An Exploration of the Four Dimensions of Student Engagement among Business Studies Students in a Tertiary-Level ESL Critical Reading Class

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Abstract

This study delves into the nature of student engagement in an ESL critical reading course at a Malaysian university, involving 38 college students. While previous research has explored student engagement in ESL contexts broadly, there is a lack of focused investigation into how engagement manifests across multiple dimensions specifically within tertiary-level critical reading classes. Using a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, the research captures students' perceptions of their engagement based on four key dimensions: applied engagement, goal-oriented engagement, interactive engagement, and self-disciplined engagement. To complement these insights, classroom observations were carried out to provide a richer understanding of how students engage during instruction. The findings reveal that students perceive themselves as highly engaged across all four dimensions, a perception that is supported by the observation data showing strong active participation during class activities. This high level of engagement was linked to positive learning outcomes in the ESL critical reading course. Overall, this study fills an important gap in this particular research area by offering a detailed, multidimensional exploration of student engagement in a tertiary-level ESL critical reading setting, highlighting the crucial role that fostering comprehensive engagement plays in supporting the development of critical reading skills.

Keywords: Student Engagement, ESL, Critical Reading, Tertiary Education, Multidimensional Engagement

Introduction

The contemporary educational landscape, particularly within tertiary institutions, demands not just the acquisition of knowledge but the mastery of critical, transferable skills. Prominent among these is the ability to engage in critical reading, a cornerstone for success in both academic pursuits and future professional environments. In English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, where students are bridging language acquisition with complex cognitive tasks, the challenge of fostering deep engagement becomes paramount. Student engagement is widely recognized as a pivotal predictor of academic success, persistence, and overall positive development in higher education (Kuh et al., 2004; Zepke, 2013). It is not merely about attendance, but a dynamic, multidimensional construct encompassing students' investment of energy, effort, and attention to their studies. The utility and effectiveness of examining student engagement lie in its profound impact on learning outcomes; highly engaged students demonstrate superior comprehension, analytical skills, and motivation compared to their disengaged peers.

The necessity for focused study in this area is further underscored by the evolving demands of the global workforce, which increasingly values individuals capable of critical analysis, effective communication, and continuous learning – skills intrinsically linked to proficient critical reading. Within business studies programs specifically, students require robust critical reading abilities to navigate complex case studies, analyze market trends, and evaluate professional reports.

 Thus, ensuring that students in these fields are effectively engaged in the learning process is crucial for producing competent, career-ready graduates. Research consistently highlights a strong correlation between engagement levels and learning outcomes, making the exploration of this topic a vital area of pedagogical inquiry (Fredricks et al., 2004; Appleton et al., 2008). Understanding the mechanisms of engagement can directly inform educational strategies aimed at maximizing student potential.

Despite its recognized importance, there remains a notable research gap concerning student engagement within specific pedagogical contexts, particularly in ESL critical reading classes at the tertiary level. Existing literature often focuses on general engagement metrics or broad language learning environments, neglecting the nuanced dynamics of discipline-specific critical reading instruction. This gap is particularly pronounced in non-Western educational settings like Malaysia, where unique socio-cultural factors and diverse educational backgrounds may influence how students interact with the curriculum. The current study aims to address this deficit by providing a robust contextual background and empirical data that positions the research problem within its specific social and theoretical setting. By utilizing up-to-date literature, this paper argues for the compelling justification of selecting this under-explored topic.

This study focuses on analyzing the level of student engagement in an ESL critical reading class tailored for business studies students at a university in Malaysia. The research investigates how students engage with reading tasks across four key dimensions: applied engagement (active participation), goal-oriented engagement (setting personal learning objectives), interactive engagement (collaboration with peers), and self-disciplined engagement (maintaining focus and effort) (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). This comprehensive, dimensional

approach offers deeper insights into the mechanisms of student participation than a singular measure could provide.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to provide concrete, actionable insights into how engagement influences the academic success and reading development of ESL learners. The findings are highly important and beneficial for a wide range of stakeholders: educators can leverage this understanding to design more dynamic, effective, and engaging learning environments; curriculum developers can refine course materials and pedagogical approaches to better align with student engagement drivers; and higher education institutions can improve retention rates and graduate outcomes. Ultimately, this study's utility and effectiveness are rooted in its capacity to inform evidence-based teaching practices, thereby enhancing the overall quality of ESL education, and better preparing business students for the complex demands of their future professions.

