Teachers' Assessment of Primary School EFL Learners' Engagement: Insights from Rural and Urban Classrooms in Vietnam

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Abstract

Learner engagement is increasingly recognized as a crucial factor in language education, especially for young learners. However, research into how teachers perceive and assess learner engagement in intact English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms remains limited. This study explored how primary school teachers in urban and rural areas in a Mekong Delta province in Vietnam assessed learner engagement across all four dimensions: behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social. Employing a quantitative approach, data were collected through a 28-item survey administered to 182 teachers across 63 primary schools. Results indicated that while teachers acknowledged all four dimensions of engagement, they tended to prioritize behavioral and emotional aspects. Geographic location (urban vs. rural) did not significantly influence teachers' overall assessment, but subtle differences were identified: urban teachers reported slightly higher mean scores for behavioral engagement, while rural teachers exhibited marginally higher scores in cognitive and social dimensions. The findings underscore the importance of a balanced approach to assessing learner engagement. Urban teachers should be guided to view engagement beyond observable participation, while rural teachers should develop a stronger awareness of the role of emotional engagement in sustaining overall learner involvement, particularly in contexts with limited exposure to English such as rural schools.

Keywords: *Engagement Dimensions, Primary School EFL Teachers, Assessment of Engagement, Urban and Rural Locations, Vietnam*

Introduction

The concept of learner engagement has recently gained significant attention in the field of second language (L2) learning and teaching. This growing interest has prompted research

on its definition, classroom manifestations, influencing factors, and strategies for fostering it in traditional classroom settings (see Dao et al., 2021b; Dao et al., 2024; Dörnyei, 2020; Hiver et al., 2024; Le & Macalister, 2024; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). However, operationalizing learner engagement in L2 contexts remains challenging due to diverse and sometimes inconsistent interpretations of the concept (Dao, 2024; Hiver & Yamazaki, 2025), emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of learner engagement in L2 contexts (Sang & Hiver, 2021; Vo, 2024).

Teachers play a key role in addressing this challenge, as their perceptions of engagement influence their instructional decisions, including how they assess and promote learner engagement in their classrooms (Dao et al., 2024; Kelly et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2014; Van Uden et al., 2013). While much research has centered on older learners, young learners remain underrepresented in L2 engagement studies (Dao et al., 2024). Understanding how young learners engage in L2 classrooms, particularly from the perspective of teachers, is vital for improving teaching practices and outcomes in primary education. Moreover, much of the research has relied heavily on qualitative approaches, such as interviews and observations, conducted within specific contexts. Little attention has been paid to how teachers across diverse school contexts, such as urban and rural areas, assess engagement in L2 classrooms. This gap is particularly significant given the inequities in educational resources, infrastructure, and teaching conditions between urban and rural schools, which may influence teachers' perceptions and practices (Nguyen et al., 2014; Pham, 2021).

This study seeks to address these gaps by adopting a large-scale survey approach, enabling the collection of data from a broader and more diverse group of teachers across urban and rural EFL contexts. By examining variations in engagement assessments across diverse settings, the research aims to provide valuable insights into how engagement is perceived and assessed in young learners' L2 classrooms. The current study is guided by two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How do primary school teachers assess young learners' engagement across multiple dimensions in EFL classrooms?

RQ2: To what extent do teachers' assessments of learner engagement vary based on school location (urban vs. rural)?

Literature Review

Theoretical Constructs of Engagement

In its field of origin, educational psychology, engagement is often defined as the action component of motivation (Noels et al., 2019) or "energy in action" (Skinner & Raine, 2022, p. 25). In language learning research, engagement acts as the bridge between motivation and actual learning outcomes, representing the active component in the motivation-action-learning sequence (Hiver & Yamazaki, 2025). As engagement fundamentally involves action, researchers from various theoretical perspectives, such as Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2002) and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, 2020) have used this construct to explain learning processes in formal educational settings (e.g., Mercer, 2019; Oga-Baldwin, 2019; Svalberg, 2009; Vo, 2024; Wang & Wang, 2024). Among these perspectives, SDT serves

as a key framework frequently used in engagement research (Mercer, 2019; Wang & Wang, 2024). SDT posits that competence (feeling capable), relatedness (feeling connected), and autonomy (feeling in control) are fundamental to self-motivation and active participation in learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When these needs are met, students are more likely to be self-motivated and engaged in learning activities. EVT has been influential in guiding research on learner engagement (Vo, 2024), positing that learners' engagement is influenced by their expectations for success and the value they place on a task (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). While SDT highlights the psychological needs that drive intrinsic motivation, EVT offers insight into how students' beliefs about success and task value shape their engagement. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding learner engagement in L2 classrooms from the perspectives of the teachers, forming the basis of the current study.

