The Impact of Student Flexibility on Enhancing Classroom Engagement in a Tertiary-Level EFL Class

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of student flexibility in enhancing classroom participation in a tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Defined as the ability to adapt to new tasks, roles and learning environments, student flexibility is increasingly seen as an important factor in promoting active participation, communication and critical thinking in modern educational environments. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study collected data through a survey administered to 40 students and semi-structured interviews with a smaller group (n=15). The survey provided an overview of students' attitudes and self-perceptions regarding flexibility and participation, while the interviews provided deeper insight into individual experiences, emotions, and coping strategies when faced with dynamic classroom activities. Findings revealed that students with higher self-reported flexibility were more likely to be actively involved in tasks such as group work, role-playing, and open discussions. However, a subset of students expressed discomfort or anxiety, particularly in conversational or collaborative situations. While many appreciated the opportunity to try out new learning formats, others preferred more structured, predictable environments. These results highlight the important role that student flexibility plays in shaping engagement levels in EFL classrooms and the need for teaching approaches that both challenge and support students to become more adaptable. The study contributes to the growing body of research on learner-centered pedagogy by highlighting the importance of developing student flexibility as a pathway to improved engagement and language learning outcomes.

Keywords: Flexibility; Student Flexibility; Language Engagement; English as a Foreign Language; Tertiary Education

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1. Introduction

The concept of flexibility in EFL and other educational contexts has received a lot of attention from various disciplines, with emphasis on its ability to improve learning outcomes, increase engagement, and foster adaptation. Student flexibility, or learners' ability to adapt to a variety of tasks, methods, and social learning environments, is just as important as the flexibility of instructional materials. Student flexibility fosters autonomy, resilience, and active participation, especially in language learning settings where students must constantly negotiate meaning and adapt to changing communicative demands. Bao (2018) emphasizes the importance of adaptable materials that align with pedagogical objectives and learner profiles. According to Bao, flexibility bridges the gap between static curriculum designs and dynamic classroom realities, enabling teachers to tailor activities and assessments to their students' specific levels, interests, and cultural contexts. In this way, they encourage students to be more adaptable and take greater control of their learning process.

Martin and Rubin (1995) define cognitive flexibility as a person's awareness of different communication strategies and willingness to adapt when interacting with others. This viewpoint emphasizes how flexibility is not only a teaching concept, but also a student-centered cognitive skill that promotes engagement and responsiveness in the learning experience.   Similarly, the impact of flexible seating in classrooms on student behavior and engagement has been investigated. Benedict (2018) explores how diverse seating arrangements, like stability balls and standing desks, can let students choose settings that are comfortable and energy-efficient, leading to improved on-task behavior. This technique allows a wide range of learning styles while also addressing the sedentary nature of normal classrooms, which can hamper concentration and productivity. Flexible seating fosters a student-centered environment, which is consistent with the overall goal of increasing classroom inclusion and interaction. This aligns with Martin and Rubin's (1995) argument that individuals with high cognitive flexibility tend to be more socially adept and comfortable in changing environments—traits that are essential for collaborative learning spaces where physical and social conditions are in flux.

The shift towards flexible learning methodologies in higher education reflects the increasing demands of a digital and globally connected world. Habib and Pius (2020) describe flexible learning techniques that use specialized and technology-enabled teaching tools to meet the diverse needs of their students. These models make education more accessible and relevant by emphasizing the ability to choose study methods, paces, and formats. Such approaches have been particularly accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced the rapid introduction of online and hybrid delivery formats. Flexible learning not only increases educational access but also prepares students for lifelong learning by teaching them skills such as adaptability, digital literacy, and collaborative problem-solving.

In this context, the flexibility described by Martin and Rubin (1995) also applies to digital interaction, where learners must continually shift between modes of communication and demonstrate openness to unfamiliar tasks and technologies.

