Student Engagement and Their Equity in their Engagement in the Thai Context

Punam Mohandas
Institute for English Language Education,
Theodore Maria School of Arts,
Assumption University, Thailand
Email: punammohandas@gmail.com

Adisorn Vinitwatanakhun
Institute for English Language Education,
Theodore Maria School of Arts,
Assumption University, Thailand
Email: 725beingearnest@gmail.com

Abstract

This study measured the level of engagement shown by Thai undergraduate students taking the upper intermediate English course at a private international university and ascertained what teachers can do to enrich the student engagement. It is the researchers' intention to present this information as being relevant in the Thai context, as currently, there is not much research available in this regard. The study also explored the premise that students have an equity in their own learning and engagement. The researchers conducted a questionnaire survey and interviews among Thai students studying English courses at the university level. Findings within the framework of 23-questions and the interviews revealed satisfactorily high levels of engagement. In particular, students' interest in attendance and punctuality do much to prove the point concerning student engagement – unless students show an equal level of responsibility towards their own growth, learning and achievements, student engagement by itself will fail to accomplish noteworthy results. Respect for the teacher was also at a significantly high level, proving the point of this study that the cultural ethos of a country (such as Thailand) must be taken into account whilst being an educator in that country.

Introduction

The need to learn and speak English fluently is recognized as imperative in non-English speaking countries such as Thailand. There, international institutions of higher education, such as universities, are attempting to bridge that gap between need and demand. Nevertheless, educators need to be strategic in compelling students to remain engaged; to continually maintain the level of engagement as well as to prompt the students to hold some equity in their own engagement. Culturally, there is a difference in the students' approach and their attitude towards academics, teachers and engagement as opposed to the western context. With this in mind, the researchers would like to show that students' equity in their own engagement plays a major role in keeping students involved and interested in their engagement.

As it does not appear to be much literature or research available on Student Engagement within the Thai context, the researchers conducted their study based on some interviews and a questionnaire shared among the selected Thai freshmen and senior undergraduate students, both male and female students, pursuing varied professional disciplines while studying the English III level from an international university in Thailand.

The present study aims to investigate the level of student engagement in the Thai context and to address the issue. It is the researchers' opinion that a study such as this will do much to improve student engagement at the higher levels of education and bring awareness to teachers concerning how they can influence students' motivation which, in turn, leads to the increase in student engagement. Moreover, the researchers believe that strong engagement levels lead students to take more of an interest and have an equal equity in their own learning/advancement, which will have a positive, turn-around effect on current student drop-out rates. Currently, various push-and-pull factors have been contributing to student disengagement within the institution. This includes the teachers themselves, leading to an inevitable drop-out.

Review of Literature

Student engagement is a wide-ranging topic with multiple defining parameters, and it is difficult to pin down an exact definition. According to Zepke (2015), it can be considered as students' and institutional behaviors, where engagement becomes the link between classroom, personal background and the community at large. According to Trowler (2010), it is the interaction between the time and effort, invested by both students and their institutions, in order to optimize students' experiences and enhance their learning outcomes and development. Although one can argue that 'engagement' can be the level of curiosity or involvement a student shows towards education, in itself it is an ambiguous term, because if students are not engaged, then it is not possible to explain their attending class or indeed, university at all. More than a couple of decades ago, Astin (1999) defined student engagement as: "The amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience". That then leads to the argument that there is a qualitative difference between involvement and engagement and that it is possible to be involved without being engaged, as in the case that a student who may be punctual and have full attendance for lectures in class sits passively without participating in any classroom activities. As an opposing term to engagement, Mann (2001) offers "student alienation," suggesting this was a more useful framework to understand students' relationship to

learning. She also argues that to remove this feeling of alienation, educators should open discourse and participation, thereby creating a sense of involvement and ownership.

Along with the focus on student engagement, the researchers would like present the stake or responsibility that lies with the students' themselves. In other words, student equity in their own engagement is insisted. Although the onus is on the teacher to constantly challenge and stimulate students so that they look forward to coming to class, students must be motivated to feel responsible for their own learning too. This is to say, the students have to feel that they want to be there, not merely drag themselves to class and be back benchers for the sake of attendance. One way to define equity would be whether there is mutual respect between teacher and students in which the teacher takes into account students' attitudes and perspectives towards learning and engages themselves to make it more enjoyable. The teacher will be able to create higher levels of interest among the students, which, in turn, leads to a productive atmosphere, becoming an instrument in creating the ideal classroom and pleasant climate.