Conceptualizing Learner Engagement
Early L2 research often viewed learner engagement as a single-dimensional construct, primarily measuring it through language output (Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000), cognitive focus (Storch, 2008; Toth et al., 2013), or mental effort (Bygate & Samuda, 2009). However, contemporary L2 research recognizes engagement as a multifaceted construct. Svalberg's (2009) Engagement with Language (EWL) and Philp and Duchesne's (2016) task engagement model are key examples of this shift (Dao et al., 2021a). As the first framework to integrate engagement into second/foreign language teaching and learning, Svalberg's EWL defines engagement as "a cognitive, and/or affective, and/or social state and a process in which the learner is the agent and the language is the object and may be the vehicle (means of communication)" (Svalberg, 2009, p. 244). This framework conceptualizes engagement across three interconnected dimensions: cognitive (attention, effort), social (interaction, support), and affective (willingness, autonomy). Similarly, Philp and Duchesne (2016), informed by educational psychology's concept of student engagement, expanded the traditional three-dimensional framework to include a fourth dimension: social engagement. They defined engagement as "a state of learners' heightened attention and involvement" (p. 57), specifying four dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, social, and affective. Following previous studies (e.g., Dao et al., 2024; Moskovich & Hershkovitz, 2024), the current study adopts this four-dimensional framework to facilitate systematic data collection and analysis, enabling a more comprehensive exploration of learner engagement from teachers' perspectives in L2 classrooms.

While dimensions of engagement are perceived as interconnected, independent, context-dependent, and socially situated (Hiver et al., 2024; Philp & Duchesne, 2016), they could be operationalized separately (Dao et al., 2024). Behavioral engagement refers to the amount and quality of learners' active participation in learning (Hiver et al., 2024). It can be measured by observing learners' voluntary involvement in speaking, answering questions or participating in tasks (Philp & Duchesne, 2016), and their effort and persistence in activities (Fredricks et al., 2004). Cognitive engagement includes processes such as sustained attention and mental effort, often requiring self-regulation (Helme & Clarke, 2001; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Helme and Clarke (2001) identified a number of

indicators of cognitive engagement, such as students' questioning, offering feedback, informing, and explaining. Emotional engagement involves learners' feelings, attitudes, and emotions towards the task, their peers, and the learning environment (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Svalberg, 2009). Positive emotions like enjoyment and enthusiasm are indicators of affective engagement, while anxiety, boredom, frustration, and anger are indicators of emotional disengagement (Mercer, 2019). Social engagement emphasizes the dynamics of learner relationships, particularly reciprocity, mutual support (Storch, 2002), and active interaction (Svalberg, 2009). Although the level of each engagement component varies for each learner and context, Mercer (2019, p. 4) proposes that "true engagement necessitates all three components", characterizing how learners act, think, and feel in the L2 classroom.

In summary, research on language learner engagement in L2 classrooms reveals variability in how it is described and operationalized (Zhou et al., 2021). Therefore, teachers may emphasize certain dimensions of engagement over others, depending on their understanding and instructional goals (Dao et al., 2021b; Kelly et al., 2024), various teacher- and student-related factors (e.g., Alzaanin, 2023), and contextual factors, such as learner demographics, teaching conditions, and resources, also influenced their perceptions (Sulis, 2022; Teravainen-Goff, 2022). Critically, teachers may not always align their engagement strategies with their conceptualizations, thus influencing their prioritization of strategies to foster engagement in their classes (Kelly et al., 2024; Moskovich & Hershkovitz, 2024). This misalignment underscores the importance of examining teachers' viewpoints to bridge the gap between theoretical models and practical applications, offering deeper insights into how engagement is identified and assessed in diverse L2 learning environments.

Teachers' Conceptualization and Assessment of Learner Engagement in L2 Classrooms
Teachers play a central role in fostering and assessing this engagement in L2 classrooms. They are considered "good judges of learner engagement" (Skinner, 2016, p. 158) because they observe its various aspects on a daily basis. Their close relation with students provide them with valuable insight into the emotional and cognitive factors that drive active participation and involvement or its absence (Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2022). Despite this important role, their perspectives on learner engagement, especially young learners, remain underexplored in literature. Research on teachers' assessment of learner engagement remains limited, with only a few studies focusing on how teachers conceptualize and assess learner engagement in L2 classrooms across various contexts (e.g., Alzaanin, 2023; Dao et al., 2021b; Dao et al., 2024; Moskovich & Hershkovitz, 2024; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2022). For example, Dao et al. (2021b) examined how teachers conceptualized and assessed learner engagement during peer task-based interactions in second language (L2) classrooms in Australia. This study employed a three-stage task-based methodology with 54 pre- and in-service ESL/EFL teachers, who observed, rated, and defined learner engagement based on peer interaction recordings and transcripts. The findings indicated that teachers primarily focused on three key indicators: deep thinking and attention to partners' ideas, content production, and interactiveness between learners.

