Exploring EFL Teachers' Roles and Practices in Promoting Student Engagement

Juthamas Thongsongsee
juthamas.t@chula.ac.th
Chulalongkorn University Language Institute, Thailand

Abstract

This case study is aimed at exploring EFL teachers' perceptions of their roles and practices in promoting student engagement in both conventional and online classes in the Thai context. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with a total of eight EFL teachers (four Thai, and four non-Thai) working at a language institute of a leading public university in Bangkok, and a focus group with three EFL teachers. Content analysis was used to analyze the data. This study concludes that "serving as a facilitator" is considered the most important role by the majority of participants as far as promoting student engagement, followed by acting as a content provider. Regarding teaching practices, the participants overwhelmingly adopted the active learning approach, and there are several factors underpinning their decisions about teaching approaches to promote student engagement including course content, course objectives, students' proficiency and learning styles, as well as course assessment. Contrary to the general assumption stating teachers' personal preconceived beliefs would affect their pedagogical choices, the participants in this study tended to focus on what appeared to work best for their students to promote their language learning rather than what they considered the commonly accepted approach to take. This study provides insights into the challenges faced by EFL teachers in promoting student engagement specifically in the online learning environment and the strategies they employed to overcome such challenges. Pedagogical implications and recommendations for further research are also provided in this study.

Keywords: EFL teachers' roles, teaching practices, student engagement, Thai EFL learners

Background and Rationale

Students' active participation is considered as an essential component in learning, especially in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, and the concept is closely related to student engagement (Rahayu, 2018). Student engagement involves student attention, interest, investment, and effort in the learning process (Marks, 2000). According to Kuh (2003), engaging learners is critical to their success, and desirable learning outcomes can be best accomplished through an active process which involves the engagement of the students throughout the learning process (Mackenzie, 2015). In

line with this is Han's (2021) assertion that language learning achievement depends heavily on student engagement, and that students who have a high level of engagement in the teaching and learning process tend to be more active in the classroom interactions and put greater effort into doing both in-class activities and outside assigned tasks, helping them be more successful in their language learning.

Student engagement is an area which has been extensively studied by many scholars due to its pivotal role in the success of the teaching and learning process in both conventional and online classes. Research shows that students learn best and retain more by actively doing, such as when they are deeply engaged in the learning process, rather than through passive learning (Carini et al., 2006; Petress, 2006). Rahayu (2018) argued that one crucial factor which influences student engagement in the classroom is the EFL teacher's teaching style or approach. Teachers should adopt an appropriate pedagogy to assist learners to increase their capacity to learn (Hargreaves, 2004). In addition, the pedagogical decisions made by the teachers can be critical to students' experiences of engagement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). This indicates that how EFL teachers conduct their classes has a significant impact on student engagement. Aside from teaching practices, Da Luz (2015) claims that teachers' less obvious roles can be fundamental to the effective teaching and learning a foreign language. Consequently, students' learning success depends on the teacher's ability to adopt a variety of appropriate roles and teaching approaches to support students' language learning (Ja, 2017).

Student engagement is influenced by contextual variations such as the learning environment or strategies employed by teachers (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019; Fredricks et al., 2004, 2019; Kahu, 2013). Numerous empirical research studies have been carried out to investigate the various aspects of EFL teacher and student engagement (e.g., Huang et al., 2022; Huy, 2022; Ja, 2017; Rahayu, 2018; Susanti, 2020). These studies put an emphasis on student engagement in class activities, student engagement in online learning, pedagogical approaches in promoting students' engagement, the relationship between teaching style and student engagement, and EFL students' views on the impact of teachers on their online learning engagement. Nevertheless, there exists a research gap within this line of inquiry as to the EFL teachers' perceptions of their own role or roles and pedagogical practices in promoting student engagement in the Thai context. In addition, few empirical studies have investigated non-Thai EFL teachers' perspectives on this issue. Therefore, the present study aims to fill this gap by exploring EFL teachers' perceptions of their roles and practices in promoting student engagement in both conventional and online classes in the Thai context.

Literature Review

Teachers' Roles

According to Wang et al. (2017), although many factors affect student engagement, teachers are always among the most influential antecedents in directing students' experience, resulting in students experiencing "less boredom and engaging more" in learning. Consequently, teachers' roles

have been the center of attention of numerous studies (Alvarez et al., 2009; Baran et al., 2011; Franklin & Harrington, 2019; Maor, 2003). Teachers must play not just one, but several important roles in the learning process, including those of the authority figure, leader, knower, director, manager, counselor, guide and even other roles as friend or parent at the same time, and some of those roles become more prominent than others from the students' point of view (Brown, 2007). Brown (2007) further asserts that the teachers' roles become increasingly important over time since they influence the entire process of teaching and learning in the effort to become more effective, which in turn determines the outcome of the teaching and learning process (p. 251). For the purposes of this study, Aydin (2005)'s clarification of teachers' roles, which include content expert, process facilitator, instructional designer, adviser, technologist, assessor, material producer and administrator, were used as the principal theoretical framework to classify EFL teachers' adopted roles.

Teachers' Pedagogical Practices

Students' ability and readiness to learn does not only depend on the students themselves, but also the suitability of a teacher's teaching approach (Felder & Henrique, 1995). This is because the English teaching and learning process involves two main active variables in the classroom, namely teachers and students. Teachers play a significant role in selecting instructional activities to help students achieve the learning objectives. The teacher's selection of classroom activities and the implementation of effective pedagogies provides a significant opportunity to influence student engagement and motivation (Collie et al., 2016; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In line with this, Huba and Freed (2000) asserted that if the teacher expects the students to be engaged and participate in the learning process actively, the teacher needs to modify their teaching approach to enhance the students' engagement in the classroom activities so that the students interact deeply with materials given and meaningful learning can be achieved.

