

# Beyond the Screen: Enhancing Adult Learners' Engagement in Virtual EFL Classrooms

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## Abstract

The use of virtual classrooms in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has increased over the years, offering flexibility and access to more opportunities for adult learners to learn. However, it has also come with important challenges, such as technological difficulties, isolation, and attention problems, which affect engagement and, consequently, language learning. Therefore, this essay aims to examine some strategies to enhance engagement in virtual EFL adult classrooms to ensure that learners are involved, actively participate, and develop their language skills in an appropriate online setting. It explores how engagement is understood in a virtual environment, the need for pedagogical shifts in online EFL education, and strategies to enhance engagement, including interactive and collaborative learning, scaffolding techniques, artificial intelligence (AI), gamification, real-world relevance, and fostering a supportive online community. These strategies help to fulfill the specific needs of virtuality and create a more engaging learning experience. This essay also highlights the importance of further research on emerging technologies and individual learner differences to continue improving virtual language education.

**Keywords:** Adult learners, Engagement, English Learning, Virtual EFL education.

## Introduction

Education has been transformed due to the rapid growth of technology. Virtual environments have provided new opportunities for adults to learn English, simplifying the challenge of finding time to study, even with the demands of an adult's busy life. Kravchyna (2021) explained that distance learning offers flexibility, accessibility from anywhere, cost-effectiveness, and the possibility of an individual approach to teaching. Adults need the flexibility of schedules and location. Avoiding transportation to a physical classroom reduces time and costs, and it also helps to meet individual needs through different techniques used in

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virtual classes. Throughout this essay, adult participants will be consistently referred to as "learners" or "students" to maintain clarity and avoid repetition.

However, despite virtual classrooms having many advantages, they also present unique challenges that can affect student engagement and consequently language acquisition. Kravchyna (2021) identified difficulties such as a lack of social interaction, technical difficulties, resistance to modern technologies, and maintaining focus as some of the obstacles that can be faced during virtual classes. These challenges particularly affect students when taking virtual courses since there are important differences when compared to face-to-face lessons. Therefore, it can negatively affect the engagement not only during class but also with the course material, the interaction with classmates and teachers, and overall their learning outcomes. When students are not engaged enough, they might find it difficult to stay motivated, participate, and practice their language skills, which is essential for language acquisition. This highlights the importance of implementing strategies that enhance engagement to create a more supportive and interactive online learning environment.

For this reason, the main objective of this essay is to analyze and propose strategies that help foster engagement in virtual EFL adult classrooms. Strengthening engagement in online learning is of particular interest because it directly impacts the success of adult learners, who often balance their studies with work, family, and other responsibilities, so staying connected and motivated in a virtual class can be harder for them. In this way, educators can ensure that adult learners participate actively in practicing and developing their language skills in an online class. Engagement is essential when learning a language because it directly affects communication skills, motivation, and the opportunity for students to meet the need for practice to develop fluency and confidence. Martin and Bollinger (2018) highlighted that "Student engagement increases student satisfaction, enhances student motivation to learn, reduces the sense of isolation, and improves student performance in online courses" (p. 205). This demonstrates that engagement is beneficial and necessary for student success in a virtual classroom.

As stated by Farrel (2021), "teaching and learning a language is a lot different from doing face-to-face lessons than online learning environments and as such they understood that they should not try to replicate one mode for the other" (p. 126). This points to the need to explore and adjust instructional strategies specifically designed for a virtual learning environment and not just transferring traditional methods to an online format. Pretending that online learning is just the same as face-to-face is a common misconception that significantly affects the learning process. Virtual classes require a shift in pedagogical approaches to adapt to the specific

characteristics of digital learning spaces and to meet the needs of adult learners. Barrett (2010) highlighted that the number of students enrolled in online programs is increasing. Consequently, this topic is relevant to higher education institutions that desire to keep offering online options for students but want to maintain their commitment to quality education.

