

INTEGRATING ENGAGEMENT THEORY TO UNCOVER THE STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION IN EFL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at investigating the implementation of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) and exploring the multidimensional nature of student engagement within an English language classroom at the senior high school level. To figure out the answer, this study used a qualitative descriptive approach. It involved an English teacher and 28 (twenty-eight) high school students in one of private high school in Bandung. The data were collected through classroom observation and semi-structured interview. All the participants were involved in the observation session, while only the teacher was involved in the interview session. The data then analyzed using thematic analysis and coding system. This study revealed that in implementing SCL, there are at least 3 (three) ways that the teacher implemented in class. It includes creating a conducive classroom environment, providing interactive material for students, and giving a clear instruction to the student. In addition, the findings also showed how the engagement captured in the process of learning through the implementation of SCL. The engagement covered students' behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social engagement. In conclusion, the implementation of SCL could facilitate students' engagement in all dimensions (behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social engagement) since the teacher changed the role; from the main source of information into a supportive facilitator and learning companion for the students.

Keywords: *Engagement theory; student-centered learning; EFL teaching*

INTRODUCTION

The shift from teacher-centered instruction to more active learning approaches places student engagement as a key factor in determining learning success (Bond et al., 2020). Student engagement in the context of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) has become an important issue in educational research worldwide (Ikmal & Sukmaningrum, 2023; Tholibon et al., 2022; Yuxi et al., 2026). This current study views student engagement as a meta construct, which means it combines many different parts of a student's learning experience. It is not only about students being physically present in the classroom, but also about how they participate, think, and feel during the learning process. By exploring the students' engagement, we could see the learning process as the holistic view since it focuses not only on the students' academic achievement, but also reflects how students think, feel, behave, and interact socially during classroom activities. In addition, understanding the students' engagement allows scholars to better diagnose instructional gaps, perhaps, the teaching method and approach do not fully

meet students' learning needs, and allow the betterment learning experiences to become more meaningful and effective.

The concept of student engagement has developed considerably over the years. One of the most influential frameworks was proposed by Fredricks et al., (2004), who classified student engagement into three main dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The first dimension is behavioral engagement. Behavioral engagement refers to students' participation, discipline, persistence, and involvement in academic activities. It includes following the teacher's instructions, being persistent in finishing tasks, and contributing actively to class discussions. In the context of this study, it refers to how students handle tasks specifically designed using the SCL approach. According to Skinner et al., (2008), this dimension includes students' involvement, effort, and persistence. In this study, behavioral engagement is more than just being physically present in class. Instead, it focuses on how students respond to tasks designed for SCL. The indicators include how well students follow instructions, their consistency in finishing tasks independently, and their active participation during discussions. High behavioral engagement in an SCL environment shows that students are taking the initiative to lead their own learning process in the classroom.

The second dimension is cognitive engagement. Cognitive engagement relates to the mental effort, strategic thinking, and psychological investment students apply to understand and master learning tasks. Christenson et al., (2012) emphasizes that this aspect includes self-regulated learning, where students manage their own learning process independently. Similarly, Huisman et al., (2019) explains that in an SCL environment, this engagement is seen through 'deep learning.' This is when students actively connect different concepts and solve problems without always needing direct instructions from the teacher. This intellectual independence is what makes cognitive engagement the main indicator of successful and lasting learning.

The last dimension is emotional engagement. Emotional engagement concerns students' feelings and affective responses toward learning, such as enthusiasm, interest, anxiety, or boredom in the classroom. It determines whether students feel excited or bored while learning. It includes students' affective reactions such as interest or boredom, and their personal assessment of the SCL method applied by the teacher. Reeve (2012) supports this argument by stating that supporting students' independence in SCL can increase their emotional satisfaction. This satisfaction eventually creates a stronger commitment to every learning activity. In this study, emotional engagement is seen as the students' personal feeling about the SCL method. When students feel valued and actively involved, they will develop the emotional strength and confidence they need to face difficult challenges in English materials (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

Although this three-dimensional framework has been extensively applied in educational studies (Fredricks et al., 2004; Lathifah et al., 2025; Preston et al., 2018), it does not fully capture the collaborative nature of contemporary Student-Centered Learning (SCL) classrooms. To overcome this limitation, more recent scholars, including Bowden et al., (2021), proposed the "Four Pillars of Engagement" framework by adding social engagement as an additional dimension. In student-centered and cooperative learning contexts, social engagement referring to peer interaction, mutual assistance, communication, and collaborative problem-solving becomes an essential factor influencing the effectiveness of classroom activities and learning outcomes. Unlike previous studies that relied only on theory or surveys (Fredricks et al., 2004; Lathifah et al., 2025; Preston et al., 2018), this research provides real evidence through observation and semi-structured interviews to uncover how student-centered learning is

applied in schools. Therefore, this research aims to bridge the gap between teachers' instructional designs and the lived experiences of students at the high school level.