Many of the differences identified between levels of student engagement in the classroom can be explained by the different approaches adopted by teachers (Hospel & Garland, 2016; Jang et al., 2016). This is because these pedagogical approaches influence a student's immediate learning environment in ways that scaffold for student engagement (Franklin & Harrington, 2019). Consequently, teachers take on the important role of mediator in selecting the most suitable approaches and shaping students' learning experience (Williams & Burden, 1997). Cothran and Ennis (2000) posited that teachers mediate, or "build the bridge" to student engagement. In essence, how teachers conduct their classes, i.e., teachers' practices, have a direct impact on student engagement.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is defined as the student's psychological investment and effort put into the learning process to understand and master the materials, skills and instructions given (Newman, 1992). Consequently, engagement represents the student's psychological and cognitive effort in accomplishing

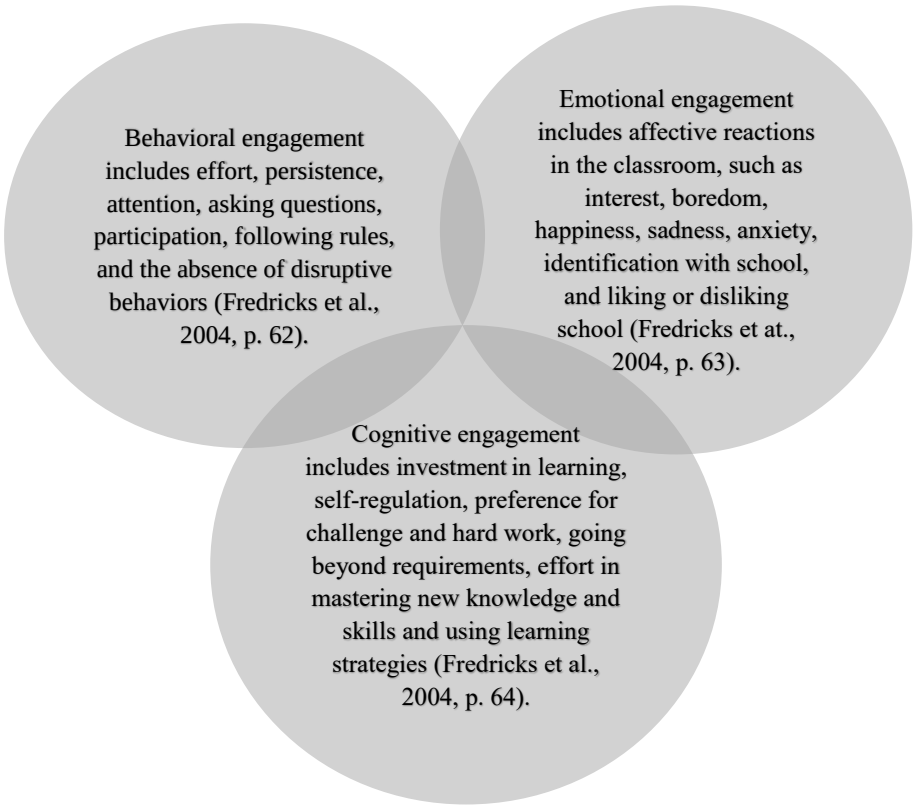
any assigned tasks. In other words, the student is cognitively and actively involved in the learning activities. Stern (1992) stated that effective learning mostly depends on the learner's conscious and intentional engagement in learning activities to achieve their goals.

Learners' engagement refers to the period in which learners are being effectively engaged with their classroom assignments and exercises (Lei et al., 2018), and it is also characterized as to what degree learners are occupied with learning in the conventional teaching cycle and alludes to the time, exertion, and energy they exert on instructive learning assignments (Chang et al., 2016). Furthermore, Hiver et al. (2021) theorized engagement to be the step in which a student is not only physically but also mentally engaged in accomplishing language learning tasks.

A number of scholars (Chang et al., 2016; Harbour et al., 2015; Lei et al., 2018) have defined student engagement as a multidimensional concept that comprises behavioral, affective (emotional), and intellectual (cognitive) engagement. Behavioral engagement refers to learners' activities and cooperation in their education, including their behavior, exertion, and association with in-class learning exercises and schoolwork (Fredricks et al., 2004). Affective (emotional) engagement entails learners' sentiments towards their institute, learning, and educators, as well as their outlooks on teaching, sense of connectedness, identification with the school, degree of attentiveness, and other feelings identified with school and learning (Hu et al., 2012). Moreover, intellectual, self-guideline, objective-coordinated, and learning techniques that learners use in scholarly assignments and learning measures are known as psychological (cognitive) engagement (Harbour et al., 2015; Hart et al., 2011; Lei et al., 2018; Quin, 2017).

Figure 1

The Construct of Student Engagement



For this study, the construct of student engagement proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004) was adopted as the operationalized definition. Behavioral engagement includes effort, persistence, attention, asking questions, participation, following rules, and the absence of disruptive behaviors. Emotional engagement includes affective reactions in the classroom, such as interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, anxiety, identification with school (belonging), and liking or disliking school. Cognitive engagement includes investment in learning, self-regulation, preference for challenge and hard work, going beyond requirements, effort in mastering new knowledge and skills and using learning strategies (Fredricks et al., 2004). This concept can be illustrated in Figure 1.

Studies on EFL Student Engagement

Due to the role of learners' engagement in resolving persistent instructive issues like low accomplishment, high dropout rates, and high levels of learner fatigue and aggression, there have been several investigations into engagement in the classroom in recent decades (Boekaerts, 2016; Fredricks, 2015). Sun and Rueda (2012) emphasized the degree of cooperation in instructional exercises in learners' engagement. Since engagement predicts students' long-term educational accomplishment, it serves as a significant social indicator (Skinner et al., 2008). Investigating learners' engagement has been expanded to include a range of hypothetical practices. To investigate the connection between context-oriented components, patterns of engagement and change, some researchers have utilized persuasive hypotheses like self-determination, self-guideline, flow, objective hypothesis and expectance-value (Fredricks et al., 2016).

