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***Exploring The Effect of Online Classes  
on Student Engagement among EFL  
College Students***

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## ***Exploring The Effect of Online Classes on Student Engagement among EFL College Students***

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### ***Abstract***

*This study examined the effect of an online class on EFL college students' level of engagement and their instructional performance through teaching practice experience. Another purpose of the study was to explore the influence of peer interaction on students' performance on the online class. Data collection sources were the Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (SCEQ) developed by Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan and Towler (2005) and a self-evaluation report administered at the end of the treatment. Results of the study revealed that the online class had a positive effect on participant students' level of engagement and their instructional performance through teaching practice experience. Moreover, in terms of the study results, peer interaction notably influenced the students' performance on the online class. Based on findings of the study, appropriate conclusions and implications have been suggested.*

**Keywords:** Online Classes-Online active Learning Environments - Student Engagement- Peer interaction

### **Introduction**

The concept of learner engagement provides a practical lens for assessing and responding to the significant dynamics, restrictions and opportunities that confront institutions of higher education. The concept gives key insights into what learners are actually practicing, and a stimulus for guiding new thinking about best practice (ACER, 2008). Relatedly, engagement, as suggested by Spiller (2005, cited in Lawrence, 2006) emphasizes the

chief role of the learner in the educational process. Real changes in the learners' understanding is determined by what they actually do.

According to Burton and Goldsmith (2002), online classes have the potentiality of facilitating communication in relation to student-student interaction and student-Instructor interaction. Besides, student can comfortably discuss difficult issues concerning online learning experiences. Creating real connections in online classes is an important target that should be attained. Instructors should organize active learning situations through which learners can practically make use of what they are learning. Instructors also need to provide multiple ways of interacting with students to create their own social presence, the thing that can be looked upon as an essential element to a successful online course (Dixson, 2010). Instructor's constant involvement in discussion is of a great necessity for enhancing the quality and quantity of student participation in online classes (Wang, 2011).

Through online learning environments, varied opportunities are provided for engaging students and empowering them to have control over their learning process. However, online learning instructors should make sure that the learners do possess the ability and willingness to perform online activities and tasks on their own (Lim, 2004). Relatedly, Robinson (2011) argues that enhancing students' engagement can be definitely attained through participating in discussion boards in an online environment. Accordingly, there is a useful evidence to support the use of online discussions as an additional teaching and learning tool for engaging students.

Lawrence (2006) points out that the literature does not specify explicit engagement practices but it does

explore institutional, pedagogical and student roles that are related to engagement. Engaged students are more likely to persist and succeed at university and their early experiences are decisive for establishing positive connections between the learner, the learning environment and the broader university experience (Krause & McEwen, 2009).

## **Relevant Literature**

### **Online classes: Definition and Nature**

"The concept of technology - enhanced , student - centered learning environment is based on key assumptions of constructivist theory – that the student must engage in an active, experiential learning process to form an individual, meaningful understanding" (McAlpine & Allen, 2007, p.639). The use of asynchronous technology, either as an add on to traditional face to face classes or as a basic requirement of an online class, can open new avenues for effective learning . However, it is not preferable to replace traditional face to face classes (chen, 2005).

According to Robinson and Hullinger (2008) there is an evidence of engagement in online learning; However, " the next questions relate to what promotes engagement in the online environment and what relations exist between engagement data and other valid measures of student learning in web-based learning " (p.107). In this regard, Yengin et al. (2010) conclude that future technologies can highly increase the chances of developing new learning forms where we can include all of the sensations into learning situation.

Online learning is focused not only on the online contexts, but also includes a full range of computer-based learning platforms and delivery methods, genres, formats

and media (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010, p. 534). According to Naidu (2006), E-learning or online learning are commonly referred to the international use of networked information and communications technology for teaching and learning purposes. Overall, "they refer to educational processes that utilize information and communication technology to mediate asynchronous as well as synchronous learning and teaching activities" (p.1).

Adoption of online discussion forums on the part of both learners and instructors has been evidently effective in relation to gaining and sharing valuable knowledge. "Enhanced qualitative online participation can make discussion forum activities really productive and, if carefully managed, may even be used as an alternative to the interactive classroom environment" (Nandi; Chang & Balbo, 2009, p. 670). Best practices within an online class may include specific tasks. For example, collaborative activities in relation to communication protocols, and permanent student postings to the class discussion forum. Also, "asynchronous communication for deeper discussions, and instructor modeling of thoughtful responsiveness with a personal tone all can help build classroom community connections" (Young & Bruce, 2011, p. 226).

### **Designing Online Classes**

The growing progress of information and communication has established ample opportunities for instructors to extend the teaching-learning process beyond the barriers of the traditional classroom (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). When instruction is designed to actively engage learners in meaningful tasks, students' feelings of engagement may be enhanced. Student engagement and sense of classroom community are highly related to one another. To clarify, students who experience a sense of

connectedness are more likely to be positively involved in course content and properly persistent on real world tasks (Young & Bruce, 2011).

Instructors have to make sure that course design is consistent, logical, and integrates adequate instructions. Also, Online instructors should train students in the technical skills required for the process of online learning. "Because cognitive engagement involves the integration and utilization of students' motivations and strategies in the course of their learning, instructors must remove technology barriers that waste cognitive energy (Mandernach, 2009, p. 2). One critical factor involves sufficient professional development for online instructors. Relevant instructional design strategies and knowledge of best practices can assist instructors in providing varied opportunities for student interaction, participation, and feedback among peers and with the instructor (Young & Bruce, 2011).

