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TABLE OF CONTENT

APPLICATION OF TECHNOLOGY AND BIG DATA IN THE FIELDS OF FINANCE, ACCOUNTING AND AUDITING IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

BANK RUN AND SILICON VALLEY BANK 1

Lam Dang Xuan Hoa, Ho Minh Khoa, Huynh Vo Nhat Linh 1

BIG DATA AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS 14

Le Thi Minh, Vo Trung Hau 14

THE EFFICIENCY OF THE INTERNAL CONTROL SYSTEM IN RISK MANAGEMENT AT THE NAM A COMMERCIAL JOINT STOCK BANK 23

Truong Thanh Loc, Tran Ngoc Thanh 23

VIETNAM - AUSTRALIA ECONOMIC AND TRADE COOPERATION IN THE NEW NORMAL: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR VIETNAMESE INVESTORS 30

Nhu Nguyen Phuc Quynh*, Anh Nguyen Thi Nguyet, Duy Nguyen Anh 30

IMPACTS OF CREDIT GROWTH AND CREDIT RISK ON THE PROFIT OF VIETNAM JOINT STOCK COMMERCIAL BANKS 43

Dao Le Kieu Oanh*, Tran Thi Huong Ngan 43

FACTORS AFFECTING CUSTOMERS' DECISIONS TO USE E-BANKING AT JOINT STOCK COMMERCIAL BANKS IN HO CHI MINH CITY 57

Nguyen Duy Khanh[1], Pham Quoc Tham[2] 57

HOW CHINA_USA POLITICAL TENSIONS AFFECT STOCK MARKET RETURN OF CHINA AND THE USA? A QUANTILE VAR CONNECTEDNESS APPROACH 70

Hao Wen Chang[1], Tsangyao Chang[2]and Mei-Chih Wang[3] 70

BANKING HUMAN RESOURCES BEFORE THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AI 92

Nguyen Huynh Chi 92

IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF TRAINING THROUGH IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENT TESTING AND ASSESSMENT – CASE IN ACCOUNTING BRANCH, UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS AND FINANCE 102

Thuy Thi Ha 102

ACTIVITIES OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN VIETNAMESE COMMERCIAL BANKS: AN OVERVIEW DURING THE COVID-19 RECOVERY PERIOD 109

Nguyễn Thị Quỳnh Châu, Đào Lê Kiều Oanh 109

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR VIETNAM IN ATTRACTIVE FDI IN GLOBAL MINIMUM CORPORATE TAX IMPLEMENTATION 117

Ngo Hoang Thong 117

DIGITAL ECONOMY IN VIETNAM, TRENDS AND POTENTIABILITY

DEVELOPING SMART HOME MODEL FOR APARTMENTS IN HO CHI MINH CITY BASED ON INTERNET OF THINGS (IoT) TECHNOLOGY 182

Dang Thanh Thuy[1], Nguyen Thanh Dien[2] 182

TRANSPARENCY OF ACCOUNTING INFORMATION OF CONSTRUCTION ENTERPRISES IN HO CHI MINH CITY – CASE STUDY OF APPLICATION OF ACCRUAL ACCOUNTING....193

Truong Thanh Loc[1]*, Pham Thi Yen Nhi[2]....193

FACTORS AFFECTING THE QUALITY OF FINANCIAL STATEMENTS OF MANUFACTURING ENTERPRISES IN HO CHI MINH CITY 207

Truong Thanh Loc*, Dang Nguyen Tuong Han, Nguyen Ngoc Mai Phuong, Nguyen Thi Quynh Huong....207

THE CRITICAL FACTORS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS' INTENTION TO USE METAVERSE TECHNOLOGY FOR SUBJECTS RELATED TO IMPORT-EXPORT LEARNING....221

Van Thuy Nguyen Ho, Chau The Huu, Luan Thanh Nguyen*....221

CONSUMER PERCEPTION ABOUT THE SUSTAINABILITY COMMITMENT OF LUXURY BRANDS IN VIETNAM AND CHINA MARKETS....233

Tran Minh Tu[1]....233

INFLUENCE OF WOM AND EWOM IN MAKING DECISION BUYING GOODS 247

Doan Anh Tu[1], Kim Phi Rum[2], Nguyen Pham Hai Ha[3]....247

DIGITAL ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL IN VIETNAM....257

Hoang Thi Chinh, Nguyen Hoang Phan 257

BLOCKCHAIN APPLICATION IN MODERN LOGISTICS: INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VIETNAM 266

Nguyen Nu Tuong Vi....266

FACTORS AFFECTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DIGITAL ECONOMY IN VIETNAM 272

Vo Tien Si 272

LEGAL FRAME FOR THE OPERATION OF THE REAL ESTATE BUSINESS UTILIZING THE BLOCKCHAIN PLATFORM IN VIETNAM....284

Le Thi Khanh Linh....284

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION – COOPERATION – GLOBAL INTEGRATION IN BUSINESS

FACTORS INFLUENCING BUSINESS ACCEPTANCE OF INDUSTRY 4.0 TECHNOLOGY APPLICATIONS IN DONG NAI PROVINCE 291

Thanh-Thu Vo*, Minh-Huong Tang 291

DIGITAL ORIENTATION, INNOVATION CAPABILITY AND FIRM PERFORMANCE: A PROPOSAL RESEARCH MODEL 298

Nguyen Van Hau 298

PREDICTION OF STUDENT'S BEHAVIORAL INTENTION TO USE SMART LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: A COMBINED MODEL OF SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY AND TECHNOLOGY ACCEPTANCE 309

