Active learning in distance English language teaching

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Abstract
Distance education is often judged by its pandemic-era performance and by the initial passivity of students. This critical narrative review addresses three questions: what made emergency remote teaching passive; what contemporary studies use to build engagement in distance education; and what this implies for teacher preparation and course design in English language teaching. Using targeted Boolean searches, thirteen peer-reviewed studies published between 2021 and 2026 were purposively selected from the Scopus database. Each study's claims were critically appraised against its methodology, and the recommendations of the reviewed studies were ranked by practical usability and empirical strength. The evidence is more consistent with inadequate preparation and unadapted design than with the digital medium itself as the main source of passivity during emergency remote teaching. Contemporary tools such as text chat, virtual reality, and chatbots based on artificial intelligence help with active participation only when embedded in the structure of task sequencing, feedback, and teacher mediation. The evidence base remains uneven, often relying on small samples or self-reported data that combine compliance with genuine engagement. The findings shift attention from digital platforms to pedagogical design. To turn distance education into a setting for active language use without any passive access, the field should prioritise teacher preparation grounded in observed teaching practice, secure institutional support at the curriculum level and verify student engagement through more than satisfaction surveys alone.

Keywords*: active learning, distance education, emergency remote teaching, English as a foreign language, student engagement, teacher preparation*

Introduction

Distance education entered the pandemic with half a century of theory behind it. In its basic form, it combines teaching and learning in separate locations connected through technology, delivered asynchronously through self-study materials or synchronously through real-time online sessions (Turek, 2014; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2022). Moore (1997) gave the field its central concept, transactional distance, a psychological and communication space between teacher and learner that widens or narrows with dialogue, programme structure, and learner autonomy, making distance a pedagogical condition managed through design. Holmberg (2003) argued that empathy and a teaching-learning conversation between student and institution promote motivation and learning, and Peters (2003) examined how digital media allow distant students to interact with adaptive programs and with one another. In all of these founding accounts, interaction is a design requirement embedded in distance education.

Two frameworks underpin this critical literature review. Garrison et al. (2000) proposed the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, in which a worthwhile educational experience arises from cognitive, social, and teaching presence. Bonwell and Eison (1991) defined active learning as instruction that involves students in doing tasks and thinking about what they are doing. Both frameworks predate the pandemic and assume time to plan.

The COVID-19 pandemic removed that assumption. The abrupt transfer of instruction to digital platforms in 2020 has been termed emergency remote teaching (ERT), a temporary shift caused by crisis

circumstances, distinguished from well-planned online education (Hodges et al., 2020). ERT lacked the design through which the theories above expect distance to be bridged. Reports on reduced participation during this period, examined in the first section of this review, raise a question the theory leaves open. Was the passivity caused by the online environment or by the missing preparation in a critical situation? Each answer points teacher preparation and course design in a different direction, yet pandemic-era research rarely separated the two explanations. This critical review examines that distinction. It asks three questions:

Q1: What made emergency remote teaching passive? Was it the online environment or the lack of preparation?

Q2: What do contemporary studies use to build engagement in distance education?

Q3: What does it imply for teacher preparation and course design?

Sources were retrieved from the Scopus database using three targeted Boolean search strings: (1) 'distance education' AND 'active learning' AND 'English language', (2) 'emergency remote teaching' AND 'English language', and (3) 'distance education' AND 'active learning'. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2026. To ensure feasibility, the final corpus was selected based on explicit relevance to the three research questions and availability through institutional database subscriptions. Thirteen studies were retained, reaching from the emergency period to recent work on artificial intelligence (AI) in language teaching. Most concern English as a foreign language (EFL); three lie outside it, an online physical education course, a survey of general online learning, and a systematic review of higher education teaching, kept because they offer experimental, large-scale, and cross-disciplinary insight into active learning and engagement that previously stated EFL studies did not provide. Individual supplementary studies and one policy document were added during analysis where specific points required them and are identified in the text. In this paper, engagement is understood as active, observable participation or collaborative interaction. Many reviewed studies rely on perception data and small samples, and the review treats these findings critically.

Passivity during emergency remote teaching: online environment or the lack of preparation

Emergency remote teaching served as a response to a critical situation that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic (Isaee & Barjesteh, 2025), and its almost non-existent preparation for educators or students contributed to many difficulties (Castañeda-Trujillo & Jaime-Osorio, 2021). The reviewed evidence is more consistent with inadequate preparation, design, and support as major contributors to passivity than with technological modality alone. During this time, face-to-face routines moved online without any time for their proper adjustment to the online environment.

