



THE DEVELOPMENT OF EFL STUDENTS' BEHAVIORAL ENGAGEMENT ACROSS TASK-BASED READING LESSONS

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Abstract: Sustaining students' behavioral engagement across lessons remains a challenge in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. This study investigates how EFL students' behavioral engagement develops across a sequence of task-based reading lessons and identifies key indicators of this engagement. Adopting a longitudinal mixed-methods design, data were collected from 66 Vietnamese university students through repeated questionnaires and follow-up interviews across five reading tasks. Quantitative results revealed a significant upward trend in behavioral engagement over time, with engagement increasing after the initial tasks and remaining high in later ones. Qualitative analysis identified three interrelated indicators of behavioral engagement: sustained focus, persistent task completion, and context-sensitive fluctuations in effort. The findings indicate that behavioral engagement is dynamic and develops through repeated task participation rather than remaining a fixed learner characteristic. The study highlights the value of structured and well-sequenced task-based language teaching (TBLT) in supporting sustained behavioral engagement in EFL classrooms.

Keywords. behavioral engagement; task-based language teaching, reading skill; learner participation

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that student engagement in the language learning process can facilitate language awareness, motivation and ultimately language achievement (Alzahrani, 2025; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017; Wong et al., 2024). Among the different dimensions of engagement, behavioral engagement refers to students' visible participation in learning, including task completion, effort, persistence, and help-seeking behaviors (Fredricks et al., 2004). Previous studies have shown that behavioral engagement is closely linked to learning

outcomes and academic performance in language education contexts (Li, 2024; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2009; Zhou & Wu, 2024).

Despite its importance, much engagement research has relied on cross-sectional designs that capture engagement at a single point in time. As a result, scholars have called for longitudinal approaches that conceptualize engagement as a dynamic process unfolding during instruction rather than as static snapshots (Hiver et al., 2021; Zare & Derakhshan, 2024). However, in EFL reading classrooms, where instruction is often organized as a sequence of interrelated tasks, little research has applied this longitudinal perspective specifically to behavioral engagement. The present study adopts a longitudinal, task-based approach to examine behavioral engagement in an EFL reading classroom to address the following research questions:

1. How does EFL students' behavioral engagement develop across reading tasks?
2. What are the emerged indicators of EFL students' behavioral engagement in the reading tasks?

By focusing on behavioral engagement as a dynamic process, this study aims to contribute to a clearer understanding of student engagement in reading task-based lessons and to provide insights for task design that supports sustained student participation.

2. Literature review

Behavioral engagement in education context

It is reported that behavioral engagement subdomain has been focused as the most frequent one in substantial amount of research (Hiver et al., 2021). Researchers conceptualize behavioral engagement in various ways, but typically in terms of *participation* (Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Lambert et al., 2017), active *involvement* in learning activities (Fredricks et al., 2004; Zepke, 2016). According to Skinner and Belmont (1993), behavioral engagement refers to a student's active involvement in learning activities and their willingness to participate in classroom discussions, group activities, and other learning experiences. In the same vein, Wang and Eccles (2011) define behavioral engagement as students' participation in academic tasks and their willingness to put forth effort in order to learn and succeed. Fredricks et al. (2004) and Reschly and Christenson (2012) focus mainly on students' attendance, on-task behavior, and completion of assignments when defining the term. In this study, behavioral engagement refers to how students act in a reading task. This is manifested externally through their participation and attention to the task. For example, they listen very carefully in a class, or they try to complete the task quickly.

With regards to its measurement, behavioral engagement has been examined through qualitative instruments such as interviews with students, teacher evaluations, and self-reports or observations of effort and participation (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). Indicators utilized in task-based studies typically center on academic behaviors such as task participation or question answering. Academic time on task, or the amount of time that students are actively engaged in learning, is frequently the most important indicator of behavioral engagement (Gettinger & Walter, 2012). Furthermore, word counts and turn counts are also used to measure behavioral engagement (Bygate & Samuda, 2009; Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000; Phung, 2020; Lambert & Zhang, 2019). Lutz et al. (2006) use 30-second interval observation to rate behavioral engagement indicators of on-task and off-task, for example a complete distraction, heads down on desk, or eye movement and hand raising. Specific indicators of behavioral engagement in reading encompass instructors' observations of students' reading behaviors and students' self-reports regarding the amount of time spent reading, effort exerted, and persistence (Guthrie et al., 2012).