To address these empirical and methodological gaps, this study provides an in-depth qualitative analysis of how SCL operates in practice and how it triggers student engagement. Since senior high school students are at a developmental stage where peer relationships and social acceptance heavily influence their academic motivation, utilizing Bowden et al., (2021) four pillars framework offers a more comprehensive lens. This research moves beyond theoretical generalizations by examining the actual instructional strategies employed by an English teacher in a secondary school setting and evaluating how those strategies resonate across students' behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social experiences.

Consequently, this study aims to answer two main research questions: (1) How is Student-Centered Learning implemented in high school in relation to engagement theory? and (2) What dimensions of student engagement emerge during the implementation of Student-Centered Learning? Through these questions, this research seeks to bridge the gap between instructional pedagogy and students' authentic classroom experiences, offering practical insights for EFL educators aiming to optimize learner-centered environments.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, as frameworked by (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). This methodology is particularly appropriate for the current study because it aims to provide a comprehensive, detailed account of the real-world application of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) and student engagement within their authentic classroom environment at a senior high school in Bandung.

Research Participants

This research was conducted at one of senior high school in Bandung that implements student-centered learning to foster active learning and student independence. The participants included one English teacher, who provided detailed insights into instructional design and lesson planning (*RPP*), and one class of high school students. The inclusion of this specific class allowed for direct classroom observations to address the research questions by examining how the four dimensions of engagement behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social emerged during student-centered activities.

Data Collecting Technique

To collect the data, this study used two main methods: classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. Classroom observation was used to see directly how the teacher implemented the lesson plan in a Student-Centered Learning (SCL) classroom and to check student engagement during learning activities. In this process, the researcher acted as a non-participant observer. This means the researcher only observed and recorded the class naturally without interrupting the lesson. The observation sheet was made based on the four dimensions of engagement from Bowden et al., (2021) to look at behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social indicators.

In addition to observation, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the English teacher. This method was used to get deeper information about the teacher's experiences and thoughts that could not be seen during classroom observation.

Specifically, the interview asked about how the teacher designed the lesson plans, managed the classroom rules, and saw the student engagement that appeared during Student-Centered Learning.

Data Analysis

The data in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis and coding through three steps from Miles et al., (2014): data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. To answer the first research question, the researcher condensed the data by selecting and summarizing main classroom observations and using interviews as supporting data. This data was then displayed in structured narratives and interpreted to draw conclusions about SCL implementation. To answer the second research question, the researcher used a coding technique by (Saldaña, 2021) based on the framework from Bowden et al., (2021). In the data condensation stage, raw observation notes were simplified and labeled into four dimensions: behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social engagement. Next, in the data display stage, these codes were organized into a structured table to show the engagement patterns. Finally, in the conclusion drawing stage, the researcher made final conclusions to describe student engagement based on the real activities observed in the classroom.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings gathered from classroom observation and interview session align with the discussion in the separated sub-section. It covers the addressed question preceded in the introduction section i.e., how student-centered learning implemented in high school in the lens of engagement theory and what dimensions of students' engagement emerge during the SCL implementation.

Findings

The Implementation of Student-Centered Learning (SCL)

Student-Centered Learning (SCL) fundamentally shifts the educational paradigm by positioning students as the primary subjects of education, operating on the principle of being 'for, of, and by the student' to promote peer collaboration and active knowledge development (Bhardwaj et al., 2025; Muliarta, 2018). In line with this philosophy, the implementation of SCL in the English classroom shifted the classroom dynamics by changing the teacher's role from the main source of information into a facilitator and learning companion (Tang, 2023). Based on the field notes findings, the teacher did not dominate the classroom through one-way lecturing but instead created a supportive learning environment that encouraged students to take greater responsibility and autonomy in the learning process. The observation and interview data showed that this learner-centered approach was effectively implemented through three interconnected instructional strategies: creating a conducive classroom environment, providing interactive material for students, and giving clear instructions. These strategies successfully encouraged high school students to become more independent, active, and confident during the English teaching and learning process (see Table 1).

Table 1. Student-centered learning practice and their engagement based on observation data

No	Strategies	Classroom Activity	Outcome	Engagement
1	Conducive classroom environment	Students group discussion – collaborative group activities and clear classroom rules.	In group discussion, students actively exchanged ideas, gave and received feedback, and completed the task.	Behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social engagement
2	Interactive material for students	Students identified short functional texts with relatable topic.	Students were excited involved in classroom discussion, and they could easily convey their idea.	Behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social engagement
3	Clear instruction	By simplified the command, students could easily understand what they should do	Students were able to work independently.	Behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social engagement

The detail exploration of these findings can be seen in the following paragraphs of this section.

