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The importance of relevance: Factors influencing upper secondary vocational students' engagement in L2 English language teaching

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ABSTRACT

While student engagement is important for meaningful learning experiences in school, vocational students are known to perceive general subjects, such as languages, as irrelevant and unengaging. For this reason, general subjects are often taught in a manner adapted to the students' vocational education. In Norway, such teaching is known as the vocational orientation approach (VO). This qualitative study investigated how VO relates to student engagement in L2 English lessons. Using data from 13 group interviews with Norwegian vocational students, the study showed how perceived relevance is a main contributing factor. Furthermore, the study also identified social and active work methods, as well as caring teachers, as key contributors towards engagement. The findings support the contention that a VO approach promotes engagement in vocational L2 classrooms, especially when it builds on student perceptions of relevance.

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1. Introduction

It is widely recognised that vocational students in secondary education need general knowledge to complement domain-specific learning (Brewer & Comyn, 2015; Christidis & Lindberg, 2019; Grubb, 2006; Mouzakitis, 2010; Sweet, 2010). English as a foreign or second language (L2 English) is therefore one of several compulsory core subjects in vocational education in most European countries (Eurydice, 2017). Although accepting that general content knowledge can matter in their future lives (Korp, 2012; Rosvall, 2012), vocational students may still be uncertain about the educational relevance of the general subjects (Abbott, 1997; European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2019; Högberg, 2011; Utvær, 2014) and their investment in such learning has been called into question (Fjørtoft, 2017; Iversen et al., 2014; Korp, 2011). In general, perceived subject irrelevance, indifference to classroom activities, and a sense of mismatch between instruction and personal preferences are issues that can reduce school commitment and impede the learning process (Pawlak et al., 2020; Shernoff et al., 2003).

Students who are mentally absent from classroom learning often experience difficulties with engagement (Hiver, Al-Hoorie, and Mercer, 2021). Engagement refers to students' level of involvement with and effort in schoolwork (Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012), and, in the context of language subjects, has been defined as a "dynamic state where learners are actively thinking

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about, focusing on, and enjoying their language learning” (Mercer, 2019, p. 643). It is typically seen as a precursor for meaningful learning experiences (Hiver, Al-Hoorie, & Mercer, 2021; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020), and even as a driver of learning (Fredricks et al., 2004; Mercer, 2019). Across subjects, there are sound theoretical and empirical reasons to believe that if content is perceived as personally relevant and useful, students are more likely to engage with it (Fedesco et al., 2017; Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Knoster & Goodboy, 2021; Schmidt et al., 2019; Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Accordingly, stakeholders in vocational education, including in the United States, England, Norway, Sweden, India, Indonesia and Australia, have explored ways to teach general content in ways that appeal to vocational students’ interests, goals, and concerns (Black & Yasukawa, 2011; Grubb et al., 1991; Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2014; Nylund & Rosvall, 2016; Quinn, 2013; Roberts et al., 2005; Widodo, 2017; World Bank Group, 2015). Solutions typically hinge upon ways of contextualising general knowledge within relevant occupational practices, either by embedding general content in vocational subjects, or by teaching general subjects separately, but with a vocational orientation (Conroy & Walker, 2000; European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2019; NOU, 2008:18; Taylor & Parsons, 2011; Vogt & Kantelinen, 2012). A vocational orientation (VO) is here defined as a didactic approach that systematically integrates general and vocational aspects when teaching a general subject. While such initiatives are quite common, their significance for student engagement has not, to the best of my knowledge, been the subject of research.

This brings us to the present study, which investigates vocational students’ perceptions of engagement in L2 English instruction for the purpose of gauging the relationship between VO and student engagement. The findings provide important and useful knowledge of vocational students’ views on English teaching that can be used to improve said teaching. In addition, they add to our knowledge in the broader field of student engagement, particularly concerning the role of relevance.

The study was conducted in vocational programmes in Norwegian upper secondary schools, where general subjects are taught separately but with a vocational orientation (VO). In the case of L2 English, the VO approach entails adapting a general curriculum to aspects of students’ vocational programmes. Classroom examples include using technical material to practice reading, writing work-related texts, and using work-related procedures to practice oral skills (Brevik, 2017; Skarpaas & Hellekjær, 2021). Such integration is a mandatory practice in secondary vocational education in Norway (Regulations of the Education Act, 2006), which means that all general subject teachers, including L2 teachers, must apply VO to their teaching.

