

Student Engagement in Project-Based Learning at SMAN 1 Tengeran

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ABSTRACT

Student engagement is vital for effective English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. However, many Indonesian classrooms remain teacher-centered, limiting meaningful participation. This study explores how Project-Based Learning (PjBL) fosters multidimensional engagement among eleventh-grade students at SMAN 1 Tengeran. Using a qualitative case study design, data were gathered over six weeks through classroom observations, reflective journals, and interviews with four purposively selected students and their teacher. Thematic analysis revealed that PjBL enhanced behavioral engagement through collaboration and persistence, emotional engagement through enjoyment and confidence, and cognitive engagement through curiosity and self-reflection. These dimensions interacted dynamically, transforming students into active, motivated, and self-regulated learners. The findings are significant in demonstrating how PjBL can cultivate deeper engagement in Indonesian EFL classrooms, offering pedagogical insights for promoting learner autonomy and meaningful participation.

Keywords: *Project-Based Learning, Student Engagement, Behavioral, Emotional, Cognitive*

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INTRODUCTION

In the global context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, student engagement has been widely recognized as a key determinant of learning success and communicative competence. It reflects the extent to which learners actively participate, persist, and internalize linguistic knowledge within various instructional settings (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Along with the growing emphasis on learner autonomy and interactive pedagogy in language education worldwide, maintaining students' engagement has become an essential component of effective English teaching.

Student engagement has become a cornerstone concern in educational research, particularly in language learning contexts. Engagement encompasses students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive investment in learning and is widely considered a predictor of academic success and deep learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where the challenge is not only mastering linguistic form but also cultivating confidence and communicative competence, engagement matters even more. When students are disengaged, learning becomes superficial: students may complete tasks merely to meet formal requirements rather than to internalize knowledge. Hence, fostering genuine student engagement is imperative in realizing the aims of English education at the secondary level.

Despite the shift in pedagogy towards more learner-centered ideals, many English classrooms in Indonesia continue to lean heavily on teacher-centered models. In such environments, instructors dominate discourse and decision-making, leaving students in passive roles with limited agency (Nasir et al., 2019). This dynamic often leads to low levels of engagement, where learners are less involved behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively (Barus et al., 2022). Furthermore, many students feel insecure when using English and have low learning motivation, which leads to limited participation, poor academic achievement,

and a decline in their communication skills (Lalu Azizan Bohari, 2024). This condition indicates the need for more innovative and student-centered learning strategies to foster students' active engagement in the classroom.

One approach that is recognized as effective in increasing student engagement is Project-Based Learning (PjBL) (Aktifianto et al., 2023). PjBL is a student-centered instructional strategy that fosters inquiry, collaboration, and the creation of authentic products, making it a promising approach to enhance engagement in EFL settings. A recent qualitative study conducted by Simatupang & Yusuf (2024) in a senior high school context revealed that implementing PjBL promotes cognitive and behavioral engagement, as students actively participated, explored, and reflected throughout the project cycles. Similarly, Delviyani et al. (2025) found that PjBL implementation in high school activities enhanced critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity through meaningful and contextual learning experiences. These findings suggest that PjBL has the potential to engage learners on multiple fronts. Nonetheless, evidence in Indonesian high school EFL contexts remains limited, particularly concerning emotional engagement and the holistic interplay of engagement dimensions.

While previous research consistently highlights the positive effects of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) on student engagement, most studies have focused on *specific dimensions* such as motivation, participation, or academic achievement rather than the holistic experience of engagement. A large body of work emphasizes how PjBL improves students' academic outcomes, particularly performance, problem-solving skills, and language proficiency by integrating authentic and collaborative tasks (Harahap, 2023; Delviyani et al., 2025). Another cluster of studies explores the affective and behavioral impacts of PjBL, showing that students become more motivated, responsible, and confident when learning is situated in real-world projects (Simatupang & Yusuf, 2024).

However, only a limited number of studies examine *how* students experience engagement across its multidimensional aspects such as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive within the Indonesian senior high school context (Nugroho et al., 2025). Most prior works rely on quantitative designs that measure engagement outcomes but do not explore the lived, evolving process through which engagement develops during PjBL. This gap positions the present study to contribute qualitatively by exploring students' perceptions, feelings, and actions as they engage in PjBL. Thus, instead of merely testing whether PjBL works, this research seeks to understand *how* and *why* it fosters engagement within the cultural and institutional landscape of SMAN 1 Tenganan.