While behavioral engagement in the classroom can be assessed through the observation of students' active participation and involvement in the learning process, it is argued that not all students will manifest identical levels of outward engagement (Egbert et al., 2021). For instance, while one student appears disinterested but is actually engaged in critical thought regarding the assignment, another may merely gaze at the assigned text without giving it a second thought. Moreover, it has been discovered that certain students, whom observers deemed to be engaged, admitted during subsequent interviews that they were not contemplating the material. On the contrary, a considerable number of the seemingly distracted students were, in fact, profoundly cognitively engaged, as they attempted to establish connections between newly acquired concepts and prior knowledge (Peterson et al., 1984). These findings highlight the complexity of students' engagement behaviors and the limitations of relying solely on external observations to measure their level of behavioral engagement. It is crucial for educators to recognize that outward appearances may not always accurately reflect the students' true level of engagement. Therefore, it is important to employ a variety of assessment methods, such as interviews and questionnaire measures, to gain a comprehensive understanding of students' behavioral engagement.

Previous studies

Extensive research has underscored the critical connection between engagement and reading processes. Higher levels of engagement during reading are consistently associated with enhanced comprehension and overall performance (Hamedi et al., 2019; Keenan et al., 2008). These findings suggest that reading is a context where engagement is particularly salient, as successful comprehension necessitates sustained attention and cognitive effort. However, a

significant portion of existing literature has prioritized learning outcomes, often overlooking the developmental trajectory of engagement itself during specific reading activities.

Furthermore, while a growing body of longitudinal research (e.g., Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2021; Zhou et al., 2022) indicates that behavioral engagement may fluctuate before stabilizing over an academic year, these studies typically focus on broad instructional periods. Consequently, there is a lack of granular insight into how engagement evolves at the task level. In task-based reading research, behavioral engagement is often operationalized through indicators such as time-on-task and observable effort (Guthrie et al., 2012; Egbert et al., 2021). Yet, these studies remain limited to single tasks or isolated phases. There remains a notable gap in understanding how students' behavioral engagement develops across a curated sequence of EFL reading tasks, particularly when investigated through a combination of self-report and qualitative interview data.

In the context of Vietnam, learner engagement and reading in TBLT have been explored to examine which dimensions of engagement were preferred by EFL teachers and students. Specifically, the study by Nguyen and Duong (2022) investigated students' attitudes towards the implementation of TBLT in an English reading class. Data from questionnaires indicated that the majority of students held positive attitudes towards TBLT in reading comprehension lessons. As for engagement, the behavioral dimension obtained the highest agreement from the participants, followed by the cognitive dimension and the affective dimension. However, it focused on high school students, not tertiary ones. Also exploring learner engagement in the context of classrooms in Vietnam, Bui et al. (2025) assessed learner engagement across all four dimensions: behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social. The study employed a quantitative approach with data collected from a survey administered to 182 teachers across 63 primary schools. The results reported that while teachers acknowledged all four dimensions of engagement, they tended to prioritize behavioral and emotional aspects. Besides, the study suggested that urban teachers should be guided to view engagement beyond observable participation, while rural teachers should develop a stronger awareness of the role of emotional engagement in sustaining overall learner involvement. However, few studies have addressed these dynamics at the tertiary level.

Overall, the previous studies have explored the topic of behavioral engagement but how behavioral engagement of students develops across reading tasks in EFL reading classrooms where instruction is often organized as a sequence of interrelated tasks remains questions to be explored. This study aims to fill these gaps by investigating the developmental trajectory of behavioral engagement among Vietnamese EFL university students as they engage in a series of TBLT-based reading activities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

A sequential explanatory mixed methods design was employed to investigate EFL students' behavioral engagement in reading tasks. The study consisted of two phases: quantitative data were first collected through a questionnaire to assess students' participation, effort, and persistence across five tasks, followed by qualitative interviews that explored their experiences in greater depth. This design enabled the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of students' behavioral engagement in EFL reading tasks.

3.2 Research setting and participants

The study was conducted at a national university in central Vietnam, which enrolls students from diverse cultural, geographical, and social backgrounds, providing a varied and representative sample for analysis. The research focused on the Reading and Writing 1 course, a core component of the English Teacher Education curriculum that equally emphasizes reading and writing skills. Using Skillful Level 3: Reading and Writing (Rogers & Zemach, 2018), the course offered a suitable context for examining students' behavioral engagement during reading tasks.