2. Background

In Norway, and elsewhere, VO teaching is believed to improve vocational students’ willingness to engage in general subject learning. Stakeholders typically claim that VO’s potential rests both with its capacity to build on student interests and its contribution towards promoting subject relevance (Berg, 2001; Casey et al., 2006; Dunleavy & Milton, 2009; Hoachlander, 1999; Iversen et al., 2014; NOU, 2008:18; Quinn, 2013; Roberts et al., 2005; Skarpaas & Hellekjær, 2021; Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Research supports these beliefs, showing that engagement hinges upon teachers’ abilities to create, shape, and influence their students’ immediate learning environments by relating tasks and content to the students’ lives and experiences (Mercer, 2019; Shernoff et al., 2016; Sulis & Philp, 2021). In the field of language learning, students have been found to perceive themselves as more engaged when lessons pay attention to relevance and student interests (Phung, 2017; Sulis & Philp, 2021) by approaching genuine language needs through topics the learners find compelling (Butler, 2016; Dao, 2021). Further, researchers have found that when language lessons draw on students’ interests, their levels of involvement and their time-on-task increases (Lambert et al., 2017), as does their internally regulated motivation (Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017).

Additionally, engagement has been found to increase when students experience supportive relations within the classroom (Aubrey et al., 2020; Hospel & Galand, 2016; Ruzek et al., 2016; Sulis & Philp, 2021; Virtanen et al., 2018). For example, teachers can facilitate the willingness to

engage by fostering interpersonal connections (Cooper, 2014), by expressing their acceptance of the students (Havik & Westergård, 2020) and by displaying warmth and involvement in the classroom (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). While teacher support is important for engagement in all types of classrooms, it might have a particularly crucial role in VO instruction as the approach is intended to promote the students' personal "projects", as well as their needs and interests.

It is likely the way VO is operationalised by individual teachers that determines its contribution towards increased student engagement. While I am not aware of any studies dedicated to exploring the relationship between teachers' VO operationalisation and engagement, the relationship figures implicitly in several studies from vocational classrooms. Interestingly, these studies are far from conclusive in terms of describing a complementary relationship between VO and engagement. To exemplify from the Scandinavian context, a survey study from Norway found that vocational students described the relevance of their English instruction as moderate (Haugset et al., 2014) and in an interview study, some students described VO teaching as "unnatural and dull" (Wendelborg et al., 2014, p. 28). In Sweden, Korp's ethnographic studies from one vocational school have reported that students fail to engage in their general subjects (Korp, 2011, 2012), describing these as boring (Korp, 2011) and having little perceived value (Korp, 2012). Further, instruction in general subjects is described by the researcher as "remote to the students' life experiences, knowledge and interests" (Korp, 2011, p. 33). Since Korp was not explicitly investigating VO teaching, she has not specified if the general subject teachers were observed to apply the approach in their teaching. However, based on the Swedish steering documents in force, they would have been expected to incorporate VO practices in their lessons (SOU, 2008:27). Indeed, another Swedish study (Nylund & Rosvall, 2016) describes how a teacher attempts to build on his students' vocational programme while teaching Swedish language arts. The researchers observe that the students are clearly disengaged from the lesson, suggesting that the observed VO teaching is not operationalised in a manner that promotes engagement.

To summarise, the use of VO is believed to enhance vocational students' engagement with their general subjects, and most, but not all, relevant research studies, support this contention. Further, some related studies raise the issue of how VO must be operationalised to promote engagement. Therefore, to better understand the potential of VO teaching, not to mention how it is best implemented, there is clearly a need for empirical investigation of vocational students' experiences of engagement.

In the present study, the analytical focus is therefore on mapping vocational students' experiences of engagement in English lessons, with the aim of understanding how VO can be operationalised to support such engagement. The study is guided by the following research question (RQ): *Under what conditions do upper secondary vocational students experience engagement in L2 English lessons?* In addition to probing this RQ from the perspective of the students' current English instruction (which includes VO), the study also elicited the informants' views about their engagement in lower secondary school English instruction. This retrospective view is utilized to deepen our understanding of how and when these students experience (dis)engagement.

