



The impact of teacher support on EFL student engagement in Ethiopian higher education

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ABSTRACT

Article History

Received: 26 May 2025

Revised: 19 August 2025

Accepted: 6 January 2026

Published: 31 August 2026

Keywords

Education quality

Education

Gender

Learning engagement

Teacher support.

Student participation is an essential component of effective English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in Ethiopian higher education. Although teacher support is widely acknowledged to be an important element, the specific impact of various types of assistance, as well as the possible influence of gender, remain unexplored in Ethiopia. The purpose of this study was to examine how different types of teacher assistance affect cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement in EFL students at Ethiopian institutions. A mixed-methods research design was employed, involving 800 undergraduate students from four public universities (Jimma, Wachamo, Wolaita Sodo, and Wolkite). Structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to assess students' perceptions of instrumental, informational, affective, and evaluative support. The findings revealed that students experienced a somewhat supportive learning environment, with instrumental support rated highest in perceived usefulness. However, informational support emerged as the most significant predictor across all engagement areas. Evaluative support had a notable impact on behavioral engagement, while effective and instrumental support showed minimal direct benefits. Affective support demonstrated a positive trend. There were no significant differences between genders regarding perceptions of teacher support or levels of involvement. These findings underscore the importance of timely feedback, clear instruction, and scaffolded learning in enhancing engagement. The study recommends that teacher training and institutional policies focus on emotionally sensitive and differentiated pedagogical practices to foster inclusive and equitable EFL learning environments.

Contribution/Originality: This study is novel as it investigates the impact of teacher support—emotional, instrumental, evaluative, and informational—on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student engagement in Ethiopian higher education. It offers context-specific insights into how teacher support influences student involvement within the Ethiopian higher education setting.

1. INTRODUCTION

Student engagement has progressively become a main focus in educational research, particularly owing to its central role in promoting academic achievement, learner persistence, and meaningful educational outcomes. This is specifically important in EFL contexts, where students face significant linguistic, motivational, and cognitive demands (Li, 2023; Luo, 2025; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2023). Engagement is commonly conceptualized

through three interrelated dimensions: behavioral, emotional (affective), and cognitive, each contributing uniquely to student success in language learning environments (An, Yu, & Xi, 2022; Feng & Hong, 2022; Li, Duan, & Liu, 2023; Peng, Sun, & He, 2022; Taddese, 2018; Zhou, Liu, & Guo, 2025).

In low-resource and multilingual educational settings, such as those found in many non-native English-speaking countries, these challenges are often intensified by large class sizes, limited instructional resources, and diverse learner backgrounds (Alrabai, 2022; Gao, Gan, & Zhang, 2025; He, Feng, & Ding, 2024; Liu, Du, & Lu, 2023; Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Therefore, fostering learner engagement has emerged as a strategic priority for improving EFL education quality and student outcomes in a more advanced manner.

Instructor support has consistently emerged as one of the most influential elements in shaping student engagement. Instructor support, in a broad sense, refers to the combination of academic and emotional guidance provided to students. It includes clear instruction (informational support), constructive feedback (evaluative support), emotional reassurance (affective support), and hands-on help with tasks (instrumental support). These forms of support are linked to increased motivation, self-efficacy, and active classroom participation (Cao & Zhang, 2023; Guo, Xu, & Chen, 2023; Li, King, & Wang, 2022; Peng et al., 2022; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2023; Shakki, 2022; Zhang, Liu, & Chen, 2023). Research conducted in various educational contexts has demonstrated that when students perceive strong teacher support, they are more likely to be actively engaged, develop more favorable attitudes toward learning, and display increased academic resilience (Cao & Zhang, 2023; Feng & Hong, 2022; Li et al., 2023; Peng et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2025).

Although extensive international research exists on teacher support, studies specifically examining its relationship with EFL student engagement within the context of Ethiopian higher education are still limited. Ethiopian public universities face a distinct set of structural and pedagogical challenges, including multilingual student populations, high student-teacher ratios, and inconsistencies in English language proficiency. English serves both as a subject and as the medium of instruction, yet limited attention has been given to how teacher support influences engagement under these conditions.

Moreover, while teacher support is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct, prior research has often treated it holistically, overlooking how its specific components: informational, evaluative, affective, and instrumental may differentially influence behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagement (Gao et al., 2025; Lei, Cui, & Chiu, 2018; Sun, 2021; Wu, Wang, & Huang, 2023). This lack of disaggregation limits our understanding of which forms of support are most impactful and under what conditions they are effective.

An additional significant gap in the existing literature concerns gender-related variations in how students perceive teacher support and engage in learning. While some international studies indicate that male and female learners may experience and respond to teacher support in distinct ways, this issue remains underexplored in EFL settings. In such contexts, gender inequalities in education often persist, influenced by sociocultural expectations, structural challenges, and disparities in access to educational resources (Li et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017; Shakki, 2022). Gaining insight into whether and in what ways gender influences the link between teacher support and student engagement is crucial for developing teaching approaches that are both inclusive and equitable (Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2020).