Nguyen Thi Hai Binh[1], Dao Y Nhi[2], Nguyen Thanh Luan[3], Dang Quan Tri[4] 309

THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPACT OF GRAMMARLY ON EFL WRITING COMPETENCY: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT. 323

Nguyen Thi Hong Lien[1], Nguyen Truong Gia Minh[2], Nguyen Ngoc Vu[3]* 323

FACTORS AFFECTING PURCHASING DECISION OF THE YOUTH ON TIKTOK 336

Ngoc Pham[1], Thanh Cong Tran* 336

FACTORS AFFECTING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY BEHAVIORS OF WORKERS DIRECT PRODUCTION AT CU CHI POWER COMPANY 345

Minh Luan Le, Thi Trang Tran 345

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND EMPLOYEES' ORGANIZATIONAL CITIZENSHOP BEHAVIOUR 355

Nguyen Xuan Hung[1], Ha Le Thu Hoai[1], Nguyen Huu My Truc[2&3], Pham Tan Nhat[2&3] 355

THE INNOVATION CAPACITY - THE ROLE OF LEADERS OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM 365

Huynh Nhut Nghia 365

PEOPLE'S THOUGHTS ON THE IMPACT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ON BUSINESS 376

Ton Nguyen Trong Hien, Bui Tuyet Anh 376

FACTORS AFFECTING BRAND SWITCHING INTENTION IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM 382

Ly Dan Thanh, Nguyen Phu Quoi, Tran Hoang Nam, Vo Hong Son, Nguyen Ngoc Thuy Tien 382

ENHANCE THE DIGITAL COMPETITIVENESS 398

Tran Quang Canh, Hoang Thi Chinh 398

ASSESSING PATIENT SATISFACTION (BRAND) AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AT THU DUC CITY HOSPITAL.....408

Nguyen Hoang Dung [1*], Nguyen Huynh Bao An [2], Van Phuong Trang [2] 408

INDUSTRIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES FORM THE FOUNDATION FOR BINH DUONG'S SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.....408

Hoang-An Nguyen 417

IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL FAIRNESS ON THE EMPLOYEES' KNOWLEDGE SHARING IN TRAVEL AND TOURISM ENTERPRISES IN HO CHI MINH CITY 426

Le Thi Nhu Quynh[1,2], Le Thi Giang[2], Truong Quang Dung[1] 426

THE EFFECT OF PERSONAL MOTIVATION ON THE TACIT KNOWLEDGE SHARING BEHAVIOR OF 5-STAR HOTELS' EMPLOYEES IN HO CHI MINH CITY.....440

Le Thi Giang, Nguyen Bach Hoang Phung.....440

DIGITAL COMPETITIVENESS AND OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY OF ENTERPRISES IN THE DIGITAL ERA: THE CASE OF VIETNAMESE ENTERPRISES 453

Diep Nguyen Thi Ngoc[1*], Canh Quang Tran[2], Anh Bach Hoang Ngoc[1].....453

FACTORS INFLUENCING PARENTS' SELECTION OF PRIVATE PRESCHOOLS IN THU DUC CITY 466

Thi-Trang Tran[1], Thi-My-Dung Pham[2], Thi-Bich-Diep Le[1*] 466

RECOVERY COMMUNICATIONS IN THE TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

DEVELOPING A SPIRITUAL TOURISM DESTINATION IMAGE MEASUREMENT SCALE OF AN GIANG 474

Nguyen Vuong Hoai Thao[1], Nguyen Quyet Thang[2] 474

PROSPECTS OF VIRTUAL REALITY TOURISM APPLICATION IN VIETNAM TOURISM PROMOTION 487

Nguyen Thi Hong Ha, Pham Thi Huong Giang 487

PERSONALIZATION TRAVEL TRENDING IN HO CHI MINH CITY IN THE CONTEXT OF POST COVID-19 497

Duong Bao Trung 497

IMPACTS OF MEDIA ON CUSTOMERS' DECISION TO CHOOSE FOOD AND BEVERAGE SERVICES POST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC 511

Nguyen Thi Bich Van 511

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION APPLICATION TO PROMOTE THE RECOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT OF INBOUND TOURISM IN HO CHI MINH CITY 521