It is important to emphasize that teaching English in a virtual environment requires educators to carefully design, analyze, and implement strategies that are targeted specifically to this context so that students can be effectively engaged. As Barrett (2010) explained “online educators have had to learn new ways of implementing and nurturing learning for their virtual student populations. The key to success is our ability to think, visualize, and implement” (p. 20). In other words, educators need to leave behind the idea of finding a way to fit their face-to-face plans into virtuality and instead, innovate to foster an engaging online environment. Consequently, based on experience as an online teacher, this essay intends to explore best practices to generate engagement, such as digital tools, gamification, collaborative learning, scaffolding techniques, and real-world applications, to provide valuable insights for educators who are willing to offer high-quality virtual EFL classes.

### **Understanding Engagement in Virtual Learning**

Engagement plays such a fundamental role in shaping the experience of a virtual class, student attrition, outcomes, and the effectiveness of the learning process. Martin and Bolliger (2018) analyzed engagement as a critical element in online learning because it involves taking into consideration active participation and real connection with peers, instructors, and course content. This implies that virtuality demands intentional efforts from educators to build rapport and connect meaningfully to overcome the absence of physical presence. Martin and Bolliger (2018) also emphasized that engagement enhances satisfaction, motivation, and performance, while reducing feelings of isolation in the online learning environment. This reflects the importance of engagement in dealing with the challenge of emotional detachment and in inspiring students with a sense of achievement, commitment, and achieving better outcomes.

However, to generate this involvement, there are different types of engagement that must be present in the class. Martin and Bolliger (2018) described one type as “learner-to-content engagement.” They defined it as an interaction in which students feel connected personally and intellectually with the course materials. This suggests that offering the option of virtuality requires analyzing the materials that are going to be used, among all the different options that virtuality might offer, to make sure that they are relevant and meaningful to generate this type of engagement. The second type that these authors explained is

“learner-to-instructor engagement.” Martin and Bolliger (2018) specified that educators play a crucial role because their presence, guidance, and support can influence the way students feel in class. This indicates that there is a need for interaction beyond the screen, where instructors should be intentional in connecting and not just delivering content.

The third and last type that Martin and Bolliger (2018) mentioned is “learner-to-learner engagement”. They explained that the interaction between students is essential to building a sense of community within the class. This means that when planning a virtual class, there must be activities that can give the opportunity for students to connect with their peers and not just to practice content or develop a skill. Fostering engagement requires understanding its complexity and its key elements.

Expanding on this, Farikah et al. (2023) also supported the idea that engagement is a concept that includes different dimensions, such as behavior, emotions, and cognition. This shows that understanding engagement requires studying and considering its complexity to be able to strengthen it in virtual environments. They explained that behavioral engagement involves active participation in learning activities and involvement in the learning process through their behaviors. A personal example of behavioral engagement can be seen when a student is always on time, submits all homework assignments, and actively participates in all activities. Farikah et al. (2023) described emotional engagement as the way students feel during the learning process with their teachers, classmates, content, and institution. From my teaching experience, it becomes evident that students are emotionally engaged when they enjoy working with their classmates or show excitement about the subject, project, or task.

Lastly, Farikah et al. (2023) defined cognitive engagement as how much effort and time students put into understanding and mastering what they are learning. Experience in virtual classrooms suggests that when students show cognitive engagement, they are curious, critically think about a topic, ask questions, research extra material, and apply concepts to real-life situations. These engagement dimensions that they mentioned are important to consider. For this reason, educators must be intentional when planning virtual lessons to make sure that these elements will be covered since they collectively contribute to effective student engagement.

Furthermore, Dixson (2010) described engagement as a cornerstone to have meaningful connections between students, instructors, and course content. She mentioned that all these valuable interactions influence course completion rates. This reflects that engagement helps students stay motivated and committed to achieving their goals. Based on my experiences as a virtual language teacher, I have seen that consistency, commitment, and long-term exposure are

necessary to improve language learning. Therefore, engagement is essential for student retention. Consequently, fostering it can also be a practical strategy for supporting program completion as well as for student success.

Overall, these perspectives reinforce that engagement in virtual learning is not a desirable outcome but a prerequisite for effective EFL education. Engagement must be acknowledged, researched, and cultivated through thoughtful course design, responsive instruction, and a supportive community.

