprehensive structure or implementation of full-length lessons. A deeper investigation into how specific strategies unfold throughout an entire lesson, and how they manifest across different dimensions of engagement, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of their effectiveness. This approach could also yield a more nuanced understanding of which engagement-promoting strategies are used and how they are applied in EFL classes at primary schools.

2.3 English Education at Primary School Level in Vietnam

Engagement in foreign language classes is a central issue in teaching English to children in Vietnam. Currently, English language education in primary schools in Vietnam and elsewhere is focused on increasing engagement and enhancing the experience with English ([Butler, 2015](#); [M. D. Le et al., 2021](#); [Nguyen, 2018](#); [Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2020](#)). As outlined in the new English primary school curriculum established by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), the key objective of the curriculum for teaching foreign languages to primary school students was to cultivate lasting motivation for English learning through active participation in communicative activities ([Ministry of Education and Training \[MOET\], 2010](#)). To achieve this objective, the curriculum increased the number of teaching sessions from two to four sessions per week. It designated communicative language teaching (CLT) as the primary approach and placed an emphasis on developing learners' oral proficiency ([MOET, 2010](#)). However, there remains a

notable gap in understanding how teachers effectively promote learner engagement in their current instructional practices.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative multi-method approach for data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002) and grounded analysis procedures (Charmaz, 2006) to interpret the findings. Multiple data collection methods were employed, including observations, field notes, stimulated recalls, and semi-structured interviews. By triangulating these diverse data sources, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how teachers foster engagement among young learners in EFL classes at primary schools.

3.2 Research Context

The study was conducted at five public primary schools in southern Vietnam. These schools had implemented the new English language curriculum issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) since 2010. Under this curriculum, English became a compulsory subject for all school students starting in Grade 3 (age 8). All schools used the same textbook series – Global Success – in accordance with the new curriculum (Hoang et al., 2022). Textbooks for each grade (3-5) contained 20 units, each of which contained three lessons and six activities per lesson. The textbook series adhered to the MOET-approved syllabus and developed basic English skills through a topic-based approach, with a strong emphasis on listening and speaking at the early levels to create an enjoyable English language learning experience (Hoang et al., 2022). The selected teachers were teaching the third and the fourth grades. One lesson in a textbook unit was taught over two classroom lessons (i.e. two teaching periods) with each meeting lasting 35 minutes (grade 3) and 40 minutes (grade 4).

3.3 Research Participants

The participants in this study were six Vietnamese English teachers from five public primary schools in Mekong Delta province in Vietnam. They were purposely selected to reflect a variety of teaching grades, teaching experiences, geographical regions, and genders (Table 1). Among them, four teachers were female and two were male, reflecting the general career trend in Vietnam where women were more likely to work as primary English teachers (Nguyen, 2018). The chosen participant also represented two types of schools (rural and urban). A greater number of teachers were chosen from rural schools because such schools are more prevalent than urban schools in the local provincial context of the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. All participants held a bachelor's degree in English language teaching, and their proficiency was reported to be at B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The schools were chosen to reflect diverse educational contexts within the region, particularly in terms of school location. The selected teachers shared a common proficiency level and received similar training in curriculum and textbook implementation, making them representative of teachers in the region. The teachers further consented to have their classes video-recorded. They also informed parents of their students about the video recording of the lessons. All parents agreed to have their children recorded.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants.

Teacher	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6
Age	34	34	32	35	37	32
Gender	F	F	F	M	F	M
Teaching experience (years)	8	8	7	10	13	7

Table 1 continued...

School setting	Urban	Urban	Rural	Rural	Rural	Rural
Teaching grade	3	3	3	4	4	4

Note. T = teacher, F = Female; M = Male

3.4 Instruments

3.4.1 Classroom observation and field notes

Classroom observation was an important source of data for this study, providing in-depth insights into teaching strategies and students' responses. Given the emphasis in qualitative research on unstructured and naturalistic observation, the researchers played an active role in the data collection process (Punch, 2009). To facilitate this, an observation sheet was developed to be flexible, allowing adaptation to various lesson contexts rather than prescribing specific strategies from the literature (see Appendix A). This flexibility enabled researchers to identify and document relevant data during each lesson, including the strategies employed by the teacher and comments on the students' responses. Reflections on the effectiveness of the lessons in promoting engagement were also documented through unstructured field notes. To enhance the accuracy of the data, the completed observation sheets were cross-checked with video recordings of the lessons and field notes.

