

Behavioural, Cognitive, and Emotional Engagement in Task-Based Grammar Learning: A Qualitative Case Study of Indonesian EFL Undergraduates

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigated how behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement manifested in task-based grammar learning and how Indonesian EFL undergraduates perceived the features supporting or constraining their engagement. Five first-semester students were recruited from a class of 25 in an English education program at a public university in West Java, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews and students' storytelling drafts. Interview transcripts were analysed using a six-phase thematic analysis, while the drafts were examined as complementary evidence of students' grammatical choices and revisions. Member checking, peer debriefing, and data-source triangulation were employed to strengthen credibility. The findings revealed that behavioural engagement was manifested through active participation, persistence, error correction, and revision. Cognitive engagement emerged through narrative planning, text comparison, monitoring of grammatical choices, connection of grammar to meaningful contexts, and strategic use of digital resources. Emotional engagement involved enjoyment, enthusiasm, confidence, challenge, and occasional stress. Students generally perceived task-based grammar learning as meaningful and motivating because contextualised storytelling, familiar topics, planning, focused feedback, and revision enabled them to use grammar for communicative purposes. Nevertheless, excessive task demands, insufficient support, and difficulty transferring grammatical knowledge from structured tasks to spontaneous communication constrained their engagement. The study demonstrates that engagement in task-based grammar learning is multidimensional, interconnected, and conditional rather than an automatic outcome of task use. Grammar instruction should therefore combine meaningful tasks with manageable challenge, appropriate scaffolding, attention to form, and opportunities for reflective revision.

Keywords: behavioural engagement; cognitive engagement; emotional engagement; EFL undergraduates; grammar learning; task-based language teaching

1. Introduction

Grammar remains a foundational component of undergraduate EFL education because grammatical knowledge enables learners to interpret relationships within texts and use linguistic resources to construct effective academic and professional discourse (Casal & Lee, 2019; Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Zheng et al., 2023). For students in English education programmes, this competence has dual significance: it supports their own language development while contributing to the pedagogical knowledge and classroom-language proficiency required to explain linguistic choices, interpret learners' difficulties, and model appropriate language use as future teachers (Adel & Azari Noughabi, 2023; Faez et al., 2021; Graus & Coppen, 2018). The pedagogical problem, however, cannot be reduced to whether undergraduates possess sufficient grammatical knowledge. A more consequential issue concerns how meaningfully they engage with grammatical form, meaning, and use during instruction. When grammar teaching is centred primarily on rule presentation, decontextualized manipulation, and accuracy-oriented exercises, students may develop explicit knowledge about particular structures without necessarily learning how and why those structures are selected in purposeful communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Pawlak, 2020, 2021). They may complete exercises successfully while having limited opportunities to analyse alternative forms, test linguistic hypotheses, monitor their choices, or revise language in response to communicative needs. Consequently, successful task completion cannot by itself demonstrate substantive

learning involvement because visible participation may coexist with superficial cognitive processing or emotional detachment. The central concern is therefore not only whether grammar is taught but also whether its teaching engages learners behaviourally, cognitively, and emotionally (Hiver et al., 2024; Oga-Baldwin, 2019; Philp & Duchesne, 2016).

