

Exploring EFL Students' Social Engagement across Task-based Reading Activities

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ABSTRACT: *The study aims to examine how students' social engagement develops across a sequence of task-based reading activities and to explore the indicators through which this engagement is expressed during classroom interaction. The five-week study involved 66 second-year English-major students at a Vietnamese university who participated in five collaborative reading tasks. Data collected from questionnaires administered after each task and follow-up interviews with ten selected students were analysed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The questionnaire results show that students' social engagement gradually increased across the task sequence and became relatively stable in the later tasks. The interview findings further indicate that students' engagement was manifested through different forms of collaboration, including helping peers solve task difficulties, sharing and discussing ideas about the reading texts, and providing encouragement during group work. These findings may offer insight into social engagement in EFL reading by showing both how it develops across task-based reading activities and how it is expressed through practical support, shared textual understanding, and emotional encouragement. The study also suggests that task design may shape opportunities for social engagement when reading activities require peer explanation, textual justification, and mutual support.*

KEYWORDS: Social engagement; task-based language teaching; reading; peer interaction.

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1. Introduction

In language classrooms, learning occurs through interaction and collaboration because students often exchange ideas, discuss interpretations, and support each other while completing learning tasks. These interactions highlight the importance of social engagement, which refers to learners' participation in interaction and collaboration with others during learning activities (Svalberg, 2009). Research has shown that the social dimension of engagement plays a key role in facilitating overall engagement in learning. When learners are socially engaged, they tend to activate cognitive resources, remain behaviourally involved, and connect affectively with the learning process (Svalberg, 2009). Social engagement is also closely linked to affective engagement, particularly in contexts where peer interaction and social affiliation support participation (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Studies further suggest that language learning

can become more effective when learners interact and collaborate with peers in meaningful ways (Moranski & Toth, 2016; Sato & Ballinger, 2012; Toth *et al.*, 2013).

Despite its importance, social engagement remains relatively underexplored in engagement research (Bergdahl & Hietajärvi, 2022; Hiver *et al.*, 2021). In many engagement models, interaction with peers is often treated as an indicator of behavioural engagement rather than a distinct dimension (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Henrie *et al.*, 2015; Schindler *et al.*, 2017). However, scholars argue that the social dimension should be examined independently in language learning contexts because language learning is inherently relational and interaction-based (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Svalberg, 2009). Moreover, recent work also highlights the dynamic nature of learner engagement in classroom tasks. Engagement may fluctuate during task performance and across repeated task

experiences, suggesting the need for studies that examine engagement across tasks and over time (Zare & Derakhshan, 2024). At the same time, most task engagement research has focused on productive language tasks such as speaking or writing, while engagement in reading contexts remains less understood (Hiver *et al.*, 2025). These gaps indicate the need for further research exploring how learners engage socially during collaborative reading tasks.

Therefore, the present study investigates EFL students' social engagement during task-based reading lessons at a Vietnamese university. Specifically, the study attempts to examine how students' social engagement develops across a sequence of reading tasks and to identify the indicators through which such engagement is expressed in classroom interaction. By focusing on social engagement in reading contexts, this study contributes to a better understanding of learner engagement in task-based language learning and offers practical insights for designing collaborative reading activities in EFL classrooms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Engagement in Language Learning

Social engagement has increasingly attracted attention in studies of learner engagement in educational settings. As a distinct dimension of engagement, social engagement generally refers to learners' interaction with others and their active participation in collaborative learning activities. Svalberg (2009) highlights the importance of social engagement in foreign language learning and defines it as learners' interaction and active involvement in the learning process. Similarly, Bonvin and Sanchez (2017) describe social engagement as the level of interaction and connectedness students develop with their peers and teachers. This dimension emphasizes learners' willingness to participate in communication and maintain relationships during classroom activities (Lambert, Philp, & Nakamura, 2017).

Although social engagement is often discussed alongside other dimensions of engagement, it needs to be clearly distinguished

from behavioural and affective engagement to ensure conceptual clarity. Behavioural engagement typically refers to individual participation in learning activities, such as effort, attention, and task completion (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004). Affective engagement, similarly, reflects learners' individual emotional responses, including interest, enjoyment, or boredom during learning (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). In contrast, social engagement is inherently interactional and relational. It is expressed through learners' mutual involvement with others, including sharing ideas, responding to peers, and providing support during task performance (Lambert *et al.*, 2017; Svalberg, 2009). While behavioural and affective engagement can occur at the individual level, social engagement emerges through interaction and co-participation with peers. For this reason, treating peer interaction merely as an indicator of behavioural engagement may overlook its relational nature.