Howard (2009) recommends that instructors should incorporate face to face meetings into their online classes with a view to improving community feelings, encouraging exploratory discussions, engaging dominated learning styles, developing instructor-students interaction and promoting instructor efficiency. Moreover, these face to face meetings have the potential of helping students to understand and adopt effective practices. They also support trust and respect relationships within the class and offer advice concerning any extraneous factors that may affect students success in the course. At the pedagogical level, instructors have to identify the strategic purpose for including online discussions. Also they should decide how to relate each discussion session to a course component as well as to learning outcomes ... The main discussion purpose is to struggle on the part of individual learners with a view to engaging course material with peers while checking comprehension (Baker, 2011).

Through the blended layout, the online component is more accessible, in that students are able to ask questions through face to face meetings about assignment expectations. Also, the triangulation method of instruction has the potential to meet varied learning styles. The variety helps keep students involved, and introduces them to a wide range of competencies than would be possible in a purely traditional classroom environment. Besides, critical thinking abilities can be promoted through encouraging students to comment on their peers' online discussion postings. They learn to challenge their assumptions and to provide a rationale for their responses (Gilbert & Flores-Zambada, 2011). "Online discussion forums provide a platform for incorporating and sharing knowledge, deriving and analyzing solutions for different problems". Learners are encouraged to participate in online discussion forums for displaying their knowledge of a course and their ability to manage a discussion (Nandi; Chang & Balbo, 2009, p. 666).

### **Active Learning within Online Classes: The Promise**

Effective communication and interaction are basic factors ensuring the success of online courses. Besides, adopting varied communication means are essential in establishing a flexible learning environment (Wang, 2011). In this respect, Dixson (2010) argued that meaningful communication chances should be integrated into online courses. Such connections have the potential of assisting students to feel engaged with the courses they are taking despite the lack of a physical presence of instructor or other students.

Involving students in more than listening, emphasizing students' exploration of their own attitudes and values, engaging students in activities like reading, discussing, or writing, and focusing on developing students'

skills rather than on conveying information are some instances of active learning strategies that can be adopted in an online learning environment (Yengin et al., 2010). Also, Nardos (2000, p.24) explains that "active learning is likely to be enjoyed, offers opportunity for progress, and thereby fosters positive students' attitudes towards the subjects". Mayerson (2006) has the belief that one of the best instructional methods is utilizing active learning by the use of learner involvement, motivation, interest, self discovery, continual peer and instructor feedback and communication, self reflection, and transferability. Deep learning is most likely to take place in such rich and varied environments.

To enhance students' cognitive engagement in online courses, instructors should integrate active learning environments with authentic learning tasks; promote a personal connection with students; and facilitate the process of learning in an online environment (Mandernach, 2009). According to Haughton and Romero (2009, p. 571) "an effective online instructor should choose instructional strategies to solicit student inputs. These inputs are then used to understand learner needs and ... to create an authentic and individualized instructional context that supports the learning of the individualized student".

"The blended model is a student-centered approach that allows the instructor to behave as a coach, a facilitator, and a cheerleader for his/her students. It is a way to let students lead in an environment in which they're guided to success" (Gilbert & Flores-Zambada, 2011, p. 252). For some students, a benefit to the asynchronous online learning environment is the ability for enhanced communication between students and instructor versus communication in the traditional classroom setting. Students who may feel reluctant to communicate in such traditional classroom are

more likely to participate in discussions in an online environment (Burton & Goldsmith, 2002).

In online learning environment, there is a critical role for instructors to play. They have to clearly figure their own roles and implement effective strategies with a view of enhancing their students' learning experiences. This role includes "organizing and carrying out activities to provide guidance, providing strategic support and assistance to help learners assume control of their own learning and reflecting upon and readapting activities accordingly (Lim, 2004, p. 23). Anderson (2004) stated that the main tasks of the effective e-learning teacher "include the design of a series of learning activities that encourage independent study and community building, that deeply explore content knowledge, that provide frequent and diverse forms of formative assessment, and that respond to common and unique student needs" (p. 276).

Instructors in online learning environments have several potential advantages. Flexibility of teaching that can be done at anytime and from anywhere. Also, updating online teaching materials can be easily conducted. "If designed properly, online learning systems can be used to determine learners' needs and current level of expertise, and to assign appropriate materials for learners to select from to achieve the desired learning outcomes" (Ally, 2004, p.5). Giving timely and consistent feedback on the part of the online instructor is considered a critical factor to the students' success within an online class. Also. The type of feedback students get from their peers highly contribute in fostering students' understanding of the online course content. Through such positive environment, students have an ample opportunity to ask questions, to explore different points of view and to comment on their peers' ideas (Burton & Goldsmith, 2002).

Krause and McEwen (2009) specify certain characteristics of effective online learning experiences. These are : Contextualized, situated, responsive and experiential learning ;Effective communication, engagement and interaction among students ; catering for different learning styles and levels ; Peer learning and community building; Fostering self-reflection; Role modelling online engagement behaviours; Well designed assessment and provision of effective, timely feedback; A fully functional online learning environment where technology is exploited for enhancing learning and curriculum delivery. According to McAlpine and Allen (2007,p.641) " in an online format, collaboration is usually mediated by online discussion, a vital part of which is to keep students actively engaged".