This study aims to provide a detailed and context-sensitive investigation of the role of teacher support in a multilingual EFL environment with limited resources by combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The findings are intended to guide the development of more responsive, research-informed instructional approaches, promote gender parity, and ultimately improve the quality and utility of English language education in Ethiopia and other EFL environments. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the levels of perceived teacher support and learning engagement among Ethiopian EFL students?
2. Are there gender differences in Ethiopian students' perceptions of teacher support and their levels of learning engagement?

3. How does teacher support affect engagement among Ethiopian EFL students?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Teacher Support

Teacher support is widely acknowledged as a vital component of both the social and academic landscape, serving a key function in fostering students' well-being, boosting their motivation, and promoting academic achievement (Guo et al., 2023; He et al., 2024; Li, 2023). Within EFL contexts, teacher support becomes especially salient due to the linguistic and psychological challenges students often face.

Sun (2021) established four major dimensions of social support that apply to educational settings: informational, affective, evaluative, and instrumental support. Building on this paradigm, Wei (2024) identified instructor support as an uncommon and integrative category within academic study, combining the numerous support categories into a cohesive construct. This broader perspective emphasizes the multifaceted nature of teacher assistance and its critical role in fostering a positive and effective learning environment.

Each dimension of teacher support plays a vital role in meeting the varied academic and emotional requirements of students. Affective support involves teachers expressing care, empathy, and trust in response to students' emotional conditions (Gao et al., 2025; Gao, Li, & Liao, 2024). Instrumental support includes the provision of practical help, such as dedicating time and offering learning materials to assist students (Wu & Kang, 2023). Evaluative support consists of meaningful feedback and assessments that help learners track their academic development (An et al., 2022). Informational support focuses on delivering clear guidance and instructional assistance that aids comprehension and successful task execution (Zhou et al., 2025).

Several empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that teacher support positively influences various aspects of student development, including academic achievement (Li et al., 2023), engagement (Zhao & Yang, 2022), active participation in class, willingness to communicate (Wei & Xu, 2022), psychological well-being (Gao et al., 2025), and affective learning outcomes (Sun & Shi, 2022). For instance, Li et al. (2023) revealed that comprehensive teacher support strengthens academic resilience, which in turn indirectly enhances English language performance by promoting more adaptive learner behaviors and positive attitudes.

While the positive link between teacher support and educational outcomes is well established, research on gender differences in students' perceptions of such support remains mixed. Some studies (Lei et al., 2018; Sun, 2021; Wu et al., 2023) indicate that female students generally report higher levels of perceived teacher support, especially regarding emotional support. For example, Sadoughi and Hejazi (2023) found that female students experienced significantly greater emotional support, with no notable gender differences in instrumental, evaluative, or informational support. In contrast, Liu and Li (2023) discovered that male students reported receiving more emotional support, indicating that these patterns may vary depending on the setting. These conflicting findings highlight the complexities of how gender influences perceptions of teacher assistance, as well as the need for additional research, particularly in understudied settings such as Ethiopian higher education.

2.2. Learners Engagement

Learner engagement has emerged as a primary topic in recent EFL studies, with substantial implications for students' academic success, motivation, and learning continuity (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Zhou et al., 2025). This idea is especially important in language learning environments, where perseverance and active engagement are required to develop communicative abilities.

According to Cao and Zhang (2023), engagement is defined as the degree to which students are emotionally invested in academic activities and the intensity with which they participate. Engagement is commonly recognized in EFL teaching as a complex phenomenon with three interconnected dimensions: behavioral, emotional (or affective), and cognitive (Hoi, 2025). Behavioral engagement relates to students' visible participation and the amount of time

they devote to academic work. Emotional engagement refers to learners' attitudes and emotional reactions to the learning process, such as curiosity, enjoyment, or interest (Sang & Hiver, 2021). Cognitive engagement refers to the mental energy and self-directed tactics that students use to process, comprehend, and assimilate educational material (Wu et al., 2023).

Several elements have been identified as having an impact on EFL student engagement. These elements include instructor excitement (He et al., 2024), teaching approaches (Zarrinabadi, Lou, & Shirzad, 2021), classroom emotional climate (Zhang et al., 2023), students' self-efficacy views (Phipps, 2022), and individual learning preferences (Miwa & Jitosh, 2020; Tusino, Dewi, & Saputro, 2022). According to Feng and Hong (2022) enjoyment has an important role in predicting behavioral engagement, and this effect is influenced by students' judgments of their academic progress. Their studies also showed that female learners exhibit higher levels of engagement than their male counterparts, emphasizing the role of emotional and demographic elements in shaping engagement.