3. Methods

3.1. The context

In Norway, L2 English is an obligatory subject from the first school year of primary school. Most students develop fluency in the language, and Norway is routinely ranked as a top five country regarding L2 English skills (EF Education First, 2021). Furthermore, English is an integral part of teen culture with extensive extracurricular exposure to the language (Brevik & Holm, 2022; Rindal, 2014).

While Norwegian lower secondary school (years 8–10) is comprehensive and general in orientation, students in upper secondary school (years 11–13) can choose between general and

vocational studies. As students are not streamed, most have a genuine choice, and in recent years, about half have opted for a vocational programme (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020). Most such programmes comprise two years in school prior to a two-year apprenticeship.

All upper secondary school students must pass a general English course comprising 140 teaching hours, which prioritises communicative and intercultural competence, the development of basic literacy skills and historical, cultural, and social content knowledge (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2006; 2019). In line with the Common European Framework of reference (Council of Europe, 2001), the subject curriculum describes learning outcomes as competence aims that teachers are free to operationalise as they see fit. Granted, in vocational programs, the teachers are required to apply VO teaching, but they are mostly at liberty to decide how and when they do so.

3.2. Research design, procedure, and participants

This qualitative study builds on material collected in 2018 and 2019 for a research project that investigated the compulsory English subject in vocational study programmes in Norway. The research project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (no.: 59328). The empirical data were obtained from 13 group interviews with 50 vocational students (years 11 and 12) from a purposive sample of 10 upper secondary schools in eastern and western Norway. These were selected based on their vocational profile (offering two or more vocational programmes) and their expressed commitment to VO teaching (more details below). Group interviews were chosen to allow students to build on each other's responses (Vaughn et al., 1996) and to achieve interaction among the interviewees (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Furthermore, within-group homogeneity can inspire participants to elaborate with stories and themes that help researchers understand the participants' social world (Hughes & DuMont, 1993). Ideally, interactions among participants may also enhance the quality of data in group interviews by providing checks and balances on each other (Krueger & Casey, 2017), and in eliciting a sense of what is important and what is not (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 175). Group interviews are also "cost-effective", in the sense that they are less time-consuming and do not steal too much from the students' class time.

All informants had been learning English for more than 10 years. An overview of the schools is provided in Table 1.

I recruited participants for the present study as part of the aforementioned project, where teachers and their VO practices were also explored. In the project, it had been decided to focus on two geographical areas (East and West), and to include schools from six (out of 11) administrative regions in Norway. A geographical spread was adopted because schools within one administrative area tend to participate in the same professional development courses. However, it was limited to six out of 11 regions to make travel time manageable for a single researcher. Within the six locations, participants were to be recruited from schools that, as mentioned above, offered two

Table 1 . Overview of schools, including location, year and programme type.

| School aliases | Location | Year | Programme |
|----------------|----------|------|---------------|
| Bayside | West | 11 | Technical |
| Capeside | West | 12 | Non-technical |
| Greendale | East | 11 | Non-technical |
| Hawking | East | 12 | Technical |
| Lee | West | 11 | Technical |
| McKinley | East | 12 | Non-technical |
| North Shore | West | 11 | Non-technical |
| Preston | East | 11 | Technical |
| Rydell | East | 12 | Non-technical |
| Sunnydale | East | 11 | Technical |

or more vocational programmes and that expressed a commitment to VO teaching. Such a commitment was identified by scrutinizing the schools' websites for information concerning their teaching practices, values and visions. In total, a list of 22 prospective schools were identified and contacted. Eventually, one English teacher from ten of these schools were recruited to participate in the project. The teachers had to confer with their students before giving consent, and in cases where they taught multiple vocational programmes, the students decided who would participate. Therefore, I did not have a say in what study programmes were included in the study or in what year the students were (i.e., 11 or 12). Ultimately, the participating students were from the following study programmes: Design, Arts and Crafts, Electricity and Electronics, Health, Childhood and Youth Development, Restaurant and Food, and Technical and Industrial Production. However, to safeguard anonymity, [Table 1](#) specifies only whether students belong to a technical (i.e., Electricity & Electronics and Technical & Industrial Production) or a nontechnical (i.e., Design, Arts & Crafts, Health, Childhood & Youth Development and Restaurant & Food) programme. The schools have been given aliases drawn from popular culture, and in the findings section, student aliases start with the same letters as their school. Within schools, the interviewed students all belong to the same class.