### **Student Engagement : Nature and process**

The concept of student Engagement is based on the notion that learning is influenced by the way in which a learner participates in activities of educational purposes. "While students are seen to be responsible for constructing their knowledge, learning is also seen to depend on institutions and staff generating conditions that stimulate and encourage involvement" (ACER, 2008, P.1) In addition, Mayerson (2006) defines engagement as "a student's level of involvement in the subject matter and course, marked by the characteristics of student-to- instructor and student-to-student communication, independent research, work effort, overall interest in the course, and the nexus of that involvement with his or her course's web site" (p.14)

Engagement is effort focused on instructional tasks, it means working hard at the business of the class. When learners are engaged they are focused on text,... they are writing the answers to written exercises. They are attending to teachers or they are helping each other do their work

(Beder et al, 2006, p.1). Helme and Clark (2001) also emphasize classroom situations as relate to engagement, They define engagement as " the deliberate task-specific thinking that a student undertakes while participating in a classroom activity" (p.136). Students who are working on groups projects together, reviewing one another's papers, interacting through a discussion forum, are likely to be more engaged in the course (Dixson, 2010; Harris, 2009).

In the research literature, engagement in learning basically refers to the amount, type, and intensity of investment students make in their educational experiences. To explain, the more time and effort students devote to and the more engaged they are in tasks that foster learning, the more and the more likely they are to succeed. A basic finding from the wide research on engagement is that, in terms of learning outputs, the most crucial factor is the actual practices students go through while they are doing their academic work (Coates, 2006). Specifically, student engagement may be defined as students' involvement with activities and conditions that are "likely to generate high-quality learning" (ACER,2008,p.1).

Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004, p.5) suggest that three types of engagement can be recognized. Cognitive engagement which is defined as " the student's investment in and commitment to academic work. Emotional engagement refers to a student's reactions to others, and connections with the school community, and behavioral engagement to participation in both the school and academic work" . To add, Kuh (2003) states that engagement relate to the efforts of the student to study a subject, practice, get feedback, analyze, and solve problems.

### **Enhancing Student Engagement**

To enhance student engagement, varied opportunities should be provided. Among these opportunities, encouraging

learners to reflect on their learning, exposing learners to a variety of engaging activities, considering learner feedback seriously, promoting ideas, discussions and conversations about engagement, combining engagement measures with traditional ways of assessment, and enhancing engagement through developing the abilities of teachers (Coates, 2006). Class participation and students interaction can promote the quality and quantity of their engagement. Besides, continuous dialogue between teacher and student while exploring their subject matter may be looked upon as a basic requirement for teaching to take place (Spiller, 2005, cited in Lawrence, 2006).

Enhancing student engagement can be attained through providing opportunities for : producing resources to help students learn about engagement ; finding ways to generate students' reflection on their study; exposing learning to a variety of engagement activities ; Integrating measures of engagement into traditional assessment (Coates, 2006). Relatedly, Zyngier (2007, p. 344) proposes that an engaging pedagogy should guarantee that what teachers and students do is :

*Connecting-to and engaging with the students' cultural knowledge; Owning-all students should be able to see themselves as represented in the work; Responding-to students' lived experiences and actively and consciously critiquing that experience; Empowering-students with a belief that what they do will make a difference to their lives and the opportunity to voice and discover their own authentic and authoritative life''.*

The engagement-based learning and teaching approach, as suggested by Jones (2008) provides the essential bases for promoting student engagement and the learning process as a whole. According to this approach, there are six key elements for teachers to consider: 1- Developing one-on-

one relationships (between student and teacher); 2- Learning new varied skills and habits to engage students; 3- Adopting specific strategies that facilitate student engagement; 4- Feeling responsible for student engagement; 5- Establishing a culture of student engagement; 6- Increasing student engagement through professional development. Along the same lines, Taylor and Parsons (2011) reported that providing a positive, challenging, and open environment that encourage students to take risks and collaborate with respectful peers and the teacher are so essential requirements for successfully engaging students.

### **The Study Problem**

The current study aims at investigating the effect of an online class on EFL student-teachers' level of engagement. Moreover, it is an attempt to explore the influence of peer interaction on students' performance on the online class. Also, the effect of students' participation in the online class on their instructional performance through teaching practice experience is to be investigated. Accordingly, the following research questions are to be addressed:

- 1- To what extent does the online class affect EFL student-teachers' level of engagement?
- 2- How does peer interaction influence EFL student-teachers' performance on the online class?
- 3- In what way does participation in the online class affect EFL student-teachers' instructional performance through their teaching practice experience?

### **The Study purpose and Significance**

The main purpose of this study is to understand and potentially influence, the ways that active learning online may be designed to engage EFL student-teachers. Besides, the study aims at bringing students forward into the new

paradigm of online active learning. With regard to significance, the current study may provide empirical evidence in relation to vast potentialities of the web for creating a positive learning environment in which the students are encouraged and prepared to be autonomous, engaged learners.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This study was conducted on 25 college third year students (22 females and 3 males) majoring in English as a foreign language at the English department. Participants enrolled in a mandatory methodology course which lasted for one academic semester, four hours a week. Besides, in the second semester, students were exposed to practical sessions through on-campus computer labs.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Two basic instruments for data collection have been designed and used in the current study. These were: The student course Engagement Questionnaire (SCEQ) and a self-evaluation report administered at the end of the treatment.

### **The Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (SCEQ)**

With a view to assessing learner engagement level the student course engagement questionnaire developed by Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan and Towler (2005) was adopted in the current study. The SCEQ is a multidimensional measure of student engagement that comprises four factors. These were Skills Engagement, Emotional Engagement, Participation/ Interaction Engagement and Performance engagement.