Social engagement is also shaped by relational practices and social norms within classroom environments. These include cooperation, listening to others, maintaining respectful relationships with peers and instructors, and participating responsibly in learning activities (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012; Wentzel, 2012). In language learning contexts, such interaction is particularly important because learning often occurs through collaboration and shared meaning-making. Within reading classrooms, social engagement may be reflected in learners' exchanges of interpretations of texts and their discussions of ideas related to reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Lutz *et al.*, 2006).

In task-based language learning, classroom tasks often require learners to interact, exchange ideas, and collaboratively complete activities, creating opportunities for social engagement to emerge during task performance (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007). In reading lessons, such interaction may involve discussing interpretations of texts, negotiating meaning, and supporting peers in completing comprehension tasks. Drawing on these perspectives, the present study conceptualizes social engagement as the extent to which students collaborate and interact

with peers during classroom reading tasks.

Although task-based language learning provides opportunities for interaction, these opportunities have been more frequently examined in speaking tasks (e.g., Aubrey *et al.*, 2020; Dao & Sato, 2021; Mystkowska-Wiertelak *et al.*, 2025) or writing tasks (e.g., Aubrey, 2022; Chen *et al.*, 2023; Hiromori, 2021; Zhang, 2021) than in reading tasks. This gap may be partly related to the way reading is commonly positioned in EFL classrooms as an individual and comprehension-oriented skill, with lessons organized around vocabulary preparation, comprehension questions, strategy practice, and teacher-led answer checking rather than meaningful exchange or personal meaning-making (Goodmacher & Kajiura, 2010; Nguyen & Dang, 2022). Such a view, however, may overlook the interactional potential of reading when learners are asked to work together around texts. Research on collaborative reading shows that small-group reading activities can create opportunities for peer interaction, shared interpretation, and collaborative construction of textual meaning (Jin *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, examining social engagement in task-based reading activities can show how students construct textual meaning not only individually but also through interaction with peers.

2.2 Measurement of Social Engagement

Previous research has identified several observable components through which social engagement can be examined in classroom interaction. In general, social engagement is reflected in learners' initiation and maintenance of interaction with others (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Svalberg, 2009), collaboration in completing tasks (Waters & Gasson, 2006), and supportive behaviors toward peers (Kearney & Ahn, 2014). Other commonly discussed indicators include reciprocity in interaction (Lambert *et al.*, 2017; Hunsu *et al.*, 2018; Torche & Valenzuela, 2011), mutuality in collaborative work (Dao *et al.*, 2021; Storch, 2008), and responsiveness to peers' ideas and opinions (Dao *et al.*, 2021). As Philp and Duchesne (2016, p. 10) note, socially engaged learners tend to "listen to one another, draw from

one another's expertise and ideas, and provide feedback to one another."

To examine these behaviors, researchers have used both observational and self-report measures. Observational approaches often focus on interactional indicators such as backchannels, reciprocity, and the distribution of turns during peer interaction (e.g., Dao *et al.*, 2021; Lambert, Philp, & Nakamura, 2017; Lambert & Zhang, 2019; Phung, 2017; Phung *et al.*, 2020). However, some scholars argue that self-report measures, such as surveys or questionnaires, can provide a broader perspective on learners' engagement. Smith *et al.* (2018) found that self-reported data captured a wider range of engagement behaviors that were not always observable in classroom interaction. Nevertheless, both approaches have limitations. Observable behaviors such as turn distribution or backchanneling may not always reflect genuine engagement, as students may display these behaviors without actively contributing to meaning construction. Consequently, questionnaire instruments have been widely used to measure social engagement in educational research (e.g., Bantawtook, 2021; Dao *et al.*, 2021; Hunsu *et al.*, 2018; Kołsut & Szumilas, 2023). Although previous studies have identified several indicators of social engagement, these elements are often examined separately or within broader engagement frameworks. As a result, less attention has been paid to how these indicators collectively reflect students' social engagement during specific classroom tasks. Therefore, the present study investigates how EFL students demonstrate social engagement during task-based reading activities and identifies the indicators through which such engagement is expressed in peer interaction.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, in which quantitative data were collected and analysed first, followed by qualitative interviews to explain and interpret the quantitative patterns (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This design was suitable because it captures both the developmental trend of social

engagement across tasks and the qualitative indicators of how such engagement was enacted in classroom interaction.