In a recent study conducted by Huy (2022), which explored EFL undergraduates' views of the impact teachers have on their online learning engagement in Vietnam, it was found that how effectively EFL teachers perform their pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical roles has a substantial impact on their students' engagement in learning English online. Another study conducted by Huang et al. (2022) revealed that students' emotional engagement and cognitive engagement in activities are affected by various task features and teacher's roles. Huang et al. (2022) noted the importance of the teacher's role in affecting students' emotional engagement in certain activities such as a teacher's Q&A activities, and particularly the teacher's feedback, which have a powerful influence on accelerating students' learning. In the same vein, Andrade and Brookhart (2016) assert that the teacher plays an important role in directing students' attention to learning goals and criteria. Teacher's feedback can help provide students with both knowledge and personal encouragement in this way to encourage thinking, motivate and promote learning. Meanwhile, students' confidence will be strengthened, which helps enhance their emotional engagement.

In the Thai context, Jantrasakul (2012) examined how and to what extent critical thinking-based EFL lessons helped facilitate Thai EFL students' language learning and their engagement in their fundamental English course at a tertiary level, and she concluded that the teaching approach initiated access to the target language use and the personal "voice" development, resulting in full engagement

and willingness to take extra steps in their language learning. In another study, Manprasert (2017) investigated Thai EFL learners' and teachers' perceptions of the teacher's role in promoting English language learning autonomy with social media. The findings emphasized the significant role of the EFL teachers in selecting appropriate social media and monitoring students' engagement with such media to promote learner autonomy. Although her study focused on promoting learner autonomy, student engagement and learner autonomy are interrelated constructs contributing to students' success in their language learning. As Benson (2011) pointed out, factors such as learners' active participation in their own learning process and their opportunities to select and make decisions may foster autonomous learning, and that learners' active participation reflects all the three facets of student engagement as proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004). Former studies carried out in Thailand tend to focus on either the EFL teachers' roles or their teaching approaches, yet this present study aims to explore those two key interrelated aspects in promoting student engagement in both conventional and online classes. Consequently, this study aims to provide answer to the following research questions:

1. What are EFL teachers' perceptions of their roles in promoting student engagement in both conventional and online classes?
2. How do EFL teachers conduct their conventional and online classes to promote student engagement?
3. What are the practical strategies adopted by EFL teachers in tackling the challenges in promoting student engagement in both conventional and online classes?

Research Methodology

Research Design

The present study was designed based on a qualitative approach. According to Mertens (2010), qualitative methods such as interviews, observations and document reviews are predominant in the interpretive paradigm which aims to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge, and this coincides with the method used for data collection in this study. Several different types of qualitative approaches are practiced in educational research, but this study was primarily designed based on a case study approach. Case study is a method for learning about a complex instance based on a comprehensive understanding of that instance obtained by extensive descriptions and analysis taken as a whole and in its context (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 166). Punch (2005) further clarifies that a case study aims to understand a case in depth and in its natural setting, recognizing its complexity and its context. It also has a holistic focus, aiming to preserve and understand the wholeness and unity of the case (p. 150).

Context of the Study

This study was conducted at a language institute at a public university in Bangkok, Thailand. This university is one of the leading universities in the country, with around 20,000–25,000 undergraduate students and 10,000–12,000 postgraduate students. The institute has around 60 full-time teachers (45 Thai and 15 non-Thai). The language institute is primarily responsible for providing compulsory English courses to undergraduates in both the regular program and international program, as well as elective courses for graduates in all disciplines. Besides the two general English courses for freshmen, most of the courses provided are English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses which are specifically tailored to match students' specific needs in their study disciplines. All the EAP/ESP courses offered by the language institute involve 3-hour weekly class sessions. Most of the classrooms are equipped with hardware devices including computers, projectors, and visualizers, and software such as Microsoft Office programs. The university provides a strong Internet connection in all areas.

The Participants

According to King et al. (2019), when selecting the participants for a qualitative research study, the key criterion is diversity, as participants should "represent a variety of positions in relation to the research topic of a kind that might be expected to shed light on meaningful differences in experience". To reflect this, a total of eight EFL teachers consisting of four non-Thai and four Thai teachers working at the language institute were recruited by means of purposive sampling. It is believed that by including non-Thai EFL teachers, it can provide a richer and more insightful account of the teachers' perspectives on the issue under investigation in the Thai context. The participants have various educational backgrounds and teaching experience including at least two years teaching either the EAP or the ESP courses in both conventional and online classes.

Table 1

Details of the Participants

Pseudonym	**Gender**	**Age**	**Educational Background**	**Teaching Experience**
Achara (Thai)	Female	40s	M.A.	19 years
Parisa (Thai)	Female	20s	M.A.	5 years
Unyarat (Thai)	Female	40s	Ph.D.	22 years
Jirayu (Thai)	Male	30s	M.A.	7 years
Andrew (NS)	Male	40s	B.A.	10 years
Charles (NS)	Male	40s	M.A.	12 years
John (NS)	Male	50s	B.A.	17 years
Paul (NS)	Male	50s	M.A.	21 years

Note. NS = native speaker of English

Prior to participating in the study, formal consent forms were distributed to the participants to inform them of the research details and objectives. Guided semi-structured interview questions and focus group questions were also included to help the participants make an informed decision as to whether they wished to take part in the study. After each participant had agreed to participate and given consent, an interview was scheduled and conducted. To protect the participants' identities and anonymity, pseudonyms were used when describing their recorded answers, and an age range was used instead of reporting specific ages. Details about the participants are illustrated in Table 1.

