# EXPLORING LEARNERS' ENGAGEMENT IN A LEARNER-GENERATED CONTENT TASK PERFORMANCE

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**Abstract:**
The growing body of research on learners' engagement in second language acquisition indicates that it is essential to ensure that learners experience meaningful learning. This study investigates how learners are engaged in a learner-generated content task and perceive the assigned assignment. During the course of fifteen minutes, four volunteer Indonesian students who learned English as a foreign language completed a writing task in dyads. At the conclusion of the task, they had to self-rate on a 10-point Likert scale and respond to a post-task exit questionnaire. The quantity of Language Related Episodes (LREs) (a measure of cognitive engagement), requests for help and responsiveness (measures of social engagement), and laughs (a measure of emotional engagement) were used to gauge their engagements. Results indicated that: (1) Learners were more frequently engaged cognitively and socially in a learner-generated content task; and (2) They had positive perceptions of a learner-generated content task. Future studies are encouraged to respond to the limitations of this study.

**Keywords:** *Learners' Engagement, Learner-Generated Content (LGC) Task*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In second language acquisition research, learners' engagement has become increasingly recognized as a fundamental precursor for meaningful learning. A key characteristic of engagement is that it always has an object, such as a task (Hiver et al., 2021). The concept of learners' task engagement is multifaceted, encompassing cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions (Dao & McDonough, 2018). Cognitive engagement refers to learners' sustained focus and mental effort in the learning process (Dao, 2019; and Hiver et al., 2021). In contrast, social engagement could be defined by the presence of social interaction between a learner and the interlocutor (Dao & McDonough, 2018). Another dimension, emotional engagement, related to learners' affective responses, such as laughing or talking about their positive emotions while participating in tasks (Dao, 2019; and Glenn & Holt, 2013).

As tasks are primarily utilized to help learners acquire the target language by interacting with each other in the classroom (Dao, 2019), it is important to explore how learners are engaged with their dyads to perform the task. However, research on learners' task engagement remains limited attention in Indonesian context, where English is taught as foreign language. The studies tend to focus on whole-class engagement rather than on task engagement (see Azizah et al., 2024; Fira et al., 2023; Firdaus, 2015; Kristiana et al., 2023; Lotulung, 2022; Satoto & Subekti, 2023; and Yuyun, 2023). A challenge when grouping learners to perform a task is that teachers often observe that not all learners contribute equally. However, this observation often remains a cliché among English teachers in Indonesia, without fully understanding the underlying reasons.

Despite the growing popularity in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), much of the research has focused on how task design affects language processing, such as

improvements in grammar accuracy, sentence complexity, and vocabulary use, while the attention for task roles—such as those involving learner-generated content—in enhancing learners' engagement should not be overlooked (Lambert et al., 2016). As learners become more engaged, they tend to invest more effort into task completion, which enhances their language acquisition and retention.

Following the arguments as aforementioned, the current research aims to explore (1) EFL learners' task engagement in a learner-generated content task; and (2) their perceptions of the task. The study addresses the following research questions:

1.  How are EFL (English as Foreign Language) learners engaged in a learner-generated content task?
2.  What are learners' perceptions about a learner-generated content task?

## 2. METHOD

The participants in this study were 2 dyads or 4 Indonesian undergraduate learners (2 females and 2 males) who were classmates in a class of Intensive English Course at a public university in Surabaya. The volunteers were recruited from Islamic Family Law major. Their ages ranged from 19 to 21 years old. None of the participants traveled abroad or studied in English-speaking countries, and they reported that they had studied English at formal school for between 12 and 15 years.

This study used a within-group design to explore how EFL learners were engaged with their partners in a learner-generated task performance. The dependent variable in this study was learners' engagement in a task which was measured through three dimensions: cognitive, social, and emotional engagements. The independent variable was the learner-generated content task.

As learners become more engaged in learner-generated content task (Lambert et al., 2016; Philp et al., 2014), the task resulted rich data to be analyzed. A learner-generated content task involves an activity that requires learners to create authentic content based on their own imagination. For example, Lambert et al. (2016) provided learners with four blank picture frames and instructed them to recall an interesting or humorous story about a real-life problem they had encountered, one they thought their partner would find engaging. In a variation of learner-generated content tasks, half-controlled content tasks, learners are provided with picture prompts and must creatively imagine a story that connects these images (Phan & Dao, 2023).