Five task-based reading lessons were designed by combining Willis and Willis's (2007) task-based framework and Ellis's (2003) task design principles. Classroom procedures followed three stages: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus, ensuring consistency across lessons. Task design emphasized authenticity, topic familiarity, learner motivation, and manageable cognitive demands. Across five themed units, students engaged in varied reading tasks such as jigsaw reading, role-play, question generation, prediction, and annotation, with pre- and post-task activities supporting meaningful engagement and reflection.

The study involved 66 second-year students majoring in English Language Teacher Education at a university in central Vietnam. The participants, aged 19 to 21, were drawn from two intact classes taught by the same lecturer. This arrangement ensured instructional consistency and minimized potential teacher effects, as variations in teaching style could influence students' behavioral engagement. Selecting these two classes under one instructor was therefore both methodologically sound and feasible within the institutional context. Although the sample size may appear modest, the repeated-measures design strengthened statistical power by collecting data from the same participants across five consecutive tasks. This approach generated a larger number of within-subject observations and allowed for the detection of developmental patterns over time. Furthermore, qualitative interviews were conducted to triangulate the findings and enhance the robustness of the results. Therefore,

while the study was conducted within a specific instructional context, the methodological design supports the credibility of the findings.

3.3 Data collection tool and process

3.3.1 Questionnaires

A longitudinal questionnaire design was employed to investigate students' behavioral engagement across five reading tasks within one semester. This design, which collects data from the same participants at multiple points in time (Creswell, 2014), allowed the researcher to observe changes in students' participation, effort, and persistence over time and across different reading tasks. Such an approach was appropriate for capturing the dynamic nature of engagement that a cross-sectional survey could not reveal (Bryman, 2006). The four five-point Likert-scale items were adapted from the language task engagement model (Egbert et al., 2021) and the validated five-indicator framework by Zare and Derakhshan (2024), focusing specifically on behavioral indicators.

3.3.2 Interviews

In this study, maximum variation sampling was used to select ten students from two classes for interviews, representing different levels of engagement (high, medium, and low) based on questionnaire results. The same participants were interviewed after each of the five reading tasks to trace changes in behavioral engagement over time. Each interview was conducted either in the classroom or via online platforms, ensuring convenience and allowing for rich, longitudinal insights into students' engagement experiences.

3.4 Data analysis procedure

Data were analyzed using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach. Quantitative questionnaire data from 66 students over five reading tasks were analyzed first using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were calculated to examine patterns of students' behavioral engagement across the five reading tasks. A repeated-measures ANOVA was then conducted to test whether changes in engagement across tasks were statistically significant. Mauchly's Test of Sphericity was used to assess model assumptions, and the Greenhouse–Geisser correction was applied when necessary. Effect sizes were reported using partial eta squared, and Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc comparisons were conducted to identify differences between tasks.

Interview data were analyzed thematically using an inductive approach. Transcripts were read repeatedly, and initial codes were generated focusing on students' attention, effort, and persistence during reading tasks. These codes were refined and grouped into broader categories, resulting in indicators of behavioral engagement.

4. Findings

This section reports the findings of the data analysis in response to the two main research questions. It begins with presenting how Vietnamese EFL students were behaviorally engaged across five reading tasks, followed by results on indicators of student behavioral engagement in reading tasks.

4.1 The development of students' behavioral engagement across five reading tasks

Descriptive statistics for the overall behavioral engagement across five tasks are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean scores of students' behavioral engagement levels across five reading tasks (N=66)

Code	Item	T1 M(SD)	T2 M(SD)	T3 M(SD)	T4 M(SD)	T5 M(SD)	Overall item mean
1.1	I did my best to stay focused and avoid distraction in a reading task.	4.09 (0.63)	4.32 (0.75)	4.39 (0.72)	4.35 (0.69)	4.53 (0.59)	4.34
1.2	I worked as hard as I could to complete the reading task.	4.05 (0.69)	4.41 (0.72)	4.52 (0.66)	4.52 (0.64)	4.52 (0.61)	4.40
1.3	I spent as much time as necessary to complete the reading task.	4.03 (0.68)	3.95 (0.69)	4.36 (0.65)	4.29 (0.65)	4.52 (0.53)	4.23
1.4	When the reading task is hard or dull, I either give up or study only the easy parts. (Reverse)	3.59 (0.76)	3.77 (0.70)	3.82 (0.82)	4.00 (0.82)	4.08 (0.71)	3.85
Overall task mean		3.94	4.11	4.27	4.29	4.41	