Tran Trong Thanh 521

VIETNAM TOURISM AFTER COVID-19 PANDEMIC 527

Nguyen Hoang Phan[1], Hoang Thi Chinh[2] 527

NAVIGATING THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF SOCIAL MEDIA DATA MINING AND PRIVACY 537

Pham Thai Hien 537

THE CORRELATION BETWEEN STUDENT SELF-REPORTED GENERAL WELL-BEING AND PERCEIVED SUPPORT FROM FRIENDS, TEACHERS, AND UNIVERSITY 545

Virginia Kelsey[1], Đặng Thị Mai Ly[2*], Nguyễn Anh Khoa[2], Nguyễn Văn Tường[2] 545

DIGITAL VERSUS NON- DIGITAL

PROVIDING CONVENIENCE TO CUSTOMERS IN THE DIGITAL MARKETING ERA: OBSERVATIONS FROM COMMERCIAL BANKS IN HO CHI MINH CITY 556

Nguyen Quang Trung 556

VIRTUAL REALITY: AN INNOVATIVE TOOL IN TOURISM EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING 564

Thanh Nguyen Ngoc Le[1], Khuong Thanh Nguyen[2] 564

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS OF STRATEGIC POSITIONING FOR PLACE BRANDING: A CASE STUDY OF DONG THAP PROVINCE 580

Phan Bao Giang.....580

LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL MARKETING ON VIETNAM'S SMALL AND THE MEDIUM BUSINESS ENTERPRISES (SMEs) 587

Lê Kim Nguyên[*] 587

CHALLENGES FACED BY TEACHERS IN NON-TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

PROPOSE AN ONLINE TEACHING COMPETENCE SCALE FOR UNIVERSITY LECTURERS 596

Duong Thi Kim Oanh*, Dang Thi Dieu Hien 596

EXAMINE USAGE OF LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (LMSS) BY FACULTY STAFF AT UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS (UEF) AND FINANCE WITH EXPANDED TECHNOLOGY ACCEPTANCE MODEL (TAM).....608

Ha Truong Minh Hieu, Ngo Minh Hai*, Mach Tran Huy.....608

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION
AN INDISPENSABLE EVOLUTION FOR SUSTAINABLE CORPORATES

FACTORS AFFECTING THE APPLICATION OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTING AT MANUFACTURING ENTERPRISES IN BINH DUONG PROVINCE 618

Truong Thanh Loc[1]*, Nguyen Thi Thanh Truc[2] 618

HRM DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: TAKING A ROAD OF SUCCESSION PLANNING ..629

Trương Phan Hoàng Anh, Giang Ngọc Anh.....629

THE IMPLICATION OF CONTACLESS SERVICE AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE CUSTOMER REVISIT INTENTION 640

Linh, Nguyen Duy Yen*.....640

TOURISM BRAND LOVE IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE ROLE OF ONLINE TOURIST EXPERIENCES, TOURIST-BRAND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY 651

Thanh Nguyen Ngoc Le 651

CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS IN CROSS-CULTURAL SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING (SoTL): A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY 662

Punithan Moganathas[1], Jenny Hill[2], Andy V.-M. Kok[2], Matt Barr[2], Ruffin Relja[2]*, Philippa Ward[2], Duong Tran Quang Hoang[3], Quynh Phuong Tran[3] 662

LEVERAGING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION FOR SUSTAINABLE CORPORATE EVOLUTION IN VIETNAM 677

Nguyen,Tan Dat[1], Le,Dinh Thang[2].....677

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND APPLICATIONS

FB-PROPHET MODEL FOR TIME SERIES FORECASTING IN SALES 691
Thanh Cong Tran 691
USING AI CODE IN C# PROGRAMMING 698
Nguyen Ha Giang 698
DETERMINANTS OF CONTINUANCE USAGE INTENTION OF MOBILE FOOD ORDERING APPLICATIONS (MFOAS) AMONG VIETNAMESE USERS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF E-SATISFACTION 705
Lam Hoang Phuong[1*], Nguyen Thi Kim Lien[2], Tien Hung Nguyen[3], Vinh Long Nguyen[4] 705
DECODING MARKETING INSIGHT: INSIGHT FROM OUTSIDE 718
Hoàng Thị Hằng, Trần Thành Công[*] 718
DIGITAL DISRUPTION AND DATA SECURITY: HOW FINTECH IS RESHAPING BANKING ... 724
Hoàng Văn Hiếu, Trần Ngọc Thiên Ngân 724

TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

EFL LEARNERS' ATTITUDES AND LEARNING ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNICATIVE GAME-BASED GRAMMAR TEACHING 736

Nguyen Thi Thanh Huyen[1], Tran Quoc Thao[2] 736

APPROACHES TO TEACHING L2 LISTENING: 749

CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN REAL-LIFE AND CLASSROOM-BASED LISTENING 749

Luu Thi Mai Vy 749

DEFINING ROLES OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY LANGUAGE CLASSROOM 755