Flexibility is evident not only in physical spaces but also in pedagogical approaches designed to accommodate a variety of learning styles and needs. Research emphasizes the importance of creating

adaptable environments that foster student collaboration, participation, and autonomy. Kariippanon et al. (2019) emphasize the role of flexible learning environments in increasing interaction and behavioral engagement, as well as their ability to promote student-centered learning and critical skills like problem-solving and creativity. Similarly, Shaffer's (2007) Readers' Workshop model emphasizes the importance of providing students with time, choice, and autonomy in literacy education, allowing them to engage meaningfully with materials that are appropriate to their interests and level. According to Martin and Rubin (1995), cognitively flexible people are better at shifting perspectives and dealing with ambiguity—both of which are important characteristics for developing higher-order thinking skills and thriving in learner-centered environments.

These developments require educators to develop adaptable ideas and practices that can meet the ever-changing demands of the modern classroom. This flexibility is especially important in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where teachers must accommodate their students' diverse cultural, linguistic, and educational needs, expectations, and backgrounds. Given the growing importance of adaptability and learner-centered instruction in EFL contexts, this study seeks to investigate the role of student flexibility in increasing classroom engagement. It specifically looks at how students adapt to different tasks and learning methods in flexible classroom environments. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent are students flexible in engaging with tasks assigned by the teacher?
2. How inclined are tertiary-level EFL learners to adopt flexible learning strategies?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design and Approach

This study used a mixed-methods research design to explore the impact of student flexibility on classroom engagement in tertiary-level EFL classrooms. The qualitative technique was adopted to get a thorough understanding of learners' views, perspectives, feelings, and their attitudes toward innovative and flexible teaching approaches. Considering the aims of the study, an open-ended interview format was preferred to provide participants with the opportunity to express their thoughts, interpretations, experiences, and feelings in detail. The interview questions were designed to investigate the learners' attitudes toward various instructional strategies and classroom activities, including their openness to new learning methods, emotional responses to diverse types of tasks, and preferences for specific pedagogical approaches, such as group work, role-playing, and classroom discussions or debates.

In addition to the interviews, a quantitative tool was used to support the findings with broader insights. A separate group of participants completed a questionnaire that included items adapted from the Cognitive Flexibility Scale. In the current study, the original negatively worded items (e.g., "I avoid new and unusual situations") were rewritten in a positive format (e.g., "I approach new and unusual situations with interest") to facilitate easier understanding and more

straightforward data processing. This adaptation aimed to reduce potential confusion among respondents and eliminate the need for reverse scoring during statistical analysis. The semantic meaning and structure of the scale were preserved to maintain content validity.

This design aims to uncover underlying factors that influence learners' engagement and adaptability within an EFL classroom context, using both in-depth qualitative insights and supporting quantitative data collected from two different but comparable groups.

2.2.Participants

The participants consisted of two separate groups of EFL students studying at the School of Foreign Languages in a foundation university, which aligns with the subject of the research for tertiary level education. The first group included 15 students who took part in the interview process. These students were chosen by convenience sampling, which involves selecting people who were readily available in the researcher's institution or classroom and wanted to participate in the study. Participants who were suitable and willing to participate during the research process voluntarily contributed by providing insights from their personal practices, experiences, and feelings.

The second group consisted of 40 EFL students who completed the questionnaire. This group was also selected through convenience sampling, with voluntary participation. These students responded to items designed to measure their cognitive flexibility and engagement levels in classroom contexts. Their responses provided a broader understanding to support and complement the in-depth qualitative findings.

2.3.Data Collection Tools

The data were collected using two main tools: a semi-structured and open-ended interview, and a structured questionnaire, both designed to explore EFL learners' perspectives on classroom engagement and learning flexibility. The interview included five key questions examining learners' preferences for trying new learning methods, emotional responses to new types of tasks, attitudes toward group activities, opinions on role-playing exercises, and willingness to participate in discussions or debates. Thanks to the semi-structured approach, participants were able to express their ideas freely and independently while following a consistent analytical framework. In addition to encouraging students to express their genuine thoughts without an external influence, this method assisted in revealing viewpoints and emotions that might not have been expressed in a traditional learning environment.