3.3. Data and analysis

As mentioned, 10 English teachers from different schools allowed me to observe instruction and invite students to participate in group interviews. In each classroom, I observed one teaching trajectory, spanning two to five English lessons, and subsequently asked students to volunteer for interviews. In total, 73 of the 132 students volunteered (55%), but due to conflicting obligations, only 50 were interviewed (38%). The number of volunteers varied between schools, so to ensure similar group sizes (3–5 students per group), I conducted two interviews in three of the schools and only one in the remaining seven (13 interviews in total). Prior to the interviews, I developed an interview guide (available upon request) designed to elicit learner perceptions about engaging English teaching practices, to probe likes and dislikes in the English subject, aspects of relevance and subject engagement, and to prompt comparisons with lower secondary school. The guide was utilised throughout the interviews.

The interviews, which varied in length from 13 to 27 min (mean = 21), were audio-recorded and later transcribed in full. I conducted the verbatim transcriptions myself, and because the students spoke Norwegian during the interviews, I also translated quotes into English. When translating, I prioritised keeping the style of the students' original utterances while retaining the intended meaning.

Although the study builds on interview data, classroom observations conducted in the overarching project served two complementing purposes. First, being present in class beforehand was a deliberate strategy to ensure a more relaxed atmosphere during the interviews (Seidman, 2019). Second, the students could use our shared experiences from the observed lessons to explain their views in ways that I could relate to. This proved helpful in the process of analysis and interpretation.

I utilised thematic analysis to investigate my material (Braun & Clarke, 2012), and began by listening to the interviews and reading the transcriptions while taking notes and highlighting text segments with potentially interesting items. Later, I developed initial descriptive codes concerning student engagement. Some example codes include interest, writing reports, group work, and liking the teacher. In the next phase, I utilised NVivo to review and identify broader topics. Here, I developed themes, or overarching categories, to capture patterns across classrooms. At this point, I also compared my developing themes to topics in the relevant research literature and structured them according to their relevance. From reviewing and reorganising, I derived three main themes (see section 4).

While it has been quite common for studies of vocational classrooms to attend to gender and/or class (see for example Korp, 2011; Nylund et al., 2018; Rosvall, 2015), the present study was not designed to take these features into account. This conscious decision was made to retain focus on VO as an alleged remedy for vocational students at a group level, which is how it is typically presented in Norway (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2014; NOU, 2008:18).

While this initial study sets out to probe broadly, aspects such as gender, class or immigrational background may certainly be elaborated on in later studies.

4. Findings

Three main themes relating to conditions that impact vocational students' experiences of engagement in L2 English lessons emerged from the analysis of the interview data:

- Perceived relevance triumphs interest
- Social and active work methods are significant
- The teacher variable

The students who were interviewed came from different vocational programmes, including male-dominated industries, sectors dominated by women, and vocations without a clear gender profile. Still, there were more similarities than differences between their stories, and the major themes surfaced in all interviews.

4.1. *Perceived relevance triumphs interest*

First of all, the findings suggest that while interest plays a central role for the students' willingness to engage in VO English lessons, it is less important than perceptions of relevance. This can be illustrated by the fact that the impact of interest was mentioned in seven interviews, while the importance of relevance was mentioned in all 13. Further, several of those who talked about the importance of interest, would nuance its significance by bringing in relevance as an equal, or more important factor:

I find all the [English] texts we read about our future place of work to be exciting and feel that I get something out of them ... We learn about ourselves and about how we ought to behave, so I think those texts are very relevant (Noelle)

Sure, you pay attention when you find something to be interesting, but if you think about it, you are also likely to pay attention when something is relevant and useful. I think it's a 40–60 relationship (Carl)

[English] is more compelling when it's linked to something we are interested in ... It's much better to learn about machines and such in English class ... Also because it is something we can actually use later on. (Harald)

Further, the appeal of relevance was clearly linked to the potential for practical application. Across the interviews, the students preferred content that came across as having utility value, disregarding classwork that was presented as important in its own right.