M: mean; T: task; SD: standard deviation

The table above indicates consistently high levels of behavioral engagement, with effort, focus, and persistence strongly evident across the task sequence. Among the four items, *working hard to complete the task* (Item 1.2) showed the highest overall mean ($M = 4.40$) with relatively stable variation across tasks ($SD = 0.61\text{--}0.75$), suggesting that sustained effort was the most prominent behavioral feature of students' engagement. *Staying focused and avoiding distraction*

(Item 1.1) also recorded a high overall mean ($M = 4.34$) and increased steadily from task 1 to task 5, indicating improved concentration as students became more familiar with the reading tasks. *Time investment* (Item 1.3) showed a similar steady increase, with a slight dip in task 2 followed by clear growth in later tasks, resulting in an overall mean of 4.23. In comparison, *persistence* when tasks were difficult or dull (Item 1.4, reverse coded) recorded the lowest overall mean ($M = 3.85$) and showed the widest spread across tasks ($SD = 0.70$ – 0.82). Although the mean score of item 1.4 increased steadily over time, this pattern indicates that persistence developed more slowly and remained less pronounced than effort or focus.

At the task level, overall behavioral engagement increased steadily across the five-task sequence, rising from Task 1 ($M = 3.94$) to Task 5 ($M = 4.41$). The mean scores showed moderate growth from Task 2 to Task 4 ($M = 4.11$ – 4.29), indicating that students' behavioral engagement strengthened progressively as they moved through the reading tasks.

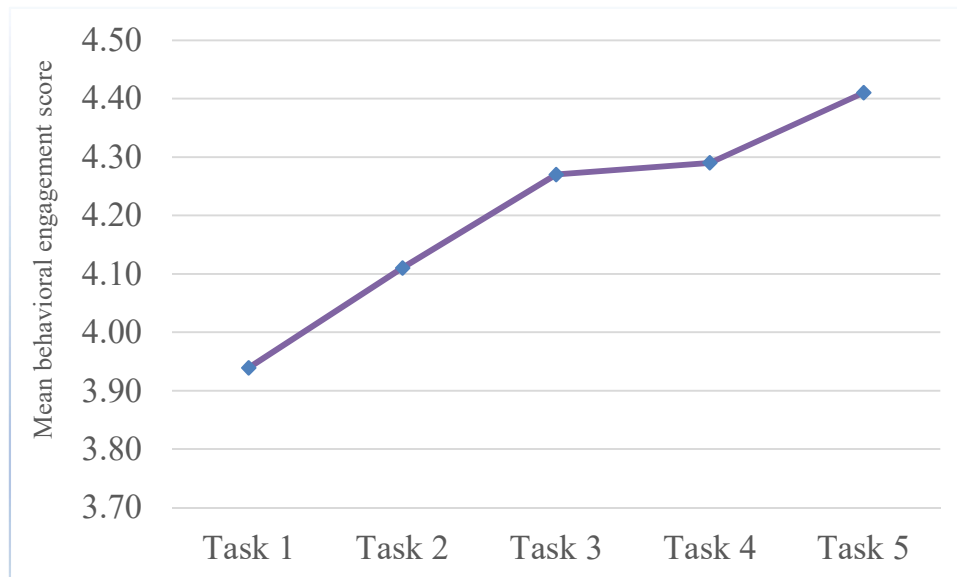


Figure 1. Students' overall behavioral engagement across five reading tasks

As can be seen from Figure 1, there was a gradual increase in behavioral engagement scores across the tasks. The line chart highlights the most notable growth between task 1 and task 3, followed by a steady and sustained increase through tasks 4 and 5.

To determine whether the self-reported increases in behavioral engagement across the five reading tasks were statistically significant, a repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted.

Table 2. Mauchly's Test of Sphericity for behavioral engagement

Within Subjects Effect	Mauchly's W	Approx. Chi-Square	df	Sig.	Epsilon ^b		
					Greenhouse-Huynh-Geisser	Feldt	Lower-bound
Tasks	.740	19.438	9	.022	.863	.916	.250

First, Mauchly's Test of Sphericity was performed to assess the assumption of sphericity. The test indicated that sphericity was violated, $\chi^2(9) = 19.438$, $p = .022$, so the Greenhouse-Geisser correction ($\epsilon = .863$) was applied for all subsequent ANOVA results (see Table 2).