Student engagement can also be described as, "the time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities" (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2006). The second component should be how the institution – or university – concerned deploys its resources, including learning opportunities and support services, in keeping the students engaged, which will induce them to achieve the desired outcomes of satisfaction, learning, and ultimately, graduation. With the Thai context in mind, it is believed that Thai students, while being keen on devoting themselves for participation and interaction with their international peers, often feel a degree of shyness at being the initiators of such interaction, caused by the awkwardness of holding up their end in an English conversation.

Therefore, teachers must foster an emotionally positive climate or environment in the classroom and must take accountability if students choose to disengage themselves. As Mearns, Meyer and Bharadwaj (as cited in Zepke & Leach, 2010, p.170) stated , "if the teacher is perceived to be approachable, well prepared and sensitive to student needs, students are committed to work harder, get more out of the session and are more willing to express their own opinions". Bryson and Hand (as cited in Zepke & Leach, 2010, p.170.) also insisted that "students are more likely to engage if they are supported by teachers who establish inviting learning environments, demand high standards and challenge, and make themselves freely available to discuss academic progress".

Additionally, with this study, the researchers would like to demonstrate how important it is to keep cultural concepts in mind while speaking of student engagement, particularly in Thailand. This includes the Asian way of inculcating learning for a child/student to accept the teacher as a sort of substitute parent. A good teacher is not necessarily defined as someone who encourages higher thinking. The good teacher is also someone who can foster an emotionally supportive classroom climate, which will provide a more productive learning. Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White and Salovey (2012) concluded that the quality of social and emotional interactions in the classroom, between teacher and students or teacher and peer support, will create classrooms high in Classroom Emotional Climate (CEC). CEC offers a platform for teachers to be sensitive to students' needs, becoming a person who foster warm and nurturing relationships with their students, taking their constraints and perspectives into account and refraining from using harsh disciplinary measures. In absence of any other adult, sometimes a student may be able to unburden and an empathetic teacher can take on the role of surrogate parent-cum-counsellor in the student's mind (particularly in Asia). Teachers must encourage this channel of communication in order to make the students more productive academically as well as

inculcate an equity in their own learning or engagement. Most importantly, it is students at the cusp of adolescence and adulthood, who need an outlet to vent their feelings, confusion and pressure.

Indisputably, engagement can have a strong effect on students' achievements, their performances as well as their attendance. Students from CEC backdrops show greater interest and therefore engagement in their work. Compared to students who have a poor relationship with their teachers, CEC students, who are reported as having better quality relationships with their teachers, are also more engaged in learning and achieve higher levels academically (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2011).

Society; consumerism; decreasing moral values; high salaries with equally high levels of pressure – all of the ills of the current age place great demands on working parents today, who often pass on their worries to their almost-adult children, intentionally or unintentionally. The researchers have noted that due to financial worries, unemployment, factors such as daily commute, a family's needs and changes, such as divorce or death within the home, can affect a student's psychological state and ability to focus on the lessens in class. In a state of nearly emotional, mental or physical exhaustion, it is not possible for students to obtain outstanding results, however, an empathetic teacher will still be able to motivate them to participate and save them from reaching a tipping point.

Equally, the socio-economic factor is crucial and cannot be overlooked in the pursuit of higher education. Educational institutions that are sought after either for the quality of their teaching or for the multiple disciplines/facilities they provide, are of course the top choices for students and even those from comparatively financially challenged backgrounds aspire to be part of such institutions. However, gaining admission to a prestigious university is the first challenge. It happens very often that the family is unable to sustain the financial pressure of paying the fees every semester. In such instances, there is tremendous pressure on students to excel and graduate as soon as possible to ease the financial burdens on their parents. The students then experience feelings of being "cut off" from their relatively more financially secure peers. In such cases, keeping the student engaged can be quite a challenge, as college life is now perceived as mere drudgery.

In this context, it cannot be stressed enough that a teacher must learn to invest in the emotional, psychological and mental well-being of students, rather than being merely involved academically. Failure to do so can lead to the students' disengagement or disenchantment on part of the students within the system/institution at large, which is giving rise to one of the most crucial issues facing educational institutions these days – the high retention rate. Apart from the pressures of 'push' and 'pull' - while the 'push' factor can be ascribed to unfavorable situations within the academic environment, such as examination pressure or disciplinary actions that compel students to withdraw from the institution, the 'pull' factor is when family straitened circumstances, such as financial situation, marriage, divorce, death and suchlike compel a student to "pull out" from the institution (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1994). There is also the added factor of 'falling out' (Watt & Roessingh, 1994) which basically occurs when a student is not showing any notable progress in academic work, and instead, becoming jaded or apathetic, a side effect of inadequate personal and educational support.