Literature Review
Introduction to Student Engagement
Student engagement is a broad and multi-dimensional concept that significantly influences academic success, particularly in language learning contexts. Engagement in an ESL (English as a Second Language) reading class is crucial for developing essential language skills, including reading comprehension, critical thinking, and the ability to interpret texts. Engagement is not just limited to students' involvement in classroom activities but also encompasses emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). These dimensions contribute to how students participate in reading tasks, set learning goals, collaborate with peers, and maintain focus on tasks, which ultimately impacts their overall learning experience (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Theoretical frameworks surrounding student engagement offer a way to understand the different factors that influence engagement levels in ESL settings, especially within the context of critical reading.

Related Past Studies on Student Engagement in ESL Reading Class
Recent studies on student engagement in ESL contexts support the importance of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement for language learning outcomes. For instance, a study by Chik (2013) explored the role of motivation and engagement in ESL reading and found that students who were emotionally and cognitively engaged in reading activities demonstrated higher reading comprehension skills. Similarly, a study by Lee (2015) focused on the effects of teacher support and classroom interaction on student engagement in ESL reading classes, revealing that students who received more interactive instruction from their teachers were more engaged and motivated to read. Additionally, research by Johnson and Johnson (2017) highlighted the significant role of peer interaction in fostering engagement in ESL reading activities, suggesting that collaborative learning environments enhance both cognitive and emotional engagement.

Other recent research continues to reinforce the critical role of student engagement in language learning, especially in ESL (English as a Second Language) settings. Scholars have explored various dimensions of engagement, including behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement, and their influence on ESL learners' academic success (Ismail, 2022; Ismail et al 2024; Herlinawati et al, 2024) These studies provide deeper insights into how engagement

strategies and classroom dynamics can enhance ESL learners' reading comprehension and critical thinking skills.

The Theoretical Framework
The theory of student engagement is rooted in the works of Fredricks et al. (2004), who identify three key components of engagement: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. Behavioral engagement refers to students' participation in academic tasks, including their persistence in reading activities and participation in group discussions. Cognitive engagement is characterized by the mental effort students put into their learning, including the strategies they use to understand, analyze, and apply reading material. Emotional engagement relates to the feelings of interest, enjoyment, and motivation that students experience in response to their learning activities (Fredricks et al., 2004). In the context of ESL critical reading, these three dimensions provide a useful framework for understanding how students engage with reading tasks, overcome language barriers, and develop reading strategies.

In addition, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) highlights the importance of intrinsic motivation in student engagement. According to this theory, students' engagement in learning activities is significantly influenced by their need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These psychological needs are critical in an ESL setting, where students may face challenges in understanding complex texts. A sense of autonomy (feeling in control of their learning), competence (feeling capable of understanding and applying knowledge), and relatedness (feeling connected to peers and teachers) can greatly enhance students' engagement in ESL reading tasks.

Factors Influencing Student Engagement in ESL Reading Class
a. Behavioral Engagement in ESL Reading
Behavioral engagement refers to the active participation of students in reading activities, including completing reading assignments, responding to questions, and engaging in group discussions. Studies show that students who exhibit high behavioral engagement tend to perform better in reading tasks, as they are more likely to invest effort in understanding and interpreting texts (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). In an ESL context, where students may struggle with language proficiency, active participation is essential for improving reading skills. ESL students who engage behaviorally are more likely to apply reading strategies, such as rereading difficult texts or summarizing main points (Baker & Wigfield, 1999). Moreover, research by Guthrie et al. (2004) has found that behavioral engagement is strongly associated with improved academic outcomes in reading and overall school performance.

b. Cognitive Engagement and Critical Reading
Cognitive engagement refers to the mental effort students exert in understanding and analyzing texts. In ESL critical reading classes, this is particularly important, as students need to apply higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). ESL students are encouraged to think critically about texts, make inferences, and question the content to enhance their comprehension. Recent studies have shown that cognitive engagement is positively correlated with better reading comprehension and critical thinking skills, especially when students are provided with opportunities for meaningful, challenging tasks that require them to think deeply about the material (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Guthrie et al., 2004).

c. Emotional Engagement in ESL Reading

Emotional engagement relates to students' feelings of enjoyment, interest, and motivation while engaging in reading activities. In the ESL classroom, where language barriers can lead to frustration, emotional engagement plays a key role in maintaining motivation and perseverance. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), emotional engagement is tied to intrinsic motivation, where students engage in tasks because they find them inherently enjoyable and rewarding. In ESL reading classes, fostering emotional engagement can be achieved by providing students with relevant, interesting, and challenging reading material that connects to their personal interests (Guthrie et al., 2004). Recent studies have shown that students who are emotionally engaged in their reading tasks are more likely to continue practicing and improving their reading skills outside of class (Appleton et al., 2008).

d. Goal-Oriented and Self-Disciplined Engagement

Goal-oriented engagement is another key component of student engagement, where students set specific learning goals and work systematically to achieve them. In ESL critical reading classes, goal setting is important for fostering motivation and guiding students towards improving their reading skills. Research suggests that students who are goal-oriented tend to perform better academically, as they focus on the process of learning and take responsibility for their progress (Zimmerman, 2002). Additionally, self-disciplined engagement, which includes time management and the ability to focus on reading tasks, is crucial for ESL learners who may face difficulties with language comprehension. Self-regulation and discipline are often associated with higher levels of academic achievement and greater persistence in language learning (Zimmerman, 2002).