Nobody cares when it's not something you can use (Philip)

[L2 English] is more compelling when it's linked to our interests. When it has a practical application ... and is something you can actually use later (Sophus)

It's really cool to see that English and our vocational subjects are connected ... [English] is something we can use when we start working. A tool or a resource. (Ruby)

The disregard for content that was presented as inherently important, or, from the students' perspective, important for no clear reason, became even more evident when the students compared English in lower- and upper secondary school. Most of the informants (43 of 50) said that they had liked the English subject less in lower secondary school than in their present classes. One student put it as follows:

[Lower secondary English] was too similar to social studies and RLE [religion and ethics subject], those types of things. It did not relate to any of the things we are interested in, and then it's no fun ... It was just nothing. (Samuel)

His frustration was mirrored in all 13 interviews, which further underscores the importance of relevance for engagement. Indeed, what the students complained about was a sense of frustration that many cultural and historical topics had been taught repeatedly during compulsory school without a clear reason. The repetition had had a negative impact on the students' engagement, so when they encountered VO teaching in upper secondary school, it not only came across as more relevant and practical, but also had the advantage of novelty, breathing new life into a subject many had experienced as unduly repetitive in lower secondary school.

Another recurring issue concerned how the students repeatedly mentioned that schoolwork needed to challenge their current language skills to be truly engaging. In other words, their assessment of whether something qualifies as relevant was not determined by utility value only, but also by its potential to expand their current language repertoire. VO topics were particularly important in this respect, as students in eight of the schools claimed to have developed adequate general English language skills while in lower secondary school. Therefore, to improve further, they did not want their teachers to prioritise general English competence, but repeatedly mentioned how vocational topics provided new contexts for language production that required knowledge that they had not yet mastered. For this reason, work-related English was found to represent a novel development and a genuine challenge. This excerpt from the North Shore interview exemplifies what most students said about their language learning needs:

- Noelle: We will, of course, encounter English at work, but we learned a lot of English in lower secondary school.
- Noor: Yes, we know all the basics. But we do need to learn the more difficult words.
- Noelle: Yes, if you are to explain something [in English] you can't say "tverrfaglig samarbeid [interdisciplinary cooperation], you know what I mean", you need to know the English word.

In the same vein, almost everyone described work-related vocabulary as the most important aspect of language to work on in class. Only the Hawking students disagreed, describing vocabulary tasks as "kids" stuff and repeatedly explaining how they would typically disengage (Haavard) or "just finish [the work] quickly and poorly" (Harald) whenever schoolwork became too easy. While the Hawking students also preferred vocational topics, they did not consider vocabulary work particularly challenging, and their contrasting viewpoint supports the contention that lessons must be seen as both thematically relevant *and* appropriately challenging to be worthy of engagement.

To sum up, the students expressed that while interest-based instruction is important, their perceptions of relevance matter even more. This indicates that, contrary to popular beliefs, vocational students are not unmotivated learners. Instead, they come across as strategic learners with an orientation towards practical use and utility value, who struggle with the ideal of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. They want to learn and develop, but are quite restrictive about what they care to invest time and effort in.

4.2. Social and active work methods are significant

Previous research suggests that not all VO teaching succeeds in engaging students. Interview data from the present study sheds light on why this might be, as one group of students (Hawkins, year 12 students) expressed that their teacher's operationalisation of VO did little to promote engagement. Similar to the study by Wendelborg et al. (2014), these students expressed positive sentiments towards the idea of VO, they were just not happy with the version they encountered in the classroom. They said that their present teacher combined VO topics with reading and writing tasks, which were work methods they did not much enjoy:

- Hans: All we do is write and hand in our work. It's very boring.
- Haavard: Yes, and just recently we had to read those things about South-Africa¹, and I mean, we only read to get through it. To put it away.

¹A text about vocational education in different countries.

- Harald: Last year [year 11] we would learn English words for tools and things ... At least that was useful.
 Hans: And more important than learning what they do in South-Africa ... It is just so irrelevant. You will forget it immediately after you finish reading ... I feel it lacks relevance for us vocational students.

The students in Hawking were not the only ones who expressed a dislike of certain activities. Overall, the students' reported that their engagement dropped whenever schoolwork was mainly a question of independent seatwork, and the interview data from all groups suggested that the students needed opportunities to be social and to interact to fully engage with their English subject. Across schools, only one student (Mona), expressed an interest in reading and writing tasks. In addition, the students preferred being active while learning, which Hans put it like this: "We like lessons where there's activity ... so we're not just sitting there". The common denominator in the students' descriptions of independent seatwork was apathy and a lack of meaning, and for a great deal of them (mentioned in seven interviews) this type of work had dominated in lower secondary English. For this reason, it seems VO is effective in supporting engagement only insofar that it builds on activities where there is interaction between students, and where the students perceive themselves as "active". In other words, perceptions of relevance and utility do not depend solely on what is being taught, but also on how it is taught. The students consistently mentioned "being active while learning" as an ideal, and apart from one interview (Capeside did not mention this specifically), they all pointed to groupwork, conversations, and classroom discussions as particularly engaging activities. The students also claimed that they learned more when they worked collaboratively, because this gave them the opportunity to exercise their language skills (Ruby, Harald, and Hans) and to learn from each other (Gina and Gwen).