3.2. Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at a public university in central Vietnam, within a compulsory Reading–Writing 1 module of the English Language Teacher Education program. The course adopted Skillful Level 3 Reading and Writing (Rogers & Zemach, 2018) as its core textbook. Instruction followed a blended structure in which students completed preparatory activities on the university’s LMS before class, while classroom time was devoted to discussion-based activities and collaborative reading tasks. Sixty-six second-year pre-service teachers from two classes participated in the study. They were aged between 19 and 21 and had received approximately ten years of formal English education. Although many students shared similar regional and educational backgrounds, noticeable differences emerged in their confidence, interactional preferences, and willingness to contribute during group work. Both classes were instructed by the same lecturer, which helped maintain consistency in teaching approach and classroom environment. Students’ participation in this study was voluntary, informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the study, and all collected data were reported anonymously.

3.3 Task Design and Implementation

Five task-based reading activities were implemented across five consecutive weeks. In this study, task-based reading activities refer to pedagogic reading activities informed by task-based principles rather than communicative tasks in the narrowest sense. Although the activities involved text comprehension, vocabulary support, and reading-strategy work, they were designed to move beyond isolated comprehension exercises by requiring students to use textual information for peer interaction, interpretation, justification, and shared outcomes. The five activities included jigsaw reading, role-play discussion, students-as-question-master, prediction-based reading, and

sequencing/timeline construction. In the jigsaw reading activity, students read different sections of a text and exchanged summaries to reconstruct the main information collaboratively. In the role-play discussion activity, students used textual information to defend assigned viewpoints and report group responses. In the students-as-question-master activity, students generated questions for peers, discussed possible answers, and explained textual evidence. In the prediction-based reading activity, students predicted answers before reading, checked their predictions against the text, and justified their reasoning with peers. In the timeline construction activity, students identified key information and collaboratively produced a timeline summarizing major events. Across the five task-based activities, students were expected to work with textual information collaboratively rather than complete reading exercises individually, thereby creating repeated opportunities for peer interaction and social engagement.

The activities were organized following Ellis’s (2003) three-phase framework of pre-task, during-task, and post-task. In the pre-task phase, the teacher introduced the topic, clarified the activity goal, and provided useful language support. During the task phase, students worked collaboratively in small groups, prepared responses or products, and reported outcomes to the class. In the post-task phase, students reviewed the task outcome and focused on useful language emerging from task performance. This design provided a consistent structure across the five lessons and repeated opportunities for peer interaction, collaboration, and social engagement.

3.4. Instruments and Data Collection

In this study, two instruments were used to collect the data. To measure students’ perceived social engagement during task performance, a questionnaire was administered after each of the five reading tasks. The questionnaire consisted of four items adapted from Dao *et al.* (2021), targeting key dimensions of social engagement such as collaboration, responsiveness, and mutual support. While the original instrument encompasses a broader set of items designed to

capture reciprocal interaction between students and their partners, only four items were selected and adapted for the present study to better reflect students' own interactional behaviors during collaborative reading tasks, including listening to peers' ideas, sharing ideas, seeking help, and providing support. This adaptation was deliberately made to align with the study's focus on students' self-reported engagement rather than reciprocal interaction between partners. Moreover, reducing the number of items also helped minimize redundancy and allowed students to respond more efficiently after each task within the repeated-measures design. Students recorded their responses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was developed in accordance with established survey design procedures, including piloting and refinement to ensure clarity and relevance (Artino *et al.*, 2014; Cohen *et al.*, 2018; Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). The internal consistency of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each of the five administrations. As shown in Table 1, all values exceeded the widely accepted threshold of .70, indicating satisfactory and reliable internal consistency of the instrument across tasks. To provide additional evidence for the internal structure of the scale, corrected item-total correlations were also examined. Across the five administrations, the corrected item-total correlations ranged from .315 to .737, suggesting that each item contributed adequately to the overall social engagement scale.