Ho Xuan Tien, Duong My Tham 755

EFL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND LEARNING INVESTMENT IN PORTFOLIO - BASED ENGLISH WRITING LEARNING: A LITERATURE REVIEW 763

Ly Gia Huy[1], Tran Quoc Thao[2] 763

EXPLORING EFL LEARNER IDENTITIES IN PROJECT-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING AT A HIGH SCHOOL IN AN GIANG PROVINCE 774

Nguyen Hong Thien[1], Tran Quoc Thao[2] 774

THE VALUES OF SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING: A LITERATURE REVIEW 791

THE ISSUE OF AMBIGUITY IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 801

Nguyen Dinh Tuan 801

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL EFL STUDENTS' MOTIVATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING 812

Huynh Thanh Nhon[1], Tran Quoc Thao[2] 812

EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF WRITING ANXIETY ON VIETNAMESE ESL UNDERGRADUATES' WRITING PERFORMANCE: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY 821

Nguyen Ngoc Nguyen, Nguyen Hoang Phan 821

THE APPLICATION OF THE "FLIPPED CLASSROOM" MODEL IN TEACHING ENGLISH IN THE VIETNAMESE UNIVIVERSITY EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT 838

THE USE OF RESOURCE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN EFLFLIPPED CLASSROOMS 847

Nguyen Quynh Thao Vy[1,*], Duong My Tham[2] 847

INSIGHTS INTO ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS' USE OF PHRASAL VERBS IN ACADEMIC WRITING 860

Do Thi Thanh Thuy, Tran Quoc Thao 860

LAW IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL INTEGRATION

LEGALISING INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY INFRINGEMENTS IN RUSSIA – A WAR TACTIC IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE 869

Bui Thi Hong Ninh* 869

MODEL OF ASSET REGISTRATION WORLDWIDE AND LESSONS FOR VIETNAM IN IMPROVING ASSET REGISTRATION LAWS 880

Vu Anh Sao[1,2], Nguyen Thi Xuan Mai[2] 880

LEGAL ISSUES ARISING FROM THE DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION, AND USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) - INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS FOR VIETNAM 887

Le Hoang Minh Huy*, Nguyen Thi Thu Ha, Dao Trong Duc, Ky Dieu Linh, Bui Thi Thuy Linh, Nguyen Nam Trung 887

SOUTH KOREA'S EXPERIENCES ON PROPERTY REGISTRATION LAW - LESSONS FOR VIETNAM 896

Vu Anh Sao, Pham Huynh Bao Oanh 896

THE RISE OF REMOTE WORK: LEGAL CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYMENT LAW IN VIETNAM 903

Nguyen Thi Xuan Mai[1], Nguyen Thi Ngoc Loan[2] 903

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN THE EMERGING AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE 910

Nguyen Thi Thu Trang 910

THE IMPACTS OF GLOBAL MINIMUM TAX ON FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT (FDI) CORPORATIONS IN VIETNAM 921

Trần Ngọc Thanh[1] 921

CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE ACTIVITIES AND TAX MANAGEMENT ISSUES 933

Le Huynh Phuong Chinh, Ngo Thi Khanh Linh, Pham Ngoc Lan Anh 933

EXPERIENCE IN KOREA AND CHINA ON TAX MANAGEMENT FOR CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE ACTIVITIES 941

Duong Anh Son[1], Tran Vang Phu[2] 941

LEGAL PERSPECTIVE ON REGULATIONS RALATED TO PERSONAL INCOME TAX WHEN EARNING INCOME THROUGH E-COMMERCE PLATFORMS IN VIETNAM, TAKING THE CASE OF INDIVIDUALS DOING BUSINESS THROUGH TIKTOK APPLICATION 946

Nguyen Duc Tri [1], Hoang Minh Châu[2] 946

THE COMPATIBILITY ON THE SCOPE OF MUTUAL LEGAL ASSISTANCE (MLA) IN CRIMINAL MATTERS AND THE CONDITIONS OF REFUSAL MLA IN CRIMINAL MATTERS BETWEEN VIETNAMESE LAW AND INTERNATIONAL TREATIES WHICH VIETNAM HAS SIGNED. 956

Pham Huynh Bao Oanh 956

TAX POLICY FOR E-COMMERCE OF COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO VIETNAM 967