In this study, each dyad received a sequence of three pre-existing pictures as prompts, along with three blank picture frames. The task portrayed a sequence of events involving a chase by a mysterious figure. Learners were instructed to create a story using all the prompts and to invent potential events for the blank frames. The materials originated adapted from a composition exercise by Heaton (1975), and none of the learners previously knew the materials.

Before starting data collection, the project was introduced to the learners, and a question-and-answer session was held to address any questions they had (10 minutes). On the day of data collection, learners were asked to form pairs with a classmate they were most familiar with (1 minute). This approach aimed to reduce the potential impact of unfamiliarity with their partners (Phan & Dao, 2023). In the first group, both learners

were female (Poppy and Pippa), while in the second group, both were male (Jay and Gatsby). These names are pseudonyms.

Each dyad worked at stations that had been prepared in advance. The stations were strategically space to control noise. Each station was equipped with two background questionnaires, two post-task exit questionnaires, a set of double folios for writing, and a printed learner-generated content task. Before starting the task, each learner completed a background questionnaire (3 minutes), listened to an explanation of the task (5 minutes), and activated the audio recorder on their mobile phones. Once the researcher started the timer, learners began working on the task, which lasted for 15 minutes. At the end of the task, they were asked to respond to the following question on a post-task exit questionnaire (5 minutes): Overall, what do you think about the task that you just did with your partner? At the end of the task, they were asked to self-rate their enjoyment level on a 10-point Likert scale by responding the following item: How much have you enjoyed the task that you just did with your partner? They should also respond to the following question on a post-task exit questionnaire (5 minutes): Overall, what do you think about the task that you just did with your partner?

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The participants also followed follow-up interviews to clarify any unclear utterances and ambiguous statements. The whole transcripts were read, highlighted, and labelled based on indicators of cognitive, social, and emotional engagements.

To determine whether the learners were cognitively engaged, the cognitive domain was firstly assessed through idea units. An idea unit is defined as an idea or a piece of information related to the topic being discussed (Dao, 2019).

Excerpt 1 illustrates an idea unit taken from the first group. In line 1, Poppy gave one instance of idea unit that *the thief got closer*, *he* (the boy that was followed by the thief) *realized.* Her information in line 3 (*he realized*) was not counted as an idea unit as it was a repetition of her information from line 1.

**Example 1.** Cognitive Engagement: Idea Unit
  1.  Poppy          :  The thief got closer, he realized.
  2.  Pippa          :  Yes.
  3.  Poppy          :  He realized, then?

Capturing learners' cognitive engagement can also be from LREs (Language-Related Episodes). LREs are talk episodes where learners reflect on the language they are using, inquire about their language choices, or make corrections to their own or others' language (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). A study by Dao & McDonough (2017) explored LREs through four categories: lexical, grammatical, mechanical, and phonological. Lexical LREs refer to episodes where learners engage in discussions about the meanings of words or debate the appropriateness of specific words in a particular context. Grammatical LREs are defined as episodes where learners correct their own grammar, correct their partners' grammar, or discuss a grammatical aspect (including prepositions). Mechanical LREs are episodes in which learners had concerns

about punctuation or spelling during the writing task performance. Finally, phonological LREs are episodes that illustrate a condition when learners had concerns about pronouncing specific words.

Excerpt 2 shows a lexical LRE where learners discussed the lexical item *thief*. Pippa asked about the English word of *pencuri* (line 1) and stuttered while mentioning the word *swip*. Poppy attempted to infer that what her partner wanted to say was *swiper* (line 2). In line 3, Pippa repeated the word *swiper*, confirming that was the word she intended to use. However, she then expressed doubt about whether *swiper?* was the correct English translation for *pencuri*. Poppy, tried to clarify the term suggested by her partner and ask *what is that? Is that a thief?* (line 4). Pippa repeated the word *thief* (line 5) and sought Poppy's agreement. Poppy confidently responded with *yes*. As Pippa and Poppy were involved in the lexical LREs, it was counted that each learner had one instance of lexical LRE.