Research Instrument

Interview is one of the most important data collection tools in qualitative research because it is a very accurate way of accessing people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of situation and constructions of reality (Punch, 2005). There are several different types of interviews, but in this study the "semi-structured interview", as defined by Cohen et al. (2007), and focus groups were adopted. A semi-structured interview is "a type of interview which has a sequence of themes to be covered as well as suggested questions. Focus groups are a form of group interview between the interviewer and the group. The reliance is on the interaction within the group who discuss a topic supplied by the researcher" (Morgan, 1996), yielding a collective rather than an individual view. Consequently, the participants interact with each other rather than with the interviewer so that the views of the participants can emerge. According to Cohen et al. (2007), focus groups can be useful to triangulate with more traditional forms of interviewing, for example, questionnaire and observation. It is essential to note that this study focused on the teachers' perceptions of their roles and practices in promoting student engagement; thus, it does not examine the teachers' actual practices, which would require other data collections methods such as classroom recordings, classroom observations or log file data as suggested by Scherer et al. (2020).

Regarding the guided interview questions for the semi-structured interviews and the focus group, three teachers in the field of English Language Teaching took part as experts in the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) and reviewed the interview questions in advance to enhance the validity and reliability of the data to serve the purposes of this study. The interview questions were modified according to the experts' comments and suggestions. Ultimately, there were 10 guided interview questions created for the semi-structured interview and two questions for the focus groups (see Appendix 1).

Data Collection

To collect the qualitative data, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in English with the participants via Zoom meetings scheduled at the participants' convenience, and each interview lasted a maximum of one hour. All the interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission, and three-digit numbers were used to label each audio file. To obtain in-depth information

about the EFL teachers' perceptions of their roles in promoting student engagement and how they conducted their conventional and online classes to enhance student engagement, 10 guided questions were asked. Additional impromptu questions related to the points raised by the participants were also asked. As student engagement, the main construct of the present study, has been defined differently by several scholars, the operationalized definition of student engagement proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004) was explained at the outset of the interview to minimize any ambiguity in understanding which could negatively affect the reliability or validity of the interview responses. Although the participants had an opportunity to see the guided interview questions prior to agreeing to take part in the study, the researcher explicitly stated that they could ask the researcher to clarify any questions or issues raised during the interview that they were unclear about.

In addition to the eight in-depth semi-structured interviews, three of the EFL teachers took part in a focus group discussion conducted in English for the duration of 45 minutes via Zoom. The focus group was also scheduled at the participants' convenience. At the beginning of the focus group discussion, the researcher asked two guided questions: "Which techniques or strategies do you usually employ to enhance student engagement in your class?" and "When student engagement is low, what do you usually do?" The focus group interview was also audio-recorded with the participants' permission, and three-digit numbers were also used to label the focus group audio file.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, the researcher chose to follow Marshall and Rossman's (2014) guidelines which entail seven analytical stages: 1) organizing the data, 2) immersing in the data, 3) generating categories and themes, 4) coding the data, 5) offering interpretations, 6) searching for alternative understandings, and 7) creating a written record of the findings. Content analysis was used to group the relationships of the variables into themes to present in-depth information on the EFL teachers' perceptions of their roles and practices in promoting student engagement in both conventional and online classes in the Thai context.

The interview data from both the semi-structured interviews and the focus-group were transcribed verbatim, and data mapping was also conducted for easy cross-checking with the audio files. After organizing the data, the researcher reviewed the transcripts several times and categorized the data into six broad themes, namely teachers' roles, teachers' practices in a conventional setting, teachers' practices in an online setting, factors affecting teachers' practices, challenges faced by the EFL teachers, and strategies employed to tackle such challenges. After that, the researcher coded the data and created categories and subcategories, followed by the additional steps proposed by Marshall and Rossman (2014).

Results and Discussion

The research findings and the discussion are presented based on the three research questions as follows:

1) What are EFL teachers' perceptions of their roles in promoting student engagement in both conventional and online classes?

In this study, Aydin (2005)'s clarification of teachers' roles including content expert, process facilitator, instructional designer, adviser, technologist, assessor, material producer and administer, was adopted as a framework for classifying the teachers' roles expressed by the participants. While many scholars (e.g., Anderson et al., 2001; Aydin, 2005; Bawane & Spector, 2009) have pointed out that EFL teachers might need to adopt different roles when teaching online as it is more challenging to engage students in the online learning environment, it was evident from the interview data that the participants assumed the same roles in both conventional and online classes. This is illustrated in the following excerpts:

> *Well, for me here I'd say I'm a facilitator as I try to provide opportunities for students to develop their language skills in class. I prepare lessons, activities and I always try to encourage my students to use English in class and outside class. I also try to make them love English. I'd like to be a role model for my student too. I think I'm also a material producer as I like to use different resources in class. (Achara)*

> *I definitely adopt a combination of several roles, usually not together, but different roles at different times in different situations. I think the term "facilitator" most accurately describes my role in the classroom in both on site and online. Although this would be an ideal situation, often time and class size constraints mean that I have to resort to a more traditional approach, so I switch to being a content expert. (Andrew)*

> *It depends on the course I'm teaching. In EAP/ESP courses, where students have a genuine desire to learn the language or enhance their confidence, I view myself as a content provider and I also see myself as a facilitator while they are doing activities or completing a task. I also act like a "coach" to help guide students, practice with them, and build confidence through encouragement. (Charles)*

> *For me, language learning is about helping the learners to learn the content in a positive learning environment, so I always position myself as a facilitator in all classroom settings. I enjoy using variety of resources in my class, so I'm a material designer as well. Being an adviser is another role I often adopt. I can be a language adviser/consultant, and students can*

always reach me via email. I try to accommodate students' individual needs. Actually, I see myself as a conductor in an orchestra when I'm in class. (Jirayu)

Well, I see myself as a facilitator, particularly with my conversation classes. We don't do a lot of lecturing. So, I usually break things down and put students into pairs or groups to practice. I sometimes act like a cheerleader as Thai students are shy and some are self-conscious about their English, so I need to help them overcome their shyness. Well, in a way, I think I'm a content expert too as I need to explain the content. (John)