Learner engagement provides a multidimensional and context-sensitive framework for examining the quality, rather than merely the occurrence, of students' involvement in grammar learning (Chen & Hu, 2025; Pearson, 2024; Svalberg, 2018). Behavioural engagement encompasses observable involvement, including attending to instruction, contributing to interaction, sustaining effort, completing tasks, locating errors, and revising grammatical output (Ben-Eliyahu et al., 2018; Zhang & Hyland, 2018). Cognitive engagement concerns the intellectual investment and strategic processing underlying such behaviour. In grammar learning, it may involve planning language production, comparing alternative structures, reasoning about relationships between form and meaning, monitoring comprehension and output, drawing on prior knowledge, and applying strategies to resolve linguistic problems (Dao, 2020; Svalberg, 2018). Emotional engagement refers to the affective experiences accompanying learning, including interest, enjoyment, confidence, anxiety, frustration, and boredom, which can strengthen or weaken students' willingness to persist when tasks become demanding (Boudreau et al., 2018; Khajavy et al., 2018; Teravainen-Goff, 2025). Although these dimensions interact, they remain analytically distinguishable. Students may participate actively without processing grammatical choices deeply, understand a grammatical concept but avoid contributing because of anxiety, or experience frustration while remaining cognitively invested in solving a linguistic problem (Ben-Eliyahu et al., 2018; Chen & Hu, 2025; Dao, 2021). Similar observable behaviours, such as accepting feedback or revising a sentence, may also reflect different levels of understanding, ranging from critical evaluation to mechanical uptake (Koltovskaia, 2020; Pearson, 2024; Zhang, 2020). Examining the three dimensions together therefore provides a more comprehensive account of whether learners participate, how deeply they process grammatical knowledge, and how their emotional experiences sustain or constrain their involvement.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) offers a potentially productive context for cultivating these dimensions because it organizes learning around purposeful language use and the achievement of communicative outcomes rather than treating grammar solely as an isolated body of rules (East, 2017; Lambert et al., 2017; Long, 2016). Whereas conventional form-centred instruction commonly presents a target structure before requiring learners to reproduce it through controlled exercises, a pedagogic task requires learners to mobilize their linguistic resources to exchange information, solve a problem, narrate events, or produce a text for an intended audience (Ellis, 2016; Erlam, 2016; Long, 2016). This emphasis on meaning does not exclude explicit attention to grammar. Explanation, modelling, feedback, and correction can be incorporated before, during, or after task performance when learners need support to express meanings more precisely (Ellis, 2016; Li et al., 2016; Michaud & Ammar, 2023). Collaborative participation may stimulate behavioural engagement by requiring learners to contribute ideas, negotiate decisions, and sustain joint activity, while planning and revising texts can promote cognitive engagement through noticing, comparison, hypothesis testing, and evaluation of grammatical choices (Chen et al., 2023; Zhang, 2022; Zhang & Crawford, 2022). Personally relevant topics and meaningful outcomes may strengthen emotional engagement by generating interest and a sense of ownership, whereas model texts and focused feedback can support both cognitive processing and observable revision (Kang, 2020; Lambert et al., 2017; Mujtaba et al., 2021). These features nevertheless constitute opportunities for engagement rather than guaranteed effects. Participation may remain unequal during collaboration, learner choice may produce both enjoyment and anxiety, and excessive task difficulty may increase cognitive demands without improving emotional involvement or language performance (Chen et al., 2023; Mora et al., 2024; Nakamura et al., 2021). Engagement consequently depends on how tasks are designed and mediated, including their relevance, complexity, interactional structure, scaffolding, feedback opportunities, and correspondence with learners' prior knowledge (Bryfonski & McKay, 2019; Michaud & Ammar, 2023; Van den Branden, 2016).

Empirical research supports this conditional understanding of task engagement. Aubrey et al. (2022), for example, followed 37 learners in a Japanese university across ten speaking tasks and analysed repeated questionnaire responses and written reflections. Engagement fluctuated according to task purpose, repetition, topic familiarity, perceived difficulty, confidence, anxiety, and group cohesion, indicating that it was neither stable

across tasks nor determined by a single learner characteristic. Using structural equation modelling with 413 Vietnamese EFL learners, [Vo \(2023\)](#) similarly found that perceived task relevance predicted engagement more strongly than the provision of learner choice, with perceived usefulness and emotional responses mediating this relationship. [Qiu \(2024\)](#) combined analyses of oral performance with interviews from 64 ESL learners and demonstrated that task complexity and interactional mode influenced behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement differently rather than producing a uniform engagement pattern. In the Indonesian higher-education context, [Sanjaya et al. \(2022\)](#) used questionnaire data from 76 students to establish that autonomous and controlled motivation predicted behavioural engagement in pragmatic learning, although controlled motivation was the stronger predictor. Because the study concentrated on behavioural engagement, however, it did not explain whether students' participation was accompanied by sustained cognitive processing or constructive emotional experiences. These studies indicate that task engagement emerges through interactions among task characteristics, learner motivation, interpersonal conditions, and instructional mediation, while also demonstrating the limitations of treating engagement as a single or stable outcome.

Research focusing more directly on form-oriented tasks reinforces the need to distinguish engagement from grammatical attainment. [Marcos Miguel \(2021\)](#) analysed classroom interaction in two university-level Spanish courses and found that corpus-based tasks encouraged communication and language exploration, although difficulty formulating linguistic hypotheses and socially motivated off-task discussion sometimes disrupted task completion. In a focused-dictogloss experiment involving 67 upper-intermediate EFL learners, [Khezrlou \(2023\)](#) found that explicit instruction delivered before or made available during task performance improved immediate and delayed explicit knowledge of the target structure, but none of the instructional conditions significantly developed automatized explicit knowledge. Differences between measured outcomes and participants' perceptions further indicated that perceived involvement and grammatical development cannot be treated as equivalent outcomes. [Zare et al. \(2024\)](#) reached a comparable conclusion through a sequential explanatory mixed-methods intervention involving 114 Iranian EFL learners. Data-driven form-focused tasks generated stronger immediate engagement than conventional instruction, with participants attributing their involvement to curiosity, autonomy, concentration, and discovery-oriented learning; however, the engagement advantage was no longer evident one month later. Thus, task-based and discovery-oriented activities can promote noticing, exploration, participation, and positive affect, but the resulting engagement may vary across learners, task conditions, and time.