Similarly, Alzaanin (2023) investigated how 12 EFL university teachers in Saudi

Arabia conceptualized learner engagement and identified influencing factors, using semi-structured interviews. The study found engagement to be a multifaceted concept, predominantly defined through behavioral (e.g., active participation) and affective (e.g., motivation and emotional connection) dimensions, with factors such as learner-centered practices, positive teacher-learner rapport, and flexible learning spaces facilitating engagement. In an interview study with eight language teachers at a university in Poland, Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2022) found that teachers primarily focused on the behavioral aspects of learner engagement, rather than the emotional and cognitive components. Some teachers believed that changing learners' attitudes was beyond their control, considering them deeply ingrained and difficult to modify.

Recent studies highlight the importance of learner engagement in online L2 classrooms (see Dao, 2024 for a review). Research indicates that teachers predominantly assess online engagement through observable behavioral indicators, such as attendance, task completion, and participation (e.g., Consoli & Curle, 2024; Moskovich & Hershkovitz, 2024; Toth et al., 2024). This reliance on behavioral cues stems from the challenges teachers face in gauging deeper engagement levels (Consoli & Curle, 2024). The absence of non-verbal communication and limited student visibility, often due to learners keeping cameras and microphones off, hindered teachers' ability to interpret engagement effectively (Consoli & Curle, 2024; Toth et al., 2024). Nevertheless, teachers acknowledged the unique opportunities online teaching provides. They acknowledged the potential of digital tools and evolving pedagogical practices to cultivate not just participation, but deeper, more meaningful engagement (Consoli & Curle, 2024).

Recent research on learner engagement in L2 classrooms has examined teachers' perspectives and practices in fostering engagement among young learners. While studies like Le and Macalister (2024) and Oga-Baldwin and Nakata (2020) have explored strategies to promote engagement among young learners in EFL settings, a gap remains in understanding how engagement is conceptualized and assessed among young L2 learners. Relevant to the current study is Dao et al.'s (2024) study, one among very few recent engagement studies that particularly investigated the perceptions and assessment of public primary school teachers regarding young learners' engagement in Vietnam. The study found that teachers primarily conceptualized engagement through behavioral (e.g., active participation) and emotional (e.g., enthusiasm) dimensions, while cognitive and social aspects were less emphasized. Teachers relied on observable indicators, such as raising hands and showing excitement, and employed strategies such as games, rewards, and verbal praise to foster engagement. The findings underscored the need for a broader understanding of engagement that integrates cognitive and social dimensions into task design to enhance meaningful L2 learning. Another relevant study is an interview study with 13 primary and secondary Israeli school teachers by Moskovich and Hershkovitz (2024). Results revealed that teachers perceived student engagement in traditional classroom settings as mostly behavioral and emotional, and in online learning as mostly oriented towards task-centered behavioral aspects of learning.

The review highlights several research gaps. First, most studies focus on adult learners, leaving a lack of research on young learners' engagement in ESL/EFL contexts. Second, these studies, including those involving young learners and/or teachers, predominantly use

qualitative methodologies, such as semi-structured interviews and observations, limiting the generalizability of findings across educational contexts. Finally, there is a lack of comparative research exploring how L2 teachers in urban and rural contexts perceive and assess young learners' engagement. Given the potential impact of geographical and contextual factors on teaching perceptions and their assessment of learner engagement, addressing these gaps could offer a more comprehensive understanding of learner engagement in L2 classrooms.

Teaching English in Primary Schools in Vietnam

English has been a compulsory subject for Grade 3 learners (aged 8) in the national curriculum in Vietnam since 2010, following the introduction of the National Foreign Languages 2020 Project (Nguyen, 2011). This policy emphasizes improving the English proficiency of Vietnamese learners to enhance the country's global competitiveness. However, a notable gap in English language education persists between rural and urban areas, driven by differences in resources, teacher training, and class sizes (Nguyen et al., 2014; Pham, 2021). These factors contribute to a performance gap, with rural learners generally underperforming compared to their urban counterparts (Le & Chung, 2020). While much is known about the challenges in engaging young learners in primary schools (Copland et al., 2014; Copland et al., 2024), research examining how teachers' assessments of engagement contribute to these disparities remains limited. This underscores the importance of understanding how teachers in rural and urban settings assess learner engagement, as their perceptions of engagement significantly influence their instructional practices and the support they provide (Berry, 2020; Kelly et al., 2024).

