



## **Student Misbehaviour in the EFL Classroom: An Exploration of Students' Perspectives**

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### **Introduction**

Managing student discipline has always been seen as the most challenging task that teachers at all levels have to deal with daily (Egeberg et al., 2021). Previous studies have shown that student disciplinary problems are the major source of teachers' stress (Sugino, 2010a; Tsouloupas et al., 2014) and job dissatisfaction (Kengatharan, 2020; Pourtoussi et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Most importantly, teachers' attribution and interpretation of student misbehaviour can affect their motivation and commitment in teaching (Aldrup et al., 2018; Frenzel, 2014; Tran & Moskovsky, 2022). To provide teachers a better understanding of student misbehaviour in the EFL classroom, the current study examined the most common misbehaviours reported by students, students' evaluation of the impact of these behaviours on teachers and their teaching, and the relationships between the frequency of student misbehaviour and their motivation for English language learning, and between the frequency of student misbehaviour and their perceived influence of misbehaviour on teachers and their teaching.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Student Misbehaviour**

Student misbehaviour refers to student disruptive or unwanted behaviours that interfere with learning and classroom activities (Johnson et al., 2019; Kearney et al., 1991; Winter, 1995). Sun and Shek (2012) suggest that any classroom behaviours that involve "rule-breaking, violating the implicit norms or expectations, being inappropriate in the classroom settings and upsetting teaching and learning" can be considered as misbehaviour (p. 2). Examples of student misbehaviour include chatting, non-attentiveness, doing something in private, sleeping, being late for class, using mobile phones, aggression, and being impolite and disrespecting teachers (Johnson et al., 2017; Kulinna et al., 2006; Sun & Shek, 2012). In the context of foreign language teaching, Debreli and Ishanova (2019) found that the most common classroom misbehaviours reported by Turkish teachers were using a mobile phone, using the mother tongue, a lack of



willingness to study as part of low motivation, excessive talking, and asking irrelevant questions. Among these behaviours, using the first language in the English language classroom was considered unique to the foreign language learning context. Teachers stated that students used their mother tongue when they struggled to understand the lesson content and express their opinions. Some might use their first language to make fun and disrupt the lesson, which caused lesson interruptions, and teachers' negative emotional responses.

## **The Influence of Student Misbehaviour on Teachers and Their Teaching**

Effects of student misbehaviour on the learning process and the classroom environment have been the focus of various research in education (e.g.: Marzano & Marzano, 2003; Sadik & Yalcin, 2018). Previous studies have shown that students who engage in unproductive behaviours report lower academic achievement than those who do not misbehave (Angus et al., 2010; Finn et al., 2010). Teachers' performance and teaching quality have been affected adversely by disciplinary problems (Baysal & Ocak, 2021; Sun & Shek, 2012). Teachers might have to pause the lesson to manage student discipline (Finn et al., 2010), which not only interrupts the lesson flow (Baysal & Ocak, 2021) but also causes teachers difficulty in staying on track and achieving the learning outcomes (Glock & Kleen, 2019). Gormley et al. (2021) found that teachers spent an average of 2.4 hours per week dealing with disruptive student behaviours.

Student disciplinary problems have been linked to teachers' stress (Sugino, 2010a; Tsouloupas et al., 2014) and job dissatisfaction (Kengatharan, 2020; Pourtoussi et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). In a study of the influence of student-related demotivating factors on Vietnamese university EFL teachers and their teaching, Tran and Moskovsky (2022) found that student misbehaviour could trigger teachers' emotional exhaustion, anger and anxiety. Particularly, teachers reported that they found student misbehaviour as a sign of their disrespect and undervaluation of teachers and teachers' efforts in teaching. These interpretations, in turn, contributed to the withdrawal of teachers' engagement in and dedication to teaching (Pourtoussi et al., 2018). Teachers who frequently deal with students' problematic behaviour also experience reduced work enthusiasm and low levels of job satisfaction (de Ruiter et al., 2020; Vidić et al., 2021). Previous research has shown that difficulties in managing disciplinary problems impede teachers' sense of personal accomplishment (Aloe et al., 2014) and self-efficacy in teaching (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Vidić et al., 2021). These negative influences can increase the rate of teachers' attrition (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Moreover, disciplinary issues have been found to cause teachers' sense of rejection and consequently hinder teachers from building positive relationships and connections with students (Aldrup et al., 2018).