A total of twelve lessons were observed over a three-month period. All lessons were video and audio recorded. Every teacher contributed two lesson videos, each lasting 35-40 minutes. The recordings were later used for stimulated recall sessions. As noted earlier, the observed lessons were drawn from the same textbook series for Grade 3 and 4 learners. While the lessons were skill-integrated, each emphasized a particular language skill or language feature. Of the twelve lessons, seven focused on speaking, three on listening, and two on pronunciation. Despite having different focuses, all observed lessons followed a similar procedure of 1) reviewing previously learned vocabulary, 2) engaging children in interactive, game-based activities to practice the vocabulary and stimulate interest in the presentation stage, 3) eliciting the picture(s) to lead to the main practice activities in the practice stage, 4) facilitating interactive activities for skill and language practice, and 5) implementing game-based activities for freer language practice in the production stage. This procedure reflected the implementation of Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT) approach following the design of the textbook lessons for primary and secondary school learners in Vietnam (Bui & Newton, 2022; Tran et al., 2023). This approach, according to Ellis (2009, p. 224), "utilizes a structural syllabus and typically involves 'PPP' (presentation-practice-production)". Teachers were observed to follow this procedure as an overall framework for the lesson design, as also noted in previous studies (e.g., Bui & Newton, 2022; Cao, 2019; Tran et al., 2023). However, they also integrated additional elements, such as vocabulary reviews and competitive, game-based activities to promote language practice at various stages of the lessons.

3.4.2 Stimulated recalls and semi-structured interviews

After each lesson was recorded, a stimulated recall (SR) interview was conducted within 48 hours. The stimulated recall protocol followed the procedure suggested by Gass and Mackey (2013). Each teacher watched a recording of their lesson(s) during the SR session at their own pace, and they were asked to recall their thoughts at the time. While viewing the recordings, the teachers were asked to stop after each activity to describe what they were doing, identify the strategies they used to promote learner engagement, and describe how engagement was fostered. A total of twelve audio-recorded stimulated recall sessions ranging from 40 to 50 minutes in length was used. Following each SR session, the teachers were invited to a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 30 to 40 minutes. The interview protocol was designed to elicit deeper insights into the strategies observed during the lessons and to encourage teachers to reflect on their rationale and perceived effectiveness. More specifically, the interview questions focused

on why particular strategies were chosen, how these strategies contributed to learner engagement in specific activities, how teachers evaluated their effectiveness, as well as how learner engagement was observed or interpreted in practice (see Appendix B). Both the SR sessions and semi-structured interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the teachers' first language, to facilitate more fluent and comfortable expression. All but two of the interviews took place on the same day, typically in the school's staff room. The remaining two was conducted the following day.

3.5 Data Analysis

All video-recorded lessons, field notes, and oral responses from stimulated recalls and semi-structured interviews underwent transcription, typing, and thorough cross-checking by the first two authors, who also served as coders. The first coder adopted a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to systematically examine the data. Initially, all sources, including classroom notes, video lesson transcripts, SR transcripts, and semi-structured interview transcripts were subjected to inductive coding in order to identify the engagement-promoting strategies used in each lesson. This involved a repeated review of the data, allowing patterns and themes to emerge without being constrained by predefined categories. The first coder began by carefully reading through each data source multiple times to become deeply familiar with the content. During this phase, segments of the data that indicated specific teacher actions, techniques, or activities aimed at fostering learner engagement were highlighted and marked as potential codes. Following this initial coding, explanations provided during the semi-structured interviews regarding the rationale for each strategy were analyzed and subsequently coded according to the established dimensions of engagement.