Methodology

Context and Participants

The study was carried out at public primary schools within a large southern province of Vietnam. Primary education in Vietnam include the first five years of schooling (Grades 1-5). Primary English education is compulsory for children in Grades 3-5 (ages 8-10) and optional for those in Grades 1 and 2. The teaching and learning strictly follows the national curriculum, which is managed by the Department of Education and Training at the national, provincial, and district levels (Pham et al., 2024). In terms of the curriculum, the new primary English curriculum was introduced in 2018 through a National Foreign Languages 2020 Project. The curriculum claims to adopt the communicative approach as the primary method of foreign language teaching. According to the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2010), the new primary English curriculum aims to enhance English proficiency among primary students, preparing them for future academic and professional endeavors in an increasingly globalized world.

The new curriculum was accompanied by a series of MOET-approved textbooks which were claimed to be designed to follow the CLT and/or TBLT approach (Tran et al., 2023). Among the approved textbooks, the two series of *Global Success* (Tiếng Anh 3–5) and *I-Learn Smart Start* were used across the schools in this study. The majority of schools utilized the *Global Success* series, which comprises 20 units per grade, each containing three lessons and six activities. In contrast, the *I-Learn Smart Start* series is organized

thematically, featuring six lessons per unit and five activities per lesson.

The study included 182 primary school EFL teachers from 63 public primary schools. The majority of participants were female (n = 156), with a smaller proportion being male (n = 26). All participants held at least a bachelor's degree in English language teaching. Teachers varied in age and teaching experience, with the largest age group being between 31-40 years (n = 78), followed by those aged 41-50 years (n = 59) and 22-30 years (n = 39). Six teachers were older than 50 years.

The teaching experience of participants ranged from less than one year to more than 20 years, with 90 teachers having 11-20 years of experience, 49 having 1-10 years, 38 with over 20 years, and 5 with less than one year of experience. In terms of school location, 121 teachers were from rural schools, and 61 were from urban areas.

Table 1

Participant Teachers' Demographic İnformation

		Teachers (N = 182)
Age (years)	22-30	39
	31-40	78
	41-50	59
	Over 50	6
Gender	Male	26
	Female	156
Experience (years)	Less than one	5
	1-10	49
	11-20	90
	Over 20	38
School setting	Urban	61
	Rural	121

Study Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine how primary school teachers assess learner engagement across four dimensions: emotional, social, cognitive, and behavioral and the extent to which their assessment varies due to the school settings (urban vs. rural). Quantitative research method was used to collect numerical data, which allowed the researchers to summarize the teachers' responses and identify patterns in their assessments (Rana et al., 2021). The independent variable was the school setting (urban vs. rural), while the dependent variables were teachers' assessments of the four engagement dimensions.

Instrument and Procedure

The data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of two sections. The first section encompassed open-ended questions asking for the participants' background information (e.g., age, gender, teaching experience and school setting). The second section included 28 Likert- scale items equally divided into four parts examining teachers' perceptions regarding their assessment of learner engagement across the four dimensions: emotional, social, cognitive, and behavioral. To facilitate understanding, this section starts

with a leading statement: *"Based on your observations, learners demonstrate engagement in classroom activities when they...",* followed by a list of 28 items for participants to rate. These items were developed based on 1) existing conceptualization and indicators of the four dimensions of learner engagement (e.g., Dao et al., 2024; Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Svalberg, 2009) and 2) teachers' preliminary interviews (n=6) that explored teachers' conceptualization of learner engagement. Questionnaire items were translated into the participants' first language (Vietnamese) and piloted with 30 teachers via Google Forms prior to the actual data collection. Revisions regarding the wording and organization of items were conducted following feedback from the pilot participants to ensure clarity and content validity.

The final version of the questionnaire demonstrated excellent internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.955 (Table 2). The subscales for Emotional Engagement (α = 0.885), Social Engagement (α = 0.874), Cognitive Engagement (α = 0.918), and Behavioral Engagement (α = 0.933) all showed high reliability, with values exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency across all dimensions.