The first factor consisted of nine items (items 4, 5, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17, 20, 23) that was labeled Skills Engagement because it represented student engagement through practicing skills. Coefficient alpha was 0.82. Skills engagement factor seems to include general learning strategies that one can use to attain intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. The second factor consisted of five items (items 7, 8, 11, 21, 22) that was labeled Emotional Engagement because it represented student engagement through emotional involvement with the class material. Coefficient alpha was 0.82. The third factor consisted of six items (items 1, 2, 3, 6, 18, 19) that was labeled participation/ Interaction Engagement because it represented student engagement through participation in class and interactions with instructors and other students. Coefficient alpha was 0.79. The fourth factor consisted of three items (items 12, 15, 16) that was labeled Performance Engagement because it represented student engagement through levels of performance in the class. Coefficient alpha was 0.76.

The factor analysis resulted in a 23-item final version of the SCEQ (see Appendix A). All student engagement factors showed reasonable reliability that ranged from 0.76 to 0.82. The highest of the correlations among the student engagement factors was 0.44 between skills and emotional engagement, lending some support for the discriminant validity of the student engagement measure.

Students were instructed to rate each of the SCEQ items on the following scale: 1= not at all characteristic of me, 2= not really characteristic of me, 3= moderately characteristic of me, 4= characteristic of me, 5= very characteristic of me.

### **The Self-Evaluation Report**

At the end of the treatment, participant students were asked to give a self-evaluation report in a written form. Two

main questions were raised to be answered. The first question dealt with the influence of peer participation on students' performance on the online class; "Active Learning Online". To explain students were invited to describe how their peer participation, or in particular, their fellow students' interaction influenced their own performance on the online class. Regarding the second question, it dealt with the effect of the online class: "Active Learning Online" on student-teachers' performance through their teaching practice experience. A copy of the self-evaluation report is provided in appendix (B).

### **The Online Class: "Active Learning Online"**

The current researcher initiated an online class entitled "Active Learning Online" through a free educational web site called the Nicenet ICA (Internet Classroom Assistant). It can be accessed on: [http:// www.nicenet.org](http://www.nicenet.org). The Nicenet ICA is a web-based classroom environment that enables instructors to create online classes/forums for their students to join. The decision was made to use the online class as an add-on to face-to-face lectures. Both the online and face-to-face components of the course were redesigned and integrated with one another to formulate an effective hybrid approach.

The course chosen for the implementation of the online class: "Active learning Online" was a mandatory EFL methodology course entitled "Methods of Teaching English". The course lasted for 15 weeks (the whole first term) with 4 hours of face to face classroom teaching per week. The course was first presented at the first term. Afterwards, in the second term, online practical sessions were offered to the experimental group members who could log onto the online class through on-campus computer labs. The course covered three main topics. These were: Major

English language teaching approaches; Teaching planning in terms of the four language skills; Involving students in learning through questioning strategies.

It was very essential from the very beginning of the treatment to clearly define the course and its learning outcomes to help students and the instructor (the current researcher) to establish a common ground of expectations. To that end, designing the online class required specifying the prerequisite knowledge and skills on the part of both students and the instructor. To specify, technological and technical skills are a very essential component of the online class as it requires specific technical skills and competencies that are completely different from the demands of the traditional classroom. Accordingly, two orientation sessions were given for preparing students to the online learning environment. The required technical skills included signing up for the online class, configuring a web browser, posting messages to the class or to the instructor, navigating class links, participating in group work, completing and submitting online assignments, completing reading tasks, and participating in online discussions.

For the purpose of creating an active online learning environment, a great deal of attention was devoted to the planning and execution processes of the online class. Significantly, a considerable body of research work strongly suggest combining production with communication with a view to enhancing the active learning potential of the online environment (For example, see Dixson, 2010; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010; Hrastinski, 2009; Nandi, 2009; Brindley; Walti & Blaschke, 2009; Haughton & Romero, 2009; Naidu, 2006; Burton & Goldsmith, 2002). Planning these communicative activities required the use of various communication tools that encouraged students to interact

with their peers and the course content while completing varied online tasks and assignments.

Through the Nicenet ICA, students made use of many options and devices. Under the link 'Conferencing', students could discuss, express and share their views and responses to the topics and discussion questions created and posted by the researcher (the online class mediator). The discussion questions were constructed in accordance with the course topics with a view to activating the students' background knowledge, stimulating their thinking and generating rich and constant discussions in a non-threatening atmosphere.

The students had the opportunity to post their answers to the addressed questions as well as their comments on their peers' answers. Additionally they could pose their own questions and queries about content-related concepts/issues and different strategies for completing the required tasks and assignments. Online conferencing provided the opportunity for the students to participate positively in the online class activities at their ease whenever they are ready and able to do so.

Regarding the feature 'Link Sharing' the students were instructed to visit some specific web sites selected and prepared beforehand by the researcher. Through these relevant web sites, the students had access to a variety of hyperlinks that are closely related to the course topics and the addressed discussion questions as well. Besides, there was a possibility of providing relevant texts and instructional materials through the feature 'Document'. The students were guided to read and analyze these specific texts with a view to enhancing their understanding of the course topics. These reading tasks allowed students to discuss the topic thoroughly, think critically, relate the course material

to their own experiences both inside and outside classroom setting, and reflect on past beliefs and practices Moreover, students had access to study the course materials at their own pace and in terms of their own needs.