Alongside the interviews, the questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from a separate group of participants. The survey items, adapted from the Cognitive Flexibility Scale, aimed to measure students' ability to adapt to new situations and their general attitudes toward flexible learning environments. This tool helped provide broader patterns and trends to support the in-depth qualitative insights gathered from the interviews.

2.4.Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected were analyzed using narrative analysis. This approach allowed the researcher to explore and interpret the participants' responses in depth by focusing on the personal experiences and perspectives shared by EFL learners. The emphasis was on understanding the meaning and significance behind their attitudes, emotions, and preferences related to flexibility in classroom activities. The interview questions provided insight into how learners perceive new learning methods, their reactions to different types of tasks, and their engagement in group activities, role-playing exercises, and discussions. Through narrative analysis, the researcher aimed to uncover patterns, identify key themes, and highlight the importance of learners' viewpoints. This method was especially appropriate for the study's objectives since it facilitated an interpretative process that captured the variety of learner experiences, challenges, and individual voices. By examining their narratives, the study gained a better understanding of how flexibility in teaching approaches affects EFL students' involvement and participation in class.

In addition to the qualitative analysis, the quantitative data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The responses were examined to identify general trends and patterns related to students' cognitive flexibility and engagement levels. This numerical data supported the qualitative findings by offering a broader view of learners' attitudes and helped to validate the emerging themes from the interview data.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Since the study questions included open-ended interview questions, these questions were created by the researcher and were edited by receiving feedback regarding the interpretability of the questions. All participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study. They were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and it was stated again in the explanation section of both the interview and the survey that the responses would remain anonymous and would only be used for graduate course research. In addition to this, permission was obtained from Matthew Martin, the original author of the Cognitive Flexibility Scale, to adapt and use the scale for the questionnaire. As a result of all these processes, the participants voluntarily shared their responses.

3. Results

3.1.Reliability of the Flexibility Scale

To ensure internal consistency of the scale used to measure learners' flexibility, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the 12 items. The reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha of **.859**, indicating a **high level of internal consistency** among the items (see Table 1). This value suggests that the scale is a reliable measure of tertiary-level learners' inclination toward flexible learning strategies.

Table 1. *Internal Consistency of the Flexibility Scale*

Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
.859	12

3.2. Descriptive Statistics of Flexibility Items

Descriptive statistics were computed for each of the 12 items in the flexibility scale to gain an understanding of learners' average responses and variability (see Table 2). The mean scores ranged from **4.45** (Item 2: "I approach new and unusual situations with interest") to **5.35** (Item 5: "I usually have choices when deciding how to behave"), suggesting that learners, on average, reported a **moderately high level of flexibility** across all items. Standard deviations indicated moderate variability, with the highest variability observed in Item 8 ("My behavior is a result of conscious decisions that I make"; SD = 1.368).

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of Flexibility Scale Items (N = 40)*

Item	Mean	SD	Min	Max
1. I can communicate an idea in many different ways.	5.23	0.73	3	6
2. I approach new and unusual situations with interest.	4.45	1.18	2	6
3. I feel like I often get to make decisions.	5.10	0.81	3	6
4. I can find workable solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems.	4.88	0.94	3	6
5. I usually have choices when deciding how to behave.	5.35	0.77	3	6
6. I am willing to work at creative solutions to problems.	5.18	0.84	4	6
7. In any given situation, I am able to act appropriately.	5.07	1.05	2	6
8. My behavior is a result of conscious decisions that I make.	4.98	1.37	1	6

Item	Mean	SD	Min	Max
9. I have many possible ways of behaving in any given situation.	5.18	0.96	2	6
10. I can easily use my knowledge on a given topic in real life.	5.10	0.81	3	6
11. I am willing to listen and consider alternatives.	4.97	1.03	2	6
12. I have the self-confidence necessary to try different behaviors.	5.10	0.90	3	6

3.3.Distribution of Learners by Flexibility Level

To further investigate learners' general inclination toward flexible learning strategies, a frequency analysis was performed based on their overall flexibility score (the average score across the 12 items). As presented in Table 3, a significant majority of learners (n = 34; **85%**) scored **4.50 or higher**, suggesting a **high level of positive attitude** toward flexibility. The remaining 15% (n = 6) had scores below 4.50, indicating a neutral or slightly less flexible orientation.