Despite growing interest in gender disparities in EFL student engagement, study findings remain uneven. Using latent profile analysis, Li et al. (2022) discovered that male students were more likely to appear in both highly engaged and disengaged groups, indicating that male engagement patterns vary. In contrast, Oga-Baldwin and Nakata (2017) discovered that female students regularly shown higher levels of involvement. Sadoughi and Hejazi (2023) discovered no significant gender differences in participation among EFL students, confounding the matter even more. These contradicting findings highlight the need for more study to better understand how gender interacts with other contextual elements to enhance learner engagement.

2.3. Teacher Support and Learner Engagement

The relationship between teacher support and student involvement has been a prominent focus of language education research. Numerous studies demonstrate that teacher support greatly improves learners' active participation and sustained effort, particularly in EFL situations where students encounter additional barriers to engagement (Cao & Zhang, 2023; Feng & Hong, 2022).

Sun and Shi (2022) portrayed school involvement as a fluid term influenced by a variety of contextual and interpersonal factors, including teacher support. Empirical investigations back up this viewpoint. Feng and Hong (2022) found that supportive teacher behaviors have a beneficial impact on engagement, particularly in terms of classroom participation and motivation. Liu et al. (2023), using structural equation modeling, discovered that both intellectual and emotional teacher support strongly influenced engagement among EFL students. Similarly, Miwa and Jitosh (2020) demonstrated that teacher aid indirectly increases engagement via mediating variables such as self-efficacy and goal orientation. This implies that teacher support is a strong predictor of student engagement, with its impact mediated by academic emotions and prior experiences.

Although several studies have established a link between teacher support and student engagement, the distinct roles of its various dimensions emotional, instrumental, evaluative, and informational have not been adequately investigated in EFL contexts (Liu et al., 2023; Miwa & Jitosh, 2020; Wang, Ying, Liu, & Wei, 2022). Furthermore, findings on gender variations in how teacher assistance is perceived and how successfully it promotes engagement are inconsistent (Liu et al., 2023), emphasizing the need for targeted research. Filling these gaps is critical for creating more nuanced and inclusive teaching approaches that are customized to varied EFL learning situations.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design to investigate the relationship between teacher support and student engagement among EFL learners in Ethiopian public universities. The study aimed to gain a comprehensive and well-rounded understanding of the subject by combining quantitative and qualitative data.

3.2. Settings

The study was conducted at four Ethiopian public universities during the 2023 academic year: Jimma University, Wachamo University, Wolaita Sodo University, and Wolkite University. Participants were freshmen undergraduate EFL students enrolled in Communicative English Abilities II, a course designed to enhance key language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing through an interactive, module-based teaching strategy. Although English was the primary medium of instruction in Ethiopia, local languages were occasionally used to clarify difficult subjects.

3.3. Participants and Sampling Techniques

The study included first-year undergraduate EFL students from four public Ethiopian universities: Jimma University, Wachamo University, Wolaita Sodo University, and Wolkite University. During the quantitative phase, 800 students were chosen: 200 from each of the four universities using stratified sampling to ensure equitable representation across institutions and genders. The sample included 414 female students and 386 male students. For the qualitative phase, 20 volunteers (five from each university) were selected with the intention of maintaining gender balance and reflecting a range of academic achievements. This technique was used to collect multiple perspectives and obtain thorough, relevant knowledge of students' experiences across academic levels and gender identities.

3.4. Instruments

3.4.1. Questionnaire

Quantitative data were gathered using a standardized questionnaire separated into three sections. The first component collected demographic information, such as participants' ages, fields of study, and self-assessed English competence. The second portion assessed students' perceptions of teacher support using the Teacher Support Scale, which contained 30 closed-ended questions adapted from Sadoughi and Hejazi (2023). This section discusses four types of teacher support: emotional support (items 1–7), instrumental support (items 8–15), evaluative support (items 16–23), and informational support (items 24–30). Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The final portion assessed students' learning engagement with a 21-item scale modified from Sang & Hiver (2021). Three dimensions of participation were addressed and graded using the same Likert scale: behavioral (items 1–7), affective (items 8–14), and cognitive (items 15–20). Prior to its complete implementation, the questionnaire was pilot tested with 30 students to determine its clarity, relevance, and reliability. The pilot results demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.86 for the teacher support scale and 0.88 for the engagement measure.

3.4.2. Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 carefully chosen students, five from each of the four universities involved, to supplement the quantitative results and gain a more in-depth understanding of how teacher support correlates with student engagement. These interviews explored students' direct experiences with their EFL instructors' support tactics, their participation in English learning activities, and the barriers and motivational aspects affecting their involvement. Each interview lasted 25 to 30 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent to ensure accuracy and facilitate extensive analysis.