The "Assignment' feature provided the opportunity of assigning varied tasks and assignments for the students to perform. These assignments were basically based on group work for facilitating peer participation and peer interaction. Also, through group work, it was easier for the instructor to monitor online discussions and assess students' performance. Also, through the 'Class Administration' feature, access to the number of times each member visited the online class and the number of postings performed/ sent by each class member can be attained. Moreover, the feature 'Class Members' provided a detailed account about the students' usernames and passwords. The students had the option to use pseudonyms if they liked to. Therefore, the students were more willing to express themselves freely without fear of being embarrassed. Besides, the students had the capability to edit their own messages after they have posted them to the online class. Also, the instructor had the potentiality to edit their writings and to give comments and feedback. The students, also, could share and give comments on each other's postings.

One basic purpose of the course was cultivating a learner- centered environment that may encourage learners to be autonomous and active participants. To that end, three basic online active learning strategies were used: Think-pair- share, minute paper, and collaborative learning groups. Regarding the first strategy; Think- pair – share, there were three basic steps. Firstly, the instructor posed a prepared question and asked the students to think about it. At the second stage, the students paired up with a partner and

shared their knowledge in a verbal form. Thirdly, the instructor selected a few pairs to expose their ideas and share what they have with the whole class. In this way, the strategy proceeded from working on the individual level to pair level and finally as a large group. The strategy made it easy for the students to organize their prior knowledge and generate questions when used at the beginning of a lecture. However, when used later in the lecture, the strategy enabled the students to summarize what they are learning, transfer it to new situations and integrate new information with what they already know.

In the second strategy; Minute paper, a question or a clue was posed about the most interesting or the most important points in a lecture and the students were asked to write in response to the presented question. The strategy was adopted at any point in the lecture but it may be more beneficial if it is presented at the end of the lecture. The minute paper strategy provided the opportunity for the students to summarize the lecture's content and to put information in their own words. One basic advantage of the strategy is it helps the students to identify gaps in their understanding and helps the instructor to assess how well the students were learning the content.

Regarding the third strategy; Collaborative learning groups, the participants teamed together in small groups (four or five members each) to explore a significant question, a meaningful task or a shared assignment. The tasks were adequately defined and the goals were clearly identified and used as a guide. The group members mainly drew on their background knowledge and past experiences while attempting tasks. The required tasks included: Navigating the online class sharing links with a view to designing learning activities to be adopted in teaching

practice classes in relation to a wide range of instructional models and strategies; Making lesson plans and worksheets; Conducting web quests concerning specific content-related concepts; Preparing formal reviews for the assigned readings.

The participants had the option of deciding the group roles themselves. Each group had to assign five varied roles to its members. These were: 1- Group facilitator who moderates discussion, keeps the group on task, and makes sure that all members have the opportunity to participate and learn; 2- Group recorder who takes notes of the group's discussion and prepares a written conclusion; 3- Checker who makes sure that all group members understand the concepts and the group's conclusions; 4- Summarizer who restates the group's conclusions or answers; 5- Elaborator (in groups of five) who relates the discussion with prior concepts and knowledge.

A number of varied tasks were employed on the part of the instructor (the current researcher) during the delivery of the online class. These were: Building the course material; Formulating, editing, and responding to questions; Supporting, encouraging and commenting on students' responses/postings; Providing guidelines, tips, and effective use of the medium; Designing and conducting a balanced mix of group, pair, and individual activities; Establishing time-limit for group activities.

## **The Study Results**

### **The effect of the online class: "Active Learning Online" on enhancing student engagement.**

In this part of research, students' responses on the Student Course Engagement Questionnaire are presented in

relation to the four basic factors; Skills Engagement, Emotional Engagement, Participation/ Interaction Engagement and Performance Engagement.

**Table (1) : Skills Engagement**

No	Statement	5		4		3		2		1		Mean	Rank
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
4	Doing all homework problems	8	32	8	32	6	24	3	12	-	-	3.84	5
5	Coming to class everyday	18	72	5	20	1	4	-	-	1	4	4.56	1
9	Taking good notes in class	10	40	10	40	4	16	1	4	-	-	4.16	4
10	Looking over class notes between classes to make sure I understand the material	4	16	15	60	4	16	2	8	-	-	3.84	5
13	Putting forth effort	3	12	9	36	10	40	3	12	-	-	3.48	7
14	Being organized	7	28	9	36	6	24	2	8	1	4	3.76	6
17	Staying up on the readings	2	8	9	36	11	44	2	8	1	4	3.36	8
20	Making sure to study on a regular basis	10	40	12	48	2	8	-	-	1	4	4.2	3
23	Listening carefully in class	14	56	7	28	2	8	2	8	-	-	4.32	2

Data reported in table (1) show that the online class "Active Learning Online" had a positive effect on the students' level of engagement. Items 5, 23, 20 gained higher ranks indicating that the students were interested in attending classes, listening carefully in class and studying on a regular basis. However, being organized, putting forth effort and staying up on the readings (items 14, 13, 17) were the practicing skills that gained lower ranks.

**Table (2):Emotional Engagement**

No	Statement	5		4		3		2		1		Mean	Rank
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
7	Thinking about the course between class meetings	5	20	5	20	11	44	4	16	-	-	3.44	5
8	Finding ways to make the course interesting to me	6	24	5	20	10	40	3	12	1	4	3.48	4
11	Really desiring to learn the material	10	40	11	44	4	16	-	-	-	-	4.24	1
21	Finding ways to make the course material relevant to my life	8	32	9	36	4	16	-	-	4	16	3.68	2
22	Applying course material to my life	6	24	7	28	8	32	2	8	2	8	3.52	3

Regarding Emotional Engagement, table (2) indicates that the higher rank items (11, 21) dealt with the students' real desire to learn the material and to make the course material relevant to their life. On the other hand, thinking about the course between classes and finding ways to make the course interesting (items 7, 8) were the statements that gained lower ranks.

