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## Examining Factors Affecting Student Engagement in English Preparatory Classes According to Student Opinions

BURCU KARAFIL and AYTUNGA OGUZ

### Abstract

This study aimed to determine the classroom engagement levels of university students studying English Preparatory Classes, and the factors affecting their engagement in the classes. In the study, survey method, which is one of the qualitative research methods, was employed. The population of the study consisted of students selected from Bilecik Seyh Edebali University's "Optional English Preparatory Classes" during 2016-2017 academic year. The sample of the study consisted of 67 students selected from the population through random sampling. Mixed method was used to obtain the data, with quantitative data obtained from 67 students, and qualitative data obtained from nine students determined by criterion sampling method. In the study, the "Classroom Engagement Scale for University Students" developed by Eryılmaz (2014), and the "Learning Climate Questionnaire" adapted to Turkish language by Kanadlı and Bağçeci (2016) were both employed. Qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions prepared by the researchers, and content analysis was performed in its analysis. As a result of the study, it was determined that the emotional and cognitive engagement levels of the students were at an appropriate level, and that behavioral engagement was at a slightly appropriate level. The students stated that personal factors, characteristics of the program, implementation of the program and factors related to teacher behavior affected their engagement in English language preparatory classes.

**Keywords:** Engagement, autonomy, support, higher education.



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## Introduction

In today's societies, learners need to acquire knowledge by utilizing their cognitive skills rather than acquiring in the passive form. In addition, the processes of how knowledge is acquired, its content and usage in real life have been vital. Therefore, it is important that individuals develop creativity and thinking skills. Similarly, Yıldırım (2015) stated that in the information age we live as individuals who learn constantly, develop themselves, and produce new knowledge. With these improvements, quality has become more important than quantity in education, and the concept of educational effectiveness has gained significance.

In order to be able to talk about an effective teaching process, an effective learning climate should first be established in the classroom. For this purpose, the learning process should be managed in a healthy, supportive and safe learning environment that develops mutual respect for students by creating an environment in which they can actively engage (Duta, Panisoara & Panisoara, 2015). Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, and Major (2014) stated that in an effective classroom environment, the level of interaction between teachers and students is found to be high, and that students feel themselves as being valued, and their efforts are seen important. Ames (1992) stated that the main purpose of the teacher's presence in the classroom and at school is to ensure that students engage in the school and class processes. In light of these explanations, active student engagement is deemed necessary in order to talk about an effective teaching process (Abdullah, Bakar & Mahbob, 2012).

Student engagement is defined as a state of being behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively immersed in classes. Engagement refers to a state of attention and involvement which includes participation not only in the cognitive domain, but also in the social, behavioral, and affective domains. Therefore, engagement is a multidimensional concept which includes at least three components as cognitive, behavioral, and emotional (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Engagement in classes means that students take an active part in activities such as speaking, active listening, being generally involved in the lesson, performing their assigned tasks, and being fully prepared for lessons even if they do not speak (Crosthwaite, Bailey & Meeker, 2015). In general, engagement is defined as involvement, participation, and commitment to a certain set of activities. It is a noted action which incorporates emotions, attention, goals, and other psychological processes along with persistent and effortful behavior (Skinner, Kindermann, Connell & Wellborn, 2009). As seen, engagement tends to have certain characteristics such as interest, effort, concentration, active participation, and emotional responsiveness. In other words, engaged students have focused energy and attention and they are emotionally involved (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Brenner and Brenner (1998) stated that engagement is a meaningful way for students to participate in learning in accordance with their own learning speed. However, without these behaviors, students can also engage in classes through monitoring, listening, and thinking activities (Turner & Patrick, 2004).