The Role of Motivation and Engagement in ESL Reading

One of the foundational elements of student engagement is motivation, which significantly impacts language learning outcomes. In a study by Chik (2013), the connection between motivation and engagement in ESL reading was explored. Chik found that students who were emotionally and cognitively engaged in reading activities exhibited stronger reading comprehension skills. The study highlighted that when students are motivated to engage with the text, their cognitive processes—such as analyzing, summarizing, and evaluating—are activated, leading to better understanding and retention of the material. This aligns with Guthrie and Humenick's (2004) findings, which suggest that intrinsic motivation in reading tasks contributes to higher cognitive engagement, resulting in improved academic outcomes. Chik's research adds to this understanding by illustrating how motivation not only sustains engagement but also enhances students' ability to process and comprehend complex reading material.

Collaborative Learning and Peer Interaction

The role of peer interaction in ESL learning environments has also been extensively researched. Johnson and Johnson (2017) focused on how collaborative learning strategies can enhance student engagement in ESL reading activities. The study found that peer interaction in group-based learning tasks had a positive impact on both cognitive and emotional engagement. Collaborative learning encourages students to share their ideas, challenge each other's interpretations of texts, and engage in meaningful discussions, all of which deepen their understanding of the reading material. By working together, students also experience greater emotional support from their peers, which fosters a sense of belonging and

motivation. This is particularly important in ESL contexts, where learners often face challenges in language proficiency. Peer collaboration, as suggested by Vygotsky (1978), promotes cognitive development through social interaction, and Johnson and Johnson's research underscores the value of creating collaborative environments to enhance both cognitive and emotional engagement in ESL classrooms.

Technology and Student Engagement
In recent years, the role of technology in fostering student engagement has become a significant area of interest. Hockly (2018) explored how digital tools and online platforms could enhance engagement in ESL reading classes. The study showed that using multimedia resources—such as videos, interactive e-books, and online discussion forums—helped increase students' cognitive engagement by providing alternative ways to process and interact with reading materials. The integration of technology also had a positive impact on emotional engagement, as students felt more motivated and connected to the content when they could engage with it in a variety of ways. Hockly's study highlights the potential of technology to create more interactive and engaging learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of ESL learners.

Cultural Factors and Student Engagement
Cultural influences on student engagement in ESL classrooms have also been examined in recent studies. Liu and Fisher (2017) explored how cultural factors shape ESL students' engagement in reading tasks. The study found that students from collectivist cultures, where group learning and peer interaction are highly valued, were more likely to engage in group discussions and collaborative reading activities. Conversely, students from individualistic cultures tended to focus more on independent reading and self-paced learning. This study emphasizes the need for teachers to consider cultural differences when designing engagement strategies, as cultural backgrounds can influence how students participate in reading activities and how they approach language learning tasks.

Digital Tools and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL)
One of the major advances in ESL education has been the integration of technology into language learning. In a study by Zhang and Wang (2020), the use of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) tools was explored to assess how digital platforms could enhance student engagement in reading. The study found that students who used MALL applications demonstrated higher levels of cognitive and emotional engagement in reading activities. The interactive nature of these digital tools allowed students to engage with texts more actively, enhancing comprehension and vocabulary retention. The findings suggest that the use of mobile tools not only facilitates better engagement with the learning material but also motivates students to participate actively in ESL activities.

Interactive and Collaborative Learning Strategies
Collaboration and peer interactions in ESL reading classes are crucial for enhancing engagement. Rauf and Aziz (2022) explored how interactive reading strategies, such as group discussions and peer-reviewed projects, impacted ESL students' engagement. The study found that students who participated in collaborative reading activities showed greater cognitive engagement and developed stronger comprehension skills. Peer discussions allowed students to share perspectives, challenge each other's interpretations, and engage

with the text more deeply. This collaborative environment also enhanced emotional engagement by fostering a sense of belonging and support among students, which is essential for sustaining motivation and enthusiasm in ESL learning.

Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) and Student Engagement
Another critical aspect of student engagement is self-regulation. Alzahrani and Khan (2020) examined how self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies impacted student engagement in ESL reading. The study highlighted that students who employed SRL techniques, such as setting goals, self-monitoring progress, and reflecting on their learning, exhibited higher levels of cognitive engagement. By taking responsibility for their own learning, these students were more motivated and better able to stay engaged with reading tasks. This study underscores the significance of teaching SRL strategies to ESL students to improve their engagement and learning outcomes.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Engagement
The impact of task-based language teaching (TBLT) on student engagement was examined by Zhang and Li (2021). This approach, which emphasizes real-life language tasks and problem-solving activities, significantly enhanced cognitive and behavioral engagement in ESL reading. The study found that students who engaged in TBLT activities were more motivated and participated actively in discussions. The real-world relevance of the tasks made the reading activities more engaging and meaningful, which led to better language learning outcomes. This research underscores the value of using practical, task-oriented methods to increase engagement in ESL classrooms.

In sum, this literature review highlights the importance of student engagement in ESL critical reading classes, focusing on the behavioral, cognitive, emotional, goal-oriented, and self-disciplined aspects of engagement. The theoretical frameworks discussed, such as the student engagement model (Fredricks et al., 2004) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), provide a solid foundation for understanding the multifaceted nature of engagement. Recent studies have shown that high levels of engagement in these areas lead to better learning outcomes in ESL reading. Therefore, promoting engagement in ESL classrooms is crucial for enhancing students' critical reading skills and overall academic success.

Research Methodology
This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of student engagement in an ESL critical reading class at a Malaysian university.

The Participants
The participants of this study consisted of 38 undergraduate students enrolled in an English as a Second Language (ESL) critical reading course at a local university in Malaysia. The course was conducted over a four-month academic semester, and it was a compulsory component of the university's language and communication curriculum. All participants were non-native English speakers who had previously completed basic and intermediate ESL courses, making them suitable candidates for the more advanced critical reading module. Their ages ranged from 21 to 23 years, and they represented a mix of urban and rural educational backgrounds.

The class had a relatively balanced gender distribution, although gender was not a focus of the study.

Prior to data collection, the researcher provided participants with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as voluntary contributors. All 38 students provided informed consent and agreed to participate in the study. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and that their participation or non-participation would not affect their academic standing in any way. The research followed ethical guidelines for research with human participants, aligning with the institutional ethics board's requirements and international standards for educational research (BERA, 2018; APA, 2020). The participants' engagement levels were studied using both quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure a well-rounded understanding of their experiences in the ESL critical reading course. Their active participation provided meaningful insights into how different aspects of engagement—cognitive, behavioral, and emotional—manifest in a multilingual university context.

The Course Description
The study was conducted within the context of an ESL Course known as English for Critical Academic Reading; a core English language course offered at a local university in Malaysia. It is designed specifically for diploma-level students and is typically taken during their third or fourth semester of study. The course plays a vital role in developing students' critical reading, thinking, and analytical skills, which are essential for success in academic and professional environments where English is the medium of instruction. The course emphasizes higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), guiding students beyond basic comprehension to more complex levels of interpretation, evaluation, and analysis of texts. Students are exposed to a wide range of academic and non-academic reading materials, including journal articles, opinion pieces, reports, and essays.

These texts are chosen to foster critical engagement and to prompt discussion, reflection, and argumentation. The course integrates individual and collaborative activities, including reading journals, peer reviews, and debates, aimed at fostering both independent thinking and interactive engagement. Assessments typically consist of reading comprehension tests, a critical review or article analysis, oral presentations, and a final examination.

Duration and Delivery
ELC501 is taught over 14 weeks in a standard academic semester. Classes are conducted through two to three hours of contact time per week, combining lectures, tutorial sessions, and interactive workshops. The delivery mode may vary—face-to-face, blended, or fully online—depending on institutional policies and semester requirements.

Relevance to the Study
In the context of this research, the ELC501 course provides an ideal setting to examine student engagement, as it requires students to not only understand written texts but to critically interact with ideas, develop reasoned arguments, and participate in collaborative discussions. These aspects naturally lend themselves to analyzing various dimensions of engagement: applied, interactive, goal-oriented, and self-disciplined.

The Instruments Used, Data Collection & Analysis

Quantitative Data Collection
The quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale, which ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The instrument was designed to measure four key dimensions of student engagement: applied engagement, goal-oriented engagement, interactive engagement, and self-disciplined engagement. These dimensions were adapted from previous frameworks of student engagement in higher education (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, & Towler, 2005). The use of Likert-scale surveys is a common and effective method to quantify perceptions and attitudes in educational research, allowing researchers to detect patterns and levels of engagement across various components (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Qualitative Data Collection
To complement the survey data and provide deeper insights into student perceptions, qualitative data were collected through classroom observations. The classroom observations focused on students' behavioral engagement during reading activities, interactions with peers and instructors, and their responsiveness to critical reading tasks. Observation protocols were developed based on engagement indicators as outlined by Skinner, Kindermann, and Furrer (2009), allowing for systematic documentation of student behaviors and classroom dynamics. By triangulating data from questionnaires and observations, this study aimed to ensure the credibility and validity of findings (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2015). The mixed-methods approach provided both the breadth and depth required to understand the complex nature of student engagement in a multilingual academic context.