For me, I'd say my dominant role is being a facilitator as I tend to design my class based on a task-based or a project-based approach. I find it's a lot better than giving lectures. I like to use lots of activities in class, and I will monitor and try to facilitate them. I sometimes act as an instructional designer when I'd like to change a few things in the course. I won't say I'm a content expert as I'm more of a language expert. Whether teaching onsite or online, I'm still the same teacher, so my roles remain the same. (Paul)

I see myself as an instructor and a facilitator. I'd prefer to act as a facilitator because I strongly believe in the student-centered approach and active learning. I personally think students will learn more when they actively engage in completing the tasks. When I need to explain things or give useful information to my students, I will become an instructor or a content provider. I often act an advisor as well. When students need help or advice on any issue, I enjoy helping them. (Parisa)

For me, being a strong believer in a student-centered approach and active learning, I always act as a facilitator in class, in all settings. I'm also an adviser who shows empathy towards my students. I find if I use the right tools and resources, students will pay more attention in class and they will also engage more and this will help them learn and master the English skills, so I'd say I'm a material producer as well. (Unyarat)

To sum up, the three dominant roles adopted by each participant can be summarized as follows:

Table 2

A Summary of Different Roles Adopted by the Participants

Roles	Content expert	Facilitator	Instructional designer	Adviser	Assessor	Material producer
Achara	2	1			3	
Parisa	2	1		3		
Unyarat		1		2		3
Jirayu		1		3		2
Andrew	2	1	3			
Charles	2	1		3		
John	2	1				3
Paul		1	2			3

From the table, it can be concluded that "being a facilitator" is the dominant role adopted by all the participants. This implies that the teachers believe in a student-centered learning approach, and they give students opportunities to engage in activities and take control over their own learning. Furthermore, when teachers adopt the facilitator role, it creates a positive learning environment which is paramount in fostering student engagement in either a conventional or an online class. This is in line with the study findings of Rahayu (2018) pointing out that when the teachers are successful in creating the positive classroom climate, the students' engagement is on the right path. In a similar vein, Willms, et al. (2009) asserted that "students who describe their classroom disciplinary climate as positive are one and a half times more likely to report high levels of interest, motivation and enjoyment in learning". In fact, students' high levels for interest, motivation and enjoyment in learning are important facets reflecting their behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement.

In the Thai context, teachers are still regarded as an authority figure in the classroom, so it is understandable that teachers view themselves as a content expert or a knowledge provider. It is essential that teachers teach the content effectively and make it more interesting and relevant (Matyokurehwa, 2016). When the content is relevant to students' real needs, they tend to be more engaged in class. Besides being a facilitator or a content expert, an adviser role is also regarded as an important role in promoting student engagement. This is because research shows that teacher support is argued to influence the three dimensions of engagement, namely behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement. For instance, when students know they are cared for by their teachers, they are willing to pay attention and adjust their attitudes more positively (Huy, 2022). In line with this, Fredricks et al. (2004) also pointed out that by creating an environment where students know they are respected and supported, teachers are more likely to make students "more strategic about learning," which means they become more cognitively engaged (p. 75).

The points raised by Jirayu, Paul and Unyarat concerning the use of various activities, tasks, resources, and digital tools in their teaching clearly illustrate their pedagogical role as a facilitator, and this corresponds with the findings obtained from Huy (2022) study which stated that lecturer's flexibility in terms of varying teaching activities is reported to greatly impact a specific dimension of engagement which then influences the others. Pedler et al. (2020) pointed out that teachers need to make the subject interesting by using resources and activities that promote student interest, provide opportunities for deep understanding, critical thinking, analysis and problem solving as well as incorporating student collaboration in learning, active, hands-on, discussion and group work to promote cognitive engagement. The use of a task-based or a project-based approach in John's class is considered a practical way to enhance cognitive engagement. This is because when students need to accomplish a task or a project, they will put great efforts and engage in their learning. Since teaching is such a dynamic and a context-specific activity, teachers need to take many factors into consideration when assuming their roles which inevitably affect their pedagogical choices. In essence, it is essential for teachers to adopt the most suitable roles to promote student engagement considered a key aspect contributing to learning success.

2) How do EFL teachers conduct their conventional and online classes to promote student engagement?

To identify the ways in which the participants conduct their conventional and online classes, the question "Are there any differences in the way you conduct your conventional classes and the online classes?" was asked during the interviews. Although the class settings in both learning environments are significantly different, all the participants' responded "*not really.*" They further clarified that whether the lesson is delivered conventionally or virtually, they plan their lesson the same way. This notion is illustrated in the following excerpts:

> *Well, I usually conduct my class, either online or onsite, pretty much in the same way. I mean, these days, students come to class with their tablets and I still use Google Classroom, Google Docs, video clips, Kahoot, and Mentimeter at various points during the class session. I like to put students to work in groups or in pairs to do activities. If I teach on site, students just grab their chairs and move around. For an online class, students will be put in breakout rooms. Monitoring students while they are doing the activities can be a bit tricky online, but it's not a big issue for me. Classroom management is slightly different though. It's a lot easier onsite. (Paul)*

> *In terms of the overall structure of lessons, I probably have a similar approach to both online and conventional classes. The difference I find with online classes is that there is both a physical and psychological disconnection between myself and the students. Generally speaking,*

> *in conventional classes I move around the classroom a lot. I find this allows the lesson to be less focused on me and be more student centered. I also think that this change in the physical positioning of the teacher means students would see me as being more "on their side". And the last point is the different dynamics of positioning yourself in the classroom creates a livelier atmosphere. (Andrew)*

The interview data illustrate that Paul and Andrew often integrate collaborative learning activities in their teaching, and they use various activities and technological tools to promote learning. Both emphasize the importance of giving clear instruction regardless of the class settings. Paul said, "*For me, I find giving clear explanation on the content to be covered for any lesson is crucial. Students need to achieve what they're supposed to learn."* Paul's view resonates with what Andrew perceives as his first priority in teaching. Andrew explained, "*I plan my lesson based on the content needed to be covered, and any activities are designed to make the lesson more engaging and interesting to students*." This is in accordance with the findings in Henrie et al. (2015) which concluded that clarity of instruction and relevance of activities influenced student satisfaction more than the medium of instruction. In line with this, Jeong (2019) proposed that collaborative learning activities through online communication can bring more dynamic classroom interaction, which motivates the improvement of language learning as well as learning of concepts and content.