Despite the growing attention to PjBL in EFL education, most existing studies have focused primarily on its effects on language proficiency or motivation rather than its direct impact on student engagement (Dewi, 2024; Zhong et al., 2025). Furthermore, research in the Indonesian context remains limited, especially at the senior high school level, where classroom dynamics and curriculum demand often differ from those in university or primary school settings (Nugroho et al., 2025). Given the continuing dominance of teacher-centered instruction in many Indonesian EFL classrooms, there is an urgent need to explore how PjBL can be effectively implemented to foster deeper behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement among students. Investigating this issue not only addresses a significant gap in the literature but also contributes to understanding how student-centered pedagogies can be adapted to align with national education goals and local classroom realities.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how students engaged in PjBL in English classes at SMAN 1 Tenganan, focusing on their active participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment throughout the project process. The site was purposively selected because preliminary classroom observations and informal discussions with English teachers indicated that students showed fluctuating levels of participation and motivation during PjBL activities. Although the school had implemented PjBL as part of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, teachers reported that not all students were equally involved some demonstrated high enthusiasm and collaboration, while others remained passive or hesitant to use English. These initial observations suggested that SMAN 1 Tenganan provides a rich and authentic context

for examining how engagement manifests differently among learners in real classroom settings.

Adopting a qualitative case study approach, the research involves students as primary participants and includes teacher perspectives to strengthen data credibility through triangulation (Hyett et al., 2014; Lincoln, 1985.). This design enables an in-depth exploration of engagement dynamics as they naturally unfold in the classroom context. Theoretically, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on student engagement by situating PjBL within the underexplored Indonesian EFL environment. Practically, it offers evidence-based insights for English teachers and curriculum designers to foster more engaging and student-centered learning experiences in senior high schools.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design, as it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' real-life experiences in authentic learning contexts (Ucus, 2018). This approach was chosen to examine how Project-Based Learning (PjBL) fosters behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement among EFL students in a natural classroom setting.

The research was conducted at SMAN 1 Tengaran, located in Semarang Regency, Central Java. The participants consisted of 34 eleventh-grade students who took part in PjBL-based English learning. From this class, four students (two males and two females) were purposively selected as focal participants to represent varying levels of engagement, ranging from highly active to less active learners, based on teacher recommendations and preliminary observation results. One English teacher was also involved to provide complementary insights for data triangulation.

Data were collected over one month through four classroom meetings using three instruments: observation, interviews, and researcher's reflective journal. Classroom observations were carried out throughout the learning process to capture students' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement indicators, such as participation, cooperation, persistence, motivation, and enthusiasm. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students and the teacher to gain deeper understanding of their perceptions and experiences during PjBL implementation. Reflective journals were used by the researcher to record classroom dynamics, contextual notes, and emerging analytical insights, which served as supporting evidence to strengthen the triangulation of data sources.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024). Thematic analysis was then applied to identify recurring patterns and categorize engagement dimensions throughout the project stages. To ensure validity, source and method triangulation were applied by cross-verifying data from observations, interviews, and reflective notes (Nurfajriani et al., 2024). This procedure ensured that the findings accurately represented the actual classroom context and provided trustworthy insights into students' engagement development during PjBL activities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents and discusses how students engaged behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively during the implementation of PjBL in an English class at SMAN 1 Tengaran. Consistent with the multidimensional framework of student engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), the results demonstrate that PjBL fostered meaningful behavioral participation, emotional connection, and cognitive investment among students, although the intensity of engagement varied across stages of the project.

Behavioral Engagement

Observation data indicated that students displayed strong behavioral engagement during the PjBL process. Most participants were actively involved in discussions, group

decision-making, and project preparation. Student A remarked, *"At first I was shy to speak English, but since everyone had their own part in the project, I felt like I needed to contribute too."* This statement shows that the collaborative and interdependent structure of PjBL encourages a sense of responsibility and balanced participation among group members.

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Teachers also confirmed this finding, noting that students became more disciplined and responsible. One teacher stated, *"Students become more disciplined and responsible because they don't want to disappoint their group. Even those who are usually quiet try to do their part."* Students also demonstrated persistence, particularly during the revision and presentation phases. Rather than giving up when encountering linguistic challenges, they sought feedback from peers or teachers, which indicated sustained effort and self-regulation.