Engagement of students can produce many positive results. First, engagement in classes primarily enhances students' learning and supports the learning process (Fritschner, 2000; Dancer and Kamvounias, 2005; Mortensen, 2008; Caicedo, 2015), helps students learn and practice new knowledge and strategies, and also to examine their own thinking processes (Turner & Patrick, 2004). In this respect, it is observed that students are more successful in the courses to which they engage. Moreover, students who engage in classes have higher

motivation, learn better and develop thinking skills (Rocca, 2010; Czekanski & Wolf, 2013). In addition, engagement provides improvement in students' respect for different cultures, time management and interpersonal listening and speaking skills (Czekanski & Wolf, 2013). Active classroom engagement is also important in terms of the personal development of students. Students with higher levels of engagement are said to be more satisfied (Mustapha, Rahman & Yunus, 2010). On the other hand, it is seen that students have difficulties in asking questions in class environments where there is no environment of student engagement or participation in class discussions (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005). As a result, engagement is particularly important in the classroom setting since it contributes to student learning and development (Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

The engagement of students in classes is also important for teachers as well as for students. In this context, student engagement is required for the recognition of learning problems or for the evaluation of students' progress; providing them with cognitive and affective support in order to improve their comprehension skills (Turner & Patrick, 2004).

Engagement has an important role in foreign language classes as in other fields. In foreign language learning environments, engagement in classes refers to the presence of activities that provide active participation for students (Crosthwaite et al., 2015). In order to be able to learn a second language, students must become actively engaged in classes (Mortensen, 2008). Tepfenhart (2011) stated that success in foreign language classes is largely dependent on students' verbal participation. Therefore, it is very important for teachers to provide for the verbal participation of students. Students' verbal participation can be ensured by increasing the interaction between teachers and students, and between student and student by ensuring that students are included in the overall language learning process.

Providing for the verbal participation of students can be a challenging process for teachers (Vandrick, 2000; Aidinlou & Ghobadi, 2012). Foreign language classes generally consist of teacher expectations, classroom atmosphere, instructional content and teaching activities. In language classes, teachers expect students to use the target language from the first day. In this case, it is the task of the teachers to present the model behaviors expected from the students. Therefore, when teachers plan their lessons, the aim should be the usage of the target language in the classroom and students' asking questions continuously from the outset (Gahala, 1986). In addition, in teaching English as a foreign language, teachers should always encourage their students to speak up in class. In most foreign language classes, students have the opportunity to speak only at a minimum level, and it is therefore difficult to effect student engagement within such an environment (Warayet, 2011).

There are many factors that affect student engagement in classes. Interaction between teachers and students and teacher behaviors can significantly affect the engagement of students (Garci, 2008; Jang, Reeve & Deci, 2010; Russel & Slater, 2011; Groves, Sellars, Smith & Barber, 2015; DeVito, 2016). Especially, respectful professional relationships and interaction are seen as ways to improve student engagement in the classroom (Parsons & Taylor, 2011). Moreover, teachers' behavior plays an important role in the initiation and regulation of in-class engagement (Skinner et al., 2008). In this context, classroom behaviors and teachers actions have an effect on student behaviors (Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio & Turner, 2004). As part of this process, autonomy support is seen as an important teacher behavior affecting student engagement (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon & Barch, 2004). When the autonomous motives of students such as interests, needs, and

preferences are supported by teachers using interesting and relevant learning activities, student engagement can be seen to increase (Assor, Kaplan & Roth, 2002). Therefore, it is very important for teachers to provide autonomy support as a means to facilitating student engagement.

Learner autonomy is defined as students' taking responsibility for their own learning (Little, 1995). Autonomy support, on the other hand, requires teachers to actively encourage students to make their own choices and to enable students to express their own feelings and thoughts (Deci & Ryan, 1987). It is expressed as autonomy support that teachers help students to determine their own goals and to realize their own interests (Assor et al. 2002). Likewise, Reeve (2006) stated that teachers who provide autonomy support know the interests and preferences of their students, and encourage them by taking into account their various characteristics. Teachers who provide a high level of autonomy support try to answer the questions of the students and give importance to the wishes of their students. In this way, they try to create a student-centered environment within the classroom. In addition, they try to understand the emotions of their students and give importance to their students' opinions (Stefanou et al., 2004). On the other hand, teachers who do not provide autonomy support exhibit controlling and repressive behaviors (Reeve, 2006).