Algouzi and Hazaea (2023:5-6) provide the strongest evidence because they analysed recorded practice, while many studies mostly rely on self-reported questionnaires or interviews. In eleven Saudi EFL writing sessions, cameras and breakout rooms went unused, microphones stayed muted except at session openings, and interaction was mostly evident only in chat. Teaching most of the time consisted of lecturing in response to questions. Attendance was 15.15%, but it is important to add that attendance was not compulsory, so the figure reflects more institutional rules. Session reports describe attending students as active, but these come from the teaching team and warrant caution. Where recordings and self-reports conflict, the recording carries more weight.

Castañeda-Trujillo and Jaime-Osorio (2021: 703-708) also show the same pattern from both teachers and students. Teacher educators reported declining interaction, above all between students, because they participated so little when the teacher spoke. A lecture-based activity that the educators used the most frequently was read by students as a symptom of passivity. Participants blamed unstable connectivity, unequal device access, and exhaustion as more important issues than the online format itself. Participation rose when teachers decided to exchange the one-way delivery with collaborative tools and forums. Students described themselves as passive at first and active later. Redesign worked even

under emergency conditions. Even the educators, already familiar with technology, conceded that their knowledge "was not and is not enough" to keep students connected (Castañeda-Trujillo & Jaime-Osorio, 2021: 710).

Sum and Oancea (2022: 19-20) confirm this once again across higher education. Across their thirty-two reviewed studies, some teachers reacted by tightening control over who can speak, while others started engagement through polls, hand-raising functions, emojis, and chat. The same platforms supported both outcomes, which serves as evidence that readiness and institutional support changed the balance. The review is not language-specific, so its application here is an inference.

Isaee and Barjesteh (2025) seem to contradict this account. Their study about Iranian learners and teachers reported high satisfaction with ERT. For both groups, attractiveness scored highest and efficiency lowest (teachers 4.58 against 3.46; learners 4.52 against 3.77). Respondents liked ERT but doubted it worked. Individual tables contain contradictions, where teachers who were satisfied with accessibility (M=4.20) rated their own platform IT skills at 2.55. Teachers declared online classes boredom-free, yet about nine in ten learners reported the opposite. The instrument was self-developed, the samples small, and the survey followed nearly two years of ERT. Its recorded satisfaction reads as adaptation more than as evidence of engagement.

Ayar (2026) explains the teacher side of this gap: Her study with 179 Turkish EFL educators traced their online speaking anxiety mainly to a perceived lack of competence. She concludes that self-confidence without competence would be of almost no use in language teaching. Ministry of Education teachers reported more anxiety than university instructors, pointing to institutional support as a factor. Her youngest educators reported the lowest perceived competence. Familiarity with technology did not translate into readiness to teach through it.

The studies name different causes: structural readiness in Sum and Oancea, teacher anxiety in Ayar, and cautious pedagogy in Algouzi and Hazaea. Yet, every study began in the same way, with identifying the switch made "almost overnight" (Ayar, 2026), by educators who lacked preparation (Castañeda-Trujillo & Jaime-Osorio, 2021:706), into prioritising accessible format instead of adapted design (Isaee & Barjesteh, 2025). And whenever the studies track time, passivity recedes, tools are gradually adopted, passive students become active, and satisfaction grows. This suggests that the initial passivity was largely a consequence of the abrupt, unassisted transition and less of an inherent flaw in digital medium.

The distance environment contributed to loss of informal contact, human visual cues, spontaneous peer interaction, and personal contact with the educator. The recession of passivity was not only due to the passing of time or due to accepting the new reality. It followed the work of teachers who redesigned the teaching process, moving from face-to-face lessons simply transferred online to a collaborative environment. What such design achieves when it is planned is the subject of the next section.

Designing engagement in distance education

The ERT period showed that active participation responds to activity designs adjusted to digital environment. Contemporary studies begin from that premise and treat engagement as an outcome a course truly builds instead of only hoping of achieving. Gökoğlu et al. (2024) analysed 1,281 online learners using two established concepts: (1) transactional distance, the psychological gap that learners feel between themselves and their teacher in a distance course, and (2) community of inquiry, a framework describing how an online class becomes a learning community through social contact and shared thinking. Both factors depend on how a course is designed and run. This makes engagement a result of a design outcome. Consoli and Curle (2025:611) define the target more strictly: learners need to be in an active pursuit of knowledge, and teachers must distinguish actual engagement from "shallow engagement", in which students comply with tasks without further critical investment. The studies reviewed in this section proposed concrete activities toward this target. Table 1 presents them together with their

implementation and, because the supporting evidence varies considerably in strength, a critical evaluation of each source.