Table 3. *Distribution of Learners by Flexibility Score Range (N = 40)*

Flexibility Score Range	Interpretation	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
4.50 – 6.00	High inclination (positive attitude)	34	85%
3.50 – 4.42	Neutral or low inclination	6	15%
Total		**40**	**100%**

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the extent to which tertiary-level EFL learners are inclined to adopt flexible learning strategies. Drawing on both quantitative data from a questionnaire and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews, the findings suggest that most learners demonstrate a significant tendency toward flexibility in their learning behaviors.

The quantitative results indicate a generally high level of flexibility. Out of 40 participants, 85% scored above 4.50 (on a 6-point Likert scale) on the overall flexibility scale, signaling a strong inclination toward adopting alternative behaviors, strategies, and decision-making processes in response to learning challenges. The descriptive statistics further reflect this pattern, with high mean scores on several items such as *"I usually have choices when deciding how to behave"* (M = 5.35), *"I can communicate an idea in many different ways"* (M = 5.23), and *"I am*

willing to work at creative solutions to problems" (M = 5.18). These items are closely tied to the construction of behavioral and cognitive flexibility.

The qualitative interviews conducted with 15 students prior to the survey phase enriched these findings by uncovering learners' personal reflections and real-life classroom experiences. For instance, in response to the first interview question— *"Do you like trying new and different ways (listening to songs, writing a diary, watching videos, playing games) when learning English, or do you prefer using the same methods?"*—most participants expressed a preference for experimenting with diverse learning tools. Many mentioned that using multimedia resources or creative methods helped maintain their motivation and allowed them to engage more deeply with content.

Responses to the second interview question— *"When the teacher gives you a new type of task (a group project, a presentation, a game), do you feel excited and happy or nervous and anxious?"*—revealed that while a few students felt anxious at first, the majority described these novel tasks as enjoyable challenges. These students linked their positive reactions to a sense of autonomy and self-confidence—reflected in the survey item *"I have the self-confidence necessary to try different ways of behaving"* (M = 5.10).

Additional qualitative themes emerged from responses to questions 3, 4, and 5, which focused on learners' attitudes toward group activities, role-playing, and classroom discussions. Most interviewees indicated that they found group activities beneficial for both social and academic growth. In line with survey responses like *"I have many possible ways of behaving in any given situation"* (M = 5.18), students emphasized that peer collaboration helped them view problems from different perspectives and experiment with new approaches. On the other hand, a minority of students expressed discomfort with role-playing or debates, often citing fear of making mistakes or speaking publicly. This nuance may help explain the slightly lower mean score on the item *"I approach new and unusual situations with interest"* (M = 4.45), hinting at a mild resistance toward unpredictable or high-stakes tasks.

5. Conclusion

This study contributes to the broader literature on learner autonomy and adaptability in EFL settings by showing that learners actively adopt flexible strategies when provided with varied, student-centered tasks. The findings support the broader literature on learner autonomy and adaptability in EFL settings (e.g., Cools & Van den Broeck, 2007). The evidence suggests that flexibility is not only present but actively utilized by learners when they are provided with opportunities to engage in varied, student-centered tasks. Importantly, the strong reliability of the questionnaire (Cronbach's α = .859) also reinforces the internal consistency of the instrument used to assess flexible learning behaviors.

Nonetheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small, and all participants were drawn from a single institution, limiting the generalizability of the results.

Furthermore, while qualitative interviews added rich narrative data, future research might expand this approach through focus groups or classroom observations to better capture the situational dynamics of flexibility.

In summary, both the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study indicate that tertiary-level EFL learners exhibit a clear inclination toward adopting flexible learning strategies. The integration of open-ended interview insights strengthens the validity of these results, revealing that learners value novelty, collaboration, and adaptability—especially when supported by a safe and engaging classroom environment.

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