The autonomy support afforded by teachers in the classroom provides many benefits. Autonomy support primarily helps students to identify and develop internal motivational resources (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Reeve et al., 2004; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Najeeb (2013) stated that students are more courageous in a learning environment where autonomy is supported, they are not afraid to ask questions, and they ask for help from their teachers and peers when needed. Wang & Neihart (2015) stated that students who have more support in the classroom environment are generally more successful.

The support for autonomy in the field of foreign language learning has become important, especially in recent years. With the support of autonomy, it is expressed that the language learning process has improved (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). In his study, Chan (2000) conducted a large scale study on learner autonomy in language learning. Within the scope of the study, he implemented an English program which supported learner autonomy. In order to achieve this, the students' learning process was within a classroom environment where they could take their own learning responsibilities and made self-assessments by affording them the right to decide. In another study, Okazaki (2012) examined the relationship between autonomy support and students' motivation in foreign language classes; and similarly Thaliah & Hashim (2008) examined the relationship between autonomy support and student engagement in foreign language classes.

Foreign language learning is a complex process involving cognitive and affective factors. There are many factors affecting the language learning process (Zhanibek, 2001). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the reasons why students do not engage in classes and to provide the necessary support to students in this direction (Vandrick, 2000).

When the literature is examined, studies examining the factors affecting the engagement of students in English language classes can be found (Turanlı, 2010; Simanjalam, 2008; Mustapha et al., 2010). Mortensen (2008) investigated how classroom organization in language teaching can affect students' active participation. Aidinlou and Ghobadi (2012) and Zhou (2012) studied factors affecting the verbal participation of students in English language classes. In his study, Warayet (2011) examined how student engagement is achieved in

English language classes and how student participation is handled in terms of classroom interaction. In another study, de Erenchun Lizarraga (2014) examined the factors that hinder student engagement in English language classes.

In the current study, it is aimed to determine the engagement level of students in English preparatory classes and the factors affecting students' engagement in classes according to their own opinions. In this way, firsthand-views about students' feelings and perceptions about this issue can be obtained. It is thought that students' perceptions reflect their own realities related to their experience (Aidinlou & Ghobadi, 2012). In line with the findings, the current study aims to determine deficiencies in the curriculum and to suggest organization of the curriculum in a way so as to increase student engagement and to make the curriculum more effective. Therefore, it is thought that an important contribution will be made to the literature by this study. In light of this information, the following sub-problems were tried to be answered:

- What is the engagement level of students in foreign language preparatory classes?
- How do students perceive the autonomy support provided by their teachers in foreign language preparatory classes?
- Is there a significant relationship between the perceived autonomy support and engagement level of students in foreign language preparatory classes?
- What are the factors affecting the engagement level of students in foreign language preparatory classes according to students' views?

## Methodology

This section provides information about the model of the study, the sample of the study, the data collection tool, the data collection process, and the techniques of data analysis employed.

In the study, the survey method was employed. Survey models describe, compare, analyze and interpret the situations of individuals, institutions, groups or sources in the way that they are (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007).

The population of the study consisted of 100 students studying at Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University's Optional Preparatory Class. The sample of the study consisted of 67 students selected from this population. Of these students, 31 were female and 36 were male. Data collection tools were applied to all students studying at the preparatory class in order to obtain the quantitative data. On the other hand, criterion sampling, which is among the purposive sampling methods, was used in obtaining the qualitative data. Purposeful sampling is a technique widely employed in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). Moreover, in criterion sampling, individuals, groups, or settings are selected according to the determined criteria (Huberman & Miles, 1994).

In the current study, a total of nine students were selected in order to obtain qualitative data. In the selection of the students, the classes, which were at low, middle, and high ability level were classified as three different levels. A total of six classes were available within the Optional Preparation Program, with two classes at each of the three levels. Students from each level were determined from among the student groups according to their exam score, based on a success level of low, medium, or high. As a result, a total nine students were determined as the participants of the qualitative data.