Table 3 Repeated-measures ANOVA using the Greenhouse–Geisser correction for behavioral engagement

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Tasks	8.712	3.450	2.525	12.142	.000	.157
Error (tasks)	46.638	227.731	.205			

The analysis revealed a statistically significant effect of task on behavioral engagement: $F(3.450, 227.731) = 12.142$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .157$ (see Table 3), indicating that students' behavioral engagement differed significantly across the five tasks, with a large effect size. The findings suggest that the way each reading task was designed had a clear influence on how students engaged behaviorally.

To further examine the significant main effect observed in the repeated-measures ANOVA, Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc comparisons were conducted to determine which specific reading tasks differed significantly in terms of students' behavioral engagement.

Table 4. Significant Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons for behavioral engagement

Comparison	Mean Difference (I–J)	Sig.
Task 1 - Task 3	–0.333	.000
Task 1 - Task 4	–0.348	.000
Task 1 - Task 5	–0.470	.000
Task 2 - Task 5	–0.295	.003

Table 4 presented a trend in which students' behavioral engagement increased during the first few tasks, particularly between tasks 1 and 3, and then stabilized, with no significant changes across the final tasks. More specifically, task 1 showed significantly lower behavioral engagement than tasks 3, 4, and 5 ($p < .001$), indicating that students were less focused, effortful,

or persistent during the initial task compared to subsequent ones. The difference between task 1 and task 2 approached statistical significance ($p = .051$), implying a possible early increase that was not yet conclusive. Additionally, task 5 demonstrated significantly higher behavioral engagement than task 2 ($p = .003$) and task 1 ($p < .001$), but not compared to tasks 3 and 4 ($p > .05$). This finding is consistent with the descriptive statistics, which revealed a steady upward trend in mean behavioral engagement scores across the five-task period.

The analysis of students' behavioral engagement across the five tasks reveals a consistent upward trajectory, as evidenced by descriptive statistics and repeated measures ANOVA. Post hoc comparisons further demonstrated that students' engagement was initially lower but increased substantially after the first two tasks, maintaining high levels thereafter. The findings show that students not only adapted to the reading tasks but also demonstrated growing persistence, time investment, and focus over time.

In short, these findings reinforce engagement theory by showing that behavioral engagement is dynamic and shaped through repeated task participation rather than fixed learner traits. Engagement rose quickly after the initial task and then stabilized, suggesting that early task exposure plays a key role in activating effort, focus, and persistence, while later gains depend on how tasks evolve.

4.2 Indicators of students' behavioral engagement across five reading tasks

The findings from interviews provided a better understanding of the data derived from the questionnaire. Three interrelated themes emerged from the interview data, illustrating how students sustained attention, completed tasks with persistence and experienced fluctuations in engagement across different contexts. These themes display the behavioral dimension of engagement as a combination of effort, control, and adaptability throughout the reading process. The frequencies of such themes from interview finding are reported in the table 5 below.

Table 5 Frequencies of behavioral engagement indicators across five reading tasks

Main theme	Task one	Task two	Task three	Task four	Task five	Quote example
Sustained focus during reading tasks	8	9	8	10	12	"I was very focused"
Task completion as persistence	6	7	8	8	9	"I was just trying to get the task done... so that we could move on."

						(Student 2, task 01)
Fluctuating						Yes, there were a few moments when I didn't feel like working.
behavioral	5	4	4	3	2	
engagement across						(Student 4, task 03).
contexts						

Sustained focus

A key theme emerging from the interviews was that students who maintained focused attention during reading tasks also reported a stronger sense of control, confidence, and comprehension. This reflects the behavioral dimension of engagement that is students' ability to remain attentive, avoid distractions, and stay on task. A majority of students frequently used expressions such as *"I was very focused"* or *"I wasn't distracted"*, signaling deliberate mental effort to stay engaged. For example: *"I was much focused. I felt like I understood the whole text and could summarize and recall its content."* (Student 1, task 05). Similarly, Student 3 emphasized how the structure of the task supported their concentration: *"No, I wasn't distracted. Most of the activities were individual tasks, so I had to concentrate to complete them."* (Student 8, task 05). This indicates that sustained attention was not a passive state but an active behavioral commitment. The students linked their focus with deeper comprehension and confidence in recalling information. This theme closely aligns with questionnaire item 1.1 — *"I did my best to stay focused and avoid distraction in a reading task."* High behavioral engagement was therefore associated with consistent attention and an internal sense of mastery. In short, steady focus supported stronger control and clearer comprehension during reading.