### **The Need for Pedagogical Shifts in Online EFL Education**

Traditional teaching methods are not adequate for virtual courses. Farrell (2021) pointed out that traditional face-to-face methods do not work well in virtual environments. He argued that online classes require students to take more responsibility for their learning to avoid disengagement. Hence, educators must rethink students' participation, for example, collaboration in breakout rooms, spaces for challenging tasks, and taking the time to think about creative ways to maintain student engagement. Additionally, educators must reflect on their practice and work collaboratively among instructors to make sure that the needs are met and that the shift is evident whenever teaching an online course. Farrell (2021) also suggested that teachers need to develop technological skills to use the digital tools correctly and help students when needed. As a result, institutions should also include education programs that incorporate teacher training specifically for online teaching to support a more flexible, interactive, and learner-centered experience online.

Instructor presence plays an essential role in promoting engagement in digital environments. Bigné et al. (2018) found that active teacher involvement helps to maintain students' emotional connection with the course and increases motivation. Their study emphasized that when students perceive the instructor as accessible and responsive, they are more likely to participate and persist in their learning. As discussed before, the connections in virtual environments play a very important role that must be taken seriously among instructors. It makes a difference to avoid feelings of isolation when learning online. Dixson (2010) also emphasized the value of presence, stating that meaningful communication between teacher and learner is vital in online education. Her study highlighted that the instructor's presence is vital for students' engagement. It is a challenge for educators since it requires an effort to connect and fulfill this key need. For example, a warm tone, regular feedback, and encouraging reflection and interaction help students feel connected.

To carry out these pedagogical shifts, teacher preparation is critical. Much is expected from teachers in every situation, and they usually cope with what has been asked. However, as Barrett (2010) explained, educators often lack training in designing and facilitating learning in digital environments. This means that knowledge about technical tools alone is not going to be enough to achieve good results. Instead, there should be adequate training to help educators adapt to the demands of virtual classrooms in the best way possible, and not just doing the minimum or transforming a face-to-face class into a virtual one. Farrael (2021) supported this view, noting that many instructors are unfamiliar with effective strategies for online teaching. As a result, teachers should participate in programs to develop the necessary skills to enhance their teaching practices, activities, interactions, and techniques for virtual environments. Engagement demands that educators must have a shift in how teachers design learning experiences, best practices to communicate with classmates, and also to build online communities that can share experiences that foster meaningful engagement.

## **Strategies to Enhance Engagement in Virtual EFL Classrooms**

### ***Interactive and Collaborative Learning***

As supported by several authors in the sections before, engagement in virtual EFL classrooms is significantly influenced by how much the learners can interact with one another and with the course content, but in a very meaningful way (Bigné et al., 2018; Dixson, 2010; Farikah et al., 2023; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). According to Dixson (2010), students in online courses consistently reported higher engagement levels when the course design included frequent opportunities for interaction, not only with the instructor but especially among peers. Her study suggested that student-student interaction and student-instructor interaction are correlated with higher engagement. Dixson's (2010) findings suggested that doing activities is not enough; it requires quality and intentional design of the connections that will be fostered during the virtual lesson. Thus, planning interactive and collaborative learning activities is a good strategy to foster engagement since students are going to have a successful learning experience.

Building on this idea, Martin and Bolliger (2018) conducted a study to investigate the importance of engagement strategies in online learning but specifically the strategies related to learner-to-learner, learner-to-instructor, and learner-to-content interactions. Some valuable strategies, such as group work, peer discussions, instructor presence, regular communication, timely feedback, discussion boards, chat sessions, and video conferencing, were recommended to implement in order to build on interactions and create engaging environments. This reflects

that when using interactive and collaborative learning, students can feel motivated to participate and engaged with the class.

Martin and Bolliger (2018) pointed out in their study that when students were encouraged to exchange their ideas or had opportunities to apply content collaboratively, they reported higher satisfaction with the lesson. This shows that it is worth taking the time as educators to plan interactive and collaborative activities so that students can feel satisfied with the course, create a sense of community, and consequently, be engaged to have a successful outcome when learning.

In parallel, Britt (2015) explored several interactive strategies that can enhance student participation and engagement in online learning environments. Some of these strategies are solving real-world problems collaboratively, case studies, group projects, debate forums, and role-playing exercises. It is important to note that the lesson design is essential to help students feel engaged enough to practice language meaningfully in online environments. For example, role-playing exercises foster relevant and meaningful practices where students work together to simulate authentic communicative contexts that are especially important in the language learning classroom.