Moreover, semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten students from the participant group. These students were purposefully selected based on their responses to the initial questionnaire to represent different levels of social engagement (high, medium, and low). The same group of participants was retained across all five tasks to allow for consistent tracking of their interactional experiences over time. This

sampling strategy aimed to capture diverse perspectives while maintaining continuity in the qualitative data. The interviews were conducted after each task and carried out either face-to-face or via Microsoft Teams, depending on students' availability and schedules. This flexible arrangement helped ensure participants' convenience and sustained participation throughout the study. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to allow participants to express their ideas more comfortably. Each interview lasted about 15–20 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. The recordings were later transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, focusing on mean social engagement scores across the five tasks, and repeated-measures analysis was used to examine differences across tasks. The interview data were analysed through thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with repeated readings of the interview transcripts, allowing the researcher to become deeply familiar with the data before any formal coding took place. Initial codes were then generated to capture the range of interactional behaviors students demonstrated during the reading tasks including asking for help, explaining ideas, negotiating meaning, and encouraging peers. These initial codes were subsequently examined and grouped into broader categories based on shared functions and purposes. Through this interpretive process, three overarching themes of social engagement gradually emerged: functional collaboration, cognitive collaboration, and affective collaboration. To further enrich the analysis, the frequency of each code was calculated across the five reading tasks, offering a clearer picture of how patterns of social engagement

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients for Social Engagement across Five Tasks

Dimension	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4	Task 5
Social engagement	0.825	0.722	0.75	0.818	0.712

developed and shifted over time. The coding process involved two coders, who used the same coding scheme and then compared their coding decisions. Disagreements were discussed and resolved through consensus, and the coding scheme was refined where necessary. In addition, an audit trail was maintained, including code definitions, example excerpts, coding decisions, and theme revisions. Member checking was conducted with selected participants to confirm whether summaries of their task-related interview responses reflected their intended meanings. Finally, interview findings were compared with questionnaire results across the four social engagement items to explain how social engagement developed and how it was manifested in reading-task interaction.

4. Results

4.1 Development of Students' Social Engagement across Reading Tasks

This section reports the findings addressing the first research question of how students' social engagement developed over time across the five reading tasks. The table below reports the mean scores of students' social engagement items across the five reading tasks, together with overall item mean and overall task mean scores.

From the table above, the item-level results show that students' social engagement was consistently high across the five reading tasks,

with several behaviors becoming more frequent over time. Among the four items, sharing ideas with peers (Item 4.2) recorded the highest overall mean ($M = 4.54$). This suggests that exchanging ideas was a central and stable feature of students' social engagement throughout the reading tasks. Similarly, listening carefully to classmates' ideas (Item 4.1) remained consistently high across all tasks (overall $M = 4.20$), increasing slightly from Task 1 ($M = 4.00$) to Task 5 ($M = 4.32$). This pattern indicates that students generally showed attentiveness to their peers' contributions during group interaction. In contrast, asking classmates for help (Item 4.3) began at a relatively lower level ($M = 3.44$) but showed the most noticeable growth across tasks, rising steadily to 4.14 by Task 5 and producing an overall mean of 3.85. This trend suggests that students gradually became more comfortable seeking assistance from peers when they gained experience with collaborative tasks. A similar upward pattern was observed for helping other students during the task (Item 4.4), which increased from Task 1 ($M = 3.88$) to Task 5 ($M = 4.32$), resulting in a high overall mean of 4.19. This finding indicates that peer support became more common as students progressed through the reading tasks and developed stronger cooperative relationships in the classroom.

At the task level, overall social engagement rose steadily from Task 1 ($M = 3.91$) to Task 3 ($M = 4.23$), peaked at Task 4 ($M = 4.37$) and

Table 2. Mean Scores of Students' Social Engagement Items across Five Reading Tasks ($N = 66$)

Code	Item statement	T1 M (SD)	T2 M (SD)	T3 M (SD)	T4 M (SD)	T5 M (SD)	Overall item mean
4.1	I listened carefully to other students' ideas	4.00 (0.80)	4.20 (0.86)	4.18 (0.74)	4.29 (0.80)	4.32 (0.68)	4.20
4.2	I shared ideas with other students	4.30 (0.68)	4.52 (0.64)	4.59 (0.63)	4.67 (0.54)	4.61 (0.58)	4.54
4.3	I asked other students for help	3.44 (0.96)	3.65 (0.97)	3.86 (0.86)	4.17 (0.74)	4.14 (0.88)	3.85
4.4	I helped other students to complete the task	3.88 (0.76)	4.12 (0.83)	4.27 (0.76)	4.36 (0.69)	4.32 (0.68)	4.19
	Overall task mean	3.91	4.12	4.23	4.37	4.34	

