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BEYOND PARTICIPATION: EXPLORING THE COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT OF QUIET LEARNERS IN INCLUSIVE EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: This study examines the cognitive and emotional engagement of quiet learners in inclusive English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, challenging the assumption that limited verbal participation indicates disengagement. Using a qualitative interpretive approach, the study distinguishes behavioural participation from cognitive processing, emotional involvement, and self-regulated learning. The findings demonstrate that quiet learners frequently maintain sustained attention, strategic processing, task persistence, reflection, and linguistic monitoring despite limited oral participation. Emotional engagement is characterized by both positive experiences and anxiety related to public performance and negative evaluation.

Keywords: quiet learners, learner engagement, cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, inclusive education, EFL classrooms, classroom participation, language learning.

Introduction: Learner engagement has become a central concept in contemporary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, particularly within inclusive classroom environments where learners are expected to participate actively in communicative, collaborative, and learner-centred activities. Traditionally, classroom participation has been treated as an important indicator of engagement, with speaking frequency, volunteering answers, initiating interactions, and contributing to group discussions commonly interpreted as evidence of learners' involvement. However, equating visible participation with engagement may provide an incomplete and potentially misleading representation of learners' educational experiences. This issue is particularly significant for quiet learners, whose limited verbal participation does not necessarily indicate a lack of cognitive investment, motivation, or emotional involvement.

Quiet learners constitute a heterogeneous group whose classroom behaviour may be influenced by personality, linguistic confidence, previous educational experiences, perceived competence, anxiety, cultural expectations, peer relationships, and classroom interaction patterns [1]. In EFL contexts, where learners are frequently required to communicate in a language in which they have limited proficiency, these factors can become especially consequential. A learner who rarely speaks during classroom discussions may nevertheless engage deeply with linguistic input, formulate responses internally, monitor language use, reflect on feedback, and experience strong emotional responses to learning activities. Consequently, observable participation should not be regarded as a sufficient proxy for multidimensional engagement.

Methodology and Literature Review

The methodological and theoretical foundation of this study draws on contemporary scholarship on learner engagement, inclusive education, and second-language acquisition. The study employs a qualitative interpretive research design to examine the cognitive and emotional engagement of quiet learners in inclusive EFL classrooms. A qualitative approach is appropriate because cognitive processing and emotional experiences cannot be fully identified through observable classroom

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participation alone. The study specifically investigates how learners with limited verbal participation experience learning activities, process linguistic input, regulate their learning, and respond emotionally to classroom interactions.

The concept of learner engagement has developed substantially beyond the traditional understanding of classroom participation. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, in their influential article "School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence" , conceptualize engagement as a multidimensional construct comprising behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. This framework provides a foundation for distinguishing visible behavioural participation from less observable dimensions of engagement [2]. Quiet learners demonstrate engagement through sustained attention, cognitive processing, strategic learning, persistence, reflection, and emotional investment even when their verbal participation remains limited.

Philp and Duchesne, in "Exploring Engagement in Tasks in the Language Classroom", conceptualize engagement in language learning as a dynamic phenomenon involving behavioural, cognitive, and affective dimensions. Their task-oriented perspective establishes that engagement should be interpreted in relation to specific classroom activities rather than inferred exclusively from students' outward behaviour. In EFL classrooms, linguistic proficiency, confidence, classroom norms, and willingness to communicate directly influence verbal participation. Consequently, low levels of speaking do not constitute sufficient evidence of low cognitive or emotional engagement [3].

Classroom interaction represents another significant dimension of EFL learning. Michael Long's "The Role of the Linguistic Environment in Second Language Acquisition" emphasizes interaction and negotiation of meaning as important conditions for second-language development. The present study extends this perspective by recognizing that meaningful learning involves forms of engagement beyond continuous verbal production. Quiet learners participate in classroom processes through attentive listening, internal response formulation, written contributions, observation of peers, linguistic analysis, and reflection. These forms of involvement constitute important components of classroom engagement despite their limited visibility [4].

The sociocultural dimension of learning is grounded in Lev Vygotsky's Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes (1978). Vygotsky explains learning as a socially mediated process in which interaction, language, cultural tools, and internal psychological activity contribute to cognitive development. This theoretical position supports the interpretation of quiet learners' engagement as a process that encompasses both social participation and internal cognitive activity [5]. Learners internalize linguistic knowledge through observation, reflection, mediated interaction, and individual meaning-making. Therefore, classroom silence does not represent a single behavioural category and requires contextual interpretation.