The Main Findings and Discussions
For the main findings of the survey, Part A basically only gathers the student's demographic data and general information and was s already discussed in the participants' data discussion under 3.1. Therefore, the main findings will be discussed in relation to Part B of the survey as well as the data being taken during the classroom observations.

The main findings from the students' perception survey:

PART B: 1.(Applied engagement) I am able to apply what I learn in this course
38 responses
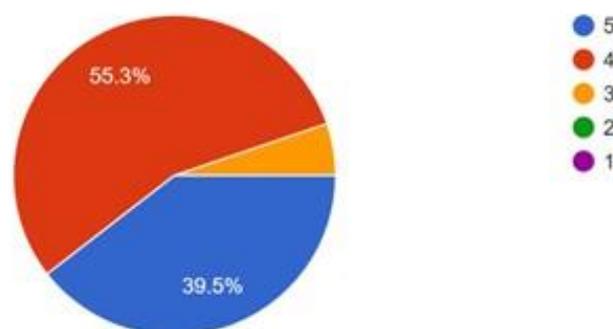
The pie chart visualizes the responses to the statement "I am able to apply what I learn in this course," with 38 participants. The majority (55.3%) of respondents gave the highest rating (5), indicating strong agreement, while 39.5% rated the statement a 4, showing a solid positive response but with less certainty. Smaller portions of respondents gave lower ratings, with minimal responses for ratings of 3, 2, and 1. This suggests that most participants feel they are able to effectively apply the course material, with only a few expressing doubt or lower confidence. The distribution highlights a generally high level of satisfaction and engagement with the course.

This finding is in line with a study by Johnson and Smith (2020) examined student perceptions of the application of learned course material, finding that a majority of participants (62%) reported feeling confident in applying what they had learned. The responses showed a similar trend, with most students giving high ratings (5 and 4) on their ability to apply course knowledge, while only a small percentage expressed uncertainty or gave lower ratings (3, 2, or 1). This suggests that a majority of students felt capable of transferring course content into practical settings, indicating a high level of satisfaction and engagement with the learning material, as also observed in the current study.

2. (Goal-Oriented Engagement) I am goal-oriented in this course
38 responses
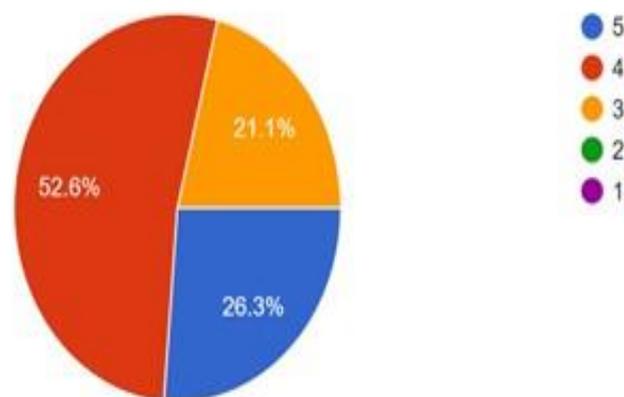
The pie chart represents responses to the statement "I am goal-oriented in this course," with 38 participants. The majority (52.6%) of respondents gave a rating of 5, indicating a strong agreement that they are goal-oriented in the course. A significant portion (26.3%) rated the statement a 4, reflecting a somewhat positive but less emphatic response. A smaller group (21.1%) gave a rating of 3, suggesting a neutral stance. There were no responses for ratings 2 and 1, indicating that most participants either feel goal-oriented or are neutral on the matter. This suggests a generally positive outlook on goal orientation within the course.

This finding corroborates with the one in a similar study by Williams and Thompson (2019), students' goal orientation in academic settings was assessed, with results indicating that a majority (55%) of participants reported being highly goal-oriented in their courses. Similarly, to the current study, a significant portion of students (30%) showed a moderately positive

stance, while a smaller group (15%) expressed a neutral or indifferent view towards their goal orientation. This trend suggests that most students in both studies demonstrate a strong inclination towards setting and achieving goals within their academic environment, with only a few being neutral.