The students' achievement scores were used in their determination as participants. In determining their achievement scores, the students were ranked from the highest to the lowest, according to their test scores. In this way, the nine students were determined by using criterion sampling method. Of the nine students identified, four were female and five were male.

Two data collection tools were used to find the answers to the research problems. The first data collection tool was the "Classroom Engagement Scale for University Students", which was developed by Eryılmaz (2014) in order to determine students' level of engagement in classes. The scale is a five-point Likert-type instrument consisting of 15 items. In addition, the scale items consist of three dimensions as "Behavioral Engagement", "Emotional Engagement" and "Cognitive Engagement". There are five items in each dimension. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was originally found to be .86 for the "Behavioral Engagement" dimension, .84 for the Emotional Engagement" dimension and .84 for the "Cognitive Engagement" dimension. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient for the total score of the scale was found to be .92. In the current study, the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient was found to be .89 for the "Behavioral Engagement" dimension, .79 for the "Emotional Engagement" dimension", .90 for the "Cognitive Engagement" dimension and .93 for the total scale.

The other data collection tool was used to determine the autonomy support provided by the teachers in the study. The instrument used was the "Learning Climate Scale" developed by Williams and Deci (1996) and adapted to Turkish by Kanadlı and Bağçeci (2016). The scale consists of 15 items as a seven-point Likert-type instrument, ranging from "completely agree" to "completely disagree". The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the scale was originally found to be .89. In the current study, it was found to be .94.

In order to obtain the qualitative data of the research, open-ended questions were prepared by the researchers and asked to the students. The questions were prepared in a way so as to reflect the purpose of the research in the best way. In addition, the questions were checked by an expert in the field of curriculum to see whether or not the questions were clear, understandable, related to the topic, and were able to could provide the necessary data. As a result, the essential corrections were applied.

In order to collect the research data, the scales were applied in English language courses during the spring semester of the 2016-2017 academic year. For this purpose, permission was sought from the English teachers, and then the two scales were applied to students who volunteered to take part in the study. It was aimed to reach the whole population; however data was obtained from 67 students who fully completed the scales and therefore were included in the analyses.

In order to collect the qualitative data of the study, open-ended questions were asked to the students by way of interview technique. The interview is defined as a technique used extensively in qualitative research that enables individual participants in a study to explain their feelings and thoughts about the subject of the study (Sönmez & Alacapınar, 2011). In the current study, the interview technique was used to support the quantitative data with the aim of enabling students to explain their emotions and thoughts about factors that affect their engagement in English preparatory classes. At the stage of answering open-ended questions, the student participants were determined by using criterion sampling technique. Prior to the interviews taking place, the students were given information about

the study. The most suitable time-frame was determined for the interviews and the researcher for the interview to be held. Students were then interviewed individually within the agreed time period. The interviews were conducted in the researcher's office and each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes.

The quantitative data were transferred to the computer environment and later analyzed. For the quantitative data, descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations were computed so as to display the subjects' overall responses for the "Classroom Engagement Scale for University Students" and the "Learning Climate Questionnaire." In addition, Pearson correlation analysis was performed in order to determine the relationship between the two variables. In the analysis of the qualitative data, descriptive analysis method was used. The purpose of descriptive analysis is to present the findings to the reader in a structured and interpreted manner (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). In this direction, data obtained from the interview forms were coded and descriptive analysis was then performed. Prior to the analysis, students' opinions were examined and themes and categories determined by taking into consideration the purpose of the study and the interview questions. The answers of the participants to each question were processed according to these themes, frequencies were then determined, and the findings were defined and interpreted. The appropriateness of the themes and the categories were presented to an expert in the field of curriculum and instruction for their opinion and a consensus was reached. In the Findings section of this study, students' names are not given explicitly for the purposes of ensuring the participants' anonymity, and therefore coded as S1, S2, through to ..... S9.

## Findings

The findings of the study are presented as follows in accordance with the sub-problems of the study.