Persistence

Another prominent behavioral pattern was persistence which was shown when students kept working on the reading tasks even when their interest or energy declined. When being asked about their persistence during the lessons, most students reported completing all assigned tasks like *"Yes, I did"* or *"I completed all of them."* Their comments suggest a sense of duty and responsibility, even in less engaging situations. For instance:

"I was feeling a bit tired that day, so I couldn't concentrate fully... After reading the article, I checked my predictions and realized I'd gotten a few right... That made me pay more attention for the rest of the lesson." (Student 2, task 04) or

"I participated as much as I could, to the best of my ability." (Student 08, task 03)

These responses align with questionnaire item 1.2 — *"I worked as hard as I could to complete the reading task,"* and stand in contrast to the reverse-coded item 1.4 capturing tendencies to give up on difficult tasks. However, not all persistence indicated deep engagement. Some students

admitted they were motivated primarily to finish the task rather than to learn from it: *"I was just trying to get the task done... so that we could move on."* (Student 2, task 01). This statement reveals a surface form of persistence — students continued working, but their primary goal was completion rather than comprehension. Overall, this theme demonstrates how students' behavioral engagement can appear similar on the surface, despite differences in motivation. Most students finished the tasks, but some students did so out of responsibility while others were focused on performance. This shows that completing a task doesn't always mean a student is fully engaged.

Context-sensitive fluctuation in effort

The third indicator shows that students' behavioral engagement was dynamic rather than constant, shifting across task stages and classroom contexts. Changes in energy, interest, or environmental factors such as noise and group work often influenced attention and participation. Several students described these fluctuations explicitly. Student 2 noted that while they began the task attentively, their focus dropped during a noisy discussion phase: *"I think my focus was average, about 50%... I sometimes lost track because other groups were talking loudly"* (Student 2, task 01). As shared by Student 8 about how their engagement varied depending on task type: *"I felt quite engaged when we started working in groups to make an action plan... But during the prediction part, I wasn't very focused"* (Student 8, task 04). Such quotes illustrate that behavioral engagement was sensitive to contextual and emotional conditions. Even minor distractions could lower focus temporarily, though engagement often recovered once the activity became more interactive or meaningful. Student 4 described the ups and downs in effort not only personally but collectively: *"Yes, there were a few moments when I didn't feel like working. I noticed that others didn't really want to do it and were just sitting around."* (Student 4, task 03). These examples reinforce that behavioral engagement is not a fixed trait but a situational state influenced by both internal motivation and external classroom atmosphere. While students rarely gave up entirely, their participation level often shifted between high and moderate engagement depending on context. From the teachers' perspective, it is essential to recognize the moments of students' distraction.

These three indicators show that students' behavioral engagement during the reading tasks had several layers. At times, they stayed focused and kept going out of responsibility. At other points, their attention rose and dipped depending on what was happening around them. These findings suggest that lessons need to support steady attention and limit distractions so students can stay consistently engaged.

In short, the questionnaire and interview findings show a steady rise in behavioral engagement as students moved through the five reading tasks. Students became more focused, more willing to invest time and effort, and less likely to give up when tasks felt dull or demanding. This improvement seemed linked to growing familiarity with the task format and a

clearer sense of what was expected of them. Interview data added depth to this result. Many students described deliberate efforts to stay attentive, while others highlighted persistence even when they felt tired or distracted. Their comments also showed that behavioral engagement shifted with context. Group noise, task type or energy levels often shaped how strongly they participated at different moments. These findings suggest that behavioral engagement is flexible and dynamic. Students generally maintained strong effort, yet their moment-to-moment involvement rose and fell depending on the learning conditions.

5. Discussion

The findings reveal a gradual increase of behavioral engagement across the five reading tasks, suggesting that students became more focused and persistent when they gained familiarity with recurring task procedures. This pattern highlights the responsiveness of behavioral engagement to instructional design. In this respect, the results are comparable to Gao (2026), who reported increased student engagement after redesigning a basic English reading course under the outcome-based education framework. In both studies, engagement appeared sensitive to changes in how reading instruction was structured within a single course. Despite such similarities, several differences should be noted. Gao (2026) employed a pre-post design to compare engagement before and after a course-level instructional redesign, examining engagement as a multidimensional construct. In contrast, the present study does not involve a shift from one teaching model to another. Instead, it traces the development of behavioral engagement across successive tasks within a consistently structured task-based framework. This design allows for a more fine-grained understanding of how engagement strengthens incrementally through repeated task participation rather than through a single reform intervention.