Another pattern in the students' descriptions of classroom activities was that they invoked the dichotomy "theory–practice" to categorise activities. Independent reading, writing, or listening were consistently described as "theory", as seen in this Bayside excerpt:

- Bernhard: What I didn't like about lower secondary English was that there was too much theory.
 Baard: Definitely!
 Interviewer: What do you mean when you say theory?
 Bernhard: You know, it is when you have to sit at your desk and listen to the teacher. To me, that is theory.

Bernhard's perception was mirrored in seven of the other group interviews, where students made clear their dislike of this type of "theory". However, although the students' vocational subjects were presented as quintessential examples of practice, the students recognised how the English subject had potential: On the one hand, it could be operationalised as "just sitting there" (i.e., "theory"), while on the other, it could be made active and engaging, and thus closer to "practice". One student articulated this as follows:

- I generally like the subject [English], but not when it's all about content. I want projects, to create, and presentations, those types of activities. Not just sit there and read a book (Milly).

In other words, Milly's comment illustrates how tasks can be made more appealing by including creative and collaborative learning forms. However, the findings also illustrate how VO topics need to be combined with classwork that the students find appealing. While it is not surprising that students in general prefer to be active in the classroom, the finding is still interesting as it certainly opposes the myth of the vocational student as unmotivated and passive.

4.3. The teacher variable

The third theme concerns how the students described themselves as more likely to engage with learning when they feel that the teacher takes their needs and interests into account, makes an effort to get to know them, and expresses optimism on their behalf. In the context of vocational education, it would seem that VO teaching comes with an inbuilt opportunity for teachers to be

perceived as engaging because it makes an effort to match student and instructional approach. This contention is supported by the students' comparisons of their lower secondary English teachers with their counterparts in upper secondary school. The latter English teachers were described as able to create "better" tasks (Bayside, Lee, North Shore, Preston, Rydell, Sunnydale) and praised for being more caring and supportive (Capeside, Lee, McKinley, North Shore, Preston, Rydell). Examples of supportive practices include accommodating student preferences (Capeside), explaining things more carefully (Lee, North Shore), and providing more assistance (Bayside).

A small number of students, however, liked their lower secondary school English teacher the best. Haavard gave the most telling example and described an English teacher who was very approachable and clearly noticed him and his needs. He did not feel the same about his current teacher, whose failure to match his expectations had become a major hindrance to his engagement. Furthermore, while he usually found that he was able to do the work she required, he would typically respond with apathy and disengagement because he did not see the point of many of the activities. In Haavard's narrative, his disengagement with instruction grew drastically because he did not perceive a positive student-teacher relationship.

5. Discussion

In popular opinion, political documents (Ministry of Education and Research, 2015; NOU, 2008:18; NOU, 2014:7; NOU, 2015:8) and theoretical discussions (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2014; Vogt & Kantelinen, 2012), VO teaching is presented as an initiative that will promote vocational students' engagement with general subjects, including L2 English. However, not all empirical research supports this contention (Korp, 2011, 2012; Nylund & Rosvall, 2016; Wendelborg et al., 2014). To explore the relationship further, the present study has investigated under which conditions upper secondary vocational students experience engagement in L2 English lessons. The results support the contention that VO has an important role to play for such engagement, and point especially to relevance, activity types and the teacher's impact as key influences. The study establishes a strong relationship between VO teaching and engagement and elaborates on this connection, making the main contribution of the study twofold: It both reinforces the popular view of VO as an initiative to support engagement and provides details and insights into how this relationship functions.