From the interview data, all of the participants conduct their class based on an active learning approach. To illustrate, Andrew asserted that "*for learning to take place, there needs to be an 'active' element from the students' side. My role as a teacher is to set up activities that promote active learning and to remind them of the need for engagement.*" If the teacher expects the students to be engaged and participate in the learning process actively, the teacher needs to modify their teaching approach to enhance the students' engagement in the classroom activities (Huba & Freed, 2000). In light of this, the findings and discussion for the second research question centers around the factors underpinning the teacher's decision on the teaching approach which entails course content, course objectives, students' proficiency and learning styles, and assessment.

Course content.

It is evident that course content plays a key part in the teaching and learning process as teachers need to cover the content specified in the course syllabus. The level of difficulty of the content is one of the main components that receives attention from all the participants. All of the participants asserted that they need to find the right approach to help their students understand the content and master specific skills set for each class session.

I'd say probably a combination of many different factors affect my choices of teaching approaches. Primarily, whether the course is writing, speaking, presentation based, etc., I would say course content is the first factor. (Andrew)

For me, the course content itself is one of the key factors affecting my teaching. Whatever I choose to do in class will depend on the complexity of the content. If the content is far beyond the students' level, I try to present each point in a way my students can understand the concept. I will use a variety of activities and teaching techniques to help them master the difficult concepts. (John)

The fact that the EFL teachers such as Andrew and John view "the course content" as one of the most important factors affecting their pedagogical choices are supported by Heilporn et al. (2021) who stated that from an external perspective, ensuring that courses are well-structured and-paced appeared as key to enhance student engagement. In line with this, McGee and Reis (2012) proposed that a clear course structure fostered student behavioral and emotional engagement. This means teachers need to carefully plan their lessons, structure the courses, and deliver the content in the way that students can understand. Referring to John's excerpt stating that *"If the content is far beyond the students' level, I try to present each point in a way my students can understand the concept. I will use a variety of activities and teaching techniques to help them master the difficult concepts.*", this practice is supported by Heilporn et al. (2021) who affirm that student engagement can be reinforced by doing individual or collaborative projects and using digital resources devoted to deepening understanding of the content. In the same vein, Huba and Freed (2000) proposed that teachers need to modify their approach to enhance the students' engagement through the use of classroom activities so that the students interact deeply with materials given and meaningful learning can take place.

Course objectives.

From the interviews' responses, the participants pointed out that they plan their lessons to help their students achieve the course objectives as stated in the course syllabus. They feel they are obliged to fulfil the course requirements as illustrated in the following excerpts:

Well, I must say everything I do in class needs to match with the course objectives. I don't see any point in spending time doing things which are not relevant. So, I would say the course objectives serve as a framework of my lesson preparation. It's actually more manageable to plan things around the objectives. (John)

There are many things which I take into consideration when planning my lessons for each class, for example, the content, the course objectives the course requirements, assessment tasks, learning environment, and student proficiency level. Two key aspects that I find really important are the content and the objectives. I need to ensure what I do in class can help my students understand the content, and that they achieve the objectives set for the unit. (Parisa)

Since teaching has always been measured by the students' learning outcome (Ja, 2017), it is crucial for teachers to design and deliver their lessons to help their students achieve the course objectives which serve as their specific learning goals. The interview data show that two of the most common techniques which teachers use to check whether their students achieve the course objectives are asking questions, and assigning language tasks. This is in accordance with the research findings of Songkhro (2021) which asserted that asking and answering questions in English classes are necessary to check students' understanding. Songkhro (2021) further clarified that the questioning strategies the teachers use are based on the difficulty of the content. Goals and objectives are established, and the questioning strategy is selected according to the objectives.

Students' proficiency and their learning styles.

According to Brown (2007), the important factors in learning English do not only depend on how good the teacher uses the appropriate approaches, methodologies, strategies and techniques in teaching but also from other three aspects namely language environment, language system and learner. From the three factors, the most important one is the learner. The interview data suggest that the participants take students' proficiency and their learning styles into consideration when planning their lessons, and that these two factors also affect the way in which they conduct their classes. In fact, it is logical that students' proficiency, learning styles and reactions in class form the basis for the EFL teachers' interactive decisions. Consequently, teachers may need to make some adjustments in their lesson plans to accommodate students' immediate needs as they arise in class.

For every class I teach, during the lesson planning stage, I always take students' proficiency, and learning style into consideration. I try to use different techniques and resources to attend to students' and try to accommodate them as much as possible. Teaching is not about me; it's more about my students. (Jirayu)

When teaching weak students, I need to allow more time for them to accomplish the task. I find using a variety of games and class activities as well as creating a lively and positive atmosphere can engage them more. I always show empathy towards them and give them positive reinforcement. To me, maintaining a good relationship with students is essential when teaching

low proficiency students. I strongly feel that when students feel comfortable with the teacher and they realize they can trust the teacher, it will positively affect students' language learning. (Unyarat)

From the above excerpts, there are several interesting aspects relating to assisting learners master English skills, and these include using variety of games and activities accommodating mixed abilities learners, creating a lively and positive atmosphere, giving positive reinforcement and maintaining a good relationship with students. Since the use of variety of games and activities has been previously discussed, the following arguments will focus on other aspects. All of the participants state the importance of creating a positive class atmosphere. Songkhro (2021) asserted that classroom climate is imperative, and the atmosphere, aura of the classroom the students are in can directly affect their mood and reception to the teachers' classroom instructions. This is in accordance with the findings of the study conducted by Dorman et al. (2006) which conclude that if the classroom has a friendly atmosphere, learners will be more open to the teacher. The students will acquire knowledge when they feel the learning climate positive and supportive. Matyokurehwa (2016) also affirmed that developing a good academic relationship with students is crucial to engage the students. In line with this, Willms et al. (2009) asserted that student-teacher-relations are constructive learning environments. To promote emotional and cognitive engagement, providing timely constructive feedback to students is critical to engage the students because learners appreciate constructive feedback (Huang et al., 2022).