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

Table 3. Mauchly's Test of Sphericity for Social Engagement

Within Subjects Effect	Mauchly's W	Approx. Chi-Square	df	Sig.	Epsilon _b		
					Greenhouse - Geisser	Huynh-Feldt	Lower-bound
Tasks	.633	29.87	9	< .001	.805	.851	.250

Table 4. Repeated Measures ANOVA Results for Social Engagement across Five Reading Tasks (Greenhouse–Geisser corrected)

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Reading Tasks - Greenhouse - Geisser	9.78	3.22	3.037	10.78	< .001	.139
Error(Task)	60.78	215.82	.282			

then remained stable in Task 5 (M = 4.34). This pattern shows a clear increase during the early and middle tasks, followed by a slight levelling off at the end. The findings indicate that students sustained high social engagement throughout the study, with peer interaction and support strengthening as the tasks progressed.

A repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted to examine changes in students' social engagement across five reading tasks. As reported in Table 3, the Mauchly's Test of Sphericity was violated, $W = .633$, $\chi^2(9) = 29.87$, $p < .001$, so Greenhouse–Geisser correction was applied in the subsequent analysis.

As summarized in the above table, a repeated-measures ANOVA with Greenhouse–Geisser correction showed a significant effect of task on students' social engagement, $F(3.22, 215.82) = 10.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .139$. This indicates that students' social engagement differed across the five reading tasks, with a moderate to large effect size.

Post-hoc Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons revealed that social engagement in Task 1 was significantly lower than in Task 3, Task 4, and Task 5 (all $p < .001$). In addition, Task 2 showed significantly lower engagement than Task 4 ($p = .011$). No significant differences were found among Task 3, Task 4, and Task 5 (see Table 5).

In short, the descriptive analysis and statistical tests point to clear shifts in students' social engagement across the five tasks. Engagement was lower in the first two tasks, then rose and stayed steady from tasks 3 to 5. The corrected ANOVA confirmed that these differences were meaningful, showing a moderate effect of task on students' interaction. Pairwise results also highlighted a sharp jump in engagement after task 1, followed by a stable period in the later tasks.

4.2 Indicators of Students' Social Engagement in Reading Tasks

The qualitative findings showed that students'

Table 5. Significant Bonferroni-adjusted Pairwise Comparisons for Social Engagement between Reading Tasks

Comparison	Mean Difference (I–J)	Sig.
Task 1 - Task 3	-0.322	< .001
Task 1 - Task 4	-0.466	< .001
Task 1 - Task 5	-0.439	< .001
Task 2 - Task 4	-0.250	.011

social engagement was expressed through different forms of collaboration that appeared across all reading tasks. Three main indicators were identified: functional collaboration, where students supported one another to complete tasks; cognitive collaboration, involving shared responsibility and joint problem-solving; and affective collaboration, reflected in encouragement, trust, and confidence built through teamwork.

Functional Collaboration

One important way students demonstrated social engagement was through functional collaboration, where peers supported one another to complete reading tasks more effectively. These interactions often involved asking and answering questions, checking vocabulary, or verifying answers to ensure shared understanding. As one student described, *“When someone had a question, I would help answer it... we also discussed the results to reach a consensus.”* (Student 1, task 01). Similarly, several participants mentioned brief peer assistance as part of their routine interaction: *“I quietly asked my classmate... to explain it instead of asking Ms. Linh [the Teacher].”* (Student 8, task 01), *“We mostly talked about which examples... My partner asked... and we checked the text together.”* (Student 5, task 01). Such collaboration reflected a practical form of engagement where students relied on each other to clarify information and solve immediate problems. While task-focused and often brief, these moments of cooperation created an atmosphere of shared support, reducing dependence on the teacher and encouraging interaction among peers.

Cognitive Collaboration

Students also engaged socially through cognitive collaboration, working together to build shared understanding and complete collective goals. This type of interaction involved idea exchange, reasoning, and negotiation, as learners discussed interpretations, divided roles, and integrated one another’s contributions. One student recalled, *“My group worked well together... We divided the sections... I checked vocabulary meaning... We learned from each other’s explanations.”* (Student 4, task 01).