**Example 2**. Cognitive Engagement: Lexical Language-Related Episodes (LREs)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Pippa | : | Eh, what is the meaning of *pencuri* [Indonesian translation]? Swip swap swip |
| 2. | Poppy | : | Swiper. |
| 3. | Pippa | : | Swiper. Swiper? |
| 4. | Poppy | : | What is that? Is that a thief? |
| 5. | Pippa | : | Thief. Is that ok? |
| 6. | Poppy | : | Yes. |

In the following excerpt, the learners of the second group were engaged in a grammatical LRE to discuss the past tense of the verb *wake up*. Jay initially noted that *wake up* is a simple form verb, but he did not know its past tense, expressing uncertainty with the sound *rrrrtttttt* (line 1). In line 3, he observed that he and his partner had not clarified the past tense of *wake up*. Gatsby then laughed at Jay's confusion and provided the correct form, *woke* (line 4). Jay quickly agreed, saying, "*That's it! Woke*" (line 5). Gatsby ultimately revised the statement in the initial line, *finally he rrrrtttttt*, by expressing *finally he woke* in line 6. Jay noticed that the verb was missing *up*, so he added it. Gatsby repeated the particle in line 8 to confirm his agreement. Both learners received a point for this grammatical LRE, as they both contributed to the discussion.

**Example 3.** Cognitive Engagement: Grammatical Language-Related Episodes (LREs)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Jay | : | Wake wake up. That is … That is the verb one, what is the verb two? Finally he rrrrtttttt and that was a dream. Perfect. |
| 2. | Gatsby | : | Alright. |
| 3. | Jay | : | The problem is the verb two of wake up. Finally he wake up. Finally he … So? |
| 4. | Gatsby | : | [*laughing*] Woke |
| 5. | Jay | : | That's it! Woke. |
| 6. | Gatsby | : | Finally he woke. |

| 7. | Jay | : | Up. |
|----|-----|---|-----|
| 8. | Gatsby | : | Up. |

Excerpt 4 illustrates a situation in which only one learner was engaged in a mechanical LRE. In line 1, Jay was seen speaking to himself while writing a story. At one point, Gatsby reminded him to insert a *comma* after the adverbial clause *when he sending some package.* Unfortunately, Jay did not respond and continued writing another clause, *he followed.* In this case, only Gatsby who demonstrated an instance of mechanical LRE.

**Example 4.** Cognitive Engagement: Mechanical Language-Related Episodes (LREs)

| 1. | Jay | : | *Pa-ka-ges* [*spelled the syllables and pronounced them based on Indonesian alphabet pronunciation*]. Then … when he sending some packages, he followed by mysterious man. When he … sending … some … package *pakage* [*Indonesian pronunciation*]… |
|----|-----|---|-----|
| 2. | Gatsby | : | Comma |
| 3. | Jay | : | He followed |

In excerpt 5, learners discussed the correct pronunciation of the word *near.* Initially, Poppy mispronounced the word. Pippa then repeated it with correct English pronunciation, though she was uncertain and used a questioning intonation. Poppy simply responded *uh um.* Pippa repeated the word in line 4 but with wrong pronunciation; she used an Indonesian-alphabet-based pronunciation to confirm a mutual word reference with her partner. To avoid any misunderstanding, Poppy clarified by translating the word to Indonesian *dekat.* Finally, in line 6, Pippa confirmed that *near* was indeed the word under discussion, pronouncing it once more according to the Indonesian alphabet. Excerpt 5 shows how two learners engaged with each other to produce a single instance of phonological language-related episode (LRE), with each learner receiving one point for their contribution to this LRE.

**Example 5.** Cognitive Engagement: Phonological Language-Related Episodes (LREs)

| 1. | Poppy | : | The police were near [*wrong pronunciation*] |
|----|-------|---|-----|
| 2. | Pippa | : | Near? [*correct pronunciation*] |
| 3. | Poppy | : | Uh um. |
| 4. | Pippa | : | Near [*wrong pronunciation: near*] |
| 5. | Poppy | : | *Dekat. Dekat.* [*Indonesian translation*] |
| 6. | Pippa | : | Is that near [*wrong pronunciation*], isn't it? Near? [*wrong pronunciation*] |

The second dimension, social engagement, can be identified through learners' actions, such as requesting or providing help to their partners (task management assistance) or showing responsiveness toward their dyads' ideas (Storch, 2001). An instance of responsiveness is a talk episode as it is demonstrated through repeating or

expanding their partners' ideas (Dao, 2019). Responsiveness is different from idea units; idea units are related to the number of learner contributions in showing content or ideas, while responsiveness is a degree of mutuality (Dao & McDonough, 2018). Mutuality is learners' contribution to achieving a particular consensus (Storch, 2002). In short, there are two indicators in assessing social engagement in this research: task management and responsiveness including repeating and expanding ideas.