The final stage involved aligning specific strategies with each dimension of engagement (behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social). For example, the strategy of 'rewarding stickers' was categorized under behavioral engagement with the rationale 'to encourage active participation', while the strategy of 'using fun board games for language practice' was placed under emotional engagement with the rationale 'to create an enjoyable classroom atmosphere'. The teachers' explanations were also compared with the observational data to ensure triangulation. For inter-coder reliability, the second coder independently followed the same coding procedure as the first coder did, as described above, for coding the data set. The two coders discussed the differences until both achieved agreement on all coding results. This iterative process ensured the accuracy and reliability of the thematic analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results presented in this section concern the strategies the teachers used to promote learner engagement in their EFL classrooms as well as how these strategies manifested across the four dimensions of engagement: behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social. The explanation in this section starts with the answer to the first research question related to the specific strategies employed, followed by an analysis of how these strategies manifested across the four dimensions of engagement (the answer of the second research question).

4.1 Strategies for Promoting Engagement in EFL Classes at Primary Schools

The first research question explored the engagement-promoting strategies the teachers employed in their classes. The analysis of data from classroom observations (including video recordings), field notes, stimulated recall sessions, and semi-structured interviews revealed that the teachers drew on a diverse pool of strategies to promote engagement across the three stages of instruction: Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP) in all 12 lessons (referred as L1-L12). Table 2 shows this sequence with the specific strategies employed in each stage (i.e., stage-specific strategies), as well as those consistently applied across all three stages of a lesson.

Table 2 shows that, following the PPP sequence, all 12 lessons were started with a vocabulary review activity which was supplemented with colorful flash cards or digital pictures on PPT lesson slides, or gestures to engage children right at the beginning. The vocabulary review activities, followed by fun games supplemented with physical objects were employed by all participant teachers across the 12 lessons. For example, T6 carried out a familiar game called ‘Slap the Board’ but provided children with a colorful plastic hammer to slap on words, which was observed to excite children immediately at the sight of the hammer. T3 brought in two colorful balls of blue and red for a “Passing a Ball” game. Other teachers, however, preferred digital games presented on PPT slides with colorful and lively images. Next, all teachers used a similar strategy of using visuals, gestures, or objects to pre-teach new vocabulary before introducing the main practice activities in the practice stage. Observation data indicated that the brightly colorful pictures presented via means of flashcards or PPT slides as well as funny gestures and objects could capture children’s interest and attention effectively.

The practice stage involved the implementation of the practice activities in the lesson. They included, for example, ‘Listen, point and say’ for a speaking-focused lesson or ‘Listen and circle’ for a listening-focused or pronunciation lesson. To engage children in the speaking-focused lesson, all teachers paired children for a drill practice of the target pattern after listening to a model conversation. They all shared the strategy of pairing a stronger peer with a weaker one for this activity. For a listening activity, two teachers (T3 & T4) grouped children to make guesses for their choice of answers before starting a listening activity. These two teachers and T5 engaged children in a sharing activity by pairing or grouping children to share answers after completing the task.

When it came to the production stage, all teachers engaged children in fun language games of various kinds as an effective strategy to engage them in language practice. Analysis of observation data showed that these games were mostly aimed at providing additional opportunities for practice and enjoyment. Most games were whole-class activities, led by the teacher with all children actively engaged. Other games were played by small groups of children, taking turns in groups of 3, 4 or 5. To engage children more effectively, T3 supplemented the practice activity in the production stage with fun music and colorful puppets. Many of the games in this stage were designed on PPT slides and aimed to provide opportunities for drill practice. Only three of the games provided freer and more meaningful practice, conducted by T4, T5 and T6. For example, T6 invited children to describe a friend in the class while children in the other team guessed who that child was.

Table 2. Engagement-promoting strategies used across the twelve lessons.

Strategy	Frequency											
	T1		T2		T3		T4		T5		T6	
	L1	L2	L1	L2	L1	L2	L1	L2	L1	L2	L1	L2
Presentation stage												
Supplementing vocabulary review activities with brightly colored visuals (physical or digital) or objects.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Using fun games (e.g., board or digital) for vocabulary review practices and warmers.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Using flash cards, gestures, and objects to pre-teach new vocabulary items.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Practice stage												
Pairing/grouping (a) stronger learner (s) with (a)weaker one (s) for language practice.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Pairing/grouping learners to make guesses of answers before doing a task (e.g., listen and circle).					√		√	√				
Pairing/grouping children to share answers after a task.					√	√	√	√	√	√		

Table 2 continued...