Despite these advances, the relationship between task-based grammar learning and multidimensional engagement remains insufficiently explained. First, much existing task research has operationalized engagement through participation measures, performance outcomes, or questionnaire responses. Qualitative components have generally supplemented outcome-oriented designs rather than providing an integrated account of how behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement is experienced within a bounded grammar-learning context. Second, grammar-oriented studies have primarily examined the acquisition of particular structures or compared instructional conditions, leaving the processes through which students engage with grammatical decisions less visible. Third, evidence from Indonesian higher education remains limited, and the available research has not simultaneously examined the behavioural participation, cognitive investment, and emotional experiences of students learning grammar through TBLT. Addressing this gap requires more than establishing whether learners complete tasks or report positive attitudes. It requires examining how they sustain participation, reason about grammatical choices, use learning strategies, respond emotionally to task demands, and interpret the instructional conditions supporting or constraining their involvement. The contribution of the present study therefore lies in connecting the three dimensions of engagement within a qualitative case of first-semester Indonesian EFL undergraduates. Student interviews are used to examine their learning experiences and perceptions, while storytelling drafts provide complementary evidence of grammatical decision-making, error noticing, and revision.

Accordingly, this qualitative case study aims to explore how behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement manifests in task-based grammar learning among first-semester EFL undergraduates at an Indonesian university. It also investigates the task features that students perceive as supporting or constraining these dimensions. By examining engagement as a differentiated but interconnected process, the study seeks to extend current understanding of how task-based grammar pedagogy is experienced in an under-researched higher-education context and to inform the design of tasks that connect grammatical accuracy with purposeful language use. The

study addresses the following research questions: 1. How do behavioural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of engagement manifest in task-based grammar learning among first-semester Indonesian EFL undergraduates? 2. What features of task-based grammar learning do students perceive as supporting or constraining these dimensions of engagement?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design to investigate behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement in task-based grammar learning. Qualitative case studies facilitate an in-depth examination of a phenomenon within its naturally situated context, particularly when the phenomenon and its contextual conditions cannot be meaningfully separated (Rashid et al., 2019; Yazan, 2015). The case was bounded by one first-semester grammar course in an accredited English education program at a public university in West Java, Indonesia. The unit of analysis was the students' multidimensional engagement within the task-based grammar activities implemented in the course. Establishing these boundaries clarified what constituted the case and prevented the study from becoming a general investigation of undergraduate grammar learning (Yazan, 2015). Moreover, Engagement was conceptualized through three interrelated dimensions. Behavioural engagement encompassed students' participation, effort, persistence, task completion, error correction, and revision. Cognitive engagement concerned the mental effort and strategies involved in planning language production, examining grammatical alternatives, monitoring understanding, and applying grammatical knowledge. Emotional engagement referred to affective responses such as interest, enjoyment, confidence, anxiety, frustration, and willingness to persist when tasks became difficult (Fredricks et al., 2004; Hiver et al., 2024; Zhang & Hyland, 2018). These dimensions functioned as sensitizing concepts that guided data collection and the preliminary organization of the data rather than as fixed categories into which all evidence had to be placed. Because classroom observations were not included, behavioural engagement was interpreted through students' reported experiences and corroborating evidence in their task-produced texts rather than treated as directly observed classroom behaviour.

2.2 Instructional Context and Participants

The course integrated grammar instruction with creative, meaning-oriented activities intended to connect grammatical accuracy with purposeful language use. The focal activities required students to plan and construct stories, apply grammatical knowledge in meaningful textual contexts, and revise their writing after identifying linguistic problems. Storytelling provided a communicative outcome through which students could use grammar to organize events, express relationships among ideas, and communicate meaning rather than merely reproduce isolated structures. Focused attention to grammatical form was incorporated through planning, discussion, feedback, error identification, and revision. Participants were recruited through voluntary, criterion-based sampling. Qualitative interview sampling requires a transparent relationship among the research purpose, participant characteristics, inclusion criteria, and claims that can reasonably be made from the resulting data (Robinson, 2014). Eligibility was therefore limited to first-semester undergraduates who were enrolled in the focal course, had participated in the storytelling activities, and were willing to discuss their experiences. All 25 students enrolled in the course were invited to participate, and five volunteered. The sample was intended to provide detailed accounts from students who had experienced the instructional activities rather than represent the entire cohort or the wider population of Indonesian EFL undergraduates. All five participants were 19 years old and reported between one and five years of formal grammar learning. Three participants identified as male and two as female. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect their identities.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Reported years of formal grammar learning
Aksaya	Female	19	1–5
Bima	Male	19	1–5