Excerpt 6 shows an episode of requesting help. Poppy asked for her partner's assistance to *write* out the story on a double folio paper. It was counted as one instance of requesting task management assistance for Poppy.

**Example 6.** Social Engagement: Requesting task management assistance
1. Poppy     : Pip. Please write. Could you please write?
2. Pippa     : Where?
3. Poppy     : On that paper.

Excerpt 7 illustrates one instance of a learner's (Poppy) social engagement, idea repetition, with her partner (Pippa). After Poppy state her idea *chasing with the thief to home*, Pippa showed agreement *yes* before repeating the word *chasing.*

The last dimension, social engagement, can be identified through their actions, such as requesting or providing help or showing responsiveness toward their partners' ideas (Storch, 2001). Example 7 shows an instance of requesting help.

**Example 7.** Social Engagement: Responsiveness through repeating an idea
1. Poppy     : Chasing with the thief to home.
2. Pippa     : Yes. Chasing. Then … [long pause]

The example below also indicated responsiveness as an indicator of social engagement. After Jay gave his idea, finally he realized, he asked how. Then, Gatsby developed Jay's idea that the man realized a mysterious person where the mysterious one is a thief. Therefore, one instance of expanding an idea was counted for him.

**Example 8.** Social Engagement: Responsiveness through expanding an idea
1. Gatsby     : Then the third is
2. Jay     : Finally he realized. How? Eee …. [long pause]
3. Gatsby     : A mysterious person. The mysterious one, is a thief. Thief.

The final dimension examined in this study was emotional engagement, with a focus on enjoyment. This positive emotion could be manifested through learners' laugh (Dao & McDonough, 2018). In this study, enjoyment was assessed by observing the frequency of laugh.

Jay mentioned that *he was already scared* (line 1) in Excerpt 9. Gatsby then expanded his partner's idea. After he mentioned the word *dreamed*, he laughed. It indicated that his argument was funny and imaginative. Excerpt 9 was coded that only Gatsby who had one instance of task enjoyment.

**Example 9.** Emotional Engagement: Laugh

1. Jay : He was already scared.
2. Gatsby : This one ran as fast as possible. Then calling police. In fact the sixth was he only dreamed [*laughing*]

## 3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

To investigate how learners are engaged during writing task performance, instances of idea units, LREs, laughter, requesting task management assistance, and responsiveness were identified. Table 1 shows frequency counts of instances during writing task performance.

**Table 1.** Learners' engagement during a learner-generated content task

| Indicators of cognitive, social, and emotional engagements | N |
|---|---|
| *Cognitive Engagement:* | 79 |
| Idea Units | 26 |
| Lexical LREs | 29 |
| Grammatical LREs | 15 |
| Mechanical LREs | 7 |
| Phonological LREs | 2 |
| *Social Engagement:* | 25 |
| Requesting for task management assistance | 6 |
| Responsiveness through repeating an idea | 6 |
| Responsiveness through completing or expanding an idea | 13 |
| Emotional Engagement: | 10 |
| Laugh | 10 |

As shown in Table 1, the data showed that the learners demonstrated greater cognitive engagement compared to social and emotional engagements. The frequency of learners to be engaged cognitively was the highest (79). The second highest engagement demonstrated by the learners was social engagement (47). Emotional engagement had the smallest number (10), indicating learners did not too much engaged emotionally.

Although the frequency instances of the learners during interaction shows a small number, Table 2 shows that learner reported their high enjoyment level based on a 10-point Likert scale, with a mean score of 8.5. The enjoyment scores ranged from a minimum of 7 to a maximum of 10, indicating that, despite lower emotional engagement instances, learners generally experienced high levels of enjoyment during the task.

**Table 2.** Learners' self-rated enjoyment levels

|  | Enjoyment |
|---|---|
| Mean | 8.5 |
| Min | 7 |
| Max | 10 |

Using the content analysis approach, learners' perceptions about the task from exit questionnaires were analyzed. The results showed that they had a positive perception of the task given. It also became a positive indicator of their emotional engagement. Comment 1 illustrates why the student enjoyed the task.