Furthermore, the present findings differ from those reported in longer-term longitudinal studies. More specifically, Sulis (2022), examining engagement across four lessons within an academic year, reported multiple trajectories rather than a consistent increase, with engagement fluctuating depending on classroom dynamics and learners' initial conditions. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2022) identified fluctuation and recovery patterns across extended timeframes, and Oga-Baldwin and Fryer (2021) found that engagement tended to increase initially and then stabilize over a semester. Compared with these longer-term investigations, the present study reveals a steady increasing pattern across successive tasks. One plausible explanation for this difference lies in timescale. Over a semester or academic year, engagement may reach equilibrium when novelty diminishes and contextual variables multiply. Extended durations also allow broader motivational and social factors to shape engagement trajectories. In contrast, the five-week instructional duration examined in the study may represent an adaptive phase, during which repeated exposure to similar task structures enhances procedural familiarity and confidence

before stabilization occurs. In other words, behavioral engagement may show visible strengthening in shorter, structured sequences, while longer-term studies capture later phases of stabilization or diversification.

In terms of the indicators of behavioral engagement, the findings revealed that student behavioral engagement was characterized by sustained focus and controlled persistence rather than mere task compliance. This deeper level of behavioral engagement aligns with the upward trajectory found in the quantitative data. However, the qualitative insights also showed that this development was not entirely linear at the micro-level. Students described intermittent decreases in attention linked to specific task stages, environmental factors like group noise, and the nature of the activity itself. This dynamic and fluctuating pattern at the micro-level is supported by Hiromori (2021), who reported that behavioral indicators can decrease or shift as interactions continue. Furthermore, the fluctuations observed in this study are congruent with findings by Aubrey et al. (2020), where shifts in engagement were shaped by situational factors such as fatigue and unfamiliarity with procedures rather than task difficulty alone. Both sets of evidence highlight that behavioral engagement is not a fixed state but is context-sensitive and highly responsive to immediate classroom conditions.

Ultimately, the integration of both datasets confirms that while the overall developmental trend of behavioral engagement is positive and increasing across the tasks, it remains "malleable" and subject to moment-to-moment changes. This conclusion lends further support to previous research (Sulis, 2020; Sulis & Philp, 2021), which asserts that student engagement can rise and fall within the duration of a single lesson or across a series of activities.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated how EFL students' behavioral engagement developed across a sequence of task-based reading lessons and identified key indicators of such engagement in reading tasks. This study demonstrates that behavioral engagement can strengthen over a sequence of task-based reading lessons when tasks are consistently structured and pedagogically aligned. Interview data further revealed that behavioral engagement was reflected not only in task completion but also in sustained focus, controlled persistence, and context-sensitive fluctuations in effort during reading activities. Together, these findings indicate that behavioral engagement in EFL reading is dynamic and shaped through repeated task participation, rather than remaining a fixed learner characteristic.

Pedagogical implications

The findings suggest that sequencing reading tasks plays an important role in sustaining students' behavioral engagement. Early tasks should focus on building familiarity and confidence, while later tasks may need added variation, interaction, or challenge to prevent

engagement from leveling off. Clear task structure, manageable demands, and meaningful goals appear to support students' attention and persistence. Teachers should also be aware that engagement may fluctuate within lessons due to contextual factors such as noise or fatigue, and should design activities that help students regain focus and maintain effort during reading tasks.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied primarily on self-reported questionnaire data and interviews without incorporating classroom observations or other objective behavioral measures, which may limit the direct capture of observable engagement behaviors and introduce potential self-report bias. Second, the sample consisted of 66 students from two intact classes within a single university, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings despite the use of a repeated-measures design. Finally, the study focused on a short sequence of reading tasks within one course, and longer instructional periods may reveal different developmental patterns of behavioral engagement.

Future research

Future studies could include classroom observations or learning analytics to complement self-report measures of behavioral engagement. Research conducted across longer time spans or in different instructional contexts may provide further insight into how engagement develops and stabilizes. In addition, future work could examine how behavioral engagement interacts with emotional and cognitive engagement to better understand the multidimensional nature of student engagement in EFL reading classrooms.

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