Others highlighted equal participation and coordination within group tasks: *“During group work, all students had to participate. There weren’t situations where one person did everything.”* (Student 9, task 02), *“That activity required everyone to discuss and come up with the most accurate and fastest response so the group could score.”* (Student 6, task 03). Cognitive collaboration was also evident when students debated and justified their reasoning, using text evidence to reach agreement: *“We debated which was more serious in Vietnam and used evidence from the reading to support our points.”* (Student 6, task 04). These examples show that social engagement was not limited to cooperation for task completion but extended to collective thinking and meaning-making, where peers contributed intellectually to one another’s understanding.

Affective Collaboration

In many interactions, students’ social engagement took on an **affective dimension**, where teamwork fostered emotional support, encouragement, and a sense of belonging. Working with familiar peers helped learners feel more relaxed and confident in expressing themselves. One student shared, *“We were allowed to choose our own groups with friends we already knew... so we had more fun working together.”* (Student 2, task 02). Peer encouragement and reassurance also motivated participation and persistence: *“When one of us didn’t understand something, others explained. That made me feel supported and more motivated.”* (Student 10, task 04), *“At the beginning I was still shy... But when we worked on the visual product—the timeline—I started to talk more.”* (Student 6, task 05). Some students even extended this support beyond their own group, assisting classmates and exchanging ideas across teams: *“After completing my assigned task, I asked others if they needed help, and we discussed and finalized the answers together. We also interacted with other groups to learn what they had done.”* (Student 8, task 05). These reflections highlight how social interaction provided not only academic assistance but also emotional reassurance. Through collaboration, students gained confidence, built friendships, and

developed a sense of community that made the reading lessons more enjoyable and engaging.

In sum, the findings show that students' social engagement was expressed through functional, cognitive, and affective forms of collaboration that intertwined throughout the reading sequence. Across all tasks, peer interaction played a central role in helping learners share ideas, clarify understanding, and support one another emotionally. Although these collaborative behaviors appeared from the beginning, interview data indicated that they became more frequent, confident, and interactive in later tasks. Students who were initially quiet or hesitant gradually took a more active part in discussion, negotiation, and mutual assistance. This growing sense of cooperation and social connection corresponds with the quantitative results, which showed a steady rise in mean scores for peer collaboration and responsiveness. Together, these findings suggest that task-based group work not only fostered cooperative learning but also strengthened students' confidence and sense of belonging in the classroom community.

5. Discussion

The quantitative findings suggest that students' social engagement in the present study generally increased across the five task-based reading activities and became more stable in the later tasks. This was shown in the overall upward trend across tasks and was further supported by the repeated-measures ANOVA, which indicated significant differences in social engagement across the sequence. At the item level, peer-support behaviors showed the clearest development, particularly students' willingness to ask classmates for help and to support others during task completion. This trajectory is consistent with research viewing engagement as dynamic and shaped by learners' classroom experiences over time (Alzahrani, 2023; Li *et al.*, 2024). One possible explanation is that, across the five-week sequence, students may have become more familiar with their peers and with the expectations of peer interaction, which made them more willing to treat classmates as accessible learning resources. This interpretation

aligns with Aubrey *et al.* (2020), who suggest that peer interaction can become more active and supportive when learners gain familiarity with collaborative practices. However, the pattern should not be explained only by growing peer familiarity. The five task-based reading activities also differed in their interactional demands, and the higher engagement in later tasks may have been partly shaped by task-specific features. For example, Task 3, the students-as-question-master activity, required learners to generate questions, respond to peers' answers, and discuss textual evidence, which may have made peer response and mutual support more necessary. Similarly, Task 5, the timeline construction activity, required students to organize textual information into a shared product, which may have encouraged negotiation, joint decision-making, and peer explanation. These features may have made interaction more purposeful and obvious during task completion. Therefore, the findings suggest that students' social engagement in reading appeared to be associated with both growing peer familiarity and the task features that supported peer interaction.