Moreover, Jeong (2019) stated that collaborative learning activities in online communication can lead to more dynamic classroom interactions that promote language development and meaningful social interactions among learners. This reflects the idea that when students participate in group tasks, they can learn from one another, and they will have more ownership of their learning process, which leads to more engagement and motivation to keep learning the language. Jeong (2019) concluded in her study that online collaborative learning activities improved students' English performance, confidence, and classroom interaction. This is essential because learners tend to feel isolated not only because of virtuality but sometimes due to the learning process. They might think that they are the only ones struggling with the language or making mistakes; however, when working and learning from peers, they can feel a sense of community working towards the same goal of learning English.

In conclusion, the thoughtful integration of interactive and collaborative learning creates a supportive environment in which learners feel engaged enough to express themselves, take risks, and, as a consequence, improve their language skills. The inclusion of these strategies offers opportunities for adult EFL learners to tackle challenges related to motivation, language anxiety, and autonomy. Students value genuine, well-structured, and purposeful opportunities to interact with peers and content. Therefore, educators need to try to innovate the pedagogical

strategies to transform online classrooms into interactive, collaborative, and inclusive learning spaces.

### ***Scaffolding Techniques***

In virtual EFL environments, scaffolding serves as a useful strategy to foster learner autonomy, motivation, and engagement. Nguyen (2022) explained that scaffolding in EFL classrooms helps learners learn more effectively because it includes breaking down complex tasks to gain mastery of the required knowledge or skills. This means that students can have frequent opportunities for small successes and celebrate small progress, which will lead to strong engagement since they will reach a higher level of competence with the right amount of support and at the right time.

Nguyen (2022) mentioned that there are two types of scaffolding within online learning: content and technical scaffolding. Content scaffolding involves helping students understand the lesson better by giving extra examples or helping them to connect the new information with what they already know. Technical scaffolding is about teaching students how to use online tools and platforms for learning. For example, showing students how to navigate the platform or software that they are going to be using, sharing documents, or basic tech troubleshooting. Both types involve trying to make the students feel as comfortable as possible and not overwhelmed or disengaged by any difficulty.

Moreover, Nguyen (2022) explained that scaffolding in language teaching plays a key role because it helps students learn better through various strategies that provide metacognitive, cognitive, and affective support. According to the author, metacognitive scaffolding helps learners think about how they learn and stay focused, cognitive scaffolding makes hard tasks easier, and affective scaffolding addresses emotions, motivation, and reduces frustration during learning. This highlights the need for educators to consider learning, the way students learn, and how they feel throughout the process to generate engagement.

Additionally, Nguyen (2022) emphasized the importance of additional forms of scaffolding due to online language teaching, such as technical scaffolding and content scaffolding. Technical scaffolding helps students use digital tools effectively, and content scaffolding supports the idea of helping students connect ideas from their first language to the target language. This further emphasizes that virtuality requires adjustments, and scaffolding must respond to its unique challenges to help students engage better.

Instructors need to master scaffolding strategies to offer opportunities for students to feel more comfortable, celebrate small wins, and engage with the English course. Nguyen (2022)

explained that for online English language teaching, educators should be ready to use scaffolding techniques when using synchronous or asynchronous learning. Synchronous sessions require careful scaffolding design and organization to manage challenges such as large groups, technical issues, limited teacher observation, and student distractions. For example, using a platform like Zoom for a whole-class discussion can be chaotic if too many students speak at once. This is why it is important to be ready to divide the class into smaller groups and apply cognitive scaffolding techniques to help students practice and learn more from the activity.

Furthermore, teachers can also use scaffolding to present the course materials to help students have a better learning experience. The quick accessibility and digital version of materials can lead to overwhelming learners, so it is essential to select learning materials carefully and present them using a scaffolding technique. Nguyen (2022) described the importance of scaffolding materials to support the learners' process and enhance interactivity. This author mentioned using hypermedia-embedded platforms to facilitate access, supplementary materials like mind maps to summarize subject-matter knowledge, authentic materials including memes, videos, and articles, and interactive tools such as Google Docs. These are just some examples that the author mentioned; however, the objective is that the educator can carefully select the ones that are the best according to the student's needs so that they can start with ones that are easy and manageable and eventually present more challenging ones without losing their class engagement due to frustration or demotivation.