Production stage												
Using fun board games (e.g., Miming, Hidden picture) and digital games (e.g., Let's clean-up, Lucky number) for freer practice of structural pattern or pronunciation practice.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Supplementing freer practice activities with puppets, fun animals, and music.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Strategies used across all stages												
Rewarding individuals/groups with physical objects (e.g., stickers, stars).	√	√	√	√	√						√	√
Praising using encouraging words/phrases (e.g., Well-done! Good job!) or clapping a short rhythm to praise the winning team (i.e., A A A Yeah Yeah Yeah Oh Yeah!).	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Asking learners to clap hands after each attempt to answer a teacher's question.					√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Promoting a sense of achievement (e.g., Yes, you can. Don't be afraid of making mistakes!).	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Asking learners to give comments to peers' answers or performances.					√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Adding competitive elements to activities (i.e., dividing class into teams/groups and decide the winning group after a competitive activity/game).			√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√

Note. T=Teacher; L = Lesson

Apart from the strategies exclusively applied in each of the main stages of a lesson, a variety of strategies were consistently applied across all stages of the lessons to captivate and maintain children's attention and interest. The most used strategy among these was the use of praise. Across all 12 lessons, teachers frequently utilized encouraging phrases such as 'Well done!' and 'Good job!' to motivate and acknowledge children's efforts. Interestingly, to praise the winning team, T3, T4 and T5 clapped hands together with their children and initiated a spirited chant 'A A A Yeah, Yeah Yeah, Oh Yeah' when, for example, team A won the game. Another common strategy employed was to promote a sense of competence among children, particularly those who may struggle in learning. When discovering that a child was slow to respond to a question or engage in an ask-and answer practice activity, these teachers tried to encourage them by uttering an encouraging statement, such as 'Yes, you can', 'Keep talking', or 'Don't be afraid of making mistakes'. Next, adding elements of competition to the activities was also found to engage children effectively. All teachers assigned children to groups so that volunteers of a correct answer will contribute scores to the groups. T1 and T2 summed up scores for groups and delivered stickers to each member of the winning group at the end of the lesson. Finally, all teachers (except T4 and T5) rewarded children with stickers or stars. Four teachers (T3, T4, T5 & T6) asked children to clap hands to compliment peers for their attempts to volunteers' answers and give comments to peers' answers or performances.

4.2 Manifestation of Strategies Used across Dimensions of Engagement

After detailing the strategies employed to promote engagement in their respective lessons, the teachers were invited to explain the rationale behind each strategy and its impact on learner engagement. Their explanation during the semi-structured interview revealed their orientation toward various dimensions of engagement, but with a much greater focus on promoting behavioral and emotional dimensions of engagement. Table 3 below provides a summary of the rationale behind the teachers' selected strategies and their alignment with different dimensions of engagement.

Table 3. Strategies used across dimensions of engagement.