Furthermore, such students often have their potential overlooked or ignored because they may be considered as outcasts and are excluded from the society. They may eventually end up with depression, stress or socially-inept skills. Falling out by itself, with no other distractions of grades, university, family etc., will lead to the drop-out factor, where the connection that the students have felt with the institution has decreased to the point of being virtually non-existent. Either they drop out physically or else, they 'drop out' in their heads

(Washor & Mojkowski, 2014), i.e. physically present but mentally absent in class, leading to a lack of participation and eventual disillusionment that causes them to limp their way to a passing-out grade.

Indeed, it is time to acknowledge the fact that, while academic institutions have high expectations of their students, at the same time, the students have expectations of their institutions and, particularly, of their teachers. Bergan (2003) offers an interesting interpretation where students can either be perceived as members of the academic community, or as "clients." In case of the latter, the university is then the "provider". If the provider meets the clients' expectations, the client will stay. If not, they will move to another provider to obtain a degree. If they see themselves as part of the community, they will have an intrinsic interest in staying, engaging in and therefore improving their overall academic experience.

This has been successful on multiple fronts. Research has found that students, who talk more, will learn more as well (Bianchini, 1997) and therefore, although group works should not be dismissed as an instructional strategy, the group tasks ought to be refined. By doing so, it will have the positive effect within the students. This includes the increasing equity in their learning process. Leeds Trinity University (n.d.), for example, involves "engaging students as active and informed participants in academic quality assurance and enhancement and enabling students to have a key stake in shaping their academic experience" (p.8). It explores the theme of:

> "Supporting partnership and problem solving led by students and staff and to enable students to direct areas of improvement throughout the university. This theme will ensure that students can approach the university; that they will be supported in the development of their ideas; and it will enable them to engage with the appropriate staff positively and professionally." (Leeds Trinity University, n.d., p.12)

Methodology

Participants

Thirty students participated in the pilot survey conducted in the first semester of the academic year 2017 (August-December 2017). Given that there were no significant issues in the pilot study, the questionnaires were then distributed to a further 185-students studying at the English III level, both male and female, of Thai nationality. The English course was attended by undergraduate freshmen, sophomores and seniors who had been adjudged competent enough in their English skills to be enrolled for the course, and hence, the age level ranged between 17-24 years of those pursuing their Bachelor degrees in the second semester of the academic year 2017 (January – May 2018).

Research Instrument

The questionnaire was written in English only and was adapted from the Student Engagement Questionnaire of the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement in 2011. It was revised by the researchers as deemed necessary. The questionnaire was then reviewed by five experts for its validity. Based on their advice, the questionnaire was further honed and refined. In the pilot survey conducted in the first semester of the academic year 2017 (August-December 2017), 30 Thai students took part. The Cronbach's alpha was performed to test the instrument's reliability (alpha =.788).

Some interviews were also conducted in English among the English III level students, to gauge their interpretation of student engagement and students' equity in that engagement.

The Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed among 185 students who were studying the upper intermediate English course, and hence, they had an adequate opportunity to engage in English with the teacher as well as their peers. The course requirements covered academic pursuits, such as grammar, vocabulary, reading, comprehension and writing skills, as well as body language and confidence building tips, while further being taught about pronunciation, voice projection and public presentation. There were various evaluation methods conducted periodically over the five-month semester, such as a couple of quizzes, five graded practice writings, a series of dictations, at least three public speaking presentations and the mid-term and final examinations.

Moreover, some interviews were conducted to elicit the in-depth data which would supplement the data collected from the questionnaire. This qualitative approach allowed the researchers to understand students' perception towards student engagement and their equity in it. Essentially, the semi-structured interviews would capture their beliefs and personal experiences as well as attitudes towards the core of the present study (Dörnyei, 2007). Six students were selected for the interview: two participants representing high-scoring learners (A1 & A2,) two students representing mid-scoring learners (B1 & B2,) and two participants representing low-scoring learners (C1 & C2.) That is, the selection was based on their English proficiency, using their grade of the English II course as the criteria.