Nguyen Thanh Minh Chanh, Ha Thi Van Anh, Pham Lam Tam Nhu 967

LEGAL REGULATIONS FOR ENTERPRISE OBLIGATIONS TO PROVIDE INFORMATION ON E-COMMERCE PLATFORM 974

Truong Kim Phung*, Nguyen Hoang Chuong 974

"ROBOT TAX" – RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VIETNAM 981

Gian Thi Le Na, Pham Phuong Doanh 981

WTO APPELLATE BODY REFORM IN THE CONTEXT OF ESCALATING GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS 988

Nguyen Nam Trung 988

IMPACTS OF STATE OWNERSHIP AND BUSINESS CHARACTERISTICS ON TAX AVOIDANCE: EVIDENCE IN VIETNAM....128
Huyen Ngoc Nguyen, Thanh Dan Bui 128
RUSSIA'S IMPACTS AND SCENES ON BEING BANNED FROM SWIFT....143
Lam Dang Xuan Hoa [1] , Phan Ngoc Anh [2] 143
THE ROLE OF ACCESS TO FINANCE AND THE ENTREPRENEURIAL INTENTION OF YOUNGERS IN THE SOUTHWESTERN PROVINCE, VIETNAM....151
Vu Truc Phuc*, Nguyen Dang Hat, Nguyen An Phu, Dao Le Kieu Oanh 151

DEFINING ROLES OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Student engagement is a fundamental factor significantly contributing to the success of teaching and learning in language classrooms. Its influence on learners' achievement varies regarding different engagement dimensions in terms of cognitive, behavioral, affective, and agentic aspects. Throughout the centuries, a variety of explorations from researchers have emphasized the effects of student engagement and the correlation between this factor and their academic results. This paper aims to review the roles of student engagement in the context of language classrooms where English is taught and learned in the 21st century. This paper synthesizes theories and findings investigated from studies and reveals a general picture of the roles of student engagement in language classrooms with skills and requirements needed for the 21st century. The paper concludes with practical implications for both educators and learners to enhance student engagement in the language classroom. In addition, recommendations for further research on each component of student engagement and measures to attain student engagement at a high level in different contexts are also proposed in this paper.

Keywords: *student engagement, language classroom, the 21st century.*

1. Introduction

Student engagement has been defined in a variety of studies on language teaching. Hu and Kuh (2002) considered this term as the level of effort students spend on educational pursuits that directly influence intended results. Hrause (2005) defined it as the amount of time, effort, and resources that students devote to learning-enhancing activities. Coates (2008), with the same viewpoint, considered student engagement as "students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning". This concept was also considered in terms of its dimensions. According to Reeve (2012), engagement is a multidimensional concept made up of four facets—behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic—that are closely tied to one another while participating in a learning activity.

It is essential to distinguish motivation and engagement because they really vary. The two terms have been used interchangeably although they differ from each other. Maehr and Meyer (1997) claimed that motivation refers to the root causes of a certain activity and this concept can be comprehended in terms of the strength, scope, caliber, and perseverance of one's efforts. Meanwhile, a large number of researchers agreed that engagement is frequently seen as the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components of actual motivation (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Kindermann, 2008). In other words, a person's environment and interest in something are intimately linked while they are engaged in it (Fredricks et al., 2004).

In the 21st century, student engagement has been examined in several research. In many different parts of the world, issues related to this term are more and more concerning. However, research on student engagement is still limited in Vietnam. Most studies have been conducted on university students and there has been little literature on the roles of engagement of students in different school systems. There are a number of needs to have materials that provide general information about this issue in various circumstances. This paper aims to shorten the research gap and is essential to complement the literature on this important aspect that has impacts on students' learning outcomes.

2. Twenty-first century skills

The concept of 21st century skills is considered to contain a wide range of abilities and knowledge, and this concept signifies different things to different people. As a result, providing a definite definition and category is not simple. According to The Glossary of Education Reform [GER] (2014, para. 1), educators, school reformers, college professors, employers, and others regarded a large scale of knowledge, abilities, work practices, and personality qualities known as "21st-century skills" essential elements for achievements in the world nowadays, especially in programs at colleges or university, careers and workplaces in modern days. Alongside the definition, the skills, knowledge, character traits, and work habits are provided as follows.

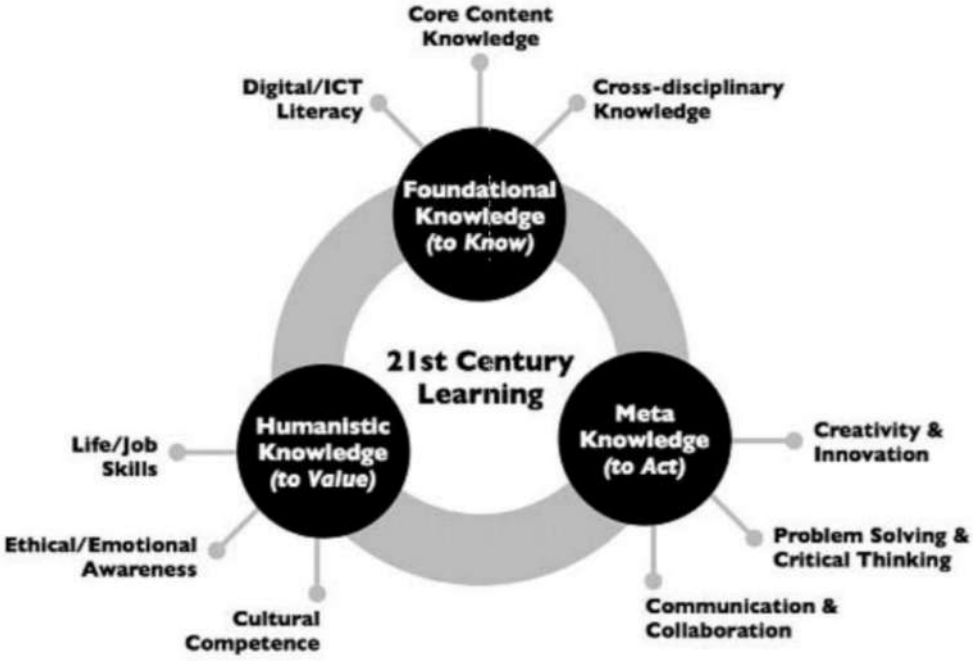
Thinking critically, resolving issues, deliberation, understanding, analyzing, and information synthesis