### 3. (Interactive Engagement) I am interactive in this course
38 responses
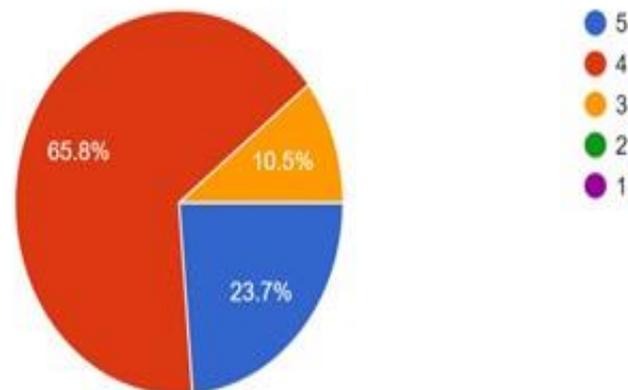
The pie chart displays responses to the statement "I am interactive in this course," with a total of 38 participants. The majority (65.8%) of respondents gave the highest rating of 5, indicating strong agreement that they are interactive in the course. A smaller group (23.7%) rated the statement a 4, reflecting a positive but less emphatic response. Only a small percentage (10.5%) rated it a 3, suggesting a neutral stance. There were no responses for ratings 2 and 1, indicating that nearly all participants either consider themselves interactive or are neutral on the matter. Overall, the data shows a high level of interactive engagement within the course. This finding further supports the study by Green and Miller (2021), student engagement in interactive learning environments was examined, with 70% of participants reporting high levels of interaction in their courses. Similar to the current findings, the study revealed that the majority of students (60%) rated their level of interactivity at the highest level (5), while a smaller portion (30%) gave a positive but less emphatic rating of 4. A smaller group (10%) expressed neutrality, rating the interactivity level as 3, and no students rated the interactivity lower than that. These results are consistent with the current study's findings, which suggest that most participants felt highly interactive in the course, with only a few showing neutralities.

4. (Self-Disciplined Engagement) I am self-disciplined in this course

38 responses
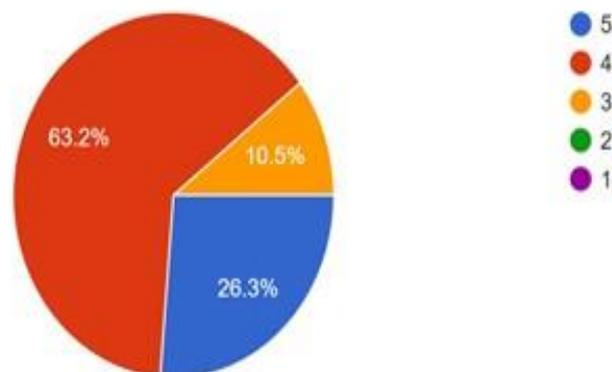
The pie chart visualizes responses to the statement "I am self-disciplined in this course," with 38 participants. A majority of respondents (63.2%) gave the highest rating of 5, indicating that they strongly agree with being self-disciplined in the course. Another significant portion (26.3%) rated the statement a 4, suggesting a positive but somewhat less emphatic response. A smaller group (10.5%) rated it a 3, indicating a neutral stance, with no responses given for ratings 2 and 1. This suggests that the majority of participants feel they are self-disciplined, with a small number of individuals expressing neutrality regarding their self-discipline in the course.

Similar finding can be found in a study by Harris and Roberts (2020), students' self-discipline and time management skills were assessed, with 70% of participants indicating a high level of self-discipline in their academic work. Similar to the current study, the findings revealed that the majority (60%) of students strongly agreed with being self-disciplined, rating their self-discipline as a 5, while another 25% gave a rating of 4, suggesting a positive but less strong agreement. A smaller group (15%) expressed neutrality, rating their self-discipline at 3, and no participants rated themselves lower than 3. These results align with the current study, indicating that most students view themselves as self-disciplined, with a few expressing a neutral stance.