A key finding in this study concerns the significance of relevance as compared to interest in terms of promoting engagement. In just over half of the interviews, the students mentioned that their teachers could foster engagement by linking instruction to their interests. In comparison, the role of relevance was mentioned in all interviews. A reasonable interpretation of these findings is that VO teaching can utilize the students' interests to boost engagement, but that initiatives aimed at enhancing perceived relevance are likely to matter more. Further, it seems that classroom tasks, success in challenging the students, and teacher behaviour can support—or counteract—efforts to make teaching relevant and engaging. Building on this, an insight from the study concerns how relevance is a complex and multifaceted concept. Further, it expands on previous studies of engagement, where for the last 20 years, the role of interest has been a major research focus (Hiver, Al-Hoorie, Vitta, et al., 2021). The present study illustrates that if English teachers in vocational programmes mainly draw on vocationally interesting topics to create engagement, they are likely not utilizing all the potential embedded in relevance. For this reason, an important contribution of the study is to provide insight into how teachers can work to enhance relevance, while concurrently offering a lens for interpreting why not all attempts at VO are successful, for example in the case of the language lesson described by Nylund and Rosvall (2016), where VO neither challenged, nor activated, the students.

Moreover, the empirical findings of the present study suggest that part of the potential of VO teaching lies in its ability to reshape and renew English language teaching in relation to the students' earlier experiences. The interviewed students stressed that relevant lessons were those where they

learned something new, and they further underlined that feeling challenged was important for their engagement. However, since vocational students in Norway have learned English since the first year of school and have extensive contact with English outside of the classroom (Brevik & Holm, 2022; Rindal, 2014), approaches that have novelty value can be hard to come by. In this context, one of VO's greatest assets is that it represents a new area of English language learning which the students have not encountered in primary and lower secondary school, or to any great extent in their personal lives. Part of its potential lies thus in its ability to combine novelty and challenge, although as the analyses show, this potential is not automatically realised.

As mentioned, the study shows that successful VO instruction is experienced as challenging. While Sulis and Philp (2021) made comparable observations concerning the importance of challenge on engagement in their study of language students at university level, they also found that students would disengage if the challenges became too daunting. In comparison, my informants did not address any negative impacts from being overly challenged. This is worth noting, as previous studies from Sweden and Norway (Korp, 2012; Nylund & Rosvall, 2016; Skarpaas & Hellekjær, 2021) suggest that simplification is a prevalent strategy in the teaching of general subjects in vocational programmes. The lack of mention of subject difficulty in the interviews can be seen as supporting the suspicion that the students are seldom overly challenged. For this reason, one may ask whether undue simplification of content poses a threat to engagement, and whether teachers should experiment with ways to increase the challenges they set for their vocational students—in the name of engagement.

Skarpaas and Hellekjær (2021) described how English teachers in vocational programmes saw the development of general English language skills as their students' main need, and, further, that they utilized VO to entice their students to engage in such learning. Taking the results of the present study into account, it would seem that teachers and students have differing views of what is relevant competence development in the English subject, as the interviewed students were mainly content with their general English skills. In their opinion, their main knowledge gap concerned the need to develop an occupationally relevant language repertoire. Curiously, while these results suggest that teachers and students have almost opposite views of what is relevant to learn, both parties consider VO teaching an instrument towards promoting relevance. Thus, an empirical contribution of this study is to show how VO teaching may function as a means of aligning the teacher and student views. It allows teachers to focus on the development of general English language skills, such as fluency in reading, writing, and speaking, while concurrently supporting students in discovering how their already acquired (and developing) language skills can be utilised in work-related contexts. The key, it seems, lies in using VO to promote the students' perceptions of relevance, for example by utilizing interesting topics, setting new challenges and designing creative and activating tasks. When such relevance is established, the teachers can likely use VO to teach whatever aspects of the English language they see the need for.

The study also provides insights into the preferences and attitudes of students with regard to English classroom activities. Mainly, the students I interviewed said that they preferred “to be active” in their schoolwork, which often meant discussion tasks, group work and various projects. This finding is in accordance with engagement theory which emphasises active involvement and participation as a requirement for behavioural engagement (see for example Fredricks et al., 2004; Hospel & Galand, 2016; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017). It is also a salient aspect of Widodo's (2017) research in which he investigated the impact of voice and agency as part of a VO project in English language teaching in Indonesia. In the present study, another aspect is seen when the students evoked the dichotomy theory-practice to describe their teaching preferences and described how in lower secondary school, English instruction fell on the theoretical, and therefore unengaging, side of this spectrum. A possible interpretation of this juxtaposition is that it illustrates an epistemological tension that some scholars claim characterizes compulsory education in Norway. Hestholm (2003, 2017), for example, argued that primary and lower secondary schools discriminate against practical knowledge by upholding a logocentric ideal that treats book learning (i.e.,

theoretical knowledge) as more valid than experience-based learning. In line with this view, abstract knowledge is an ideal, and it can be studied separately from the contexts in which it may prove useful (Jensen, 1999). My informants' descriptions of their past and present experiences suggest that this ideal may come into conflict with the ways they prefer to learn, and with their views of what is relevant knowledge. Taking this into account, VO teaching emerges as a main reason that the students expressed higher satisfaction with upper secondary English teaching as opposed to English in the lower levels.