*"In my opinion, this assignment is very interesting as it allows us to express our unique ideas and develop a storyline that aligns with our perspectives."*
[Comment 1, Group 2, Gatsby]

Gatsby found that *the assignment was very interesting.* He also appreciated it as it allowed him to *express unique ideas* and *develop a storyline.* This comment suggests that a learner-generated content task is engaging and enjoyable, providing the student with creative freedom and an opportunity for self-expression.

The following response from the exit questionnaires regarding the assigned work also indicates that the students are cognitively engaged.

*"This task is highly challenging and requires intense focus, as a lack of concentration results in a disjointed narrative between the images."*
[Comment 2, Group 1, Poppy]

Poppy mentioned that the task *is highly challenging and requires intense focus*. The comment suggests a higher level of mental effort.

The first purpose of this research was to investigate how learners are engaged with their partners during learners-generated task content. The results indicated that they displayed a greater frequency of cognitive and social engagement instances. However, a previous study revealed that learner-generated content tasks facilitate students to be more engaged emotionally and socially (Lambert & Zhang, 2019). The learner-generated content task may require more mental effort, as shown in Comment 2. Therefore, the students produced more idea units (Table 1), which is the biggest contributor to indicating cognitive engagement.

The result also indicated that the frequency count of emotional engagement instances when the students interacted with their partners showed a small number. However, their self-ratings based on a 10-point Likert scale questionnaire for their enjoyment level were significantly higher. The data is in line with the findings from the previous study. While the students reported significantly higher emotional engagement on the 10-point Likert Scale questionnaires, they did not exhibit more positive emotion when interacting with their partner; one possible explanation for this difference is that students may choose to conceal their actual emotions from their partners to prevent potential conflicts, but they are free to express a range of emotions on the questionnaire because they are aware that their answers are confidential (Dao & McDonough, 2018).

Another discovery was that students might come up with original, intriguing ideas for stories using a learner-generated content task (see comment 2). The response emphasizes how the assignment promotes students' autonomy and creativity (Wu & Albert, 2022).

Despite offering insight into learners' cognitive, social, and emotional involvement throughout a learner-generated content task, the current study has certain limitations. In terms of methodology, the study tracked the transcription of audio recordings in order to identify students' laughter as an indicator of emotional engagement. This method excluded any potential negative emotions; therefore, video-recording transcription might be necessary to identify more learners' emotions through posture and facial expressions (Dao & McDonough, 2018). A 10-point Likert scale questionnaire was also included in the study as a triangulation of data to gauge emotional engagement. Subsequent research endeavors may necessitate supplementary measures, including conducting interviews to acquire a more comprehensive grasp of the reasons behind participants' satisfaction ratings at different levels. In addition, comparable research with a larger sample size and a range of educational backgrounds may be carried out in subsequent studies to assess the generalizability of the results.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The result of the current study found that the learner-generated content task affected more on learners' cognitive and social engagements. Additionally, the finding provides evidence that learners have positive perceptions towards the learner-generated content task.

Due to the limitation found in this study, future studies may take consideration from the following suggestions. As emotions fluctuate over time (Aubrey, 2022; and Izard, 2009), a relatively new method, idiodynamic, could be adapted to capture moment-by-moment real-time fluctuations that are likely to occur each second. Therefore, the method not only helps reduce retrospective bias but also enables a more dynamic and precise understanding of emotional changes. In addition, the method could provide an authentic view of learners' emotions, as they will participate in interviews to explain the trends in their emotions based on the graphs generated by the Anion Variable Tester V2 while rating their self-reported emotions. In other words, the method offers a more accurate and personal account of learners' emotional engagement.

Subsequent research endeavors may necessitate supplementary measures, including conducting interviews to acquire a more comprehensive grasp of the reasons behind participants' satisfaction ratings at different levels after they report their enjoyment level on a 10-point Likert scale.

In short, a multifaceted perspective method in assessing emotional engagement that involves different methods of data collection will help gain a more comprehensive understanding of learners' emotional experiences. In this context, integrating idiodynamic methodology and self-report questionnaires with follow-up interview offers a richer and more nuanced view of emotional engagement.

Additionally, comparable research with a larger sample size and a range of educational backgrounds may be carried out in subsequent studies to assess the generalizability of the results.

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