**Table (3): Participation/ Interaction Engagement**

No	Statement	5		4		3		2		1		Main	Rank
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
1	Raising my hand in class	3	12	6	24	10	40	4	16	2	8	3.16	5
2	Participating actively in small group discussions	4	16	9	36	8	32	3	12	1	4	3.48	3
3	Asking questions when I don't understand the instructor	4	16	11	44	8	32	-	-	2	8	3.6	2
6	Going to the professor's office hours to review assignments or tests, or to ask questions	1	4	6	24	9	36	5	20	4	16	2.8	6
18	Having fun in class	6	24	4	16	9	36	6	24	-	-	3.4	4
19	Helping fellow students	8	32	8	32	6	24	2	8	1	4	3.8	1

Table (3) shows that helping fellow students and asking questions (items 19, 3) were the statements that gained high level of participation/ interaction engagement while contacting with the professor and raising hand in class (items 6, 1) were the indicators that showed low level of participation.

**Table (4): Performance Engagement**

No	Statement	5		4		3		2		1		Mean	Rank
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
12	Being confident that I can learn and do well in the class	9	36	11	44	1	4	4	16	-	-	4	1
15	Getting a good grade	4	16	12	48	9	36	-	-	-	-	3.8	3
16	Doing well on the tests	5	20	11	44	9	36	-	-	-	-	3.84	2

Regarding participant students' responses on performance Engagement factor, table (4) shows that most of the students (80%) were confident that they can learn and do well in the class. Also, doing well on the tests and getting a good grade were a characteristic of 64% of the participants.

**The influence of peer interaction on the students' performance on the online class "Active Learning Online".**

Regarding the second research question about the influence of peer interaction on the students' performance on the online class, analysis of the students' self- evaluation reports revealed that peer interaction had a great positive effect on their own performance. The findings were classified into three main categories. These were: Sharing a lot of ideas and comments with fellow students; Exploring

diverse opinions and perspectives; Gaining and constructing new knowledge.

The first category centered around 'Sharing a lot of ideas and comments with fellow students' (42.6%). To clarify, the students valued the influence of peer interaction as an effective catalyst for promoting this sense of sharing that took place. To add, according to the students' viewpoints, a spirit of team work prevailed in this online environment. Besides, connecting with each other helped them learn more about the course content. This distinct sense of sharing, in terms of the students' responses, largely contributed in enhancing their discussion skills. They could share their peers' answers on the discussion questions that were raised on the online class. Also, they were motivated to give their own answers without fear of being wrong as there were no wrong answers. Moreover, as a result of this type of peer interaction, they could build on the others' postings, thus, modifying their own ideas and generating new ones.

The second common category was 'Exploring diverse opinions and perspectives' (29.5%). The potential of posing different opinions was highly appreciated by participant students who were encouraged to argue for and against posted opinions. The students, also, liked looking at and considering the same issue from different perspectives. Moreover, they had the opportunity to practice the act of convincing others with one's opinion.

The third focus of responses dealt with 'Gaining and constructing new knowledge' (27.9%). The students reported that their peer interaction helped them gain new and rich experiences. Furthermore, the information they got through peer interaction supported, to a great extent, their

understanding of the course teaching material. Following are few illustrative examples of students' authentic responses.

"My peers provided me with learning experiences that are appropriate to my interests. They gave me the opportunity to know about their characters and their attitudes".

"In 'Active learning Online' we worked together to share ideas. There was a spirit of team work. Everyone can put his answer without fear. We can connect with each other and comment on the lecture".

"My peers participation affected not only my own participation but my knowledge as well. This online class is like a bowl where we can put our different opinions. Everyone shares and affects the others".

"Through participation, I acquired a lot of effective and explicit knowledge in two sides, as a student and as a future teacher as well. We could collect wide knowledge and different opinions and add our own".

### **The effect of participation in the online class on EFL student-teachers' instructional performance through their teaching practice experience**

Regarding the third research question about how student- teachers' instructional performance through teaching practice experience was affected by their participation on the online class, analysis of participants' self – evaluation reports revealed that the online class has positively affected their own teaching performance. There main themes have emerged; namely, Designing meaningful tasks for students to engage; Innovative roles for teachers; Active roles for students.

The first focus of student-teachers' responses (50.4%) dealt with the notable effect of the online class on student-teachers' capability of designing meaningful tasks for their students. To explain, the students reported that the online class with its rich and varied resources, including web-sharing links, conferencing, documents, and web practical activities, was a real vehicle that empowered them to learn how to design and use meaningful tasks and activities that relate to real life. For instance, writing simple post cards to a friend; writing a short summary for a newspaper article; planning for and giving a short oral presentation about a current event; writing a paragraph about hometown. Furthermore, through the online class, they had the opportunity to design specific tasks and activities in relation to wide range of instructional models, strategies and methods (for example: storytelling- dramatization- role playing- discussion groups- language games- dialogic instruction). Moreover, participant student- teachers could involve their students into learning through adding variety while designing these meaningful tasks. To clarify, they used varied types of teaching materials, assessment and teaching styles.

The second common theme (29.4%) centered around 'Innovative Roles for Teachers'. The student-teachers reported that the online class has contributed in informing and preparing them to perform innovative roles and tasks in their classes. To clarify, they learned about the ways in which teachers can establish a relaxing, secure atmosphere where a friendly relationship between students and teachers prevail. To add, they got a great deal of knowledge about how teachers should vary their roles in accordance with requirements of different stages within a teaching session and, most importantly, in terms of strategies or methods that are adopted in a given situation. For example, they could

confidently figure the teacher's role as facilitator, organizer, coordinator or co-learner. Besides, they learned how to appeal to diverse learning styles or backgrounds of learners. Also, they got the ability and willingness required for expressing themselves confidently in class.