Creating a conducive classroom environment

The results of this study show that, the implementation of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) was demonstrated through the creation of a conducive classroom environment. A conducive classroom in this study did not refer to a completely quiet classroom, but rather to a balanced learning atmosphere where discipline was maintained while students were encouraged to actively participate in discussions without feeling anxious. This condition was supported through collaborative group activities and clear classroom rules established by the teacher from the beginning of the lesson. For example, the teacher organized students into groups by asking them to count from one to five before working on the worksheet (LKPD) (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Students engaging in active and collaborative group discussions

During the group discussions, students actively exchanged ideas, provided feedback to one another, and completed tasks independently without relying entirely on the teacher. Nevertheless, the teacher still played an important role as a facilitator by assisting students whenever they encountered difficulties after discussing with their peers. The teacher's supportive responses created positive two-way interactions that helped maintain students' engagement throughout the learning process. However, several challenges were also identified, such as students who were less active in group work or reluctant to take notes. To overcome these issues, the teacher implemented clear boundaries and applied a reward-and-punishment strategy. For instance, students were only allowed to use mobile phones for learning purposes after the teacher had finished explaining the material. In addition, active students received extra points, while students who violated the rules experienced score reductions. According to the teacher, these strategies were effective in maintaining classroom discipline and supporting the success of SCL implementation.

Overall, the findings indicate that a conducive classroom environment was successfully established through a combination of active student collaboration and structured classroom management.

Providing interactive material for students

The second implementation of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) was reflected in the teacher's ability to provide engaging learning materials that matched students' proficiency levels. Instead of presenting long and difficult English texts, the teacher simplified the materials and related them to students' daily lives to make learning more interactive and meaningful. Based on classroom observations, the teacher taught Short Functional Text using PowerPoint (PPT) slides and encouraged students to identify examples of short functional texts they often encounter in everyday situations. This strategy successfully helped students focus better and increased their cognitive engagement during the lesson.

The learning process was further supported through collaborative worksheets (LKPD), where students worked in groups to analyze aspects such as the definition, language features, and social function of the text. During the activity, the teacher actively monitored each group to ensure all students participated in the discussion. The observations showed that the combination of group worksheets and direct teacher supervision effectively increased students' enthusiasm and maintained their attention throughout the learning process. Although differences in students' language proficiency became a challenge, especially for students who needed more time to understand instructions, the use of clear PPT visuals and collaborative group work helped lower-ability students feel more comfortable and less intimidated.

In addition, the teacher provided scaffolding and direct guidance to groups experiencing difficulties, which encouraged more inclusive participation and teamwork. According to the interview results, the teacher believed that adapting learning materials and media to students' characteristics could help students feel more connected to the lesson, improve their confidence, and reduce their fear of learning English. Overall, the findings indicate that the teacher successfully implemented contextual and engaging learning materials in the SCL classroom by accommodating students' different abilities and encouraging active peer collaboration.

Giving clear instruction

The third implementation of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) was reflected in the teacher's ability to provide clear instructions during the learning process. In this study, the teacher delivered instructions through three main strategies: simplifying command sentences, applying a bilingual approach, and using body language to explain difficult vocabulary or texts. Classroom observations showed that these strategies successfully helped students stay focused, reduced confusion, and maintained classroom order during learning activities.

Although differences in students' language abilities initially caused some students to lose focus, the teacher adaptively addressed this challenge by repeating instructions using simpler language and interactive gestures. This approach effectively regained students' attention and enabled them to work more independently and productively in their collaborative groups without constantly depending on the teacher. The interview results also revealed that the teacher intentionally used simple English, Indonesian translation, and body movements to ensure students could clearly understand the instructions (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Teacher repeats the instructions clearly

Overall, the findings indicate that giving clear and adaptive instructions played an important role in supporting the successful implementation of SCL. By adjusting the instructions to students' language proficiency levels, the teacher was able to encourage students' active participation, independence, and engagement during group learning activities.

Student Engagement Dimension in SCL

Student engagement is not only about students being physically present in the classroom, but also about how they participate, think, and feel during the learning process. The findings regarding student engagement in an SCL-based classroom are presented in this section. Data from classroom observations, field notes, and semi-structured interviews with the English teacher revealed positive outcomes across the four dimensions of engagement based on Bowden et al., (2021). Behaviorally, students

showed good discipline and managed their phone usage for learning purposes. Cognitively, deep focus was observed during learning tasks, despite minor conceptual hurdles. Emotionally, the implementation of reward systems and teacher support effectively kept students motivated, while socially, interactive group setups fostered healthy collaboration among peers.

Behavioral engagement

Behavioral engagement was characterized by a general compliance with classroom rules and prompt attendance. Students demonstrated initial discipline through early greetings in English and active participation in minor tasks, such as writing the date on the whiteboard. However, maintaining persistence in notetaking presented a challenge, as the teacher frequently had to prompt passive students to take notes, leading to moments of teacher frustration. Despite this, student focus and obedience shifted positively once the teacher distributed the learning worksheets.