### *Engagement Levels of Students in Classes*

The findings of the quantitative data obtained in order to determine the engagement level of the students in the classes are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Mean and standard deviation scores for classroom engagement scale for university students

| Classroom engagement scale for university students | $\bar{X}$ | SS  |
|--|-----------|-----|
| Behavioral engagement                              | 3.34      | .89 |
| Emotional engagement                               | 3.48      | .73 |
| Cognitive engagement                               | 3.54      | .85 |
| Total score  | 3.45      | .75 |

As can be seen in Table 1, students' opinion on behavioral engagement level is at slightly appropriate level ( $\bar{X}=3.34$ ) while their opinions on emotional ( $\bar{X}=3.48$ ) and cognitive engagement level ( $\bar{X}=3.54$ ) are at appropriate level.

On the other hand, in the interview process, students were asked about their engagement level in the classes. When the obtained data are examined, it is understood that students generally try to engage in the classes and attend to classes already prepared for the lesson. For example S1 stated; "My engagement in the classes varies depending on the difficulty of the tasks. However, I try to be engaged." S3 expressed; "I generally try to be

*engaged in the classes.*” Similarly S4 indicated; *“I do my best to engage in the classes. I try to answer the questions of the teachers.”* Moreover S7 said; *“I think I’m engaged in the classes.”* In addition, S8 emphasized; *“I try to be engaged in the classes. I try hard, actually.”*

On the contrary four students indicated that they were not engaged in the classes. S2 expressed his ideas as, *“I’m not always engaged in the classes.”* S5 stated; *“I find English very difficult, so it is difficult for me to be engaged in the classes.”* Similarly S6 said; *“I generally feel bored in the classes, so when I’m bored I think about other things.”* In addition S9 mentioned; *“I cannot understand the classes and so I feel disengaged in the classes.”*

#### *Perceived Autonomy Support Levels of Students in Classes*

In the second sub-problem of the study, it was aimed to determine how students perceive the autonomy support provided by their teachers. For this purpose, the “Learning Climate Questionnaire” was applied to the students. The mean and standard deviation scores of the questionnaire are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Mean and standard deviation scores for learning climate questionnaire

| Learning Climate questionnaire | $\bar{X}$ | SS   |
|--------------------------------|-----------|------|
| Total score                    | 4.95      | 1.31 |

*n=67*

As can be seen clearly in Table 2, perceived autonomy support of the students is at “completely appropriate” level ( $\bar{X}=4.95$ ). In order to get detailed information about the perceived autonomy support level of the students, students were asked for their opinions about this issue. The obtained data indicated that six of the students had positive opinions about the perceived autonomy support, while three of the students had negative opinions. Among the positive opinions, students stated that their teachers made a great effort and gave the necessary support in the classes. On the contrary, some students ( $f=3$ ) expressed that they were not satisfied with the teaching styles of the teachers, and that they did not like the classes because of the teachers. Some of the positive opinions on the perceived autonomy support are as follows: S4 stated; *“My teachers always encourage me to engage in the classes. They help me express my ideas.”* S5 said; *“Generally, the teachers try very much to help us. We cannot ignore their support.”* Similarly, S6 indicated; *“All the teachers are very helpful. I do not have any problems related to the teachers. They support us all the time.”*

On the contrary, students had negative opinions related to the autonomy support provided by the teachers. For example, S2 stated; *“I did not take support from the teachers, except for one of the teachers.”* S8 expressed that; *“Teachers’ styles are very different from each other. And some teachers do not support us.”* “Some classes are really boring because of the teachers. They do not help us at all.” (S9).