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Reported years of formal grammar learning
Arjuna	Male	19	1–5
Rama	Male	19	1–5
Nakula	Female	19	1–5

2.3 Data Collection

Data were generated from two complementary sources: semi-structured interviews and task-produced storytelling drafts. Combining interview and documentary evidence is valuable in case-study research because different sources can illuminate distinct aspects of the same phenomenon and allow emerging interpretations to be corroborated, qualified, or challenged (Bowen, 2009; Rashid et al., 2019). The interviews provided access to students' interpretations of their participation, cognitive investment, emotional experiences, and perceptions of the conditions that supported or constrained their engagement. The storytelling drafts supplied contextual evidence of how students applied grammatical knowledge and revised their written output. The documents were not treated as direct evidence of emotional experience; they were used primarily to corroborate reported behavioural and cognitive engagement.

The semi-structured interview guide contained 15 core questions. Four questions addressed behavioural engagement, five explored cognitive engagement, and six examined emotional engagement. The questions functioned as prompts for eliciting detailed accounts rather than as quantitative measurement items. Follow-up probes encouraged participants to provide examples, explain their responses, and describe how task relevance, difficulty, collaboration, feedback, and learning resources shaped their engagement. Developing an effective qualitative interview protocol requires alignment between the research questions and interview questions, conversational rather than test-like wording, expert feedback, and opportunities for refinement (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Accordingly, the interview guide underwent expert review to evaluate its conceptual alignment, clarity, neutrality, and relevance to the instructional context. Although the engagement framework informed the guide, participants remained free to discuss experiences that extended beyond the predetermined dimensions.

The interviews were conducted individually through Zoom. Synchronous videoconferencing can support qualitative interviewing by providing flexibility and allowing real-time verbal and visual interaction while preserving opportunities for follow-up questioning and rapport development (Archibald et al., 2019). With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researchers checked the transcripts against the recordings to preserve the accuracy of participants' accounts. The storytelling drafts were collected as documentary evidence from the focal grammar-learning activities. Document analysis involves the systematic examination and interpretation of textual materials to generate meaning, contextualize participant accounts, and contribute evidence that may not be available through interviews alone (Bowen, 2009). The drafts were therefore examined for grammatical choices, identifiable corrections, and revisions related to the strategies and difficulties discussed by participants. All interview transcripts and documents were anonymized before analysis.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed through a theoretically informed deductive–inductive thematic analysis. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report production. A hybrid deductive–inductive approach was appropriate because it enabled the researchers to draw on an established engagement framework while remaining attentive to meanings and task-related conditions emerging from the participants' accounts (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The behavioural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions therefore served as broad analytical domains rather than final themes. Specific manifestations of engagement and the conditions supporting or constraining them were developed through iterative engagement with the data.

During familiarization, the researchers repeatedly read the interview transcripts and reviewed the storytelling drafts to develop an understanding of each participant's experience and the wider instructional context. Initial codes were then assigned to meaningful segments of the transcripts. Accounts of participation, effort, persistence,

task completion, error identification, and revision were provisionally coded within the behavioural domain. Statements concerning planning, monitoring, comparison of grammatical alternatives, form–meaning reasoning, and strategy use were coded within the cognitive domain. Expressions of interest, enjoyment, confidence, anxiety, frustration, stress, or boredom were coded within the emotional domain. Additional inductive codes captured task-related conditions, including relevance, challenge, collaboration, feedback, scaffolding, and digital-resource use.

The researchers subsequently compared related codes within and across participants to construct candidate themes explaining how engagement manifested and which instructional conditions shaped it. Candidate themes were repeatedly reviewed against the coded extracts and complete dataset to establish their internal coherence, conceptual distinctiveness, and relevance to the research questions. Such recursive movement among the data, codes, and developing themes is necessary for producing a transparent and credible thematic analysis rather than treating themes as self-evident features waiting to be discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The researchers then refined the scope and meaning of each theme and examined relationships among the three engagement dimensions. Contrasting evidence—including difficulty, anxiety, stress, uneven participation, and problems applying grammar beyond the task—was retained to avoid portraying engagement as uniformly positive. The storytelling drafts were analysed separately before being compared with the interview findings. Document analysis focused on grammatical choices, visible corrections, and revisions associated with the students' reported strategies.