Although considerable research has been devoted to teachers' self-reports of disruptive classroom behaviour and the influence of these behaviours on their performance and well-being, less attention has been paid to students' perceptions of classroom misbehaviour (Aldrup et al., 2018). Teachers and students might have different experiences and viewpoints of classroom problematic behaviour. For example, Sun and Shek (2012) examined classroom disruptive behaviours among Hong Kong secondary school students and found discrepancies existed between teachers' and students' perceptions of disruptive behaviours. While teachers viewed students' tardiness, eating/drinking and passiveness as unacceptable, students did not consider these behaviours as problems. These discrepancies might derive from the differences in teachers' and students' social roles and values (Supaporn et al., 2003), and their tolerance for misbehaviour (Robinson & Griesemer, 2006).

Previous studies have shown that teachers' emotional and behavioural responses to disciplinary issues during classroom instructions are associated with their interpretations of students' intentions and motivation for misbehaving (Debreli & Ishanova, 2019; Frenzel, 2014; Tran & Moskovsky, 2022). Teachers who attribute students' unwanted behaviour to a lack of respect for teachers are more likely to experience negative emotions and low levels of effort in teaching (Tran & Moskovsky, 2022). It should be noted that teachers' interpretations can be subjective and biased (Aldrup et al., 2018). Students' misbehaviour

sometimes can be rated by teachers more harshly than how they actually are (Downey & Pribesh, 2004). Teachers' misinterpretations of students' misbehaviour not only contribute to teachers' experienced stress and burnout (Frenzel, 2014; Pourtoussi et al., 2018), but also affect the application of strategies and interventions to discipline students (Glock & Kleen, 2017). To address this problem, Aldrup et al. (2018) suggested that involving students' voices can provide teachers with a more comprehensive picture of what students think and what their intentions are when they engage in misbehaviour. With this in mind, the present study aimed to broaden the knowledge of student misbehaviour by examining the extent to which students evaluate the influence of problematic behaviour on teachers and their teaching; the relationship between the frequency of student misbehaviour and their perceived influence of these behaviours on teachers and their teaching; and the relationship between the frequency of student misbehaviour and their motivation for English language learning. The following questions are addressed in this article:

1. What are the most common misbehaviours in the Vietnamese EFL classroom?
2. What are students' perceptions of the influence of misbehaviour on teachers and their teaching?
3. Is there any relationship between the frequency of students' misbehaviour and their perceptions of the influence of misbehaviour on teachers and their teaching?
4. Is there any relationship between the frequency of students' misbehaviour and their motivation for English language learning?

## Methodology

The current study employed a questionnaire composed of three scales to answer the research questions. The study modified the misbehaviour questions originally created by Sugino (2010a) to assess how often students participate in disruptive behaviour within the EFL classroom and to understand their views on how these actions affect teachers and their teaching. Participants were asked to rate how much they engaged in the listed disruptive behaviours in the EFL classroom (from 1=almost never or never to 5=almost always or always). The list of students' misbehaviour consisted of 14 items representing 14 misbehaviours in the EFL classroom. In the next part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to evaluate the influence of the listed misbehaviour on their teachers and their teaching, using the same items in the first part of the questionnaire (from 1=insignificant to 5=severe). The Motivational Intensity Scale developed by Gardner (2010) measured students' motivation for English language learning. Participants were asked to assess their efforts in English language learning by responding to the items on a 7-point scale (from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree).

Three hundred seventy-nine students (268 females and 106 males) from a public university in the South of Vietnam participated in the study. Participant ages ranged between 18 and 24 years old ( $M = 19.4$ ), and their mean length of English language learning was, on average, 7.87 years. The number of participants whose major was English outweighed the number of non-English major participants (70.18% and 29.82%, respectively). More than half of the participants (63.32%) were in their first year of university. Almost a quarter of them (23.48%) were second-year students. A small minority (12.93%) were third-year students, and only one student (0.26%) was in his/her fourth year of university.

Collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS 27. Reliability, normality, and construct validity of the administered scales were also checked to ensure that they were consistent and adequate for the current study (Davies & Hughes, 2014). Descriptive analyses with the mean, standard deviation and variance calculation were conducted to examine the frequency of engaging in misbehaviour reported by Vietnamese university students, how students evaluate the impact of classroom misbehaviour on teachers and their teaching, and students' motivation intensity for English language learning. Independent t-tests were carried out to investigate whether students in different groups (male vs. female, and English major vs. non-English major) might report different experiences regarding their frequency of engaging in classroom problematic behaviour and their perceived influence of these behaviours on teachers and their teaching. Correlations

and regressions were calculated to explore the relationships between the frequency of student misbehaviour and their perceptions of the influence of misbehaviour on teachers and their teaching, and between the frequency of student misbehaviour and their motivation for English language learning.

## Results

Descriptive statistics showed that the reported frequency of student misbehaviour in the EFL classroom in Vietnam was low ( $M = 1.75$ ,  $SD = .46$ ). The most common misbehaviours were using a cell phone, laptop or iPad inappropriately ( $M = 2.88$ ;  $SD = .83$ ), forgetting to do homework ( $M = 2.32$ ;  $SD = .76$ ), and being late for class ( $M = 2.10$ ;  $SD = .85$ ). The least frequently reported misbehaviours were taking a rebellious attitude ( $M = 1.23$ ;  $SD = .57$ ) and giving negative comments on teachers ( $M = 1.20$ ;  $SD = .54$ ). Independent t-tests showed no significant difference between female and male students ( $t(379) = 1.47$ ,  $p = .14$ ), and between English-major and non-English major students ( $t(379) = 1.45$ ,  $p = .15$ ) in their frequency of engaging in classroom problematic behaviour.

Students' rated influence of misbehaviour on teachers and their teaching was moderate ( $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = .93$ ). The most troublesome behaviours were taking a rebellious attitude ( $M = 3.75$ ;  $SD = 1.28$ ) and giving negative comments on teachers ( $M = 1.20$ ;  $SD = .54$ ). The least disruptive behaviours were using a cell phone, laptop, or iPad inappropriately ( $M = 2.99$ ;  $SD = 1.09$ ), talking out of turn during the lesson ( $M = 2.99$ ;  $SD = 1.05$ ), and being late for class ( $M = 3.12$ ;  $SD = 1.26$ ). Independent t-tests showed no significant difference between female and male students ( $t(379) = -.47$ ,  $p = .64$ ), and between English-major and non-English major students ( $t(379) = .18$ ,  $p = .86$ ) in their perceived influence of misbehaviour on teachers and their teaching.

Students in the current study scored moderately on their motivation for English language learning ( $M = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ). Independent t-tests showed no significant difference between female and male students ( $t(379) = -.40$ ,  $p = .69$ ), and between English-major and non-English major students ( $t(379) = -.66$ ,  $p = .51$ ) in their levels of motivation intense for English language learning.

Correlation analyses showed that students' perceptions of the influence of misbehaviour on teachers and their teaching was not statistically correlated with students' frequency of disruptive behaviour in the EFL classroom ( $r = -.10$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Students' motivation for English language learning significantly and negatively correlated with students' frequency of misbehaviour ( $r = -.24$ ,  $p = .00$ ). In other words, the higher the levels of students' motivation for English language learning were, the less likely they were to engage in unwanted behaviour in the EFL classroom.

Regression analyses showed that students' motivation for English language learning negatively predicted their frequency of engaging in disruptive behaviour ( $\beta = -.24$ ,  $p = .00$ ). Thus, a high level of students' motivation for English language learning could reduce their frequency of engaging in classroom disruptive behaviour.