#### *Relationship between Engagement Level of Students and Perceived Autonomy Support*

The third sub-problem of the study sought to determine whether or not there is a significant relationship between students’ perceived autonomy support level and engagement level of the students in the classes. For this purpose, correlation analysis was conducted and the findings obtained from the analysis are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Correlation Analysis on Relationship between Students' Perceived Autonomy Support Level and Engagement Level of Students in Classes

| Variables                            | 1 | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     |
|--------------------------------------|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| <b>Perceived Autonomy Support</b>    |   |       |       |       |       |
| 1.Total Score                        | 1 | .63** | .44** | .61** | .63** |
| <b>Student Engagement in Classes</b> |   |       |       |       |       |
| 2.Behavioral engagement              |   | 1     | .74** | .79** | .93** |
| 3.Emotional engagement               |   |       | 1     | .64** | .86** |
| 4.Cognitive engagement               |   |       |       | 1     | .90** |
| 5.Total score of student engagement  |   |       |       |       | 1     |

*n* = 67, \**p*<.05, \*\* *p*<.01

As can be seen in Table 3, there is a positive significant and moderate level relationship between the perceived autonomy support and the engagement level of the students in the classes. The relationship between perceived autonomy support and the behavioral engagement level [*r*=.63], emotional engagement level [*r*=.44], cognitive engagement level [*r*=.61] and the total score of the student engagement level was found to be positive, significant and at moderate level.

#### *Factors Affecting Engagement Level of Students in Classes*

The last problem of the research was to determine the factors affecting students' engagement in the classes. The students' opinions related to this sub-problem were examined, and the obtained themes are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Factors Affecting Engagement Level of Students in Classes

| Themes                        | <i>f</i> |
|-------------------------------|----------|
| Personal factors              | 3        |
| Features of the program       | 12       |
| Implementation of the program | 5        |
| Teacher behaviors             | 6        |

Some of the students (*f*=3) stated that personal factors affected their engagement in the classes. For example, S1 expressed that; *"I have a vitamin deficiency problem. So, I get tired easily and I have forgetfulness problems. And these factors affect my engagement in the classes."* S2 stated that; *"I cannot engage in the classes especially when I get up early in the mornings because I feel sleepy. In addition, if I have a negative experience during the day, I cannot engage in the classes."* Similarly, S8 emphasized; *"Sometimes, I cannot engage in the classes because of personal problems. I think that other students will laugh at me if I make a mistake. I'm afraid of making mistakes."*

On the other hand, all of the students indicated that the curriculum affects their engagement level. Among these factors, one of the students (S2) stated that the curriculum was very intense; *"I have many classes. I feel like a high school student. So, the system is very intense."* Moreover, four of the students expressed that the curriculum was

very routine. About this issue, some of the students' opinions were as follows: S2 stated that; *"There are the same subjects in the books, and so the lessons become boring."* S3 said that; *"My interest decreases since the subjects are similar and the system is very routine."* S7 stated that; *"I wish there were some different activities in the system. All the things are same."* S8 also said that; *"I have negative opinions about the system and the curriculum. It is very bad and not effective. There should be different activities. I did not like the system at all."*

In addition, some of the students (f=4) stated that the curriculum did not focus on the verbal skills. For example, S5 expressed his ideas as;

*"There should be more focus on speaking skill in the curriculum. Instead of following the book, teachers could prepare documents for us and this would be more interesting. The issue to make the curriculum better should be handled and greater effort should be given for the speaking skill."*

Similarly S6 emphasized that;

*"There is no meaning in getting a certificate if I cannot speak the language. So, the problem in the system should be overcome. It is the legal right of the students to decide not to attend classes in which he/she cannot speak."*

Whilst S7 stated that;

*"I had many expectations from this preparatory program but the system did not match my expectations because I still cannot speak. Actually we cannot speak. The only thing that we do is come to the school, follow the book, do the nonsense activities in the book and then go home. Although, we talked about this problem several times, we only did a few speaking skill related activities. There should be more activities on speaking skills."*

Similarly, S9 said, *"We always follow the book and try to follow the curriculum. There should be more activities on speaking skills and in doing so the lessons should be more interesting."*

Some students (f=3) stated the existence of problems related to the course book. For example, S1 said; *"The classes are very boring due to wrong course book choice."* In addition, S2 stated; *"I find the main course classes difficult because of the course book."* Moreover, S7 expressed her ideas as; *"The only thing we learn from the course book is grammar. Ok, grammar is important but I think we focus more grammar, much more than necessary. This is very bad for the system."*