2.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was addressed through data-source triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, attention to contrasting evidence, and transparent documentation of the analytical process. These procedures were selected to strengthen credibility and methodological coherence rather than to suggest that qualitative interpretations could be validated in the same manner as objective measurements (Nowell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2010). Data-source triangulation involved comparing students' interview accounts with relevant evidence in their storytelling drafts. Peer debriefing enabled the researchers to question developing codes and themes, consider alternative explanations, and reconsider interpretations that were insufficiently grounded in the dataset. Member checking allowed participants to confirm the accuracy of their accounts and clarify meanings that might otherwise have been misinterpreted. Representative excerpts and contrasting cases were retained in the findings to demonstrate the relationship between the interpretations and the underlying evidence.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional body before participant recruitment. Participants received information about the study's purpose and procedures, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality protections, and their right to withdraw. Informed consent was obtained before data collection. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts, documents, tables, and reported excerpts, and identifying information was removed from the research records. These procedures reflected the need to treat anonymity and confidentiality as continuing methodological responsibilities rather than merely administrative requirements completed at the beginning of a study (Wiles et al., 2008).

3. Findings

The analysis of the interview data and storytelling drafts generated four interconnected themes that addressed the two research questions. The first three themes explained how behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement manifested in task-based grammar learning, thereby addressing the first research question. The fourth theme identified the task features that students perceived as supporting or constraining these dimensions, thereby addressing the second research question. The interviews constituted the principal source of evidence, while the storytelling drafts provided complementary evidence of grammatical choices and visible revisions. Because classroom observations were not conducted, behavioural engagement is reported through participants' accounts and document-supported indications rather than as directly observed classroom behaviour.

In response to the first research question, behavioural engagement was manifested through reported participation, sustained effort, error noticing, and textual revision. Participants did not describe their involvement solely in terms of attending the lesson or completing assigned exercises. Instead, they associated engagement with applying grammatical knowledge while constructing meaningful sentences and paragraphs. Rama reported

becoming more attentive to tense use, subject-verb agreement, and word choice during storytelling. When he encountered a problematic sentence, he attempted to identify the error and modify the sentence rather than leaving it unchanged. Another participant similarly emphasized, *"I strongly agree that task-based language teaching helps me apply proper grammar, whether in sentences or paragraphs."* This response connected behavioural involvement with the practical use of grammar across different levels of text construction.

The storytelling drafts supported these interview accounts by showing that some students returned to their texts and made grammatical changes. Bima's draft, for example, contained visible corrections to verb forms and sentence structures. Although the document alone could not reveal the reasoning behind each correction, the revisions corresponded with participants' reported efforts to notice problems and improve their written output. Behavioural engagement was therefore reflected not simply in producing a story but in persisting with the task, reconsidering linguistic choices, and revising the text when problems were identified.

Cognitive engagement was manifested through planning, comparison, grammatical reasoning, monitoring, and strategic resource use. The students described different ways of managing the conceptual and linguistic demands of the storytelling activities. Aksaya emphasized contextual relevance by explaining, *"I use Task-Based Language Teaching in grammar learning by selecting tasks that emphasize the use of grammar in real-life contexts."* Her account indicated that she approached grammar more purposefully when linguistic forms were connected with recognizable communicative situations. Bima adopted a comparative strategy, stating, *"I usually like to compare one text with another, looking for grammar differences and figuring out how they differ in usage."* His comparison of texts reflected an attempt to identify grammatical patterns and distinguish how particular forms functioned across contexts.

Other participants demonstrated cognitive engagement through narrative planning and independent resource seeking. Arjuna explained, *"I often think about some plots or stories that I want to write down to make the paragraph contextually clear."* His response showed that grammatical production was connected with organizing content and establishing a coherent narrative context. Rather than selecting sentence forms in isolation, he considered the story he wanted to communicate before constructing the paragraph. Rama extended his learning beyond the immediate course materials, explaining that he learned *"by using applications such as YouTube, or applications that can help improve grammar."* His use of digital resources represented an attempt to obtain additional explanations and assistance when his existing knowledge was insufficient. Taken as a whole, these accounts showed that cognitive engagement did not follow one uniform pattern. It involved a combination of connecting grammar with context, comparing language examples, planning ideas, monitoring written production, and seeking external support.

Emotional engagement was manifested through interest, enjoyment, perceived usefulness, confidence, challenge, and occasional stress. Positive emotional responses were particularly evident when students encountered grammar through meaningful topics and familiar experiences. Classroom discussion of hydroponic vegetable cultivation as a response to food-security challenges, for example, gave students recognizable content that could be developed into storytelling material. Aksaya connected contextualized learning with increased understanding and discovery, explaining, *"Grammar learning through TBLT makes me understand more about appropriate usage, especially when learning using context. I can also learn more about verbs, adjectives, and nouns that I did not know before."* Her response suggested that perceived progress and the discovery of unfamiliar language contributed to her emotional investment. Nakula similarly described the learning experience as *"very easy to understand and exciting,"* indicating that accessibility and enjoyment supported her willingness to participate.