Overall, scaffolding techniques can be a very powerful tool to maintain engagement in a virtual EFL classroom. It is important to notice that effective scaffolding in online settings depends on how well they are aligned with students' needs and the course structure. These strategies can support students and teachers to enjoy the learning process without feeling overwhelmed by technical issues or content. Instead, scaffolding gives the opportunity to find their own pace to enjoy the process without losing engagement.

### ***Artificial Intelligence as an Engagement Tool***

Artificial intelligence (AI) has had a quick growth and a huge impact in many areas, including education, over the past few years. It can be a powerful tool for enhancing engagement in virtual EFL classrooms for adult learners. Ghafar et al. (2023) explained that AI technologies promote the creation of personalized learning environments by adapting content, pace, and feedback to be easily used for the individual needs, interests, and skill levels of each learner. According to them, this technology supports the development of practical language

skills and engagement in English language learning. Building on this, in practice, it is common to see that learners enjoy using AI because it gives the opportunity to practice English in low-pressure and comfortable settings without feeling judged. Also, some AI gives immediate feedback, which helps to keep improving, and that can reduce anxiety and promote confidence to help feel engaged with the process.

In addition, Ghafar et al. (2023) noted that several AI tools enhance English language learning. They mentioned some examples, such as Duolingo which gamifies learning, ELSA that uses speech recognition to improve pronunciation with personalized feedback, Google Translate, text-to-speech for converting text into audio to help with pronunciation and listening skills, English ABLE for grammar learning through assessment-based environments, Orai for improving public speaking by analyzing speech patterns and providing feedback, and chatbots for conversational practice. These are just some examples that the authors mentioned, but every day new tools are released that can be useful for learning a language.

In my experience as a virtual teacher, I have seen that even AI that is not fully created for education can be adapted for learning processes. For example, prompts can be provided for students to practice conversations with real-time feedback with platforms such as ChatGPT or Gemini. Another useful tool, as seen in classroom practice, is Character.ai, which allows educators to customize characters that are designed to act like real people with different accents, tones of voice, and traits to hold a conversation, answer questions, or role-play based on how it was created.

Complementing this perspective, Wang (2019) emphasized that AI has the power to transform and enhance engagement within EFL classrooms. This author pointed out that AI helps to create more interactive and varied classes because this can include voice, text, audio, visuals, and even graphical user interface interactions. This shows that AI can be an engagement tool because it can increase authenticity and create a more interesting, different, and enjoyable atmosphere for practicing the language. Additionally, Wang (2019) stressed that AI systems have the advantage that they can provide immediate feedback for students to correct their mistakes in real-time. This reflects the idea that AI can help improve language skills and, at the same time, motivate and engage adult learners with an innovative and interactive experience.

Furthermore, Wang (2019) pointed out that AI can also help educators to customize lesson plans according to the learners' needs. From experience, it is common to listen to teachers complain about time constraints to plan, test, and design lessons. Therefore, AI is also a good tool for educators to facilitate the process of developing engaging lessons. This also

highlights the importance of finding tools and not excuses to personalize activities, feedback, content, and everything needed during class.

In conclusion, AI is a very useful tool that can transform virtual EFL classrooms by offering the opportunity to practice language skills in an interactive, independent, and useful way. The focus on personalization and accessibility with AI tools boosts engagement by providing meaningful ways to practice and a better quality of learning in virtual EFL environments.

### ***Gamification***

Pratiwi and Waluyo (2023) examined the use of gamified digital tools in online EFL classrooms. Their study focused on strengthening language learning autonomy and engagement through digital resources such as Google Forms, Quizizz, Quizlet, Kahoot!, and Socrative. Their research showed that the use of those tools in digital classes was more effective than traditional methodologies because learners had more improvement when using them. This suggests that if gamification elements are included, it leads to motivation and engagement. Through classroom experience, it becomes evident that most adult learners enjoy and feel more motivated when points, leaderboards, and student-centered experiences are included in virtual settings. Pratiwi and Waluyo (2023) also stated that the design of online EFL courses needs to focus on learners' interests, foster meaningful interactions through well-chosen digital tools. This confirms that administrators and educators need to invest time and resources in finding the digital tools that best suit the learners' needs to adapt gamification in their virtual lessons. This investment will enhance the learners' experience and engage them with the learning process.