Finally, a central objective in many educational systems, not the least within in the Nordic model, is to provide equitable opportunities to ensure that all students have the chance to realize their academic potential (Bergem et al., 2020; Opheim, 2004). As pointed out by Bergem et al. (2020), when schools manage to provide fair and inclusive teaching practices, they also succeed in compensating for student differences. Using VO to support student engagement can therefore be viewed as a way of promoting equity in education because engagement is a non-cognitive approach aimed at promoting allstudents' learning potential.

Finally, an important contribution of the study, is that it paints a picture of vocational students as active, interested and determined students. They certainly do not view themselves as disinterested in school or learning, rather they present themselves as taking their vocational education seriously and as being willing and motivated to work towards completing it. If increased engagement is what is needed to support their learning, VO teaching comes across as, at least part of, the answer.

5.1. Implications for teaching

The perhaps main implication of this study is that VO teaching has an important role to play for English language teaching in vocational programmes, first and foremost because it has the potential to increase students' engagement with learning, if properly operationalized. Further, the study suggests that perceptions of relevance are key to understanding vocational students' engagement. This means that English teachers who wish to increase their students' engagement can focus on framing their lessons as vocationally relevant. Indeed, there is reason to believe that students may respond best to a type of relevance that is anchored in their vocational subjects and that has an explicit reference point when claiming relevance. A final implication of the study is the need to support teachers in the contention that even if VO is a distinct didactic approach, good teaching is still good teaching within a VO frame. Didactic principles, such as the need to challenge the students, the significance of work methods and the teachers' ability to relate to their students, will still be tremendously important.

5.2. Limitations and transferability

A limitation of this study is that it was not designed to compare student utterances with their behaviour in class. Therefore, it is impossible to determine whether the students' representations of themselves mirror their classroom conduct. Further, classroom conduct is clearly not the result of a neat mechanical process where the teacher offers appropriate instruction at one end and engaged behaviour comes out at the other. This means that the engagement-inducing conditions described in this study compete with factors such as physical and mental well-being, stress and various social structures, which might affect how engagement is perceived in, for example, an observational study.

However, it should be kept in mind that this study draws on a strategically selected sample participants from ten different schools, chosen because of documented interest in and experience with VO teaching. Further, the consistency in the students' accounts can be used to argue in favour of transferability to similar groups. There is also considerable overlap between the findings of this study and previous research on student engagement. I would therefore contend that the findings offer useful insight into how upper secondary vocational students in Norway and in comparable contexts perceive the relationship between the learning environment and engagement in L2 English lessons.

6. Conclusion

There is no question that young people in vocational education need general knowledge and competence as part of their schooling. However, previous research has found that vocational students question the inclusion of general subjects in vocational education, suggesting the need for measures to improve their status. Based on student interviews, the present study argues that teachers can work strategically to support vocational students' engagement in L2 English, in particular by prioritising relevance. However, it also argues that relevance is a multifaceted concept and that teachers should not settle for topic-related relevance alone. Relevance necessitates teaching that is perceived as challenging and contributing towards an increased language repertoire, and as useful in the students' lives. Additionally, the students are more likely to engage whenever instruction comes across as social and active, and when they connect well with their teachers.

Further research is needed to examine whether students' descriptions of their own engagement reflect classroom behaviour. A mixed methods study, combining a large-scale survey with interviews, may also be used to nuance the results further. As mentioned earlier, studies investigating the role of VO in relation to socioeconomic factors, gender and/or immigrant status might also serve to nuance the picture further. However, based on this study, it would seem that VO teaching can be considered a key approach to increasing vocational students' engagement in English because, as my informant Ruby pointed out, “[i]t’s really cool to see that English and vocational subjects are connected”.

Disclosure statement

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