3.5. Data Collection Procedures

After securing ethical clearance from each participating university and obtaining informed consent from participants, the questionnaire was administered during scheduled English classes. Interview sessions were arranged at mutually convenient times, conducted in English or the students' preferred language, and transcribed for analysis.

3.6. Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was performed using SPSS version 23.0. Descriptive statistics, such as means and standard deviations, were calculated to evaluate the levels of perceived teacher support and student engagement. Independent samples t-tests were applied to identify any gender-based differences. Furthermore, multiple regression analysis was conducted to investigate the relationships between the different dimensions of teacher support and the various aspects of learner engagement.

The qualitative interview data were transcribed word-for-word and subjected to thematic analysis with the help of NVivo software. Using an inductive coding approach, prominent themes emerged that reflected students' views on different types of teacher support, their motivational factors, and their engagement experiences within EFL classrooms.

These qualitative insights were then integrated with the quantitative findings to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of how teacher support impacts student engagement.

4. RESULTS

Research Question 1: What are the levels of perceived teacher support and learning engagement among Ethiopian EFL students?

Table 1. Levels of perceived teacher support and learning engagement.

Variables	M	SD
Teacher support		
Emotional support	3.59	0.68
Instrumental support	3.70	0.71
Evaluative support	3.54	0.66
Informational support	3.17	0.67
Learning engagement		
Behavioral engagement	3.56	0.61
Affective engagement	3.62	0.65
Cognitive engagement	3.60	0.70
Total	3.54	0.66

Table 1 displays the summary statistics for students' perceptions of teacher support and their engagement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning within Ethiopian higher education institutions. Overall, students reported moderate to relatively high levels of both teacher support and engagement, with average scores ranging from 3.17 to 3.70 on a five-point Likert scale. Among the different types of teacher support, instrumental support received the highest average score ($M = 3.70$), followed by emotional support ($M = 3.59$) and evaluative support ($M = 3.54$).

In contrast, informational support had the lowest mean rating ($M = 3.17$), indicating that students may perceive a deficiency in clear instructional guidance and academic direction. In terms of student engagement, affective engagement scored highest ($M = 3.62$), slightly surpassing cognitive engagement ($M = 3.60$) and behavioral engagement ($M = 3.56$), suggesting a relatively strong emotional and intellectual commitment to learning tasks. The combined engagement mean ($M = 3.54$) reflects a consistently engaged student profile across the three domains.

Research Question 2: Are there gender differences in Ethiopian students' perceptions of teacher support and their levels of learning engagement?

Table 2. Independent T-test Results.

Variables	Male		Female		T	P
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Teacher support						
Emotional support	3.55	0.68	3.58	0.74	-0.434	0.656
Instrumental support	3.70	0.78	3.66	0.80	0.541	0.580
Evaluative support	3.63	0.79	3.53	0.86	1.349	0.171
Informational support	3.70	0.74	3.66	0.79	0.579	0.555
Learning engagement						
Behavioral engagement	3.51	0.75	3.49	0.71	0.329	0.734
Affective engagement	3.52	0.84	3.52	0.80	-0.003	0.989
Cognitive engagement	3.57	0.75	3.57	0.72	-0.087	0.922

Table 2 displays the outcomes of independent samples t-tests conducted to assess gender-based differences in perceived teacher support and student engagement among Ethiopian EFL learners. The results revealed no statistically significant differences between male and female students across any of the measured variables ($p > .05$). Both groups reported similar perceptions regarding emotional, instrumental, evaluative, and informational support from teachers. For example, although female students reported a marginally higher mean score for emotional support ($M = 3.58$) compared to their male counterparts ($M = 3.55$), the difference was not statistically significant ($t = -0.434$, $p = .656$). A comparable trend was observed across all engagement domains: behavioral, affective, and cognitive, indicating no substantial gender-based disparities. These findings suggest that students' experiences of teacher support and engagement are not influenced by gender, reflecting an equitable and inclusive learning environment.

Research Question 3: How does teacher support affect engagement among Ethiopian EFL students?

Table 3. Correlations between measured variables.

Variables	X ₁	X ₂	X ₃	X ₄	Y ₁	Y ₂	Y ₃
Emotional support (X ₁)	1.00	0.56**	0.53**	0.50**	0.60**	0.58**	0.65**
Instrumental support (X ₂)		1.00	0.58**	0.55**	0.57**	0.60**	0.59**
Evaluative support (X ₃)			1.00	0.61**	0.65**	0.63**	0.64**
Informational support (X ₄)				1.00	0.58**	0.61**	0.60**
Behavioral engagement (Y ₁)					1.00	0.70**	0.67**
Cognitive engagement (Y ₂)						1.00	0.66**
Affective engagement (Y ₃)							1.00

Note: ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3 revealed statistically significant and positive correlations between all forms of teacher support and the three facets of student engagement. Among the support dimensions, evaluative support showed the strongest associations with behavioral ($r = 0.65$), cognitive ($r = 0.63$), and affective engagement ($r = 0.64$), underscoring the vital influence of constructive feedback on student participation. Emotional support was most strongly associated with affective engagement ($r = 0.65$), highlighting its key role in cultivating students' positive emotional responses to learning. Furthermore, moderate to strong intercorrelations were observed both among the various teacher support types (ranging from 0.50 to 0.61) and between the engagement components (ranging from 0.66 to 0.70). These patterns suggest a robust and interconnected relationship between teacher support and students' emotional, behavioral, and cognitive involvement in learning. Overall, the results point to the significant role of multidimensional teacher support in enhancing EFL student engagement in the Ethiopian higher education context.