- Techniques for doing research, probing questions
- Creativity, artistic ability, curiosity, inventiveness, and personal expression
- Persistence, self-discipline, foresight, preparation, flexibility, and initiative
- Communication skills—oral and written, public speaking and presentation, listening
- Administration, cooperation, teamwork, and competence in using virtual workplaces
- Knowledge of information and communication technology (ICT), the media and the internet, interpretation and analysis of data, and programming computers
- Knowledge of social justice, ethics, and civics
- Financial and economic literacy, as well as entrepreneurship
- Humanitarianism, intercultural literacy, and world awareness
- Knowledge of science and scientific technique
- Awareness of environmental and preservation, and knowledge of ecosystems
- Knowledge of health and well-being such as nutrition, food, exercise, and public health and safety
- (GER, 2014)

Kereluik et al. (2013) categorized 21st century skills into three main types of knowledge that are fundamental (to know), meta (to act), and humanistic (to value) (Figure 1). The first kind consists of ICT or digital, core content, and multidisciplinary literacy. The next type includes creativity and innovation, problem-solving and critical thinking, and communication and collaboration. The final category includes cultural competency, ethical/emotional awareness, and life/work skills. (ibid., p. 130).

Figure 1

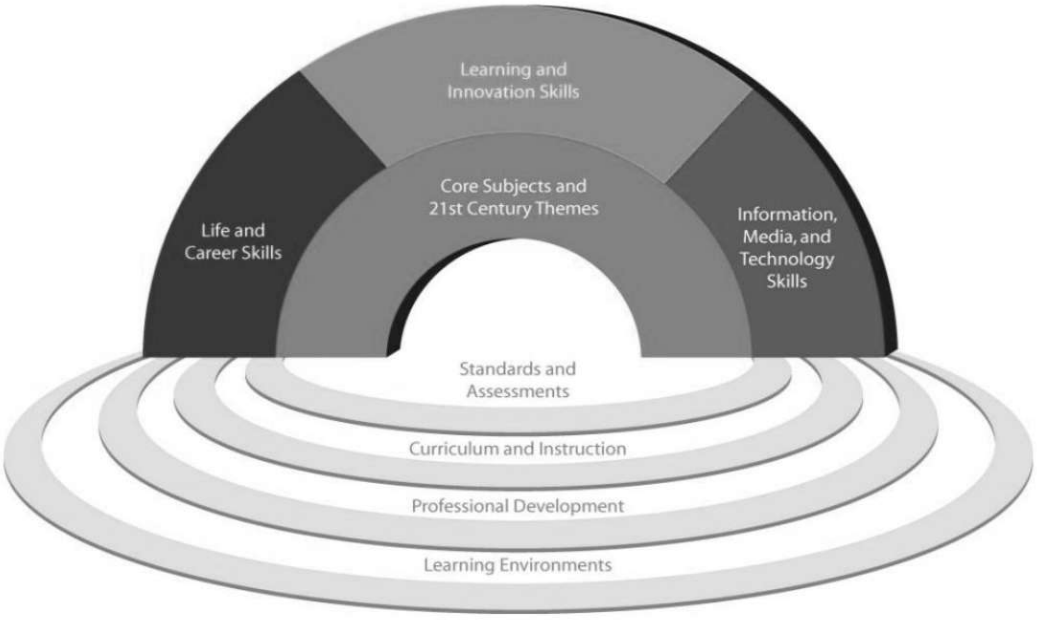
The Framework for 21st Century Skills



Partnership for 21st Century Skills [P21] (2019), an association of business leaders and educators, offered a framework for learning in 21st century identifying vital abilities and skills for the future success in the global workplace. Three sets of skills are created from the eleven competencies: (i) skills of learning and innovation (e.g., creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration), (ii) skills of information, media, and technology (e.g., information literacy, media literacy, ICT), and (iii) career and life skills (e.g., social and intercultural skills, adaptation and flexibility, creativity and self-direction, productivity and responsibility, leadership and accountability) (ibid., p. 1).