Teacher	Strategy	Summary of Teachers' Explanations	Dimension			
			BE	EE	CE	SE
Presentation stage						
1-6	Supplementing vocabulary review activities with brightly colored visuals or objects.	Encourage active participation (i.e., raise hands to volunteer answers); capture and keep learners' attention; get learners hooked.	√			
1-6	Using fun board games or digital games for vocabulary review activities and warmers.	Get learners hooked and excited; encourage active participation; and sustain focus.	√	√		
1-6	Using flash cards, gestures, and objects to pre-teach new vocabulary items.	Capture and keep learners' attention; keep them focused and interested; get them think to figure out the meaning of the new word.	√	√		
Practice stage						
1-6	Pairing/grouping (a) stronger learner (s) with (a)weaker one (s) for language practice.	Initiate the interaction; involve the weaker peer.	√			
2,4,5,6		Encourage mutual support (i.e., correcting mistakes for peers, providing prompts; checking each other's work).				√
3,4	Grouping/pairing learners to make guesses of answers before doing a task.	Keep them think and be focused; arouse their curiosity.	√			
3,4,5	Grouping/pairing learners to share answers after a task.	Encourage recalling of what they had learned; make them focus hard; promote deep thinking.			√	
Production stage						
1-6	Using fun board games or digital games for freer language practice.	Develop an enjoyable classroom atmosphere; liven up practice; keep learners interested and focused; encourage active participation.	√	√		
2,4,6		Motivate learners as they can use what they have learned to talk about things or people relevant to them; keep learners interested; encourage learners to participate, encourage recall.	√	√	√	√
1-6	Supplementing freer practice activities (i.e., fun games) with fun animals, puppets, or music.	Maintain focus and interest; increase motivation; make them feel happy and participate more actively.	√	√		
Strategies used across all stages						
1, 2, 3, 6	Rewarding physical objects (stickers, stars).	Encourage active participation; make them feel satisfied and happy; develop a sense of achievement.	√	√		
1-6	Praising using encouraging language chunks or clapping a short rhythm to praise the winning team.	Make learners feel proud and happy; make them feel a sense of achievement; create a positive feeling.	√	√		
3,4,5,6	Asking learners to clap hands after attempting to answer a teacher's question.	Make them feel proud and happy; keep them focused.	√	√		
1-6	Promoting a sense of competence by using encouraging words/phrases.	Make them feel satisfied; encourage active participation; make them feel that they are doing something useful.	√	√		
3,4,5,6	Asking learners to give comments to peers' answer or performance.	Focus hard to be able to find faults or good points for comments; reflect on their learning; promote deep thinking and focused attention			√	
1-6	Adding competitive elements to activities (e.g., activities are structured with elements of a game)	Keep learners focused and interested; make them more willingly and eagerly to volunteer.	√	√		

Note. BE = Behavioral engagement; EE = Emotional engagement; CE = Cognitive engagement; SE = Social engagement

4.2.1 *Strategies for promoting behavioral engagement*

Behavioral engagement was examined in terms of participation, initiative-taking, and efforts (Hiver et al., 2020; Skinner et al., 2008, 2009). Analysis of the underlying rationale behind the use of each strategy uncovered a predominant focus on promoting behavioral engagement. Table 3 shows that most stage-specific strategies were employed to promote this dimension of engagement, as the teachers reasoned that they used them to ‘capture learners’ attention’, ‘encourage active participation’, and ‘maintain focus’ throughout each stage of a lesson.

Similarly, most strategies (9-14, excluding 13) used consistently across the 12 lessons were primarily aimed to promote behavioral engagement. Such strategies, as rewarding children with stickers or stars, praising them by clapping hands or rhythmic chanting, and using uplifting phrases, were all targeted to ‘encourage learners to volunteer’, ‘keep them focused’, and ‘make them more willingly and eagerly to volunteer’. T1 and T2 who regularly rewarded children with stickers shared their opinions as shown in Excerpts (1) and (2).

- (1) ‘Children really like stickers and praise. When they know that they can get a sticker for an attempt to participate, they eagerly raise their hands to volunteer. They pay more attention to questions and tasks because they want to give the right answers and get praised and rewarded’. (T1)
- (2) ‘I find that my children will participate actively in class activities for a reason. They become more eager to participate if they know that they can win something for themselves or their team’. (T2)

Finally, the other two strategies were used less frequent but were also justified as supplementary efforts to enhance behavioral engagement. Five out of six teachers (n = 5) incorporated competitive elements into their activities, such as dividing the class into teams and encouraging team members to earn points for the team. Meanwhile, two teachers (n = 2) encouraged children to guess answers to listening tasks before hearing the actual responses. These strategies collectively emphasized the teachers’ dedication to fostering behavioral engagement among young learners in their classrooms.

4.2.2 *Strategies for promoting emotional engagement*

Emotional engagement was examined in terms of positive emotions, such as interest, enjoyment, and willingness to participate (Hiver et al., 2024; Svalberg, 2009). The findings revealed an alignment between strategies for emotional engagement and those for behavioral engagement, as a substantial number of strategies consistently applied across all lesson stages were primarily aimed at enhancing behavioral engagement and subsequently nurturing emotional engagement. A summary of the teachers’ rationale for employing the strategies as outlined in Table 3 illustrates how these strategies, such as rewards, praises, and competitive elements, were used not only to encourage active participation, but also to sustain children’s motivation and interest throughout the lessons.