Moreover, two of the students indicated that the course hours were very intense, and that this led to problems. S2 said that; *"We have many classes. We feel bored from the first class hour until the last."* Similarly, S3 stated that; *"I have concentration problems because of the intensity of the course hours."*

Lastly, four of the students thought that the start times of the courses were very early and that it constituted a problem for them. About this issue, students stated the following opinions: *"The courses start very early."* (S6). *"I cannot engage in the classes, especially the ones in the mornings since the classes start early in the mornings."* (S2). *"I find it difficult to come to the classes early in the mornings."* (S3). *"If the classes were in the afternoons, I could come to classes better, feel better and engage in the classes better."* (S7).

Another factor affecting the engagement level of the students expressed by some students (f=5) was with regards to the implementation of the curriculum. The students stated that they always followed the book, the process was very boring, and that such factors affected their engagement in the classes. For example, S2 indicated that; *“There are the same subjects in the course book all the time. We always do activities on the same subjects.”* S4 emphasized that; *“In the implementation of the curriculum, only the course book is followed.”* S6 said; *“The implementation of the curriculum is very boring and there is nothing to capture the interest of the students.”* Similarly, S7 stated; *“The implementation of the curriculum is very boring so my engagement in the classes decreases.”* Moreover, S6 mentioned that, *“The implementation of the curriculum is very boring.”* Lastly, S9 said; *“I assume my responsibilities as a student. However, the system is bad. The students get bored since we always follow the course book.”*

The students also stated that teacher behavior affected their engagement level in the classes. They mentioned that teachers could not make the classes interesting and did not pay attention to students who were not eager to learn. The students’ opinions about this theme are as follows: *“Classes are generally implemented like stories. So, I think the lessons become boring. Teachers do not do much to make them interesting”* (S1). *“I want to benefit more from the experiences of the teachers but they do not help us much”* (S4). *“Teachers should do more instead of following the course book all the time. When the teachers are not eager, neither are the students”* (S5). *“The attitudes of the teachers make me disengaged in the classes”* (S7). *“The teachers could make the classes more interesting”* (S9).

## Results and Discussion

In this study, it was aimed to determine the engagement level of students studying at Bilecik Seyh Edebali University’s Optional English Preparatory Classes and to determine the factors affecting the students’ engagement in the classes. In line with the first sub-problem of the study, the engagement level of students enrolled in the program was examined. The students participated in the study stated that they try to engage in the classes in general. As a result, the students’ opinions about their engagement level in the classes were at a good level. Similarly, in a study conducted by Simanjalam (2008), it was concluded that students in foreign language classes actively engaged in the classes. In addition, in the current study when the scores of the students for the “Classroom Engagement Scale for the University Students” were examined, it was seen that the level of student engagement in the classes were at a good level. While the students’ opinions on behavioral engagement were at moderate level, their opinions on emotional and cognitive engagement were at a good level. In this case, it was found that the students engage in the classes at a moderate level in activities such as active participation, as well as asking and answering questions. Moreover, they have a good level of emotional and cognitive engagement. Therefore, it can be concluded that students engage in classes through the activities such as listening, thinking or the use of gestures. In the study conducted by Abdullah et al., (2012), students were found to engage in classes actively through activities such as asking questions and expressing their ideas; whereas, they also engaged in the activities such as silent listening. While Rocca (2010) stated that students can engage in classes emotionally even if they do not participate actively, Warayet (2011) stated that students engage in classes by way of gestures, mimics, and listening, even if they do not verbally participate. In the current study, it was seen that although the students do not actively participate in the classes, their emotional and cognitive engagement levels could be higher. With the information age we live in, classroom

engagement has become much more important and students are required to engage more in the classes (Allred & Swenson, 2006). Therefore, the teaching and learning processes should be conducted in such a way so as to increase student engagement.