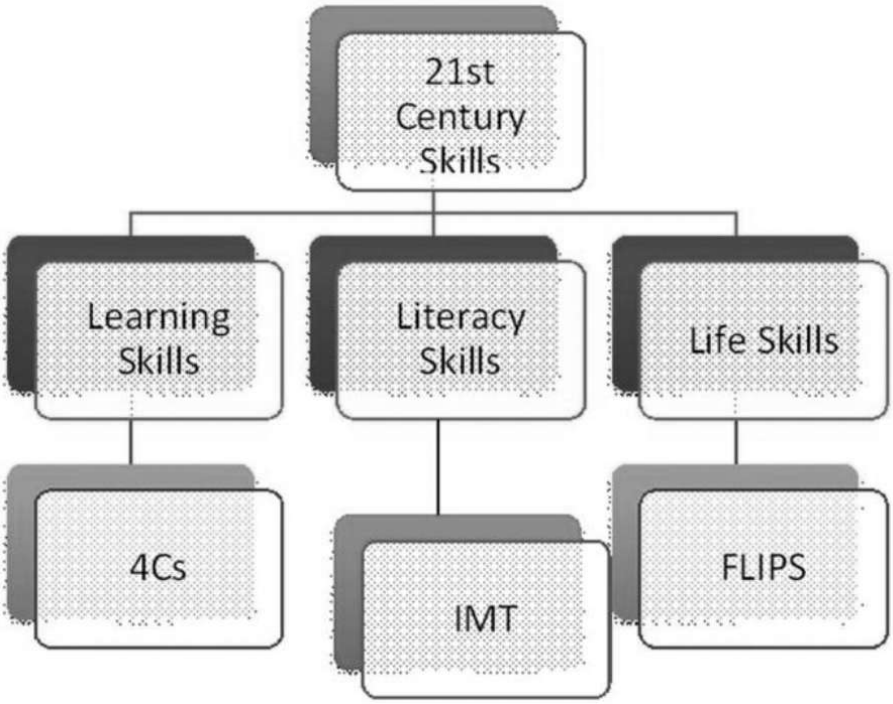
Figure 2

21st Century Student Outcomes and Support Systems



Recently, CBSE (2020) categorized the 21st century skills components into three groups, namely learning skills (4Cs), literacy skills (IMT) and life skills (FLIPS). Particularly, '4Cs' can be defined as critical thinking, creativity and innovation, collaboration, communication; IMT means information, media, and technology knowledge; and FLIPS can be interpreted as abilities to be flexible and adaptable, leadership and sense of responsibility, inventiveness and self-direction, social and intercultural interaction (ibid., p.18). Figure 3

Components of 21st Century Skills



Despite various perspectives on the classification of 21st-century skills, there are three primary groups concerning the competencies related to education, fundamental literacy, and human life. This research mainly uses the framework from CBSE (2020) since it seems to be more thorough and understandable than the others.

Considering these above frameworks, it is obvious that student engagement which is denoted as the involvement of the students in the classrooms related to activities to learn, join, and cooperate can be seen as a component to develop 21st-century skills. Improving student engagement is one of the practices enhancing students' skills these days. It proves that students' engagement contributes to acquiring mentioned skills and needs improving to meet the requirements in the 21st-century classrooms.

3. Definition of student engagement in education

3.1 Dimensions of student engagement

There are various outlooks on the components of student engagement. On examining the connection between student engagement and motivation, Fredricks et al., (2004) agreed that student engagement is a construct with three aspects namely behavior, emotion and cognition. Reeve (2012), however, argued that the agentic dimension should have been added as the fourth component as any focus on a student's actions, feelings, or cognitive engagement during a lesson unintentionally encourages a one-way information flow from the teacher to the learner. It's critical to evaluate how well students have added to the general flow of education as they make an effort to adapt and enrich what they are learning.

3.2 Student engagement styles

Four styles of engagement were indicated by Coates (2007) including intense, independent, collaborative and passive ways. For the first style, according to Coates (2007), students' learning environment is perceived by them as responsive, supportive, and challenging, and they typically find the teaching personnel to be friendly. An independent engagement was described as the style that students consider themselves as members of a friendly learning environment. However, these students are less able to cooperate with classmates inside or outside of class or to involve in educational activities and events on campus. Students following the third style of engagement have the intention to focus on the societal elements of their lives and work. However, students who have passive styles hardly take part in activities that connect to productive learning.

4. Roles of student engagement in the 21st-century language classroom

4.1 Effects of engagement

According to Rush and Balamoutsou (2006), the effects of engagement involve learning to value viewpoints that are different from their own and adopting the principles and teaching strategies of their lecturers. Spending time and effort on actions with educational significance is another benefit of engagement. Learners are motivated to engage in extracurricular activities, concentrate on their studies, raise questions to the teachers, discuss in class comfortably, frequent campus visits, and establish a few friends.