Data Interpretation

The data were comprehensively analyzed where mean scores were computed to ascertain the level of students' engagement. Although the five-point Likert scale was used as the research instrument, it should be noted that the range of the data, level of engagement, is 4. Thus, the mean scores should be interpreted as follows: 1.00-1.80 was interpreted as 'very low engagement level'; 1.81-2.60 as 'low engagement level'; 2.61-3.40 as 'moderate engagement level'; 3.41-4.20 as 'high engagement level'; and 4.21-5.00 as 'very high engagement level'.

Findings and Discussion

The table below shows the mean scores of engagement level, rated by 185 students as well as the meaning of the scores.

Table 1 *Level of Student Engagement*

No.	Statements	Mean	Meaning
1.	I participate in class discussions.	4.08	high engagement level
2.	I discuss grades with my English teacher.	3.70	high engagement level
3.	I discuss assignments with my English teacher.	3.93	high engagement level
4.	I discuss my career plans with my English teacher.	3.31	moderate engagement level
5.	I talk to students from other countries.	3.68	high engagement level
6.	I discuss things even with students of different opinions than mine.	3.91	high engagement level
7.	I have a comfortable relationship with other students.	4.10	high engagement level
8.	I have a comfortable relationship with lecturers.	4.03	high engagement level
9.	I am interested in the work I do in class.	3.97	high engagement level
10.	I try to practice English (reading books/watching TV/listening to songs, etc).	4.23	very high engagement level
11.	I ask the teacher to explain whenever I make mistakes.	3.85	high engagement level
12.	If I don't understand something in class, I ask the teacher.	3.81	high engagement level
13.	I learn useful things from my English classes.	4.26	very high engagement level
14.	I am always on time for class.	4.23	very high engagement level
15.	I have confidence in myself and in my abilities.	3.67	high engagement level
16.	If there is a problem in life, I can find a solution or answer myself.	3.94	high engagement level
17.	I am allowed to participate in class.	4.12	high engagement level
18.	I have support from my teacher with my personal problems.	3.68	high engagement level
19.	I have opportunities to socialize with other students in class and on campus.	4.01	high engagement level
20.	My teacher treats students fairly.	4.24	very high engagement level
21.	I respect my teacher.	4.59	very high engagement level
22.	I can go to my teacher whenever I have a problem.	3.89	high engagement level
23.	My teacher cares about how well I do.	4.18	high engagement level
	OVERALL	**3.97**	**high engagement level**

Data shown in Table 1 indicated that students displayed satisfactorily high levels of engagement. In particular, attendance and punctuality, as well as an interest in practicing English by individual efforts, showed demonstratively (very) high levels of engagement. This does much to prove the point about student engagement–that unless students show an equal level of responsibility towards their own growth, learning and achievements, student engagement by itself will fail to accomplish noteworthy results. While the onus remains on the teacher to challenge and stimulate students so that they take an interest in their knowledge acquisition, they need to personally be more motivated other than merely showing up for class for the sake of attendance.

Respect for the teacher was at a significantly high level, proving the point of this study that the cultural ethos of a country (such as Thailand) must be taken into account whilst being an educator in that country. In order for the students to consider themselves sufficiently engaged, there has to be a personal interaction with the teacher. Considering this point, all the students surveyed responded favorably when asked if the teacher treated students fairly, proving that students in Thailand relate to and reciprocate the teacher's personal interests in their well-being as well as academic pursuits.

On the other hand, a question regarding whether students discussed career plans with their teacher only elicited a 'moderate engagement' response level. The researchers feel this demonstrates that students expect teachers to not only impart educational instruction and knowledge at the current phase of their lives, but also look beyond to cover their career interest and perhaps offer guidance. In other words, when students feel cast adrift on the sea of life, the only constant they look forward to is the teacher who had/has been the perceived bridge between adolescence and adulthood. As mentioned in the study, teachers – particularly within the Asian context – are often considered to be surrogate parent figures. Although the actual parents/families remain a part of the career decision, it seems likely that students may feel let down by what they may deem as a 'lack of interest' from the teacher toward their future goals and that the equity of a teacher in their lives is short-term.

The interviews showed what participating students thought of engagement; how important it was to engage their responsibility or equity in that engagement; how students could engage, and how teachers could help them engage.

The participants' responses revealed that their perception of student engagement was being active in class or having activities and interaction in class both with the teacher as well as other classmates. According to one high-scoring student (A1), and two low-scoring students (C1 and C2), this could take the form of working together as groups.