In the second sub-problem of the current study, it was aimed to determine the level of autonomy support perceived by the students. In this way, the effect of the teacher factor in terms of students' level of engagement in the classes was tried to be examined. The quantitative data showed that the autonomy support perceived by the students was at a high level. Moreover, while six of the students stated that teachers provided autonomy support during the courses, three students reported negative opinions on this subject. In this case, although most of the students held positive opinions about autonomy support, some did not acknowledge much autonomy support. Therefore, the obtained quantitative data supported the opinions of the students who expressed positive opinion on autonomy support. Bayat (2007) concluded that students who learn English as a foreign language have high autonomy perceptions. Yeşilyurt (2008) found that students perceived English writing lessons as autonomy supportive. Dinçer, Yeşilyurt, and Takkac (2011) found in their study that students consider that their teachers exhibit autonomy-supporting attitudes and that they have a class climate that supports autonomy in English speaking classes. Kanadlı and Bağçeci (2015) found that students' perceived autonomy in English reading-writing and listening-speaking lessons were high in English preparatory classes. On the other hand, Ikonen (2013) found that students' perceived autonomy in foreign language classes was low.

When the relationship between students' perceived autonomy support and their engagement levels in the classes are examined, a positive and significant relationship was found between the two variables at a moderate level. There was a positive significant relationship found to exist between perceived autonomy support and behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement levels at a moderate level. In this case, it was seen that the engagement level of the students increases with autonomy support provided by the teacher in the classroom. Similarly, Reeve et al. (2004) and Thaliah and Hashim (2008) concluded that a positive relationship was found between autonomy support and student engagement. Okazaki (2012), in his study, concluded that students' motivation and performance related to learning English increased with the support of autonomy. Aidinlou and Ghobadi (2012) concluded that teacher support affects students' verbal participation in the English language teaching process. O'Reilly (2014) found that a positive relationship existed between autonomy support and intrinsic motivation and English language learning process. DeVito (2016) revealed the finding of a positive relationship between teachers' teaching styles and student engagement.

The students in the current study reported various reasons affecting their attendance. These were personal factors, factors resulting from the curriculum, factors related to the implementation of the curriculum, and also teacher behaviors. The students stated in terms of the curriculum that it was very intensive and routine, and that there was not much focus on speaking skills, with problems arising from the course book, and the courses starting early in the day. They also stated that the way in which the curriculum was implemented was boring. In addition, teachers themselves needed to make more studies so as to make the classes more enjoyable. Students expressed that these factors affected their engagement level in the classes and so, their engagement level can change depending on these factors.

Gomez, Arai and Lowe (1995) divided the factors affecting the students' engagement levels in classes into three groups as "class characteristics", "student characteristics", and "teacher characteristics." While the class features includes factors such as classroom interaction and classroom atmosphere, factors such as trust and being prepared for the lessons were included in student characteristics. On the other hand, the support provided by the teachers is among the teacher factor affecting engagement of the students. Mustapha et al., (2010) found that teacher and student attitudes have a great effect on students' level of engagement in class. They also stated that the difficult and complex content of the course was greatly affected their level of classroom engagement. Abdullah et al., (2012) stated that the personality traits of the students, and the characteristics of the instructor, were very affective on student engagement. Peng (2006) stated that students' willingness to speak and high levels of motivation increase their engagement in class. Similarly, de Erenchun Lizarraga (2014) stated motivation factor as the most important factor affecting course engagement. Aidinlou and Ghobadi (2012) stated that the level of the course, the size of the class, and the way the teacher communicates with the students greatly influences students' levels of engagement in classes. Zhou (2012) concluded that teacher behavior significantly affects student engagement, whereas, de Erenchun Lizarraga (2014) found that teacher attitudes and behaviors affect student engagement in language learning classes.

As seen from these findings, there are many factors affecting student engagement in classes. Therefore, in the teaching and learning process student engagement should be dealt with intensely and that teachers should make an effort to increase the engagement level of their students.

## Notes

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