Cognitive engagement

In the cognitive dimension, students showed good focus and effort to understand the lesson. At first, they listened well and actively discussed short functional texts by connecting them to daily life. However, some students felt confused and struggled when asked to re-explain the material in their own words. To help them complete the assignment, the teacher allowed students to use smartphones strictly for looking up learning materials.

Emotional engagement

In the emotional dimension, student engagement was shown by their positive attitude and strong motivation. Students stayed focused during explanations and showed good persistence by not giving up on difficult topics. Additionally, the use of a reward and punishment system successfully increased their enthusiasm and discipline during classroom activities.

Social engagement

In the social dimension, strong collaboration was shown through active two-way communication between the teacher and students. Within groups, students worked well together, shared roles to complete tasks, and gave feedback to correct each other's answers. They also showed respect and made sure no group member was left out.

Discussion

This section analyzes the implementation of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) and its profound influence on the four dimensions of student engagement based on the framework proposed by Bowden et al., (2021). The empirical findings indicate that interactive classroom activities combined with a highly supportive environment effectively stimulate active student involvement across all dimensions. In the dimension of behavioral engagement, students demonstrated a high level of discipline, punctuality, and compliance with classroom rules, such as greeting the teacher in English and diligently completing tasks. Although the teacher occasionally needed to repeatedly remind some passive students to maintain their focus on notetaking, they remained cooperative overall. This positive behaviour was strongly reinforced by the teacher's structured classroom management, particularly through the clear boundaries and a reward-and-punishment system established right from the beginning of the lesson. This

evidence aligns with Fredricks et al., (2004) regarding students' effort and concentration in academic tasks, confirming that a consistent structure fosters student discipline and responsibility.

Furthermore, cognitive engagement was clearly reflected in the students' focus, effort, and active thinking during the learning process. The students listened carefully to the teacher's explanations and actively participated in brainstorming activities. To encourage students' critical thinking, the teacher connected short functional texts with the students' daily lives, which helped create meaningful classroom discussions. To reduce students' anxiety and confusion when they were asked to explain the material again, the teacher used both English and Indonesian along with body gestures. This strategy helped students understand the lesson more easily and stay focused during classroom activities. These findings are supported by (Chin, 2007), who emphasized the importance of productive questioning, (Rasman, 2018), who highlighted the effective use of the mother tongue, and (Sime, 2006), who explained that teacher gestures play an important role in maintaining students' cognitive focus in an SCL classroom.

In terms of emotional engagement, the findings showed that students demonstrated positive feelings, strong motivation, and good persistence when dealing with difficult topics. By greeting the students warmly and starting the lesson with fun ice-breaking activities, the teacher successfully created a lively, comfortable, and safe classroom atmosphere. As a result, students felt more confident and did not feel stressed, anxious, or afraid of making mistakes while learning English. This strategy shows the teacher's role as a supportive learning companion and supports the theory proposed by (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), which states that a non-threatening classroom environment is important for reducing foreign language anxiety and increasing students' confidence.

Lastly, social engagement was reflected in the healthy and collaborative interactions among peers and with the teacher. During group assignments, students engaged in active two-way communication, shared operational roles fairly, and demonstrated respect by listening to one another's opinions without isolating any group members. The teacher emphasized that strict adherence to classroom rules and boundaries from the very beginning was essential to protect this collaborative environment from disruptions. This finding is consistent with (Wang & Eccles, 2012) on the significance of peer and teacher support in enhancing social interaction. Moreover, it strongly echoes Skinner et al., (2008) and (Wang & Eccles, 2012), which both emphasize that a well-structured social environment is vital for helping students collaborate effectively and build positive relationships throughout the SCL process.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the present research was to examine of the implementation of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) and its impact on student engagement in the English classroom. The findings showed that SCL was implemented effectively, changing the teacher's role from the main source of information into a supportive facilitator and learning companion. By using interactive PowerPoint slides and connecting the materials to students' daily lives, the teacher successfully created an active learning atmosphere that helped students become more confident and independent.

Additionally, the study revealed that students showed high engagement during the learning process, which was strongly driven by the teacher's classroom management. By guiding discussions and building a disciplined yet comfortable classroom

environment, the teacher successfully motivated students to participate actively. Based on the four pillars of student engagement, this active involvement was clearly demonstrated across the behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

In the process of writing this research, we used AI tools – specifically Wordtune and Grammarly – to rephrase particularly dense sentences and grammar checking. All AI used then subsequently reviewed, edited, and verified by us as the authors. Therefore, we take full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and integrity of this manuscript.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

We hereby declare that this research is free from conflicts of interest with any party.

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