Table 2
Reliability of Engagement Dimensions

Name of Measuring Scale	N of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Scale 1: Learner Engagement	28	0.955
Scale 2: Emotional Group	7 (from item 1 to item 7)	0.885
Scale 3: Social Group	7 (from item 8 to item 14)	0.874
Scale 4: Cognitive Group	7 (from item 15 to item 21)	0.918
Scale 5: Behavioral Group	7 (from item 22 to item 28)	0.933

The survey was later distributed online through Google Forms, with participants receiving an email invitation containing a survey link. The teachers voluntarily completed the survey and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality throughout the process. A total of 191 responses were collected, of which 182 were retained after data cleaning.

Data Analysis

To answer the first research question, survey data were analyzed quantitatively using inferential statistics. To compare teachers' assessments of engagement between urban and rural schools, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted. This non-parametric test was appropriate given the ordinal nature of the Likert scale data and the non-normal distribution observed (Nachar, 2008). Statistical significance was determined using a p-value threshold of < .05. This test helped identify whether significant differences existed in teachers' evaluations of learner engagement across the four dimensions, based on the school setting.

Results

Teachers' Assessment of Young Learner Engagement in L2 Classrooms

The first research question aimed to explore how teachers assessed learner engagement across the four dimensions. The analysis of quantitative variables across Emotional Engagement (EE), Social Engagement (SE), Cognitive Engagement (CE), and Behavioral Engagement (BE) was conducted to gain insights into the emphasis teachers place on each

dimension when assessing learner engagement. By analyzing means and standard deviations, the study highlights the specific aspects of engagement that are the most influential or significant from their assessments (Table 3).

Table 3

Means of Each Dimension of Learner Engagement

Engagement dimensions	N	Mean	SD
EE	182	4.42	.686
SE	182	4.20	.758
CE	182	4.35	.679
BE	182	4.44	.634
Valid N (listwise)	182		

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

As shown in Table 3, teachers' assessments indicate a focus cross all four dimensions of engagement with a slightly greater focus on behavioral and emotional engagement compared to other dimensions. Specifically, behavioral engagement received the highest mean score (M = 4.44, SD = .634), followed closely by emotional engagement (M = 4.42, SD = .686). Cognitive engagement had a mean score of 4.35 (SD = .679), and social engagement had the lowest mean score (M = 4.20, SD = .758). These values indicate a slight variation in the dimensions teachers tend to focus on when observing learner engagement, with behavioral and emotional engagement receiving slightly more attention than cognitive and social engagement.

Table 4

Dimensions of Learner Engagement and their Descriptive Statistics

Types of Engagement	Items	N	Mean	SD
	1. Feels interested while doing the activities.	182	4.63	.758
	2. Feels satisfied while doing the activities.	182	4.41	.821
Emotional	3. Does not feel bored while doing the activities.	182	4.12	1.212
Engagement	4. Shows an excited tone while speaking during	182	4.41	.874
	5. Feels happy working with peers.	182	4.40	.897
	6. Shows interest and enthusiasm for learning activities.	182	4.50	.865
	7. Looks forward to the next activity.	182	4.48	.798
	8. Maintains eye contact while talking with peers.	182	4.16	.972
	9. Involves their partner in the activity during interactions.	182	4.19	.905
	10. Helps their partner with language difficulties during	182	4.29	.860
Social	11. Encourages their partner to speak.	182	4.34	.863
Engagement	12. Uses backchanneling (e.g., 'uh' or 'uhm') to show	182	4.13	1.037
	13. Completes their partner's sentence when they have difficulty finishing it.	182	4.03	1.031
	14. Initiates interaction with their partner.	182	4.29	.898
	15. Makes an effort to work with their partner toward a	182	4.43	.816
	16. Tries to self-correct language errors.	182	4.05	.950
Cognitive	17. Actively asks the teacher for clarification to better	182	4.46	.825

	18. Maintains attention and focus on all activities.	182	4.34	.843
	19. Actively thinks to answer the teacher's questions.	182	4.46	.769
	20. Tries to explain to help their partner understand.	182	4.32	.827
	21. Tries to use previously learned knowledge (vocabulary, structures) to complete the activity.	182	4.43	.768
	22. Listens attentively and asks questions when unclear.	182	4.40	.806
	23. Actively seeks help from teachers or peers when	182	4.45	.804
	24. Quickly focuses on the activity and takes positive action to complete it.	182	4.45	.717
Behavioral Engagement	25. Actively participates in discussions.	182	4.43	.775
	26. Reacts quickly (raising hands) to answer the teacher's questions	182	4.51	.710
	27. Actively volunteers to give feedback to peers.	182	4.46	.725
	28. Is willing to participate in all activities in the lesson.	182	4.39	.908