Moreover, games were identified as an essential strategy for fostering emotional engagement, as evidenced by their frequent integration into various stages of the lesson and their explanation for using the games. The observational data indicated that most teachers incorporated at least two games per lesson, typically for vocabulary review and target language practice in the presentation stage and production stage, respectively. These games, often led by teachers and played in large groups, were intentionally employed to cultivate a motivating classroom environment that sustained children’s interest and motivation. T6’s comment in Excerpt (3) is representative.

- (3) ‘I normally include two games in a teaching period to create a positive classroom environment. I have observed that children participate more actively, and learning feels effortless. I also noticed that the more fun it is for children, the better they will remember language learned’. (T6)

4.2.3 Strategies for promoting cognitive engagement

These strategies were examined in terms of children's mental effort and mental activity in the process of learning (Reeve, 2012; Sang & Hiver, 2021). The results showed that only two strategies were purposefully used to engage children cognitively across the 12 lessons. One was to invite children to give comments to peers. Four teachers ($n = 4$) used this strategy to promote deep thinking and focused attention, as illustrated by T3's explanation in Excerpt (4).

- (4) 'I observe that children need to focus hard to see what is right or wrong in their peers' talk so that they can volunteer to give comments as requested. This focus promotes deep thinking'. (T3)

Another strategy was to get children to share answers after a listening task, such as 'Listen and circle'. Three teachers ($n = 3$) who used this strategy in one of their lessons reported that sharing encouraged recalling of what they had listened to, thus making them focus strongly to recall and understand the task more deeply, as T4 commented in Excerpt (5).

- (5) 'I have noticed that when I inform my children in advance that they needed to share their answer with peers after listening to a task, they focus harder during the task. When working with peers, they tried to explain their choice. I believe this promotes deep thinking and understanding'. (T4)

Finally, three teachers ($n = 3$) were found to promote cognitive engagement when they engaged children in games for free language practice in the production stage. These teachers reasoned that the strategies (e.g., getting children to describe a friend in the class for others to guess or involving them in a digital game to guess what the neighbor is doing after listening to sounds from a neighboring house) engaged children in intense focus and attention. For example, T6 shared his experience when teaching his class, as in Excerpt (6).

- (6) 'When children participate in a guessing game, they're motivated to recall what they've learned. So, they try to focus hard and listen attentively. For instance, in the previous lesson, when asked to guess their friend's description, they listened attentively. The class got excited when they correctly identified the peer'. (T6)

4.2.4 Strategies for promoting social engagement

These strategies were examined in terms of the interaction with interlocutors and the quality of such social interaction (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2011; Mercer, 2019). An examination of teaching practices and the teachers' explanations revealed that all teachers adopted the approach of pairing/grouping children for language practice. However, their rationale primarily focused on initiating interaction and involving weaker peers, indicating a bias toward behavioral engagement. Strategies for promoting social engagement were purposefully used in the practice stage by four teachers ($n = 4$) when they tried to 'encourage mutual support' for controlled language practice in the practice stage, and by three teachers ($n = 3$) who engaged children in meaningful practice in the production stage as they purposely attempted to motivate meaningful communication by implementing interactive games that could drive children to talk about things or people relevant to them", as T4 and T6 shared in Excerpts (7) and (8).

- (7) 'I find that children are engaged when they are involved in interaction with peers and supported during that process'. (T4)
- (8) 'My children become more interested and more willing to interact with peers or participate when they have opportunity to talk about things relevant to them. This encourage and motivate them to try harder and be more willing to interact with peers'. (T6)

These findings show that social engagement strategies were intentionally applied to boost participation and communication. Teachers emphasized relevance and peer support as key to encouraging interaction. These strategies provided a supportive environment, building learners' confidence and sense of belonging for sustained engagement.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Engagement-promoting Strategies Used by EFL Teachers at Primary Schools

The results indicated that primary school teachers employed a variety of strategies to effectively engage their young learners throughout classroom activities. The strategies included both stage-specific ones and those consistently utilized across all stages of the lesson. Stage-specific strategies included 1) using colorful pictures or objects and engaging games during vocabulary review and pre-teaching activities to capture learners' interest and attention at the initial stage; 2) organizing mixed-level pairings for language practice, facilitating collaborative guessing and sharing of answers during the practice stage; 3) incorporating entertaining games, supplemented with puppets, objects, and music, for further and freer language practice during the production stage.