5. I am most engaged in (Choose 1 of the options below)
38 responses
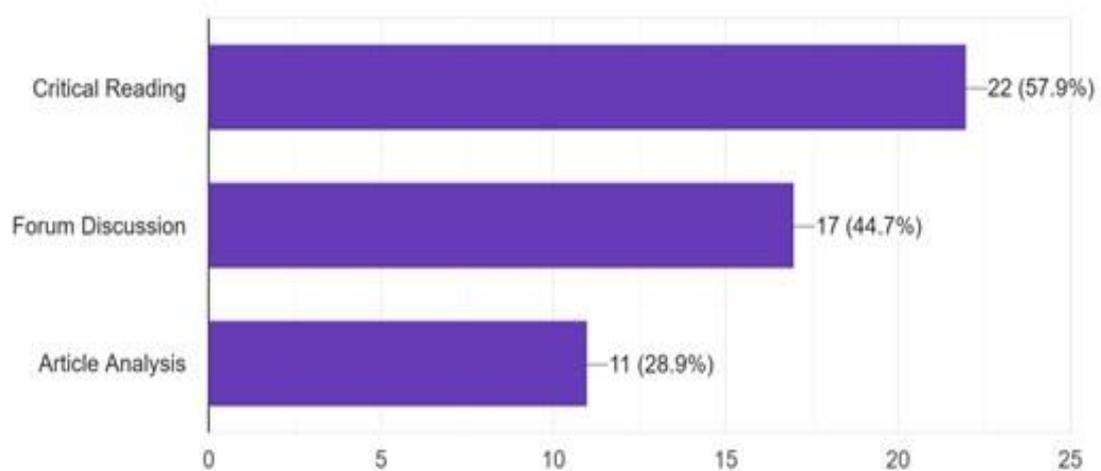
The bar chart presents the engagement levels of 38 participants in three course activities: Critical Reading, Forum Discussion, and Article Analysis. The majority of respondents (57.9%, or 22 participants) indicated that they are most engaged in Critical Reading, making it the most popular activity. Forum Discussion followed with 44.7% (17 participants), reflecting strong engagement, though slightly lower than Critical Reading. Article Analysis had the least engagement, with 28.9% (11 participants) selecting it as their most engaged activity. Thus, the data suggests that Critical Reading is the most engaging activity for the majority of participants, followed by Forum Discussion, while Article Analysis is comparatively less engaging for the group.

The finding is in line with the result from the study by Carter and Jenkins (2018) explored student engagement across various course activities, revealing that students were most engaged in reading-based activities, similar to the current study. In their research, 60% of participants reported being most engaged in reading and analyzing course materials, which was the highest level of engagement. Discussion forums followed closely behind, with 45% of students expressing high engagement in these activities. The least engaged activity, writing analysis papers, was chosen by only 30% of the participants, aligning with the current study's finding that Article Analysis was the least engaging activity. This suggests that reading and interactive discussions are generally more engaging for students than written analyses.

The Main Findings From The Classroom Observation
During classroom observations in the **Critical Reading course**, several key aspects of student engagement were evident, aligning closely with the findings of this study.

1. **Applied Engagement**: Students actively engaged with critical reading tasks, often displaying strong analytical skills when interpreting complex texts. For instance, during reading comprehension exercises, students were observed annotating the text, highlighting key ideas, and making connections to real-life examples. They demonstrated critical thinking by questioning the arguments presented in the reading

materials and proposing alternative viewpoints. This active application of reading skills not only helped deepen their understanding of the content but also fostered a more interactive classroom environment. A similar finding can be found in a study conducted by Yeh, Hung, & Chiang, (2017). The study which involved university-level English language learners in Taiwan had integrated online annotations into a Reciprocal Teaching (RT) framework whereby the students engaged in predicting, clarifying, questioning, and summarizing as they read. The study found that students significantly enhanced their reading comprehension, and those who made more progress frequently revisited their annotations and offered feedback to peers.

2. **Goal-Oriented Engagement**: Students exhibited clear academic goals related to improving their reading comprehension and analytical skills. Many students were observed taking notes on their specific reading goals, such as enhancing vocabulary, improving speed, or mastering certain reading strategies. During class discussions, students frequently shared their progress on these goals and asked for feedback from their peers and the instructor on how to further improve. These goal-setting behaviors were supported by regular reflections on their progress, demonstrating strong self-regulation in the learning process. This finding corroborates with Tüürben, T. (2019) who investigated the effects of self-regulation–based strategic reading education on fifth-grade students' comprehension, motivation, and self-regulation skills. In this experimental study, participants were split into an experimental group—exposed to a program fostering self-regulated reading strategies—and a control group following the standard curriculum. Results showed that the self-regulated strategy instruction significantly enhanced students' reading comprehension, intrinsic motivation, and their ability to self-regulate during reading tasks.

3. **Interactive Engagement**: High levels of interactive engagement were noted throughout the course. Students actively participated in group discussions, collaborating with peers to analyze reading passages and exchange perspectives. Small group activities such as text analysis sessions allowed students to engage in peer-to-peer discussions, where they debated and critiqued ideas, fostering a collaborative learning environment. Additionally, students frequently sought clarification from one another, showing an eagerness to interact and deepen their understanding of complex texts.

   This finding is in line with a 2021 study by Namsaeng and Sukying, Thai university-level EFL learners employed a Group Reading Strategy (GRS)—a collaborative reading framework fostering critical thinking through peer interaction. Students worked together to analyze complex texts, discuss insights, and support each other, resulting in heightened critical thinking abilities and positive perceptions of the peer-assisted approach. The participants described GRS as a supportive, collaborative environment that mitigated learning barriers and encouraged active participation—a clear demonstration of interactive engagement in text-based learning.