The participants' emotional experiences were not uniformly positive, however. One participant characterized task-based grammar learning as *"challenging, exciting, [and] stressful sometimes."* The coexistence of excitement and stress showed that emotional engagement could involve productive tension rather than uncomplicated enjoyment. Storytelling generated interest because students could express meaningful ideas, but it also required them to coordinate content, textual organization, and grammatical accuracy. The resulting challenge could maintain attention and effort when students considered the task meaningful, while excessive difficulty could reduce confidence or make the experience stressful. Emotional engagement therefore operated along a continuum and changed according to how students interpreted the demands and value of the activity.

The second research question concerned the features of task-based grammar learning that students perceived as supporting or constraining their engagement. Contextualized language use emerged as the most prominent supportive feature. Students valued activities that required them to use grammar for an understandable purpose rather than manipulate isolated structures. Storytelling enabled them to connect grammatical forms with characters, events, and relationships among ideas, while familiar topics helped them generate content and maintain interest. Nakula summarized this perceived benefit by stating that the approach *“helps me to better understand grammar.”* Opportunities to compare texts, plan narratives, identify errors, revise drafts, and consult digital resources also supported engagement by giving students several ways to approach grammatical problems.

These features supported different dimensions of engagement simultaneously. Story production encouraged behavioural engagement because students needed to complete and revise a meaningful text. Planning, text comparison, and grammatical monitoring supported cognitive engagement by requiring students to evaluate alternative forms and connect them with intended meanings. Familiar topics and perceived usefulness supported emotional engagement by making the activities more relevant and stimulating. The findings therefore suggested that engagement was associated not merely with the presence of a task but with how the task connected meaning, grammatical attention, and opportunities for learner decision-making.

Nevertheless, the participants identified important constraints. The clearest difficulty concerned transferring grammatical understanding from structured classroom activities to less predictable language use. Arjuna explained, *“It helps me understand grammar better, although it is still difficult for me to apply it in real-life situations.”* His account distinguished understanding grammar within a supported task from using it independently beyond that task. Other constraints included the effort required to manage meaning and accuracy at the same time and the stress generated when the task demands exceeded students’ confidence. Digital resources could provide useful assistance, but their use also indicated that some students required additional support to complete the linguistic demands of the activities.

4. Discussion

This study examined how behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement manifested in task-based grammar learning and which task features Indonesian EFL undergraduates perceived as supporting or constraining that engagement. The central interpretation is that engagement did not arise automatically from the use of tasks. Instead, it developed through the interaction of purposeful language production, students’ strategic responses, their emotional experiences, and the support available during task performance. This interpretation is consistent with the conceptualisation of language-learning engagement as multidimensional, dynamic, and sensitive to the immediate learning context (Hiver et al., 2024; Oga-Baldwin, 2019; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). The findings therefore position engagement as a situated and conditional process rather than a stable learner characteristic or an inevitable consequence of TBLT.

4.1 Manifestations of Behavioural, Cognitive, and Emotional Engagement

In response to the first research question, behavioural engagement was manifested most clearly through a recurring process of production, error recognition, correction, and revision. Students did not portray participation merely as attending class or completing assigned work. Their accounts emphasised returning to problematic sentences, identifying errors in tense use and subject–verb agreement, and modifying their written output. The revisions visible in the storytelling drafts provided textual evidence that supported these reported behaviours. This interpretation corresponds with research showing that engagement with corrective feedback is demonstrated not simply by receiving corrections but by the actions learners take to interpret and incorporate them into subsequent revisions (Han & Hyland, 2015; Pearson, 2024; Zheng & Yu, 2018). In the present study, revision was therefore a more meaningful indicator of behavioural engagement than task completion alone because it showed that students remained involved after producing an initial response and were willing to reconsider their grammatical choices.

The findings also suggest that visible participation should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of deep engagement. A student may complete a storytelling task because it is required without investing substantial attention in grammatical form. By contrast, returning to a draft, locating an error, and attempting an alternative structure reflect persistence and responsiveness to the linguistic demands of the task. Behavioural engagement

thus acquired pedagogical significance when it was connected to purposeful grammatical action. Nevertheless, because the study did not include classroom observations, these manifestations should be interpreted as reported and document-supported engagement rather than as measured frequencies of classroom behaviour.