In addition to these stage-specific strategies, teachers employed various strategies primarily aimed at encouraging active participation, sustaining focus, and fostering interest across all stages of the lessons. These strategies included rewarding, praising, complementing by giving applause, nurturing a sense of competence, and providing comments on peers' performances. The results suggested a keen awareness among the teachers to employ diverse strategies to promote engagement in their classrooms. These strategies were tailored to the unique characteristics of young learners and, to some extent, reflect age-appropriate pedagogies (i.e., using artistic activities such as games, songs, and chants), as documented in [Nguyen's \(2018\)](#) study. However, unlike the findings of [Nguyen's \(2018\)](#) study, strategies that could construct age-appropriate creativity, such as bringing real-life practice to the classroom to arouse children's interest and motivation, or using artistic activities such as plays, storytellings, and drawings were not found in the current study. In alignment with prior research documenting engagement-promoting strategies (e.g., [Aliabadi & Weisi, 2023](#); [Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2022](#); [Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2020](#)), these results underscored the importance of a varied approach to engagement promotion among young learners in EFL classrooms.

5.2 Manifestation of Strategies Used across Dimensions of Engagement

The analysis of twelve selected activities and the teachers' rationale for their usage revealed variations in engagement-promoting strategies across all four dimensions of engagement in EFL classes. This finding aligned with previous research indicating that teachers employed a diverse range of strategies to promote different dimensions of engagement in their classes (e.g., [Aliabadi & Weisi, 2023](#)). However, a predominant emphasis on fostering behavioral and emotional engagement among young learners was evident in this study. This emphasis on behavioral engagement, where teachers primarily paid attention to the learners' behavioral aspects, was consistent with research on both adult learner engagement (e.g., [Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2022](#); [Sulis, 2022](#); [Sulis & Philp, 2021](#)) and young learner engagement (e.g., [Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2020](#)). One possible explanation for this focus on strategies to promote behavioral engagement lies in the concept of attention, which is the core component of this engagement type ([Skinner et al., 2009](#)). Moreover, capturing and sustaining children's attention are primary concerns for primary school teachers due to children's short attention spans ([Cameron, 2001](#)). Furthermore, the teachers' emphasis on strategies to promote emotional engagement, such as excitement and enthusiasm, reflected their understanding of the characteristics of young learners who enjoyed 'fun' elements in their learning, often facilitated through games, playful competitions, and entertaining chantings ([Pinter, 2006](#); [Wingate, 2016](#)).

The finding that teachers engaged children in play activities or games to stimulate interest and bring enjoyment also aligned with finding from numerous studies with young learners in various East Asian contexts ([M. D. Le et al., 2021](#); [Nguyen, 2018](#); [Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2020](#)). However, [Oga-Baldwin and Nakata \(2020\)](#) found that teachers in their study planned activities as games to create enjoyment (i.e., emotional engagement), but their overemphasis on enjoyment failed to drive authentic engagement ([Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020](#)) and to create opportunities for

learning. Similarly, [M. D. Le et al. \(2021\)](#) also noted that primary EFL teachers in Vietnam “considered child-friendly activities [mostly games] as ways of brightening up the class rather than for communicative purposes” (p. 217). [Wingate \(2016\)](#) claimed that while emotional engagement was crucial for young learners, it is essential to note that excessive games without challenges may merely mask form-focused exercises and that such ‘fun’ activities, when teacher-led and controlled, may not effectively foster (L2) development. Likewise, a common strategy of using rewards, such as stickers and stars was observed to encourage learners’ active participation and interest (i.e., behavioral and emotional engagement) and develop a feeling of achievement. However, as [Mercer and Dörnyei \(2020\)](#) also suggested, rewarding strengthened only extrinsic motivation. Therefore, developing intrinsic motivation through strategies, such as incorporating individual choice and teamwork should be encouraged.