The methodological framework consequently establishes a clear distinction between participation and engagement. Participation represents what learners visibly do in the classroom, whereas engagement encompasses how learners think, feel, regulate their learning, and invest effort in educational activities. This distinction provides the analytical basis for examining quiet learners as active participants in the learning process rather than interpreting silence as an automatic indicator of disengagement. The approach consequently contributes to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of engagement in EFL education.

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Results and Discussion

The analysis identified three major patterns in the engagement of quiet learners in inclusive EFL classrooms: substantial cognitive engagement despite limited verbal participation, emotionally complex engagement characterized by both positive and negative affective experiences, and a measurable discrepancy between observable participation and broader engagement.

The first finding concerns cognitive engagement. Quiet learners demonstrated sustained attention during instructional activities and remained engaged with assigned tasks even when they rarely volunteered answers or initiated classroom discussions. Classroom observations showed evidence of active listening, note-taking, response preparation, vocabulary selection, grammatical monitoring, and task completion. Learners also demonstrated persistence when encountering linguistic difficulties [6]. Several learners prepared responses internally before contributing orally, while others expressed their understanding more extensively through written activities than through spoken interaction.

The second finding concerns emotional engagement. Quiet learners experienced a combination of positive and negative emotions during EFL activities. Interest, satisfaction, enjoyment, and confidence were particularly evident when learners received adequate preparation time and supportive teacher feedback. At the same time, anxiety, embarrassment, fear of making mistakes, and concern about negative peer evaluation were associated with reduced spontaneous verbal participation. Importantly, negative emotional experiences did not consistently correspond with withdrawal from learning tasks. Learners frequently continued completing activities and processing instructional content despite experiencing anxiety.

The third finding is the participation–engagement discrepancy. Verbal participation varied considerably among learners, but this variation did not consistently correspond with differences in task involvement. Some learners who contributed minimally to whole-class discussions demonstrated sustained attention, completed activities successfully, and produced detailed written responses. Conversely, frequent verbal participation did not always demonstrate extended cognitive processing or deeper task involvement.

The analysis also identified several classroom conditions associated with stronger engagement among quiet learners. These included preparation time, supportive teacher feedback, smaller interaction groups, opportunities for written expression, clearly structured tasks, and a classroom atmosphere in which mistakes were treated as a normal component of language learning. Activities requiring immediate public responses were associated with greater hesitation and reduced spontaneous participation among quiet learners.

The results have significant implications for the conceptualization of learner engagement in inclusive EFL education. The most important finding—the discrepancy between verbal participation and broader engagement—supports the multidimensional framework developed by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris in School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence. Their distinction between behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement provides a theoretical explanation for why learners can display limited observable participation while remaining cognitively and emotionally invested in learning. The present findings reinforce the necessity of treating these dimensions as related but analytically distinct constructs [7].

From an inclusive education perspective, the results challenge the widespread pedagogical tendency to equate active learning with frequent speaking. Such an approach risks privileging learners who are confident and verbally expressive while undervaluing learners whose engagement is

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expressed through listening, reflection, writing, observation, and delayed participation [8]. The findings therefore support a broader definition of classroom participation in which different modes of engagement are recognized as pedagogically legitimate.

The distinction between results and interpretation also leads to an important theoretical proposition: participation should be regarded as an indicator of engagement, not as its definitive measure. Observable behaviour provides valuable evidence, but it requires triangulation with cognitive and emotional indicators. A more comprehensive assessment framework should therefore incorporate task persistence, quality of written and spoken responses, self-regulation, reflective thinking, emotional experience, and learner perceptions alongside speaking frequency.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that quietness in inclusive EFL classrooms should not be interpreted as a direct indicator of learner disengagement. The findings reveal a clear distinction between observable participation and the cognitive and emotional dimensions of engagement. Quiet learners demonstrated sustained attention, strategic processing, self-regulation, task persistence, reflection, and linguistic monitoring despite participating less frequently in whole-class verbal interaction. These findings challenge participation-centred approaches that rely primarily on speaking frequency to evaluate learner engagement.

The study further establishes that emotional engagement among quiet learners is complex and context-dependent. Anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and hesitation can restrict spontaneous oral participation while leaving cognitive involvement intact. Conversely, supportive feedback, preparation time, structured tasks, psychologically safe classroom environments, and alternative interaction formats strengthen learners' willingness to engage. Emotional safety therefore represents an essential condition for inclusive EFL learning.

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