While the quantitative findings illustrate how social engagement developed across tasks, the interview data provide further insight into how such engagement was manifested during classroom interaction. The qualitative findings suggest that students' social engagement in reading was not merely reflected in visible participation in group work but was expressed through three interconnected forms of collaboration, namely functional, cognitive, and affective collaboration. Evidence from the interviews showed that students helped peers resolve textual difficulties, exchanged and justified interpretations, and created a more supportive atmosphere for participation. Firstly, functional collaboration was evident when students explained vocabulary, checked answers, or clarified textual information for peers, suggesting that classmates became immediate learning supporters during task completion. This practical support is consistent with research on peer scaffolding, where mutual assistance from peers, including more capable peers, can sustain learners' participation in

classroom tasks (Estaji & Shojakhanlou, 2023; Helou & Newsome, 2018; Yawiloeng, 2021). Moreover, cognitive collaboration appeared when students moved beyond answer sharing to justify responses with textual evidence and jointly construct understanding, particularly in activities requiring reasoning and peer response. This movement toward shared meaning-making reflects the socially mediated nature of engagement, as learning and engagement may emerge through interaction and collaborative mediation within specific classroom contexts (Dewi & Oktapiani, 2024). It also aligns with research showing that interactional tasks can support meaning negotiation and collective knowledge construction (Dao & Sato, 2021; Phan & Dao, 2023). In addition, affective collaboration was reflected in students' reports of feeling more comfortable and confident when interacting with classmates. Similar affective benefits of peer interaction have been reported in collaborative contexts, where peer encouragement strengthened students' confidence and enjoyment (Chen *et al.*, 2023; Jin *et al.*, 2022). These findings may support the view that social engagement is shaped through classroom interaction and peer relationships, rather than being solely an individual cognitive state (Baralt *et al.*, 2016; Hall, 2010). Building on this interpretation, the present study may offer insight into social engagement in EFL reading by showing that it was expressed through three interconnected forms: functional, cognitive, and affective collaboration. In terms of task design, this suggests that collaborative reading activities may better support social engagement when they create clear purposes for peer assistance, textual justification, and supportive interaction during task completion.

6. Conclusions

This study examined how EFL students' social engagement developed across a sequence of five task-based reading lessons and identified the indicators through which such engagement emerged during classroom interaction. The findings showed that students' social engagement gradually increased across the task

sequence, with higher levels of peer interaction and support observed in the later tasks. This pattern suggests that repeated exposure to collaborative reading tasks can help learners become more comfortable interacting with peers and participating in group work. Qualitative findings further revealed that students' social engagement was expressed through three main forms of collaboration: functional collaboration through mutual help, cognitive collaboration through shared meaning-making, and affective collaboration through encouragement and emotional support. These interactional patterns indicate that social engagement in reading tasks involves not only practical cooperation but also shared thinking and supportive peer relationships. The study highlights the dynamic nature of social engagement in task-based reading contexts. Moreover, the findings contribute to the growing body of longitudinal research on EFL engagement research by illustrating how social engagement develops progressively through reading tasks. The findings also suggest that well-designed collaborative tasks can promote peer interaction, strengthen students' confidence in group participation, and support a more socially interactive learning environment in EFL reading classrooms.

However, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the findings were based primarily on students' self-reported data, which may not fully capture their actual interactional behaviors during task performance. While self-report measures provide useful insights into learners' perceptions, they may be subject to potential bias. Second, although the four-item questionnaire was adapted from previous research, aligned with the study's operational definition, and showed satisfactory internal consistency, its brevity may have limited the extent to which the complexity of social engagement was captured. The absence of classroom observation or interactional data also limited the ability to examine how social engagement was enacted in real-time interaction. As a result, the findings mainly reflect perceived rather than observed engagement. Third, the results may have been influenced by task-specific

characteristics. Different task types likely created varying opportunities for interaction, which could have affected the level of social engagement reported by students across the five tasks. Finally, the sample of this study was limited to a group of pre-service teachers at a single university in Vietnam. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other educational contexts or learner populations. In light of these limitations, future research could extend the present study in several ways. First, combining self-report data with classroom observation or interactional analysis would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how social engagement is enacted in real-time interaction. Second, future studies could examine social engagement across

a wider range of task types to better understand how specific task features shape interactional patterns. Longitudinal research over a longer period may also help capture more sustained changes in engagement beyond a short task sequence. In addition, further research involving larger and more diverse learner populations across different educational contexts would help enhance the generalizability of the findings. Finally, future studies could explore the relationship between social engagement and other dimensions of engagement, such as cognitive or emotional engagement, to provide a more integrated understanding of learner engagement in task-based language learning.

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