In addition, teachers involved children in pair and group work during both practice and production stages, with many of these activities taking the form of interactive games. However, a significant portion of the interactive pattern practice and some game-based activities primarily engaged learners in repetitive drills. It is also important to note that teachers largely promoted these interactions to foster behavioral engagement among young learners (i.e., get them to participate and involve). In contrast, strategies aimed at promoting more authentic social engagement, characterized by meaningful exchanges and mutual support among learners, were limited. The results emphasized the importance for language teachers to recognize the distinction between superficial engagement and authentic one ([Hiver et al., 2024; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020](#)) or between procedural engagement (i.e., a sort of superficial, pseudo-engagement) and substantive engagement (i.e., an authentic, intrinsic, and sustained commitment to learning) ([Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991](#)). As also stated by [Harris and Bradshaw \(2017\)](#), the ultimate objective was not merely to ensure children are “on task”, but rather to immerse them in meaningful interactions conducive to learning. It is important for teachers to use strategies that go beyond keeping children merely active since the teachers need to promote meaningful engagement through communicative tasks which better lead to learning ([Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020](#)). The potential increase in the use of these strategies for young learners is supported by previous research indicating that primary school or young learners can successfully engage in learner-led and communicative tasks ([Pinter, 2006](#)).

This study presents significant pedagogical implications. Firstly, the findings highlight the need to raise teachers’ awareness of the strategies that effectively promote engagement within their classrooms. This awareness is essential for advocating a balanced approach to fostering young learners’ engagement, ensuring equal emphasis on behavioral, cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions rather than prioritizing only behavioral and emotional aspects. Secondly, teachers must be able to distinguish between authentic and superficial engagement as well as understand the different learning outcomes they produce. Finally, teachers should focus on developing both practical ‘hands-on’ skills and intellectual ‘heads-on’ abilities in young learners, as mere behavioral engagement is insufficient for achieving true knowledge and proficiency ([Skinner & Pitzer, 2012](#)). Therefore, it is crucial to incorporate training that helps teachers understand the construct of learner engagement and its various dimensions, as well as the specific strategies that effectively enhance the learning experience of young learners.

6. CONCLUSION

This study investigated teaching practices during whole-class lessons to shed light on strategies teachers used to promote young learner engagement. The results revealed that teachers employed various engagement-promoting strategies in their teaching practices in intact classes. These strategies appeared to be specific to the characteristics of young learners and manifest across all four dimensions of engagement. However, these strategies were primarily focused on promoting behavioral and emotional engagement (as opposed to social and cognitive aspects).

This study has some limitations. Firstly, the sample size is quite small, six teachers from five schools. The limited number of teachers may not adequately represent the broader population,

despite potentially encompassing diverse perspectives and practices from teachers in both urban and rural settings. Future studies should examine a greater number of teachers and schools to enhance generalizability. Secondly, the study's sole reliance on qualitative measures may limit its ability to fully capture the range of engagement-promoting strategies. Thirdly, by primarily focusing on the teachers' perspectives, the study overlooks valuable insights that learners could contribute to potentially enhance an understanding of engagement each strategy employed. Finally, while the study sheds light on engagement-promoting strategies from an observational and qualitative perspective, it fails to address the crucial link between these strategies and subsequent L2 learning outcomes. This emphasizes the need for further research aiming at establishing any direct causal relationship between engagement-promoting strategies for young learners and their L2 learning outcomes. Regardless of these limitations, this investigation is particularly important due to the under-researched nature of an EFL context, such as Vietnam and the scarcity of research on promoting engagement among young learners. The findings have implications for teacher professional development, curriculum design, and policymaking in EFL contexts, ultimately aiming to enhance the quality of English language education for EFL young learners.

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APPENDIX A

Observation Sheet

A. Information

Date and time:
Grade level:
Lesson title:
Skill-focus:
Aims of the lesson:
Teacher's name:

B. Observation Protocol

Time	Stage	Strategy	Description of strategy	Comments on Learners' Engagement

APPENDIX B

Semi-structured Interview Prompts

- (1) Why did you choose to implement this particular strategy [specific strategy] for the lesson?
- (2) In what ways do you think [specific strategy] contributed to student engagement in this activity?
- (3) How do you evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies you use to promote engagement?
- (4) How would you describe an engaged learner in your classroom?

Note:

These initial interview prompts were often followed by follow-up questions, such as ‘Can you elaborate your answer regarding . . .’, or ‘What do you mean by . . .?’