As Table 4 shows, for behavioral engagement, the results indicate that teachers across both urban and rural schools placed a strong emphasis on observable behaviors when assessing learner engagement. Items consistently received high mean scores, with "reacts quickly (raising hands) to answer the teacher's questions" achieving the highest mean score across all items (M = 4.51, SD = .710). Other behavioral indicators, such as "actively volunteer to give feedback to peers" (M = 4.46, SD = .725), "actively seeks help from teachers or peers when needed" (M = 4.45, SD = .804) and "quickly focuses on the activity and takes positive action to complete it" (M = 4.45, SD = .717), also scored highly.

In terms of emotional engagement, the findings reveal that teachers focus on learners' visible interest and enthusiasm during activities. The item "feels interested while doing the activities" received the highest mean score in this dimension (M = 4.63, SD = .758), followed by "shows interest and enthusiasm for learning activities" (M = 4.50, SD = .865). Other indicators, such as "looks forward to the next activity" (M = 4.48, SD = .798) and "feels satisfied while doing the activities" (M = 4.41, SD = .821), were also rated relatively high.

For social engagement, the results highlight that teachers valued mutual support and learners' initiative in interactions. The highest mean score in this dimension was for "encourages their partner to speak" (M = 4.34, SD = .863). Other items, such as "helps their partner with language difficulties during interactions" (M = 4.29, SD = .860) and "initiates interaction with their partner" (M = 4.29, SD = .898), also received relatively high scores. However, the item "completes their partner's sentence when they have difficulty finishing it" had the lowest mean score within this dimension (M = 4.03, SD = 1.031).

For cognitive engagement, teachers emphasized learners' mental effort, sustained attention, and self-regulation. The highest-rated items were "actively thinks to answer the teacher's questions" (M = 4.46, SD = .769) and "actively asks the teacher for clarification to better understand" (M = 4.46, SD = .825). These results suggest that teachers assessed learner engagement based on learners' active thinking and their effort to use previously acquired knowledge during tasks, as seen in items such as "tries to use previously learned knowledge (vocabulary, structures) to complete the activity" (M = 4.43, SD = .768) and

"makes an effort to work with their partner toward a goal" (M = 4.43, SD = .816).

Assessment of Learner Engagement by Rural and Urban Teachers

To explore the extent to which the assessment of learner engagement between teachers from rural and urban areas differed, descriptive statistical analyses were first conducted on the four engagement dimensions: emotional, social, cognitive, and behavioral. The normality of the data distribution was assessed using both the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests. The results indicated that none of the constructs followed a normal distribution, as evidenced by significant p- values (p < .001) across all dimensions (Table 5).

Table 5

Tests of Normality for Engagement Dimensions

Dimensions	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
EE	.202	182	.000	.803	182	.000
SE	.154	182	.000	.892	182	.000
CE	.173	182	.000	.859	182	.000
BE	.191	182	.000	.829	182	.000

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

Given these findings, the Mann-Whitney U test was utilized to examine the differences between teachers from rural and urban areas in their assessment of learner engagement. The Mann- Whitney U test is appropriate for comparing two independent groups as the dependent variable is continuous or ordinal but not normally distributed. It serves as a robust alternative to the parametric independent-samples t-test, allowing for a reliable comparison between the two groups in terms of how they assess engagement across emotional, social, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. Moreover, descriptive statistics, including the mean and standard deviation for both urban and rural teachers, were calculated for each engagement type, and the results of the Mann-Whitney U test were reported below (Table 6).

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics and Analysis of Differences in the Assessments of Learner Engagement between Teachers from Urban and Rural Areas

Item	Urban teachers		Rural teachers		Mann-Whitney U	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
EE	4.42	0.728	4.42	0.668	3588.500	.755
SE	4.18	0.845	4.22	0.713	3633.000	.934
CE	4.33	0.767	4.37	0.767	3687.000	.992
BE	4.48	0.662	4.42	0.621	3306.500	.241

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

Since the data was not normally distributed (p < .001) across all dimensions of learner engagement, the Mann-Whitney U test was employed to compare differences between teachers from urban and rural areas in their assessments of learner engagement. The test results showed no statistically significant differences between the two groups across the emotional (U = 3588.50, Z = -.310, p =.755), social (U = 3633.00, Z = -.083, p = .934), or cognitive dimensions (U = 3687.00, Z = -.010, p = .992). There was a slightly larger, though still non-significant, difference in the behavioral engagement dimension (U = 3306.50, Z = -1.174, p = .241). Urban teachers reported a higher mean score (M = 4.48, SD = .662) for behavioral engagement compared to rural teachers (M = 4.42, SD = .621), suggesting a potential trend in which urban teachers may place greater emphasis on this dimension when assessing learner engagement. However, this difference did not reach statistical significance, indicating that both urban and rural teachers evaluate learner engagement in largely similar ways across all dimensions.