Table 4. Teacher Support as a Predictor of Student Engagement.

Predictor	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig.
Emotional support (X ₁)	0.21	0.07	0.20	3.00	0.003**
Instrumental support (X ₂)	0.18	0.06	0.18	3.00	0.003**
Evaluative support (X ₃)	0.23	0.06	0.24	3.83	0.000**
Informational support (X ₄)	0.17	0.06	0.17	2.83	0.005**

Note: **p < 0.01.

Table 4 demonstrated that all four dimensions of perceived teacher support had a significant impact on student engagement among EFL learners in Ethiopian universities. Evaluative support was identified as the most influential factor ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$), emphasizing the pivotal role of meaningful and timely feedback in driving both academic effort and classroom participation. Emotional support ($\beta = 0.20$, $p = 0.003$) and instrumental support ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = 0.003$) also showed significant positive effects, reflecting the importance of teacher empathy and the provision of practical resources in cultivating a nurturing educational environment. Although the regression coefficient for information support was slightly lower ($\beta = 0.17$, $p = .005$), it was still a significant contributor, indicating that instructional clarity and guidance play a crucial role in maintaining learner engagement. Thus, the findings highlight how different forms of teacher support work in tandem to foster students' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional participation in EFL learning environments.

5. INTERVIEW RESULTS

5.1. Perceived Teacher Support and Learning Engagement

The interview results indicated that students' views on teacher support varied but converged, with many students emphasizing a strong connection between the support they received and their active participation in EFL learning tasks. Interviewees highlighted teacher support as a key motivating factor in encouraging participation and addressing language-related challenges. While many praised the supportive teaching strategies, others pointed out specific areas for improvement to enhance their learning experience.

A consistent theme that emerged from the interviews was the beneficial effect of teacher involvement on students' engagement. Six interviewees (S1, S12, S7, S14, S15, and S16) noted that the support provided by their teachers encouraged them to participate more actively in class discussions and collaborative tasks. In particular, participant S17 emphasized that receiving meaningful and constructive feedback not only enhanced their understanding but also strengthened their class participation.

In contrast, some students indicated that the lack of teachers was a barrier to their participation. For instance, S11 expressed frustration over limited access to instructors, which discouraged question-asking and reduced confidence. Conversely, S5 appreciated teachers who frequently followed up with students and said this practice helped create a supportive and engaging classroom climate. As S20 explained:

The teacher uses interactive methods such as group discussion or role play to make the class lively. I feel more engaged when we can all participate.

Several students stressed the importance of timely feedback and positive reinforcement in maintaining engagement. Participants S3, S8, S19, and S10 noted that praise and encouragement during group activities helped maintain motivation. However, others expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of feedback. For instance, S6 remarked:

I wish our teachers would provide more feedback on our assignments. I feel lost when I do not know how I am doing. This will help me get more involved.

Similarly, S9 stressed the value of teachers being approachable:

Supportive teachers make a big difference. Supportive teachers make a significant difference. When they are approachable, I am more willing to share my ideas. It creates a better learning environment for all of us.

Collectively, the findings highlight the pivotal role of perceived teacher support in influencing EFL students' classroom engagement. Teaching strategies characterized by encouragement, timely feedback, and teacher

approachability are generally associated with increased learner engagement. In contrast, lack of feedback and limited teacher accessibility emerge as major barriers to student participation. These insights emphasize the importance of adopting learner-focused, responsive instructional methods to enhance motivation and active involvement in EFL learning environments.

5.2. Gender Differences in Perceived Teacher Support and Engagement

Surprisingly, the interview results did not indicate significant gender differences in the way students perceived teacher support or their level of engagement within the EFL classroom. Both male and female participants reported feeling supported by their instructors in similar ways, and their engagement appeared to be influenced by similar instructional factors.

Both male and female students consistently highlighted the positive role of teacher encouragement in promoting active classroom participation. For instance, female participants such as S1 and S3 emphasized how supportive responses to questions and motivational comments enhanced their involvement:

"Teachers tend to be more patient with us when we ask questions. It inspires me to participate more actively in discussions."
(S3)

Similarly, male students, including S4 and S11, recognized the significance of instructor comments in maintaining attention and motivation in class.