In addition to these findings, studies have repeatedly demonstrated a connection between students' time, try, and concern in a variety of activities that focus on education and successful results like enhanced performance, persistence, and satisfaction. The term "student engagement" emerged as a result of Astin's research on student engagement in their own learning from 1984. Later, with work on successful teaching and learning strategies, this idea was extended to integrated previous aspects such as the caliber of the endeavor and the amount of time spent on tasks (Coates, 2007; Kuh, 2003).

4.2 Functions of student engagement

The importance of student engagement has been emphasized in a variety of research. According to Birch and Ladd (1997) it is a characteristic of students that is exceptionally open to beneficial impacts, like an instructor's encouragement. Student engagement gives teachers the real-time feedback they require to assess the success of their instructional tactics for student motivation. Moreover, Ladd and Dinella (2009) claimed that student engagement facilitates learning because of how effectively it forecasts children perform in school or whether they succeed or fail in achieving academic progress. When the agency has been acknowledged as the fourth component of student engagement, researchers add three additional roles including gains in learning outcomes, contribution positively to the instructional process, the responsiveness of the learning environment, and gains in the satisfaction of psychological needs.

Several studies have also emphasized the roles of students' engagement in EFL classrooms. Svalberg (2009) proposed that "engagement with language is a cognitive, affective, and/or social process in which the learner is the agent and language is the object and sometimes vehicle". Student engagement, according to Ruey (2010), is critical because enthusiastic learners perform well in the process of learning. Another research by Trowler (2010) also explored that students take action when they are engaged. As a result, they must assume responsibility for their own education. Student engagement, according to Hunt and Chalmers (2012), is to offer a learning-centered strategy in which the facilitator supplies an efficient method to learn in new ways that are relevant and pleasant to the students. More significantly, assessing teaching and learning excellence at universities had become associated with student participation (Beer et al., 2010). In EFL classroom contexts, higher-course-achievement students were more engaged in class than lower-

achievement ones (Dincer et al., 2017). It is apparent that student engagement is strongly connected with student outcomes, including academic achievement.

Additionally, there have been studies on the engagement of students in Vietnam that help to examine its functions in learning. Despite the low level of engagement among Vietnamese students, Nguyen (2016) explored the fact that student engagement has a stronger impact on students' results than any other institutional feature. The effort students put into their studies, as well as the supportive atmosphere, are the most important contributors to student results. Another study on business students in Hanoi, Vietnam, conducted by Trinh (2021), found that cognitive and agentic engagement had a substantial effect on students' academic achievement. Meanwhile, Tran (2022) investigated that EFL students in Vietnam are engaged in their learning at a high level. The cognitive dimension is focused most whereas the least one is the agentic aspect. There are also differences in the extent of student engagement regarding various groups of students who are majored and non-majored in English. The results revealed that students who are new get engaged more than the older ones and students who specialize in English pay more attention and invest in the language classrooms more than ones who are non-majored. These findings provide precious information, contributing to explaining the learning results.

In general, the effects and functions of student engagement have been explored and discussed popularly in the 21st century. The number of studies clarifying the roles of student engagement in language classrooms has blossomed. It is obvious that this concept gradually becomes concerning and a variety of research contributed significantly to the investigation of its influences in language classrooms. However, theories of roles of student engagement in language classrooms at different levels of education are still limited. This requires that there should be more research conducted in different contexts, especially in school systems besides universities or colleges.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Throughout the 21st century, the roles of student engagement have been investigated at different levels. Although subjects of research related to this aspect have not resembled, it is undeniable that student engagement can be regarded as an essential factor that influences and contributes to learners' success. This paper synthesized the theories on the roles of student engagement together with skills necessary for studying in the 21st century. It also offered a general picture of the importance of learners' participation in language classrooms. Simultaneously, it also gives some implications for both educators and learners to boost student involvement in language classrooms. First and foremost, it is really necessary for teachers as well as students to raise their awareness of the significance of engagement in the language classroom. Findings from studies indicated that student engagement plays an important role in improvement their learning outcomes. It is necessary that both educators and learners pay more attention to its roles in language classrooms to obtain high learning results. Furthermore, educational curriculum and lesson plans need to be included activities in order to encourage students to take part in the lessons in language classrooms. As mentioned above, the 21st-century skills which students need to possess are abilities of critical thinking, creativity and innovation, collaboration, and communication. Hence, discussions, debates, competitions, games, or quizzes are some interesting forms attracting students' participation in the classrooms in general and in language classrooms in specific. Last but not least, student engagement should be evaluated as a part of students' performance during lessons to motivate them to become more active and positive in learning. In Vietnam, new policies enacted by the Ministry of Education and Training have been applied to evaluate students' results with formative and summative tests including students' development and participation, which proves that student engagement has been more concern and it also contributes to scores at some extents. It is also suggested that more studies be conducted on each of the characteristics of student engagement, as well as ways to achieve

high levels of students' involvement in various circumstances so that teaching and learning in language classrooms become more efficient

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