Moreover, Chan and Lo (2024) conducted a review of studies to explore how gamification has been integrated into EFL and English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. Their research examined that gamification has a positive impact on students' engagement. They mentioned that learners participated more, had lower anxiety levels, and were more motivated. This reinforces the idea that it is worth including gamification during the lessons because it can positively impact learners' emotional and behavioral engagement. Another advantage noted by Chan and Lo (2024) is that gamified tasks offer immediate feedback, allowing learners to monitor their progress, correct mistakes, and clarify doubts. This means that using gamification allows learners to take ownership of their progress, which is especially important for adults. Chan and Lo (2024) recommended that educators design gamified activities carefully, always considering learners' cognitive development and learning

objectives. By following this recommendation, it is implied that instructors can ensure an increase in engagement and motivation in their lessons.

Overall, these studies emphasized that careful design of gamified lessons with well-selected digital tools can boost learners' motivation, autonomy, and active engagement in virtual EFL classrooms for adults. Experience in the classroom shows that games and competitions can affect the attitude and engagement of adults during virtual classes. Gamification can highly impact an EFL virtual class, so it is worth trying and applying it to enhance the learning experience.

### ***Real-World Relevance***

Incorporating real-world relevance into online learning environments is a key strategy for strengthening student engagement. Britt (2015) argued that authentic activities that closely resemble real-life tasks help learners apply abstract ideas in practical settings to make the experience more meaningful and relevant. According to her, these activities help students connect their learning to real-world applications, and as stated before, having strong connections helps with engagement. In addition, she emphasized that real-world relevance tasks usually lead to collaboration, which is another important strategy to keep strengthening engagement. This strategy helps create learning conditions that are relevant and engaging for adults who greatly benefit from practical and purpose-driven instruction in a virtual EFL classroom.

Building on this perspective, Mehrpouyan (2023) explored some real-world relevance strategies. The author mentioned the need to allow students to create videos, podcasts, or live performances to make learning more dynamic and engaging. Another strategy is to use themes that resonate with students to make more meaningful and engagement the target topic or skill.

Mehrpouyan (2023) mentioned, as some findings, the importance of using multimedia tools and interactive activities like forums, mini-projects, and video presentations to make content more engaging and relatable. This implies that whenever adults understand and experience the applicability of their knowledge, it positively transforms classrooms into more meaningful learning environments. Experience in the virtual classroom shows that authentic tasks help adult learners connect abstract concepts to practical use, and they also promote deeper thinking and collaboration. Moving beyond the screen towards a more connected experience requires designing lessons that reflect the realities, interests, and goals of adult learners. Real-world relevance creates learning environments that feel purposeful, impactful, personal, and engaging.

### ***Fostering a Supportive Online Community***

As mentioned before, feelings of isolation are one of the many challenges that students can face during virtual classes. Therefore, fostering a supportive online community is a good strategy to mitigate this obstacle. Martin and Bolliger (2018) emphasized that a supportive online community enhances engagement in virtual classrooms. They pointed out that the interaction between learners is crucial to prevent isolation and boredom. This means that if virtual classes include more activities that help students to get to know their peers and connect with them, they will be more engaged and less tempted to be distracted. These authors mentioned some strategies that are useful to create an online community: icebreaker discussions, collaborative group work, peer assessment, discussion boards, blogs, and social media platforms. This shows that there are many options to use and innovate during the virtual lessons. Creating an online community requires effort in designing classes that have a welcoming and interactive environment so that students feel comfortable participating and collaborating with their peers. A common scenario in language classrooms is when a student is afraid of making mistakes when using the target language. However, if students feel safe and supported by their peers and instructor, they will be more willing to participate and learn from mistakes rather than feeling embarrassed. Therefore, building a supportive online community should be an essential aspect to work on beyond just content.

Furthermore, Martin and Bolliger (2018) claimed that collaborative learning supports relationship-building among peers, strengthens analytical skills, and encourages knowledge sharing, which are essential for fostering deeper learning and engagement. However, educators must be flexible since some learners might not enjoy group activities. They acknowledged that some students prefer private communication or see some of the group activities as less useful. This highlights the importance of flexibility when designing engagement strategies for diverse learners.