The third focus of responses (20.2%) tackled the theme of 'Active Roles for Learners'. According to student-teachers' opinions, the most important effect of the online class was that they tried to encourage their students to be autonomous in various ways. To illustrate, they got a knowledge base about how to make their students a part of the decision making, i.e., to share in setting objectives for a lesson and in selecting and designing activities. Also, they tried to show their students how to learn, i.e., to train them in learning strategies (for example, writing a learning diary, mind mapping, note-taking strategies, planning for and evaluating their own progress). To add, they learned how to engage students in dialogue with the teacher and with each other while working together, thus, taking responsibility of maintaining a positive environment. The following illustrating examples of students' original responses can be cited.

"I tried to apply all what I learned from "Active Learning Online" and to have the feedback directly from students in the classroom".

"I learned how to use other techniques instead of lecture, such as role play, discussions and conversations. I gave students in classroom the opportunity to interact and to talk through the use of dialogic instruction".

"I let students share in designing questions and activities, use of competitions and language games. I learned the technique of making students illustrate, dramatize, or write their own conclusion of a story".

"Every thing on the online class was useful especially "Documents" in which there were very useful articles, one of them was about enhancing learners' autonomy in FL class. I can't express how I benefited from this article. Moreover, I tried as much as possible to be a facilitator, adviser, a guide and a friend to my students".

## **Discussion**

The current study revealed that the online class: "Active Learning Online", has had a positive effect on participant students' level of engagement regarding four basic factors included in the Students Course Engagement Questionnaire that was adopted in the study. These were: skills engagement, emotional engagement, participation/ Interaction engagement and performance engagement. This finding is corroborated by work in available literature of online learning environments and student engagement . in this regard, Chen (2005) concluded that in an online learning environment based on asynchronous discussion, students can construct new knowledge, develop critical thinking skills, acquire multiple perspectives and enhance interest in course content. To add, Yengin et al. (2010) were of the opinion that active learning strategies in an online environment have the potential of putting students into the center of the learning process, thus, cultivating student involvement, positive participation and responsible learning.

Promoting the learning experiences of students can potentially be attained through student engagement. It is quite evident that "measures of student engagement provide information about individuals' intrinsic involvement with their learning, and the extent to which they are making use of available educational opportunities" (ACER 2008, p.1). In this respect, Oliver (2008) stated that learner engagement can be evidently supported by the use of a web-based

learning environment. In terms of students' opinions, they learn best when they reflect, dialogue, question, write, summarize, and create their own knowledge (Mckinney, 2004).

The second research question addressed in the study dealt with the influence of peer interaction on the students' performance on the online class: "Active Learning Online". Results have shown that peer interaction positively influenced the students' performance on the online class. Three main themes have emerged representing a genuine effect of peer interaction on students' performance on the online class. These were: Sharing a lot ideas and comments with fellow students; Exploring diverse opinions and perspectives; Gaining and constructing new knowledge. This finding seems to be consistent with several previous works in relevant literature. Hrastinski (2009) has best described online learning as online participation:

*Online learner participation (1) is a complex process of taking part and maintaining relations with others, (2) is supported by physical and psychological tools, (3) is not synonymous with talking or writing, and (4) is supported by all kinds of engaging activities .... If we want to enhance online learning, we need to enhance online learner participation (p.81).*

Relatedly, Liu, Lin, Chiu, and Yuan (2001) argued that while asked to offer feedback to peers, students progress beyond the cognitive processes required for completing a given task, for they have to "read, compare, or question ideas, suggest modifications, or even reflect on how well one's own work is compared with others" (p.248). Along the same lines, Chen (2005) pointed out that peers' participation in online discussion environment plays a drastic role in impacting individual student's participation

through creating a warm, supportive atmosphere where learners can interact, raise questions, exchange feedback, and receive ample attention from each other.

Through adopting learner-centered approaches, student learning can be enhanced if we ensure learners' positive participation and engagement in the process of learning (Field and kent, 2006). This concept is illustrated by Dunlap and Grabinger (cited in Dunlap, 2005), "The process of reviewing someone else's work can help learners reflect on and articulate their own views and ideas, ultimately improving their own work" (p.20). Moreover, Maor (2003) believed that feedback "can no longer be considered the sole responsibility of the instructor because there is a much larger focus on dialogue ... [and] the joint construction of knowledge" (p.128).

Regarding the third research question, findings have proved the positive effect of the online class on student-teachers' instructional performance though their teaching practice experience. Student-teachers' capability of designing meaningful tasks for their students to engage, Innovative roles and tasks for teachers to act, and active roles for learners to play were the most common themes. This result may be supported in terms of a considerable body of relevant research. Three basic advantages of online classes were reported by Marrero (2010). These were: The ability to interact with, collaborate with, and gain knowledge from other teachers; The ability to receive immediate feedback to questions; Flexibility of course structure.

Online learning technologies have the potential to transform the professional development of teachers, penetrate cultural, discipline and other barriers, bring

educators together to learn, share successes and challenges, and co-construct and transfer learning (Rampai & Sopeerak, 2011). Significantly, the basic goal of using an online environment that promotes teacher development in a learning community is to organize, build and support a structure and a process that are purposeful and flexible with a view of fulfilling teachers' personal ongoing needs (Lock, 2006).