Discussion

Primary School Teachers' Assessment of Young Learners' Engagement in L2 Classes

The findings reveal that teachers' assessments of young learner engagement emphasized all four dimensions of engagement. More specifically, teachers commonly identified behavioral engagement through observable indicators such as voluntary involvement and active participation during classroom activities. Emotional engagement was primarily recognized through learners' expressions of interest, enthusiasm, and satisfaction during classroom activities. Cognitive engagement was centrally identified through learners' mental effort, sustained attention, and self-regulation while social engagement was mainly noted through mutual support and learners' initiative in peer interactions. These results corroborate the argument that learner engagement is a multifaceted construct (Hiver et al., 2024; Hiver & Yamazaki, 2025; Philp & Duchesne, 2016), reflecting behavioral, social, emotional, and cognitive aspects. Moreover, the indicators of engagement rated highly by teachers align with findings from previous studies. In particular, teachers' assessments align with previous research, identifying behavioral engagement through voluntary involvement and participation (Dao et al., 2024; Hiver et al., 2024; Philp & Duchesne, 2016), emotional engagement through interest, enjoyment, and enthusiasm (Dao et al., 2021b, 2024), cognitive engagement through mental effort, sustained attention, and self-regulation (Helme & Clarke, 2001; Philp & Duchesne, 2016), and social engagement through mutual support and learner initiative (Storch, 2002; Svalberg, 2009).

While all four dimensions of engagement were rated highly by teachers, notable variations emerged in their emphasis. The findings showed that behavioral and emotional engagement received a stronger emphasis than cognitive and social engagement. This finding aligns with previous studies on teachers' conceptualization and assessment of engagement across different learner populations, including adult learners (e.g., Alzaanin, 2023; Dao et al., 2021b), young EFL learners (e.g., Dao et al., 2024.; Moskovich & Hershkovitz, 2024), and online learning environment (e.g., Consoli & Curle, 2024; Dao et al., 2021a; Moskovich & Hershkovitz, 2024). The findings are unsurprising given that the participants are teachers of young language learners who tend to rely on visible signs (i.e., emotional and behavioral engagement) to assess engagement among young learners (Dao et al., 2024). Their greater focus on these dimensions aligns with the perspective that

emotional engagement plays a foundational role in shaping overall participation and cognitive investment (Dao, 2019; Henry & Thorsen, 2020) and can even influence English proficiency (Tsang & Dewaele, 2024). The focus on emotional engagement can be attributed to teachers' awareness of the developmental characteristics of young learners, who tend to learn better in fun and engaging environments (Pinter, 2015), while the emphasis on behavioral engagement can be attributed to its practicality, as it provides teachers with readily available and easily interpreted indicators of student involvement (e.g., raising hands) (Dao et al., 2024). Moreover, the findings show that while teachers of young learners prioritize behavioral and emotional engagement (Dao et al., 2024; Moskovich & Hershkovitz, 2024), those working with adult learners place greater emphasis on cognitive and social engagement (e.g., Dao et al., 2021). This contrast suggests that teachers adapt their assessments based on learners' developmental stages, but also highlights a potential imbalance in how engagement is conceptualized across age groups.

The overall slightly lower mean scores for cognitive engagement and social engagement indicate that these dimensions might receive less emphasis in teachers' assessments. Dao et al. (2024) reported that assessing cognitive and social engagement is more challenging, given that these dimensions can be less immediately observable or more complex to assess directly in classroom interactions. One notable finding is that although social engagement was rated positively, it scored lower than the other three dimensions, particularly for collaborative behaviors such as completing sentences for peers. This may be attributed to contextual factors, such as the large class sizes prevalent in urban schools in Vietnam and similar EFL contexts (e.g., Copland et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2014; Tran et al., 2023). Large class sizes often limit opportunities for structured peer interactions and make fostering effective collaboration more challenging.

Finally, it is important to note that while teachers appear to prioritize emotional engagement, relying too heavily on these may lead to superficial learning outcomes. Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) and Wingate (2018) caution that neglecting cognitive challenges and meaningful social interactions can limit the depth and sustainability of learning. Therefore, a balanced approach that promotes emotional, cognitive, and social engagement is essential to foster deeper and more sustained learning.