Cognitive engagement was expressed through several pathways rather than through one strategy shared by all participants. Some students connected grammar with real-life contexts, whereas others compared texts, planned narrative content, monitored their grammatical choices, or consulted digital resources. These differences indicate that task-based grammar learning created space for learners to exercise strategic agency. Grammar was not treated exclusively as declarative knowledge to be recalled; it became a communicative resource that students needed to select and organise to make their stories understandable. This interpretation is compatible with research that conceptualises cognitive engagement with language as deliberate attention to linguistic form, strategic problem-solving, and reflection on language choices (Ishikawa, 2018; Pawlak, 2020; Svalberg, 2018).

Narrative planning appeared to play a particularly important cognitive role. When students planned plots and organised events, they had to coordinate intended meanings, textual sequencing, and grammatical form. Text comparison similarly encouraged learners to examine how comparable meanings could be realised through different structures. Such exploratory work can direct learners' attention towards patterns of language use rather than isolated rules, as demonstrated in research on data-driven grammar learning (Lin & Lee, 2015). Cognitive engagement therefore occurred when students moved beyond reproducing a grammatical rule and began reasoning about the relationship between form, meaning, and communicative intention.

The use of digital resources further illustrates the situated nature of cognitive engagement. Consulting YouTube or grammar-support applications might be interpreted superficially as dependence on external assistance. However, participants' accounts suggested that these resources were used to address linguistic gaps encountered while completing the task. Research on automated writing feedback similarly shows that learners differ in how they interpret, evaluate, and act upon digital feedback; access to correction does not itself guarantee thoughtful processing or effective revision (Koltovskaia, 2020; Zhang, 2020; Zhang & Hyland, 2018). In the present study, resource seeking represented an aspect of self-regulation when students recognised a problem and independently searched for support. Its educational value, however, depended on whether they evaluated the information and understood the suggested correction. Digital assistance contributes to cognitive engagement when it stimulates comparison, verification, and decision-making, but contributes less when learners accept suggested changes without examining their grammatical rationale.

Emotional engagement was more complex than a simple distinction between positive and negative feelings. Students associated contextualised storytelling with interest, enjoyment, excitement, and perceived progress, but they also described challenge and stress. This combination reflects research indicating that enjoyment and anxiety can coexist and fluctuate during second-language communication and task performance (Boudreau et al., 2018; Dao & Sato, 2021). Students' emotional responses may also depend on how relevant or personally appropriate they perceive a particular task to be (Phung, 2017). The present findings therefore show that emotional engagement did not require students to feel comfortable at every stage of learning.

The coexistence of excitement and stress suggests that challenge may operate as productive tension when students consider a task meaningful, possess sufficient support, and believe successful completion is attainable. The same challenge may constrain engagement when linguistic demands exceed students' confidence or when they cannot identify a productive way forward. Research on task complexity similarly demonstrates that the effects of task demands on engagement and anxiety depend on how those demands interact with learners and performance conditions (Mora et al., 2024; Qiu, 2024). Positive emotional engagement should therefore be interpreted as students' willingness to remain invested despite difficulty rather than simply as the absence of anxiety, frustration, or uncertainty.

Although the three dimensions were analytically distinguishable, they were dynamically connected. Contextual relevance could generate curiosity or enjoyment, which encouraged students to persist behaviourally. Continued participation then created opportunities for planning, comparison, monitoring, and other forms of cognitive investment. These processes became behaviourally visible through correction and revision. Successful resolution of a grammatical problem could strengthen confidence, whereas unresolved difficulty could increase stress and weaken persistence. This reciprocal relationship aligns with research demonstrating that affective, behavioural,

and cognitive engagement are interrelated but not interchangeable (Ben-Eliyahu et al., 2018; Chen & Hu, 2025; Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Engagement in the present study therefore operated recursively: emotional responses influenced effort, effort created opportunities for cognitive processing, and the consequences of that processing reshaped subsequent emotions and behaviour.

4.2 Task Features Supporting and Constraining Engagement

In response to the second research question, contextualised storytelling, familiar topics, narrative planning, text comparison, corrective opportunities, and access to supporting resources emerged as the principal engagement-enabling features. Storytelling provided a purposeful outcome that required grammar to perform a communicative function. Instead of producing unrelated sentences to demonstrate mastery of predetermined rules, students used grammatical resources to organise events and communicate an intelligible narrative. This finding reflects the broader rationale for task-based learning, in which attention to language is situated within meaningful language use (East, 2017; Long, 2016).

The use of familiar or personally meaningful topics was especially important because it connected classroom grammar with students' existing knowledge and experiences. In this study, topic familiarity appeared to reduce the demands of generating content, thereby enabling students to allocate greater attention to narrative organisation and language choices. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that learner-generated content, personal relevance, and topic familiarity can influence the quality and intensity of learner engagement during L2 task performance (Lambert et al., 2017; Qiu & Lo, 2017; Vo, 2023). A meaningful topic could consequently support several dimensions at once: it generated emotional interest, stimulated cognitive planning, and sustained behavioural participation.