Assessment.

For all EFL teachers, their teaching goal is to help students master the language, improve their English skills, and use language as a tool to enhance their knowledge and serve their learning goals. Yet, when teaching in any formal institution, students will be formally assessed by the criteria set by the institution. This implies assessment is an integral component of a course. In a grade-oriented society like Thailand, most students aim at obtaining good grades, and this inevitably affects the teaching and learning process. The concept of 'washback' is a common principle in language teaching and testing literature. Washback or backwash refers to effects of language testing on teaching and learning (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Assessment can have a positive or negative washback. The participants in this study pointed out that they need to ensure their students are well-prepared for the course assessments. In this respect, they might opt to conduct their class in the traditional way using a more teacher-centered approach as echoed in Achara and Charles' excerpts:

Though I'd like to be a facilitator, when it's getting close to the exam dates, I tend to switch to a more traditional teaching approach. I mean I will spend time explaining all the key points which will be tested in the exams, prepare some extra practices and give the students more feedback. I will take control of the class to ensure my students are ready for the exam. It's not

quite as bad as the saying "teaching to the test", but I must admit I have to adjust my teaching because of the assessment. For students, getting good grades is their ultimate goal. (Achara)

I personally feel "teaching to the test" should be abolished, but ironically I sometimes have to do it to prepare my weak students for the exam. As there are two sides of the coin, it isn't that bad if we only do it when necessary, like in my case to help weak students pass the exam. So, I can't deny that the course assessment does play a part in my teaching. (Charles)

One might argue that a mid-term or final exam or other form of assessment scheme at an institutional level is classified as a low stake test; consequently, its impact on the teaching and learning process should be minimal. Nevertheless, institutional exams, to a certain extent, can have a significant effect on a student's future. This is because there is a causal relationship between students' grades or GPA and their future after graduation. EFL teachers in the Thai context, including native speaker teachers like Charles, are fully aware of all the conditions; consequently, they are willing to adjust their teaching approaches to help their students pass the course and obtain good grades. The above two excerpts clearly demonstrate the impact of assessment on the participants' classroom practices. Though Pedler et al. (2020) pointed out that assessing students' understanding frequently and in different ways can help promote cognitive engagement, formal assessment to a certain extent has a negative impact on the EFL teachers' practices.

3) *What are the practical strategies adopted by EFL teachers to tackle the challenges in promoting student engagement in both conventional and online classes?*

All of the participants stated they find it is more challenging to promote student engagement in the online classes, so all of them noted the need to carefully plan their lessons, select appropriate teaching resources, integrate suitable digital tools, and select engaging and meaningful activities to promote student engagement in both conventional and online classes. The participants were asked about the observable behaviors of student engagement in class. Some of their answers are illustrated as follows:

There is an intensity of discussion clearly visible in general. This may include students discussing with eagerness by showing clear hand gestures when eliciting information, and students extending their discussions further to cover other topics in the same scope not assigned by the teacher. For example, students discussing countries with abortion laws when only their opinions on abortion are required. Students can also show engagement by incorporating teachers in their discussions e.g., asking for clarification or personal opinion on any topics. (Jirayu).

> *From my experience, when I assign students to do group work, I often find a few students do not help with other members. They may read something else like turning to a wrong page of the book or they may use their mobile phones for other purposes, not looking up a word as assigned. It is fairly obvious when I look at their facial expressions. As an experienced teacher, it isn't difficult to notice when students are enjoying themselves or feel bored. (Achara)*

> *Observable behaviors would simply be whether they are engaged and focused on what is asked of them. I often walk around the class and see if they are actually doing what they are supposed to and when it comes to task-based learning, they won't know if they and their group/partner will be asked to present what they did to the class. That alone makes them work. If it is an online class, I will join the breakout rooms or get them to type their ideas/answers in the chat box. If there's no response, it simply means they've disengaged from the class. (Paul)*

From the above excerpts, it is evident that teachers rely on the observable behaviors to identify whether their students are engaged in their learning during the class session. When students appear to lose interest, become less attentive and/or seem bored, teachers often need to find the right strategy to sustain their attention to help promote engagement. Since all the teachers adopt an active learning approach, students are usually assigned to engage in activities or tasks. This means a minimal of class duration is devoted to the traditional lecturing teaching style. In a study conducted by Delialioğlu (2012), data revealed that the indicators of student engagement were significantly higher in the problem-based learning than that in lecture-based learning. According to Pedler et al. (2020), teachers can promote behavioral engagement by establishing classroom routines and procedures, providing help to students who need it, using specific and genuine praise, providing strong guidance with clear purpose, and implementing meaningful learning goals. Cognitive engagement can be enhanced by providing opportunities for deep understanding, critical thinking, analysis and problem solving, providing challenging but achievable tasks, incorporating authentic *real-world* instruction and activities, and ensuring learning is relevant to students' lives and experiences. Heikkinen (2014) suggested that another strategy to motivate and engage the students is the teachers' offering extra marks as a complimentary wishing for students who attain participation as it provides positive results.