Teachers' Assessments of Young Learners' Engagement in Rural and Urban Settings
The Mann-Whitney U test results showed no significant differences in the assessment of learner engagement between rural and urban teachers across all four dimensions. This suggests that both urban and rural teachers hold generally similar perspectives on engagement assessment. Particularly, they both rated emotional engagement similarly high, indicating a shared focus on positive emotion among young learners. However, the data did reveal subtle trends in engagement assessment. Urban teachers reported slightly higher mean scores for behavioral engagement, while rural teachers exhibited marginally higher scores in cognitive and social dimensions. While the subtle differences in scores may not reflect significant differences in teachers' assessments, they underscore the necessity for a deeper investigation of how regional variations might influence teachers' assessment of learner engagement. Given that urban teachers are generally more inclined

to implement learrner-centered strategies that promote social and cognitive engagement (Nawaz & Akbar, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2014), the lower scores observed in these dimensions compared to those given by rural teachers warrant further investigation. One possible explanation is that urban teachers are required to manage large class sizes and a more diverse student population (Tran et al., 2023), this leads them to prioritize behavioral engagement as a means of maintaining classroom order and ensuring active participation. Another explanation may be that the availability of technology resources enables a more frequent use of child-friendly activities, such as games, songs, and chants (Nguyen et al., 2014). These activities, while promoting voluntary involvement (i.e., behavioral engagement), may, to some degree, shift the focus away from deeper cognitive and social engagement (Wingate, 2018). Additionally, drawing upon Self-Determination Theory (SDT), urban students may feel more competent due to greater exposure to resources and opportunities, which could further reinforce their willingness to engage behaviorally. Conversely, in rural contexts, where students may have fewer opportunities for exposure to English outside the classroom and potentially lower proficiency levels, teachers may prioritize cognitive and social engagement to bridge these gaps. Drawing on Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT), these gaps may have encouraged rural teachers to see greater importance in mutual support, deep learning and intrinsic interest. Also, they might find it easier to encourage thinking and collaboration because they usually have smaller classes and a closer connection with their students.

Implications

The findings provide valuable implications for teachers and teacher educators. First, when assessing learner engagement, teachers may need to take a more balanced view of engagement across multiple dimensions, including behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social aspects, rather than placing a greater focus on behavioral and emotional engagement. This is important, as their conceptualization and assessment directly influence the strategies they implement to enhance engagement in L2 classrooms (Kelly et al., 2024; Mercer, 2019). Second, although behavioral engagement is essential to ensure active participation or voluntary involvement, it is important to be aware that behaviors may not always adequately reflect how learners engage in classroom activities (Dao et al., 2021; Dao et al., 2024; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Silence, often interpreted as passiveness or disengagement, may not necessarily be indicative of low engagement, but could instead reflect cognitive processing or cultural communication norms (Dao et al., 2021). Therefore, teachers should consider learner differences when assessing or promoting engagement in their classrooms. Third, rural teachers may need to consider the important role of emotional engagement in sustaining overall classroom engagement (Dao, 2019), particularly in primary school EFL contexts where learners have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Finally, teacher development programs should emphasize the importance of meaningful engagement, helping teachers recognize that while participation is essential, deeper cognitive and social engagement is necessary for sustained language development and long-term learning success.

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Conclusion

The present study investigated how primary teachers assess young learners' engagement in EFL classrooms and to identify potential differences in these assessments between teachers from rural and urban schools. The results indicate that while teachers acknowledged all four dimensions of engagement, they tended to prioritize behavioral and emotional aspects. Geographic location (urban vs. rural) did not significantly influence teachers' overall assessment. While all dimensions were recognized, teachers placed greater emphasis on behavioral and emotional engagement. The results further indicate that urban teachers reported slightly higher scores for behavioral engagement, while rural teachers reported marginally higher scores in cognitive and social engagement. The study has several limitations. Firstly, the study's sample, while substantial, predominantly comprised female teachers from a specific southern province of Vietnam, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, an unequal number of rural and urban teachers indicates an imbalance in sample size, which limited the ability to draw robust comparisons between the perspectives of teachers in these two distinct contexts. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases in teachers' perceptions of engagement. Future research should aim to include a more diverse sample that encompasses a wider range of teachers across various regions and demographic backgrounds. Employing longitudinal research designs and qualitative methodologies, such as interviews and focus groups, could yield richer insights into the complexities surrounding engagement assessments.

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Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

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