Additionally, the impact of online professional development courses on teachers' performance, according to what Holmes, Signer and MacLeod (2010) have reported, is quite evident. To explain, online courses have a positive effect on teachers' knowledge and related instructional practices. Through online environments, teachers can develop an awareness of web-based resources, convenient teaching experiences, curricular needs, and student needs. Moreover, the web-based environment can inspire teachers with new teaching ideas, resources and classroom implementations. Relatedly, Ryymin, Lallimo, and Hakkarainen (2007) have rightly believed that the critical factors that support teachers' professional development in relation to web-based learning are; the possibility to learn from peers and from daily working practices, an emotionally secure atmosphere, personal support of a monitor or a guide and a sense of commitment within the learning community.

### **Conclusion and Limitations**

This study was mainly an attempt to explore the effect of an online class: "Active Learning Online" on EFL student-teachers' level of engagement. Besides, the study aimed at investigating the influence of peer interaction on students' performance on the online class. Another secondary purpose was to examine the ways in which

students participation on the online class affected their own instructional performance through teaching practice experience Findings showed that the online class had a notable positive effect on participant students' level of engagement and on their own instructional performance through their teaching practice as well. Also, the students highly appreciated the positive influence peer interaction evidently has on their performance on the online class.

However, the current study had certain limitations that should be taken into account when considering the study results. First, the small number of participants may bring forth many limitations as far as the generalization of the study results is concerned. Another limitation is related to the tool through which data was collected for assessing the effect of the online class on student-teachers' instructional performance through their teaching practice. Due to some specific circumstances, it was difficult to assess the students' actual teaching performance in teaching practice classes. Accordingly, the written self-evaluation report form was selected and adopted to explore the aforementioned effect in terms of the students' opinions. Thirdly, because of time restrictions, it was difficult for the current researcher to give individual online replies for students' posts on the online class. Thus, giving general feedback through online conferencing forum was the most convenient option. Besides, sufficient feedback regarding the students' performance on the online class was given weekly in face-to-face class meetings.

While this investigation revealed that online classes have the potential of affording ample opportunities for engaging students, future research works need to consider the most engaging strategies in an online environment. In this respect, Krause and McEwen (2009) concluded that for

achieving university goals of optimizing the quality of e-learning environments and experiences, reliable attention and expertise are required for strategies that engage students with diverse levels of preparedness, skill levels and motivation.

There is much more to learn about what promotes engagement and what kind of relationship does exist between student engagement and student learning (kuh, 2003). Relatedly, Garrett (2011) argues that "engaging in the learning process is risky business for student and teacher-both must be willing to be vulnerable, .... Both parties are expected to put in the effort, trusting that the investment will yield the intended outcome (p.7).

Butson, Carr and Bosselman (2006) concluded that a comprehensible understanding of the engagement indicators that significantly relate to a recognized learning experience is needed and recommended. Moreover, aims, dispositions and values relevant to student engagement need to be emphasized not only the procedures and skills. Finally, I would like to conclude with this thoughtful perspective addressed by McFadden and Munns (2002, p. 364): "It is the students themselves who will be able to tell us that they are engaged and who will say whether their education is working for them in a culturally sensitive and relevant way. It is the students who will be able to tell us whether the offers that education purports to provide are real or illusionary".

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## (( نموذج اشتراك في مجلة دراسات عربية في التربية وعلم النفس ))

سعادة / الأستاذ الدكتور: رئيس تحرير مجلة دراسات عربية في التربية  
وعلم النفس السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته وبعد ،،

أرغب الاشتراك في المجلة لمدة : ( سنة واحدة □ )

على أن تصلني نسخ أعداد المجلة على عنواني البريدي الموضح بهذا النموذج.

..... الاسم  
..... الوظيفة  
..... جهة العمل  
..... الجنسية  
..... عنوان المراسلة  
..... البريد الإلكتروني  
..... الهاتف/ الفاكس

..... اسم المشترك :

..... التوقيع :

- 
- قيمة الاشتراك السنوي للأفراد بالدول العربية : ( ٥٠٠ ريالاً ).
  - قيمة الاشتراك للأفراد بباقي دول العالم: ( ٢٠٠ دولار).
  - قيمة الاشتراك للمؤسسات بالدول العربية: ( ٧٥٠ ريالاً).
  - قيمة الاشتراك للمؤسسات بباقي دول العالم: ( ٣٥٠ دولار).
  - قيمة الاشتراكات هذه شاملة تكاليف البريد العادي ، ومن يرغب في البريد الممتاز يتحمل الفرق.
  - يمكن سداد قيمة الاشتراكات بالجنبيه المصري مباشرة لكتب المجلة بجمهورية مصر العربية ، أو بحواله بنكيه باسم رئيس التحرير (أ. د / ماهر إسماعيل صبري ) على بنك فيصل الإسلامي المصري فرع بنهارقم الحساب ١٨٥٠٦
  - ترسل صورة من قسيمة تحويل الاشتراكات على البريد الإلكتروني لرئيس التحرير [mahersabry2121@yahoo.com](mailto:mahersabry2121@yahoo.com)
  - يرسل هذا النموذج بعد تعبأ بياناته عبر البريد الإلكتروني لرئيس تحرير المجلة ، أو عبر البريد العادي على عنوان رئيس التحرير الحالي : المدينة المنورة ، جامعه طيبة ، كلية التربية ، قسم المناهج وطرق التدريس . أو على عنوان مكتبنا بمصر : اش أحمد ماهر متفرع من ش الشعراوي، أتريب ، بنها .