Planning, comparison, feedback, and revision extended engagement beyond initial task production. Planning enabled students to organise meaning before composing sentences, whereas comparison with other texts or language models directed attention towards alternative grammatical forms. Feedback and revision then provided opportunities to test those alternatives and reconsider earlier decisions. Model texts can serve as useful feedback resources when learners analyse the relationship between the model and their own writing rather than imitate it mechanically (Kang, 2020). Similarly, processing corrective feedback individually or collaboratively can promote revision and written accuracy when learners actively discuss and resolve the identified language problems (Mujtaba et al., 2021). These findings indicate that task-based grammar engagement was strengthened by a cycle of preparation, production, reflection, and revision rather than by task performance in isolation.

These enabling features should nevertheless be understood as pedagogical affordances rather than inherent properties of tasks. Labelling an activity as task-based does not guarantee that students will engage with it meaningfully. A storytelling activity may encourage extensive reasoning and revision when learners understand its purpose, possess sufficient background knowledge, and receive appropriately timed support. The same activity may produce superficial participation when its topic is unfamiliar, its language demands are excessive, or its expected outcome is unclear. Research on TBLT implementation similarly shows that learning opportunities depend on the quality of task design, classroom implementation, and teacher mediation (Bryfonski & McKay, 2019; Erlam, 2016; Van den Branden, 2016). The findings therefore shift attention from the mere presence of tasks to how tasks connect grammatical form with meaningful content, create manageable challenge, and preserve learners' responsibility for making linguistic decisions.

The principal constraint identified by participants was the gap between understanding grammar within a structured task and applying it independently in real-life communication. Students could reason about grammatical forms when planning or revising a story but still struggle when language use became less predictable and instructional support was unavailable. This distinction is important because successful revision does not necessarily demonstrate that knowledge will transfer to a new text or communicative situation. Research on corrective feedback has similarly distinguished immediate revision from transfer to new writing (Karim & Nassaji, 2020), while task-supported grammar research differentiates the development of explicit knowledge from its more automatized use (Khezlrou, 2023). The present finding therefore identifies a limit of short-term, structured task performance rather than negating the pedagogical value of task-based grammar learning.

Developing flexible grammatical use is likely to require repeated opportunities to use related structures across changing topics, audiences, interactional conditions, and communicative purposes. Task repetition and content familiarity may support engagement, but variation is also needed if learners are to move beyond dependence on one familiar task format (Qiu & Lo, 2017). Accordingly, repeated practice should not simply reproduce the same story. It should gradually increase the need for independent planning, spontaneous language selection, and adaptation to new communicative conditions. Transfer should then be assessed through new tasks rather than inferred from successful completion or revision of the original activity.

5. Conclusion

This qualitative case study demonstrated that first-semester Indonesian EFL undergraduates engaged behaviourally, cognitively, and emotionally in task-based grammar learning. Behavioural engagement was manifested through sustained participation, error correction, and revision; cognitive engagement emerged through narrative planning, comparison of language forms, monitoring of grammatical choices, contextual application, and strategic use of digital resources; and emotional engagement was reflected in interest, enjoyment, enthusiasm, confidence, challenge, and occasional stress. These dimensions were dynamically interconnected, as meaningful contexts stimulated emotional interest, encouraged behavioural persistence, and created opportunities for deeper grammatical analysis and revision. Students generally perceived TBLT as a meaningful, practical, and motivating approach, particularly when tasks involved contextualised storytelling, familiar topics, planning, text comparison, focused feedback, and opportunities for revision. Nevertheless, engagement was not an automatic consequence of using tasks, as excessive linguistic demands, insufficient scaffolding, and difficulty transferring grammatical knowledge from structured activities to spontaneous communication could constrain students' involvement. Grammar tasks should therefore be organised as purposeful sequences integrating preparation, meaningful language production, attention to form, feedback, and revision, while lecturers should evaluate how students plan, monitor, seek assistance, revise, and respond emotionally rather than judging engagement solely from task completion. The study contributes a context-sensitive understanding of engagement by showing that visible participation and reported enjoyment alone cannot fully represent the quality of learners' involvement in grammar learning. However, its conclusions are limited by the involvement of only five volunteers from one institution, reliance on interview accounts, and absence of direct classroom observation. Future studies should combine observations, stimulated recall, successive-draft analysis, and longitudinal task sequences to examine fluctuations in engagement and determine whether repeated task-based grammar learning supports more independent and transferable grammatical use.

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