## Discussion

The present study examined student misbehaviour in the EFL classroom through students' perspectives. The study's first aim was to examine the most common misbehaviours in the Vietnamese EFL classroom. Results revealed that using a cell phone, laptop, or iPad inappropriately, forgetting to do homework, and being late for class were Vietnamese students' most frequently reported disruptive behaviours in the EFL classroom. These behaviours were also reported by students in other educational settings, for example, Turkey (Debreli & Ishanova, 2019), Hong Kong (Sun & Shek, 2012), and the United States (Kulinna et al., 2006). The least common problematic behaviours reported by Vietnamese students were taking a rebellious attitude and giving negative comments to teachers. Students in the current study reported that they rarely

or never engaged in these behaviours. These behaviours are regarded as highly disrespectful to teachers in the Vietnamese culture (Nguyen, 2016).

Overall, students evaluated the influence of classroom misbehaviour on EFL teachers and their teaching at a moderate level. Students were aware that misbehaviour could disrupt the lesson and demotivate teachers, but their evaluation was not as intense as teachers reported in previous studies (e.g.: Hettiarachchi, 2013; Kiziltepe, 2008; Pourtoussi et al., 2018; Sugino, 2010a, 2010b; Tran & Moskovsky, 2022). This finding supports findings of Sun and Shek's (2012) study that teachers and students could have different perspectives of misbehaviour and the impact of these behaviours on the teaching and learning process.

Interestingly, the most common misbehaviours rated by students were described as the least troublesome. On the other hand, students rated the most disruptive behaviours were the ones they reported that they never or rarely engaged in. This finding raised the question of whether students' awareness of the impact of their misbehaviour on teachers could determine the frequency of student misbehaviour. Correlation findings revealed no association between students' perceptions of the influence of disruptive behaviour on teachers and their teaching and the frequency of student misbehaviour. The extent to which students evaluated how misbehaviour might affect their teachers did not determine their frequency of misbehaving. This finding did not justify if students' engagement in misbehaviour was because of their lack of respect for teachers and their effort in teaching, as described by Vietnamese EFL teachers in Tran and Moskovsky's (2022) study. However, it supported Glasser's (1998) findings that students might misbehave when instruction and classroom activities fail to fulfil their needs for belongingness, self-worth, freedom, fun and survival. This finding is significant because it might change teachers' interpretation and assumption of student misbehaviour and their misbehaviour intentions in the classroom (Aldrup et al., 2018). Students might engage in unwanted behaviour to satisfy their unmet needs during the lesson rather than to demotivate teachers. The current study's findings also suggested that students might not consider how their misbehaviour might upset teachers and disturb their teaching when they engage in these behaviours.

Findings showed that the level of students' motivation for English language learning could predict their frequency of engaging in unwanted behaviour during the lesson. Students who reported a low level of motivation for English language learning would engage in misbehaviour more often than those with a high level of motivation. This finding supported Kerdikoshvili's (2012) suggestions that keeping students motivated and engaged in classroom activities can reduce behavioural problems. Highly motivated students come to class with clear learning objectives, and they will try their best to achieve their goals (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, 2021), which helps reduce their chance of engaging in unwanted behaviour. This finding also underlined the important roles of students' motivation in education in general and in English language learning in particular (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, 2021; Gardner, 2010).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides teachers with a better understanding of student misbehaviour from students' perspectives. Students might not always intentionally disrespect teachers when they engage in classroom problematic behaviour. Instead, disciplinary problems might occur because of the lack of students' need fulfillment in the learning process and students' low level of motivation for English language learning (Glasser, 1998). This finding might be useful in helping teachers to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation of students' misbehaviour, and their intentions of unwanted behaviour (Aldrup et al., 2018). Understanding misbehaviour through students' perspectives also supports teachers to effectively regulating their emotions and choosing appropriate intervention strategies when dealing with problematic behaviour in the EFL classroom (Tran & Moskovsky, 2022). Our research suggests that it is important for EFL teachers to provide students with high-quality teaching and well-designed classrooms which can keep them inspired and motivated during the lesson (Kerdikoshvili, 2012). By doing so, teachers can successfully reduce student misbehaviour and improve students' performance and achievement. Although there is no relationship between students' perceptions of the influence of misbehaviour on teachers and their teaching

and their frequency of engaging in misbehaviour, there might exist a relationship between students' perceptions of the influence of misbehaviour on their English language learning and academic outcomes. Future research can focus on this relationship to determine the potential factor that might help reduce students' frequency of engaging in unwanted behaviour.

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