Interviewees of both genders acknowledged the importance of verbal praise in building confidence and motivation to contribute. Positive reinforcement improved classroom involvement among female students (S2, S5, S9, S17, and S120). Likewise, male students (S6, S10, and S14) welcomed positive input, although some preferred to seek clarification from peers rather than professors.

While a few male students (e.g., S7, S12, and S18) showed a predisposition to appear self-sufficient, these actions did not imply a lack of appreciation for teacher help. Both male and female respondents emphasized the importance of teacher approachability, timely feedback, and encouragement in overcoming language learning obstacles and maintaining engagement. As S10 noted:

"Support is vital because it keeps us on track and makes us feel more assured. It's not about gender; it's about having someone there to lead us."

The findings revealed that gender had no significant impact on students' perceptions of or responses to teacher assistance in EFL environments. Students of both genders expressed gratitude for consistent, approachable, and inspiring instructional techniques. This demonstrates the general effectiveness of supportive teaching, implying that targeting tactics based solely on gender may be unnecessary. Rather, emphasis should be placed on giving all students equitable access to teacher support, which boosts confidence, encourages active involvement, and improves meaningful engagement.

5.3. The Impact of Teacher Support on Engagement

Interviewees frequently identified instructor assistance as a crucial factor impacting their learning engagement. Interviewees cited encouragement, constructive criticism, and instructor attentiveness as major motivators for active engagement and sustained interest in classroom activities. S2 explained:

"When my teacher gives me criticism, I feel more encouraged to participate. It proves that my efforts are worthwhile. If I can ask questions without reluctance, I'm more likely to participate."

Several classmates shared similar viewpoints. Interviewees (S3, S11, S17, and S20) reported that teacher-led discussions created an engaging environment. S5 reported that regular teacher involvement maintained attention and interest. S18 stressed that helpful conduct reduced fear, whereas S14 recognized how normalizing mistakes increased student participation. S16 added:

Students work better together in supportive environments. When the teacher encourages teamwork, I feel more connected to my students and interested in the learning process.

These reports emphasize the importance of teacher assistance in developing students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement. Constructive comments, a safe and welcoming environment, and personable instructors are highlighted as critical to increasing motivation, reducing fear, and facilitating cooperative learning. These findings underline the significance of using responsive, learner-centered teaching strategies to foster a supportive and inclusive educational environment.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Teacher Support and Learning Engagement Levels

Understanding how teacher support promotes learning engagement is critical for improving EFL teaching practices in tertiary education. Teacher support can take several forms, including emotional, instrumental, evaluative, and informational, and each dimension contributes significantly to how students participate in learning.

According to the findings of this study, Ethiopian EFL students rated their learning environment as fairly supportive. Instrumental support was rated the highest among the various types of support, while informational support was deemed the most inadequate. In terms of engagement, students indicated the highest level of emotive participation, followed by cognitive and behavioral engagement. These findings indicate a rather well-rounded teaching environment, although there is always room for improvement, particularly in offering clearer academic advice and fostering deeper cognitive engagement.

The interview data reinforced these findings, with students frequently emphasizing the importance of encouragement, rapid feedback, and engaging instructional tactics such as group discussions and role-playing. Approachable and positive reinforcement-based teacher behaviors were associated with increased student confidence, motivation, and active involvement in class. In contrast, poor feedback and a lack of teacher availability were highlighted as discouraging characteristics that had a detrimental impact on student participation.

These findings are consistent with Liu et al. (2023) observation that university EFL students got strong cognitive and emotional support from their lecturers. Similarly, Zhao and Yang (2022) and Zhao and Qin (2021) found that students generally identified moderate levels of instructor support and autonomy encouragement. These comparable findings show that EFL instructors are becoming more aware of their duties in providing a supportive atmosphere as part of national initiatives to increase English proficiency (Feng & Hong, 2022; Li et al., 2023; Shu, 2020).

While this study revealed that instrumental and informational help were more important than emotional and evaluative support, other investigations reported opposite results. For example, Cao and Zhang (2023) and Affuso et al. (2023) discovered a tendency among teachers to prioritize intellectual over emotional assistance, which is consistent with the current findings. Liu et al. (2023) found higher levels of emotional support, emphasizing contextual and cultural variables in teaching practice.

6.2. Gender Differences in Perceptions of Teacher Support and Engagement

Recognizing how gender affects students' perceptions of teacher support and participation in learning is critical for promoting equity and adapting teaching techniques. This study found that there were no significant gender differences in Ethiopian EFL students' views of teacher support or levels of participation. Although female students reported slightly more emotional support and males a little preference for instrumental and evaluative help, these differences were not statistically significant. Similarly, both male and female students engaged in classroom activities at the same cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels.