The teacher's role as a facilitator, who guided rather than directed, helped maintain student initiative. The final presentation stage appeared to heighten students' sense of responsibility and effort, as they wanted their projects to represent the group's best work. Overall, behavioral engagement was reflected through active participation, collaboration, persistence, and accountability throughout the learning process.

Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement was evident through students' enthusiasm, enjoyment, and emotional investment throughout the PjBL process. Observations showed that students often expressed excitement and laughter during group work, with peers supporting one another during presentations. This is in line with the results of student interviews, which describe feelings of happiness and pride in their collaborative work. As stated by Student B, *"It's more fun when we make something together, not just listen to the teacher. I feel proud when we finish our project because it's really ours."* This sense of collective pride and belonging reflects the emotional dimension of engagement, students not only participated but also developed positive feelings toward learning.

Data analysis shows that students' emotional engagement grows through social interaction and the collaborative nature of PjBL. Classroom observations reveal direct expressions of joy, interview data reveals deeper emotional reflections, while project documents show an increase in motivation and self-confidence over time. However, emotional engagement was not uniform. Some students reported anxiety before presenting in English, particularly those less confident in speaking. Yet this anxiety often evolved into satisfaction and increased self-confidence afterward. As Student D reflected, *"I was nervous, but after we did it, I felt happy and more confident to speak English again."* This transformation illustrates how PjBL creates a safe, supportive environment where emotional highs and lows become part of a productive learning cycle.

Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement was demonstrated through students' active efforts to understand and apply English meaningfully within their projects. Students not only focus on completing projects, but also on improving the quality of the language they use. Based on the interview results, several students explained that they search for online resources, practice pronunciation, and revise their drafts to achieve more natural language use. Student C explained, *"We didn't just translate words, we tried to make our sentences sound natural. It made me think harder about how to use English in real life."* This statement reflects deep cognitive processing and metacognitive awareness where students actively construct meaning rather than simply memorizing.

The results of interviews with teachers support these findings. Teachers observed that students showed greater curiosity and independence compared to conventional learning. They often asked more specific questions related to grammar, vocabulary, and context of use.

Teachers said, “They began to ask why a sentence was written that way, not just what the answer was. That shows that they are thinking more critically about language.” These observations confirm that PjBL fosters analytical thinking skills and structured independent learning, in line with the principles of inquiry-based learning.

Documentation analysis further reinforce these findings. The students' initial drafts showed many grammatical errors and paragraph organization issues, but the final products showed significant improvement in coherence, structure, and vocabulary selection. From the reflection notes, it was revealed that students evaluated themselves, recognized their weaknesses, and developed strategies to improve them. This iterative revision process shows that students not only understand the material, but also monitor and adjust their learning process, which is a key feature of metacognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in the English class at SMAN 1 Tenganan successfully stimulated students' engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Consistent with (Fredricks et al., 2004), engagement was shown to be a multidimensional construct, where participation, affective connection, and cognitive effort reinforced one another throughout the project process. The PjBL framework, grounded in constructivist principles (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978), created a learning environment in which students were positioned as active participants who constructed meaning collaboratively and purposefully rather than as passive recipients of knowledge.

Behavioral Engagement

The data indicated that students demonstrated strong behavioral engagement throughout the PjBL implementation. They participated actively in discussions, contributed to group decision-making, and persisted in completing their tasks. Such active involvement reflects more than mere compliance, it illustrates genuine ownership of learning. Students' willingness to take part in each phase of the project was reinforced by the interdependent group structure, where each member's role contributed to the success of the final output. As seen in Student A's statement, the collaborative nature of PjBL cultivated a sense of collective responsibility.

These findings align with prior studies reporting that PjBL enhances students' participation and self-regulation by integrating authentic, goal-oriented tasks (Melaku, 2024). In this study, behavioral engagement was particularly evident during the revision and presentation phases, where students maintained effort despite linguistic challenges. The persistence observed corresponds to self-regulated learning principles (Zimmerman, 2000), where learners monitor their progress and take initiative in problem-solving. Teachers also observed that students became more disciplined and accountable a finding echoed by Delviyani et al. (2025), who highlighted that project-based activities promote time management and peer accountability among EFL learners.

The teacher's facilitative role was also crucial in maintaining behavioral engagement. By guiding rather than directing, teachers created space for students to make independent decisions while ensuring that group dynamics remained productive. This approach resonates with the concept of “scaffolded autonomy”, where structured guidance supports the gradual transfer of responsibility from teacher to learner. Furthermore, the heightened motivation observed in the final presentation stage demonstrates how authentic public performance can act as a behavioral catalyst, pushing students to exert more effort to produce their best work. In summary, behavioral engagement in this context manifested through participation, collaboration, persistence, and responsibility, key behavioral indicators that sustain active learning in project-based environments.

Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement emerged as a central dimension influencing students' motivation and persistence. Students' expressions of enjoyment, pride, and excitement during group activities indicate that PjBL fostered a positive affective climate. This emotional energy not only enhanced classroom interaction but also sustained students' involvement through

challenging tasks. Such findings support Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory, which emphasizes that positive emotions such as enjoyment and pride enhance intrinsic motivation and academic persistence.

Students' emotional engagement developed dynamically. While initial stages were characterized by anxiety especially regarding English use during presentations these feelings gradually transformed into confidence and satisfaction. This affective shift reflects the role of social support and peer collaboration in mitigating language anxiety (Maulina, 2024). The cooperative atmosphere in the PjBL setting enabled students to share challenges, normalize mistakes, and experience emotional safety, conditions crucial for risk-taking in language learning (Krashen, 1985).

Moreover, emotional engagement was reinforced by the sense of ownership students felt toward their projects. As noted by Student B, completing a tangible product fostered pride and fulfillment. This aligns with findings from Mujiono et al. (2024), who observed that students' affective engagement in project-based EFL classes stems from the visibility and authenticity of their outputs. The collaborative nature of PjBL also cultivated empathy and mutual encouragement, evident in how peers celebrated one another's achievements during presentations.

However, emotional engagement was not uniform across all learners. Some students maintained a cautious stance, reflecting variability in confidence and prior learning experiences. This uneven affective response highlights that while PjBL can foster engagement, it requires careful classroom management to ensure equitable participation. Teachers' emotional scaffolding such as providing reassurance, constructive feedback, and acknowledging effort was essential in sustaining motivation across the group.

Overall, emotional engagement in this study can be seen as a bridge between behavioral effort and cognitive depth. Positive emotions facilitated perseverance and openness to feedback, while emotional support reduced fear of failure and increased students' willingness to take linguistic risks. This interplay between emotion and learning aligns with the view that affective engagement is not supplementary but foundational to meaningful participation (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Furthermore, emotional engagement developed more vividly as students progressed through the project stages. During the initial phase, many students expressed anxiety about sharing ideas in English and performing in groups. However, as collaboration deepened, their apprehension gradually transformed into excitement and confidence. This emotional transition reflects how social interaction and shared responsibility can reduce affective barriers in foreign language learning. Students often mentioned that their peers' encouragement and the teacher's supportive feedback made them "feel comfortable to make mistakes and learn together." Such feelings of belonging and mutual trust play a significant role in maintaining sustained engagement. According to Rahardi et al. (2023), emotional safety within project-based settings helps students channel their anxiety into productive energy, fostering perseverance even when linguistic challenges arise.

Notably, the creative and authentic nature of the project tasks significantly contributed to students' motivation. For example, in this study, students were required to design a written campaign and presentation addressing a real-world issue related to youth habits. Because the topic was relevant to their lives, they perceived it as meaningful rather than merely an academic exercise. This sense of purpose stimulated emotional engagement through curiosity and personal connection. Several students reported feeling "proud" of the final outcome, emphasizing how the project allowed them to express their voices in English, not just complete a school requirement. Maulina (2024) similarly emphasized that emotional investment in PjBL arises when tasks carry personal or social value, making students feel that their work matters beyond the classroom. Thus, emotional engagement in this study was not an isolated affective response but intertwined with authenticity, relevance, and shared achievement.

Another noteworthy finding was the reciprocal influence between emotional and behavioral engagement. As students experienced joy and satisfaction during group collaboration, they became more proactive in completing their roles and participating in

discussions. This cycle reflects the self-reinforcing nature of engagement dimensions: positive emotions fuel consistent behavior, while consistent behavior generates a sense of competence and ownership that strengthens emotional attachment to the task. Such interaction is consistent with the engagement model proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004), where affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects are viewed as interconnected rather than independent. In the observed sessions, enthusiasm visibly increased after students received encouraging feedback or succeeded in presenting their drafts. Even those who were initially passive began volunteering to lead group discussions, suggesting that affective reinforcement can directly elevate participation levels.

Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement emerged as the most complex dimension because it required not only motivation but also sustained intellectual effort. Throughout the project cycle, students engaged in various higher-order thinking processes such as organizing ideas, evaluating sources, revising content, and reflecting on their learning progress. Observation notes revealed that they often debated over language choices and organization patterns, showing analytical reasoning beyond surface-level correction. For instance, when revising their drafts, students discussed whether certain expressions sounded “too direct” or “too formal,” reflecting awareness of audience and tone, skills crucial in academic writing. This aligns with Mubarok et al. (2021), who argued that PjBL enables learners to engage with English as a tool for meaning-making rather than a mechanical system of grammar.

Interviews also highlighted metacognitive growth. Many students expressed that they became “more aware of how to improve their writing” and “learned to plan before writing instead of just starting randomly.” This indicates that PjBL helped cultivate reflective habits essential for self-regulated learning. Mujiono et al. (2024) noted that inquiry-based projects foster metacognitive engagement by encouraging students to question, monitor, and evaluate their progress continuously. In this study, the teacher’s scaffolding during reflection sessions where students discussed what they had learned and what could be improved, served as a crucial catalyst for such awareness. By integrating reflection into every stage, the teacher promoted both self-assessment and peer feedback as tools for deepening understanding.

Moreover, the cognitive engagement observed here was supported by authentic input and output activities. Students were not only writing essays but also researching, creating visual materials, and presenting them to peers. These multi-modal elements required synthesis of knowledge across different domains, language, content, and creativity thereby strengthening their conceptual understanding. The integration of these skills demonstrates that PjBL can serve as a bridge between linguistic competence and critical thinking, particularly in EFL contexts where exposure to authentic communication is limited. The findings resonate with Dewey’s (1938) and Vygotsky’s (1978) constructivist principles that meaningful learning occurs when students actively construct and reconstruct knowledge through purposeful activity and social mediation.

By the end of the project, students displayed balanced development across all three engagement dimensions. Behavioral engagement provided the foundation, students’ consistent participation laid the groundwork for building confidence and cognitive effort. Emotional engagement, in turn, nurtured perseverance and openness to challenges, while cognitive engagement transformed these experiences into lasting skills and insights. The interdependence of these dimensions illustrates that engagement in PjBL is cyclical rather than linear: each component strengthens the others, creating a continuous loop of motivation, action, and reflection.

Pedagogical Implication

The holistic engagement observed in this study supports the theoretical model of multidimensional engagement in language learning. When students are physically active (behavioral), emotionally connected (affective), and mentally invested (cognitive), learning becomes a personally meaningful and socially collaborative process. This comprehensive engagement explains why PjBL is often associated with long-term retention and improved attitudes toward learning English. Compared to traditional instruction, which often isolates

skill practice, PjBL situates language use in context, allowing learners to act, feel, and think as real communicators.

Finally, the findings suggest pedagogical implications for English teachers in Indonesian secondary schools. First, fostering engagement requires designing projects that are contextually relevant, collaborative, and cognitively challenging. Teachers should encourage students to take ownership of tasks, provide emotional support, and facilitate reflection. Second, integrating authentic problems can sustain motivation by connecting learning to students' realities. Third, consistent feedback and scaffolding are vital in maintaining balance among behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. When these principles are applied holistically, PjBL can transform writing classrooms into dynamic environments that nurture autonomy, empathy, and intellectual curiosity, core qualities for lifelong language learners.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that Project-Based Learning effectively fostered multidimensional engagement encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Engagement emerged organically through authentic collaboration, shared responsibility, and reflective inquiry rather than external control. Behavioral engagement, evident in students' active participation, persistence, and accountability, provided the foundation for emotional involvement, which nurtured enjoyment, pride, and a sense of belonging. These positive emotions subsequently deepened cognitive engagement, reflected in curiosity, critical thinking, and metacognitive awareness (Fredricks et al., 2004; Reeve, 2012). Together, these interconnected dimensions highlight PjBL's capacity to transform learners from passive recipients into autonomous, reflective participants in their English learning process (Thomas, 2000). Pedagogically, the findings suggest that English teachers should design project tasks that balance autonomy with structured guidance, foster emotional expression through collaboration, and link classroom activities to real-world contexts (Bell, 2010). Such practices not only enhance students' language proficiency but also cultivate confidence, curiosity, and lifelong learning dispositions. Overall, PjBL offers a sustainable framework for promoting active, meaningful engagement in EFL classrooms, reinforcing Fredricks et al.'s (Fredricks et al., 2004) notion that authentic and experiential learning is central to deep, lasting engagement.

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