Similarly, Alabbasi (2022) emphasized the importance of creating a strong sense of community in online learning environments to improve student engagement. The study highlighted that interaction, teamwork, and collaboration correlate with students' engagement levels. This means that it is important to prioritize meaningful connections among students and between students and teachers to build a supportive classroom environment that will positively impact learning outcomes due to engagement.

Alabbasi (2022) also suggested that minimizing lecture time and using more dynamic, interactive teaching methods can further improve engagement by encouraging students to share

ideas and respond to feedback in real time. It is often observed in virtual classes that learners need and enjoy opportunities to share experiences, communicate, and connect with peers. If learners feel comfortable and supported, they will feel satisfied and engage in virtual classrooms. Building a strong classroom community helps move instruction beyond the screen, tackles feelings of isolation, improves learning outcomes, and reduces dropouts because learners will develop a sense of belonging and will have a more human-centered experience that impacts their learning experience.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

Engagement is a critical factor in the success of a virtual EFL classroom for adults. Without engagement, students might attend a class but will not be involved or practice enough to improve their language skills. Engagement directly impacts learners' motivation, participation, and ability to develop language skills. It also helps to overcome obstacles such as technological issues, difficulties maintaining focus, and feelings of isolation (Kravchyna, 2021). Without deliberate strategies to foster engagement, learners might find it more difficult to interact with course materials, peers, and instructors. Therefore, their learning process might be slowed down. An informed virtual course design is needed for every virtual class. Being intentional when adding activities and strategies is essential for educators to help students maintain engagement and consequently have better learning results. Nevertheless, learner satisfaction should also be a factor to consider. Learners need to enjoy the process and learn how to learn because it is a lifelong journey.

According to my experience as a virtual teacher, I believe that online teaching is the right fit for any teacher who is open to flexibility, creativity, and the willingness to let go of old habits from face-to-face classrooms. As explained throughout the essay, engagement takes effort and patience, but it is possible. I have seen how rewarding it can be when students connect, participate, and grow in a virtual space. Teachers who are open to learning and adapting can definitely succeed in this environment. Engagement is not optional. It is not a desirable outcome. It is a prerequisite for effective online education, particularly in language learning contexts. In virtual EFL classrooms, where learners face linguistic, cognitive, and emotional demands, engagement plays a critical role in sustaining learning. As educators, engagement should be seen as a priority, and new methods and strategies specifically tailored to the virtual environment must be explored because, as Farrell (2021) noted, replicating face-to-face teaching methods in online settings often fails to meet the needs of learners.

Overall, this essay identified several strategies that can enhance engagement in virtual ELF classrooms to raise awareness among educators to consider more intentional and well-suited planning for virtual environments. Interactive and collaborative learning activities, such as peer discussions and group projects, have been shown to foster deeper involvement and build a sense of community among learners (Dixson, 2010; Britt, 2015; Jeong, 2019). Scaffolding techniques also play a vital role, helping students manage complex tasks through a balance of cognitive, emotional, and technical support tailored to the online context (Nguyen, 2022). Emerging technologies, particularly AI tools, add another layer of engagement by offering personalized feedback, immersive experiences, and low-pressure opportunities for language practice (Ghafar et al., 2023; Wang, 2019). Similarly, gamification has proven effective in boosting motivation and learner autonomy through game-like elements and instant feedback (Chan & Lo, 2024; Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023).

Incorporating real-world relevance, through authentic tasks and media-rich content, helps learners connect language use to practical contexts, making learning more meaningful (Britt, 2015; Mehrpouyan, 2023). Finally, creating a supportive online community through structured interaction and consistent communication reduces isolation and encourages active participation (Alabbasi, 2022; Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

However, future research should deepen and explore more best practices to keep engaging students. In addition, it is important to investigate how individual differences influence engagement to personalize strategies and understand the correlation between successful strategies with different cultural backgrounds, language proficiency, and digital skills. When it comes to digital tools and AI technologies, it is important to keep evaluating new resources as they continuously evolve.

Finally, exploring the role of emotional and social factors in virtual learning environments can offer valuable insights to better understand how to support adult learners facing challenges such as language anxiety or lack of motivation. Exploring those areas can help shape better, more connected, and meaningful EFL virtual classrooms.

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