This finding indicates that both male and female students experience comparable learning environments, which are likely impacted by equitable teacher-student interactions, uniform teaching methods, and cooperative classroom setups common in Ethiopian colleges. The consistency of teaching quality and instructor availability across multiple

classes appears to contribute considerably to all students having equal access to help, regardless of gender. This result is reinforced by interview replies, in which participants of both genders emphasized the importance of teacher feedback, encouragement, and approachability in increasing motivation and involvement.

This finding is consistent with those of who discovered no significant gender variance in perceived teacher support among university-level EFL students. The use of uniform instructional methodologies and equal classroom management procedures may have contributed to this consistency. Similarly, Hejazi and Sadoughi (2023) discovered that gender had little influence on short-term involvement, supporting the idea that gender alone may not be a critical factor in predicting immediate academic participation or perceived support in higher education.

Nonetheless, opposing viewpoints in the literature emphasize the context-dependent character of gendered participation. According to studies by Oga-Baldwin and Fryer (2020) and An et al. (2022), gender may have a major impact on long-term motivation and academic accomplishment, especially in more competitive or gender-normative learning situations. For example, He et al. (2024) and Lei et al. (2018) found that female students tend to have higher levels of classroom engagement, but Sadoughi and Hejazi (2023) found a significant reduction in male students' academic interest during adolescence. These studies demonstrate that, while short-term engagement may not change, long-term patterns can be influenced by socio-emotional and developmental factors.

6.3. Impact of Teacher Support on Learning Engagement

This study examined the predictive relationship between four types of perceived teacher support: informational, evaluative, affective, and instrumental and the three dimensions of student learning engagement: Behavioral, emotional, and cognitive, within the context of Ethiopian EFL university classrooms. The findings revealed that informational and evaluative support significantly predicted student engagement, with informational support emerging as the strongest predictor across all engagement dimensions, and evaluative support significantly influencing behavioral engagement. In contrast, affective and instrumental support did not demonstrate statistically significant effects, although affective support showed a positive, non-significant trend.

The predictive strength of informational support highlights the centrality of instructional clarity, guidance, and the provision of relevant learning content in shaping engagement. This form of support appears to empower learners cognitively and emotionally, equipping them with strategies to engage more deeply and persistently in academic tasks. The positive association between evaluative support and behavioral engagement underscores the value of feedback in encouraging goal-directed learning behaviors such as sustained effort, participation, and task completion. Meanwhile, the non-significant results for affective support, despite a positive trend, suggest its potential influence may be indirect or contextually mediated, rather than directly driving engagement. The lack of a significant effect for instrumental support raises questions about its relevance or perceived utility in this EFL context, possibly due to learners' emphasis on self-reliance or underutilization of tangible assistance provided by instructors.

These findings align with a growing body of research emphasizing the importance of informational support in language learning environments. Studies by Zou et al. (2021), and Chen and Kent (2020) similarly highlight the strong impact of instructional clarity and guidance on learner motivation and persistence. From a sociocultural theory perspective, the dominant role of informational support can be viewed through the lens of mediated learning and scaffolding (An et al., 2022; Hoi, 2025; Liu & Li, 2023; Muthukrishnan, Fung Lan, Anandhan, & Swamy, 2024; Y. Zhao & Yang, 2022) where teacher input not only enhances comprehension but also supports metacognitive development.

The significant role of evaluative support aligns with findings by Luo (2025) and Vuogan and Li (2023), who emphasized the formative function of feedback in guiding learner performance and reinforcing behavioral engagement. These studies affirm that regular, constructive feedback helps students monitor progress, regulate learning strategies, and persist through academic challenges.

Although affective support was not a significant predictor, prior research indicates its potential importance as an indirect influence on engagement. For example, Zhang et al. (2023) and Plonsky, Sudina, and Teimouri (2022) found that emotional expressions of empathy and encouragement promote a psychologically safe environment, which may enhance motivation, resilience, and self-efficacy all of which contribute to engagement over time (Alrabai, 2022; Shen & Guo, 2022). The current findings, while not statistically conclusive, suggest that affective support should not be discounted in pedagogical planning.

The non-significant impact of instrumental support diverges from findings in studies such as Zou, Zhang, Xie, and Wang (2021) and Liu and Li (2023), where it was found to facilitate academic achievement. This discrepancy may stem from contextual or cultural factors in the Ethiopian higher education setting, where learners may value autonomy or view direct task assistance as less integral to their learning experience. Alternatively, it may reflect variability in how such support is perceived and utilized, indicating the need for further qualitative exploration.

This study investigated how four types of perceived teacher support: informational, evaluative, emotional, and instrumental, predict three aspects of student learning engagement among Ethiopian university EFL students: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. The findings revealed that informational and evaluative assistance were both significant factors of student engagement. Informational support was the most influential element across all engagement types, while evaluative support had a significant impact only on behavioral engagement. Emotional and instrumental support, on the other hand, had no statistically significant impacts, albeit a favorable tendency that was not statistically validated.