From the interview data, the participants share some practical strategies which they adopt to promote student engagement in both conventional and online classes, summarized as follows:

1. Keeping students engaged is challenging because of their (lack of) attention and concentration. Assigning them to be responsible for a small and achievable task seems to keep them active and engaged. It is advisable that teachers set a clear rule that every member must contribute and take part in completing the assigned tasks. Teachers should provide positive reinforcement when students accomplish their task. Students always value constructive feedback from teachers. (Achara)

2. Getting students to work collaboratively in group/pair work activities in class seems to keep students' attention better than individual work. The teacher's monitoring while students work on the assigned task can also keep students engaged. (John)
3. Adopting a task-based learning approach tends to help promote student engagement in both conventional and online classes. Using interactive tasks tends to keep students engaged in online classes. It is also helpful to make turning a camera on mandatory. (Paul)
4. Designing a well-planned lesson which emphasizes student discussions during the lesson seems to work best in promoting student engagement. However, teaching and activity time should be balanced. Teachers should provide substantial feedback for improvement. Students will be likely to engage themselves with the lesson with sufficient feedback. (Jirayu)
5. Creating a positive class atmosphere is paramount in promoting student engagement. Teachers can lighten up the class atmosphere by using an energetic tone of voice along with a pleasant personality to keep the students engaged. (Unyarat)
6. Integrating technology in teaching can definitely enhance student engagement. Students in this generation love playing games or doing quizzes. Teachers should use interactive tools in their class if possible. This will make the lesson more engaging and meaningful. (Parisa)
7. Connecting lessons to students' interests tends to enhance engagement. Allowing flexibility in activities and assignments tends to garner more enthusiasm and heartfelt effort. A simple technique such as rewarding participation points tends to have some positive effects on students. (Charles)
8. Raising students' awareness of the necessity for engagement in learning can be beneficial. If students grasp the idea that engagement will benefit them, they are more likely to respond. Creating an enjoyable class to get into a flow-state will definitely promote student engagement. (Andrew)

Besides those practical strategies adopted by the participants, all of them state how they devoted the class duration to giving clear instruction, and this practice is supported by several scholars (i.e., Baran & Thompson, 2011; Jang et al., 2016; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) who affirmed that "ensuring clarity of instruction" is beneficial to support student's behavioral engagement. Teachers who provide constructive feedback, strong guidance during lesson, and clarity in expectations and instructions have students who are more behaviorally engaged. In brief, based on the practical strategies adopted by the participants, it is clear that teachers adopting active learning as their predominant teaching approach can be useful in promoting student engagement in both conventional and online class settings.

Conclusions and Implications

Drawing on the construct of student engagement proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004), this study aimed to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of their roles and practices in promoting student

engagement in both conventional and online classes in the Thai context. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with a total of eight EFL teachers (four Thai, and four non-Thai) working at a language institute of a leading public university in Bangkok, and a separate focus group with three EFL teachers. Content analysis was used to analyze the data.

In light of the findings, it can be concluded that active learning is the main teaching approach adopted by all of the participants. Since teaching is such a complex activity and is context-specific, teachers take on multiple of roles to correspond with the various factors. While the traditional teacher-centered approach is still used in specific situations, the participants overall favor the student-centered approach and mostly act as a facilitator in both traditional and online class settings to promote student engagement, also in addition to acting as content provider and instructor. Regarding their teaching practices, the participants prefer to adopt the active learning approach, and there are several factors underpinning their decision on teaching approach to promote student engagement, including course content, course objectives, and students' proficiency and learning styles, as well as preparing students for assessments. The participants tend to focus on what works best for their students to promote language learning, which is contradictory to the general assumption stating teachers' preconceived beliefs about teaching approaches would guide their pedagogical choices. The practical strategies adopted by the participants to tackle the challenges involved in engaging students are, however, in line with the principles of active learning.

Recommendations for Further Study

Four existing gaps can be identified in this study. Firstly, it was only conducted within one language institute in a leading public university in Bangkok and involved only eight EFL teachers. This means its degree of generalizability may be low since EFL teachers' perceptions of their roles and practices in promoting student engagement could be understood more thoroughly if investigated in several different contexts and involved a greater number of EFL teachers. Consequently, the results of this study may not be generalizable on a larger scale. However, such findings can provide *a holistic understanding* of the overview of the EFL teachers' roles and practices in promoting student engagement. This suggests larger-scale research studies should be carried out across different universities to better understand the issues investigated in this case study. Secondly, future studies of a similar nature should also include EFL learners, as students are one of the key variables in the classroom. By exploring students' views on their perceptions of the teachers' roles and practices, as well as their expectations of EFL teachers, key contributing factors leading to students' language learning success can be revealed and explored. Furthermore, future qualitative research in this area should involve intercoder reliability in the data analysis phase to enhance the reliability of the findings. Finally, quantitative data obtained from questionnaires and other research instruments such as class observation and self-reflection notes should also be included in future studies to provide further insights into this research area.

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Appendix 1

Semi-structure Interview Questions:

1. How do you define your role(s) as an EFL teacher?
2. How does your perceived role affect your students' language learning?
3. How does your role affect your students' engagement?
4. Are there any differences in the way you conduct your conventional classes and the online classes? Please explain.
5. What are the factors affecting your choices of teaching approaches?
6. In your opinion, how does student engagement affect your students' learning success?
7. What can you do as an EFL teacher to promote your students' engagement?
8. What are the factors affecting your students' engagement?
9. What are the challenges you have faced when trying to promote yours students' engagement?
10. How do you overcome those challenges?

Focus groups guided questions:

1. Which techniques or strategies do you usually employ to enhance student engagement in your class?'
2. When student engagement is low, what do you usually do?"

About the Author

Dr. Juthamas Thongsongsee has been teaching at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) for over two decades. She obtained her B.Sc. in Nursing from the Police Nursing College, an M.A. in Applied Linguistics from Mahidol University, an M.Ed. from the University of Melbourne, and a doctorate in TESOL & Applied Linguistics from Bristol University, the U.K. Her research interests lie in professional development, ESP, active learning and student engagement.