A1: Student engagement is having interaction with teacher and classmates. They can have activities.

C2: It's kind of members joining together and working together in groups. They have to think of what kind of work or assignment they have to do.

Student equity in their own engagement ranked as fairly high among the six students. They opined that students should be open to new things.

B1: Students must know about themselves and their responsibility.

A1: Thai students don't have an opportunity to talk to Thai friends in English, so in class we should participate.

C2: Confident students can lead shy students.

However, the general consensus was that while students do want to learn English language in the class, in case of students asking the teacher questions, the latter should not show emotion and be angry.

Class participation was perceived as being high engagement, across all the levels interviewed. One high-scoring student (A2) asserted, "If you just want a good grade, you can practice and just read a book. But if you want to develop (yourself), you participate." However, the students also ranked teacher participation in this engagement at high levels. According to them, teachers should directly and actively engage with students and must have the confidence to teach and use strategies, such as games and other activities, to keep students engaged.

C1: The teacher should give feedback and should also have a rule that all student must participate.

A1: Teachers should have activities that can bring teachers and students closer.

Conclusion

Essentially, the researchers attempted to measure the level of engagement of undergraduate students who are studying at an international private university across various disciplines. The study was specifically centered around Thai students as the researchers wanted to ascertain the level of student engagement and equity within the Thai cultural context. There is not much research currently available in this specific field and the idea was that, through this paper, some awareness could be generated in forms of the ways in which the cultural context is vitally linked to student engagement. The findings from both the questionnaire and the interviews revealed that the overall engagement level of the participants studying at the upper intermediate level of English was high, thus proving that the students realized the importance of having equity in their own engagement.

References

Astin, A. W. (1999). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Development, 40*(5), 297-308.

Australasian Survey of Student Engagement. (2011). *Student engagement questionnaire.* Retrieved from www.acer.org/files/AUSSE_2011_SEQ.pdf

Bergan, S. (2003). *Student participation in higher education governance*. Retrieved from https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/CompletedActivities/CoE_survey_intro_EN.asp#TopOfPage

Bianchini, J. A. (1997). Where knowledge construction, equity, and context intersect: Student learning of science in small groups. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 34*(10), 1039-1065. doi:10.1002/(SICI)1098-2736(199712)34:10<1039::AID-TEA5>3.0.CO;2-S

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. China: Oxford University Press.

Jordan, W. J., Lara, J., & McPartland, J. M. (1994). *Exploring the complexity of early dropout causal structures*. Retrieved fromhttps://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED375227.pdf

Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (2006). *What matters to student success: A review of the literature*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/npec/pdf/kuh_team_report.pdf

Leeds Trinity University. (n.d.). *Student engagement strategy 2015-19*. Retrieved from http://www.leedstrinity.ac.uk/Key%20Documents/Student%20Engagement%20Strategy.pdf

Mann, S. J. (2001). Alternative perspectives on the student experience: Alienation and engagement. *Studies in Higher Education, 26*(1), 7-19. dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075070020030689

Reyes, M. R., Brackett, M. A., Rivers, S. E., White, M., &Salovey, P. (2012). Classroom emotional climate, student engagement, and academic achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 104*(3), 700-712. doi:10.1037/a0027268

Rimm-Kaufman, S., & Sandilos, L. (2011). Improving students' relationships with teachers to provide essential supports for learning. Retrieved from http://www.apa.org/education/k12/relationships.aspx

Trowler, V. (2010). *Student engagement literature review*: The Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/StudentEngagementLiteratureReview_1.pdf

Washor, E., & Mojkowski, C. (2014). Student disengagement: It's deeper than You think. *Phi Delta Kappa, 95*(8), 8-10. doi.org/10.1177/003172171409500803

Watt, D. L. E., & Roessingh, H. (1994). Some you win, most you lose: Tracking ESL student drop out in high school (1988-1993). *English Quarterly, 26*(3), 5-7.

Zepke, N. & Leach, L. (2010). Improving student engagement: Ten proposals for action. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 11*(3), 167-177. doi.org/10.1177/1469787410379680 (Bryson, C., & Hand, L. (2007). The role of engagement in inspiring teaching and learning. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 44*(4), 349-362. dx.doi.org/10.1080/14703290701602748)

Zepke, N. (2015). Student engagement research: thinking beyond the mainstream. *Higher Education Research & Development 34*(6), 1311-1323. doi.org/10.1177/003172171409500803dx.doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2015.1024635