The predictive strength of informational support emphasizes the importance of instructional clarity, direction, and the delivery of relevant learning content in influencing engagement. This form of support appears to develop students cognitively and emotionally, giving them the tools they need to engage more deeply and persistently in their academic work. The substantial relationship between evaluative support and behavioral engagement demonstrates how feedback is critical in inspiring students to maintain effort, actively participate, and accomplish their assignments. Meanwhile, the non-significant results for affective support, despite a positive trend, show that its potential influence is indirect or contextually mediated, rather than directly driving engagement. The lack of a substantial effect for instrumental support raises concerns regarding its relevance or perceived value in this EFL context, which could be related to learners' emphasis on self-reliance or underuse of tangible assistance supplied by instructors.

This finding is consistent with previous research that has highlighted the critical importance of informational assistance in language acquisition environments. Zou et al. (2021) and Chen and Kent (2020) found that clear instruction and guidance greatly increased student motivation and perseverance. According to sociocultural theory, the significant impact of informational support can be understood through the concepts of mediated learning and scaffolding (An et al., 2022; Hoi, 2025; Liu & Li, 2023; Vijayarathnam et al., 2025; Zhao & Yang, 2022) in which teachers' contributions not only improve understanding but also foster metacognitive growth.

The important significance of evaluative support is consistent with the findings of Luo (2025) and Vuogan and Li (2023) who stressed the formative function of feedback in guiding learner performance and promoting behavioral engagement. These studies confirm that receiving regular, constructive feedback helps students evaluate their progress, regulate their learning strategies, and persevere in the face of academic hurdles.

Although affective support was not a significant predictor, previous research suggests that it may play an indirect role in involvement. For example, Zhang et al. (2023) and Plonsky et al. (2022) discovered that emotional expressions of empathy and encouragement promote a psychologically safe environment, which may increase motivation, resilience, and self-efficacy, all of which contribute to long-term engagement. While the current findings are not statistically significant, they do imply that affective support should not be overlooked in educational planning.

The non-significant impact of instrumental assistance contrasts with studies from Zou et al. (2021) and Liu and Li (2023), who discovered that it increased academic success. This disparity could be attributed to environmental or cultural issues in Ethiopian higher education, where students may value autonomy or see direct task support as less

important to their learning experience. Alternatively, it could represent variation in how such help is perceived and used, emphasizing the need for more qualitative research.

7. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effects of perceived teacher support (informational, evaluative, affective, and instrumental) on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement among Ethiopian university EFL students, taking into account gender differences. Students reported a reasonably supportive learning environment, with instrumental support scoring highest. However, informational support emerged as the most consistent and significant predictor of participation in all three domains. Furthermore, evaluative support had a significant impact on behavioral engagement, although emotional and instrumental support did not directly predict engagement, albeit affective support did indicate a favorable tendency.

These findings highlight the critical role of informational support, particularly clear direction and relevant instruction in sustaining ongoing engagement in language acquisition. Similarly, evaluative support, such as fast and constructive feedback, is important in increasing students' behavioral participation and sense of academic accountability. Although affective support did not directly predict engagement, its positive correlation suggests that it played an indirect role by contributing to the creation of a helpful and encouraging classroom environment. The subtle impact of instrumental support underscores the significance of its deliberate use within learner-centered instructional frameworks.

Although gender differences were not statistically significant, qualitative data revealed small emotional and behavioral differences, highlighting the importance of gender-responsive educational approaches. The overwhelming consistency in attitudes between male and female students indicates that inclusive and standardized teaching techniques can effectively foster equitable engagement across genders.

Practically, these findings suggest that EFL instructors concentrate on improving informational and evaluative assistance through explicit instruction, timely feedback, and scaffolded learning activities. Furthermore, teacher education programs should include emotionally sensitive and differentiated instructional practices that account for both individual and gender-related learner characteristics. Policymakers must invest in professional development and inclusive curriculum design to encourage equitable and sustainable engagement in higher education EFL contexts.

However, this study has certain drawbacks. The cross-sectional research methodology, reliance on self-reported data, and focus on a single institution may restrict the application of the findings and the ability to infer causal implications.

Subsequent research is encouraged to use longitudinal and multi-institutional approaches to better capture the changing nature of student participation and to extensively investigate how teacher support interacts with contextual, cultural, and gender characteristics.

As a result, the study supported the critical relevance of teacher assistance, particularly informative and evaluative types, in developing strong student involvement in EFL contexts. Adopting holistic and inclusive teaching techniques allows educators and policymakers to better fulfill the needs of various learners while also promoting equitable, engaging language education.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The Ethical Committee of Wolkite University, Ethiopia has granted approval for this study on 23 January 2023 (Ref. No. WKU /RTTAVP/231/2023).

Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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