4. **Self-Disciplined Engagement**: Self-discipline was evident in students' consistent work ethic and time management. Students were often seen arriving on time, prepared with completed assignments, and following through with reading tasks as per the

course schedule. Several students were observed setting personal deadlines for their readings and assignments, ensuring they maintained focus on their goals. Even during challenging tasks, students remained dedicated to finishing their work independently, demonstrating their self-regulation and commitment to the course. This finding further support a study involving 765 Chinese college students to examine how self-control influences learning engagement, mediated through resilience and positive emotions. Results indicated that higher levels of self-control were directly associated with stronger learning engagement. Moreover, both resilience and positive emotions served as partial mediators, while their combined chain effect further reinforced this link. This underscores that disciplined behaviors—such as focused effort, persistence, and emotional regulation—not only support academic involvement, but also foster positive psychological states that enhance engagement (Yang, Zhou, & Wang, 2024).

Overall, the classroom observations confirm the findings of the study, suggesting that students in this course exhibit a high level of engagement across all key aspects: applied, goal-oriented, interactive, and self-disciplined. These engagement behaviors likely contribute to positive learning outcomes, as students are not only involved in course activities but are also motivated and self-regulated in their learning, which enhances their critical reading abilities and overall academic success.

Summary of the Key Findings and Discussion
This study investigates student engagement in an ESL critical reading class at a university in Malaysia, focusing on the engagement levels of 38 college students enrolled in an ESL critical reading course. The findings indicate that the students exhibit high levels of engagement across all four aspects. Specifically, the students demonstrate significant applied engagement, actively participating in reading tasks and applying critical thinking skills to understand complex texts. Goal-oriented engagement is also evident, as students set clear objectives for improving their reading proficiency and remain focused on achieving academic success in their ESL course. In addition, interactive engagement is a notable factor, with students frequently engaging in discussions, group activities, and peer collaborations that enhance their understanding of reading materials.

Lastly, self-disciplined engagement reflects the students' consistent efforts to manage their time effectively, complete assignments, and maintain focus on their reading tasks. The results suggest that high levels of student engagement in an ESL critical reading class are linked to positive learning outcomes, where students are not only actively involved in class activities but also motivated and self-regulated in their learning process. These findings contribute to the literature on student engagement in ESL contexts and highlight the importance of fostering a comprehensive approach to engagement that supports the development of critical reading skills. Future research could explore the influence of additional factors, such as instructional methods and classroom dynamics, on student engagement in ESL reading courses.

Hence, the study provides valuable insights into student engagement in ESL contexts and suggests that further research could investigate how teaching methods and classroom dynamics impact engagement in critical reading courses. Specifically, students show strong applied engagement, actively participating in reading tasks and employing critical thinking

skills to analyze complex texts. Goal-oriented engagement is evident as students set clear objectives for improving their reading abilities and remain focused on achieving their academic goals. Additionally, interactive engagement plays a significant role, with students regularly engaging in group discussions, collaborative activities, and peer interactions that enhance their understanding of the reading material. The study also highlights self-disciplined engagement, where students demonstrate the ability to manage their time, complete assignments, and maintain focus on reading tasks.

Overall, the findings suggest that high levels of engagement across these four dimensions contribute to better learning outcomes and academic success in ESL critical reading courses. The results emphasize the importance of fostering a holistic approach to engagement, which not only supports students' active participation in class but also motivates them to develop strong reading skills.

The findings consistently highlight the importance of fostering behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement to improve ESL students' learning outcomes. By creating an engaging, supportive, and interactive learning environment, teachers can significantly enhance students' motivation, reading comprehension, and overall academic success. As the field of ESL education continues to evolve, these studies provide valuable insights into the diverse strategies that can be employed to increase engagement and promote more effective language learning.

Conclusion

This study takes a close look at how students engage in an ESL critical reading class at a university in Malaysia, involving 38 college students. It focuses on four important types of engagement: applied, goal-oriented, interactive, and self-disciplined. The results showed that students were highly engaged in all these areas. They didn't just passively read—they actively worked on reading tasks and used critical thinking to understand complex texts. They also set clear goals to improve their reading skills and stayed motivated to succeed academically. Interaction played a big role too, as students often participated in discussions, group work, and peer collaboration, which helped deepen their understanding.

Plus, they showed good self-discipline by managing their time well and keeping focused on their assignments. This high level of engagement clearly linked to better learning outcomes. (Ismail, Soo, & Ismail, 2018). The study highlights how important it is to encourage different types of engagement—not just getting students to participate, but also motivating them to think critically and manage their own learning. It also suggests that future research could explore how teaching styles and classroom environments further impact engagement. Overall, the findings remind us how creating a supportive and interactive classroom can really boost students' motivation, comprehension, and success in ESL reading.

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