Table 1: Examples of engaging activities in distance education

Activity	Online implementation	Source	Critical evaluation
Online think-pair-share	Teacher poses a question via screen share function or whiteboard and gives students thinking time. Automatic assignment pairs students in breakout rooms to compare ideas. Pairs report back in the main room.	Rakha (2025)	Study of a single group of 23 students within one institution, with no comparison group: Reported gains cannot be separated from normal course progression or novelty.
Online jigsaw	Home groups of four or five students, each receives a subtopic. Expert groups form to prepare presentations, then home groups reconvene and each member teaches their topic. Students work synchronously in breakout rooms or asynchronously through the learning management system.	Rakha (2025)	
Three-step interview	The teacher gives question on the topic of the session. Students then move into breakout groups of three, where one student interviews another about their views while the third records the key points as note-taker. The roles rotate until each student has been interviewer, interviewee, and note-taker. Back in the main room, the note-takers report their group's main points.	Rakha (2025)	
Sequenced text-chat tasks	Pairs of students jointly reconstruct the story of a short video clip through text chat. Each partner receives half of a set of screenshots from the clip, so the story can only be assembled by exchanging descriptions in writing. Model phases and a pre-task vocabulary activity support the work. Across three weeks, the same task type returns in harder versions, with the number of pictures rising from ten to sixteen.	Korvesi and Michel (2022)	Fifteen adult learners in one class. Offers rare outcome evidence: chat practice produced gains in spoken accuracy comparable to face-to-face practice. The class itself met in person, so transfer to fully distance courses is assumed rather than shown.
Collaborative virtual reality escape room	Pairs of students solve language-based puzzles and clues in a virtual environment, guided by a game master.	Pazakou et al. (2025)	Twenty students; the authors state the sample is too small for definitive conclusions. Pairs scored better, but the difference in learning gains was not

			statistically significant. Equipment costs raise access questions, and the novelty effect of this task may have added to the engagement that students perceived.
AI chatbots in writing	Chatbots support idea generation and give initial feedback on drafts. Teachers mediate their use through guided scaffolding, staged introduction, and explicit teaching about AI. Students use an AI chatbot at set stages of a writing task, first to brainstorm and later to get feedback on their draft, which they revise before the teacher's feedback.	Al-Azzawi and Saeed (2026)	Reports teacher perceptions only, with no learner outcome data. The same teachers doubted the quality of AI feedback.
Emotionally infused task design	Educators firstly identify the emotions that drive their students. In this study, anxiety about assessment mattered more than how interesting a topic was. Educators then design around that emotion. They support this with visually engaging materials, pictures, and screen formats shared via videoconferencing platform.	Consoli and Curle (2025)	Based on five teachers and focused on observable participation, with little direct student evidence. It is important to add that the emotional design enhances learning outcomes only under medium-task-difficulty and fails to deliver under low- and high-task difficulty (Liu & Wang, 2025).

These studies educate through their weaknesses and their designs. The first problem is what they measure. Rakha (2025) claims gains in achievement and attitudes, not in engagement as such. Al-Azzawi and Saeed (2026) report what teachers believe, not what learners do. Gökoğlu et al. (2024) measure engagement directly, but their analysis shows association, not that any activity caused it. Engagement is inferred from participation, satisfaction, or achievement, although these are related and not interchangeable. The second problem is tension inside evidence. The teachers in Al-Azzawi and Saeed (2026) used chatbot feedback as a core tool while doubting its quality and responded by fencing it with scaffolding and staged instruction. The mechanism and the risk are the same feature. The warning of Consoli and Curle (2025) applies to the evidence base itself: if activity can be shallow, then survey-based engagement scores may capture the very compliance they warn about. Their own study is not exempt, resting on five teachers and mostly observable participation. The defensible conclusion is modest. None of these activities builds engagement by itself. Each worked, where it worked, inside a structure of pairing, sequencing, feedback, and teacher mediation, and each was demonstrated in one context. The question this raises is no longer which technologies to adopt but what knowledge and design judgment teachers need to use them responsibly (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2024). That is what we discuss in our following question.

Implications for teacher preparation and course design

The reviewed studies should not conclude at diagnosis. Each proposes a solution aimed at building active learning and reducing the passivity. To answer the question posed, the recommendations are ranked based on a two-fold rubric: their practical usability for classroom instructors, and the empirical strength of the supporting evidence within the reviewed corpus.

The strongest recommendation is (1) **practice-based preparation with observed outcomes**. Zhang et al. (2025) reviewed 38 studies and found a recurring gap between pre-service teachers' general digital skills and their ability to use those skills in teaching, which they link to limited authentic practice. Sándorová et al. (2026) show that observation of students adds to the picture. Their study is small, 22 Slovak pre-service teachers in one programme, and permits no generalisation. Still, participants who handled AI tools adequately left scaffolding, feedback, and language objective underdeveloped in observed micro-teaching. These are the design elements the previous question identifies as the engine of engagement, and confidence questionnaires do not see them. The demand behind this recommendation should be stated honestly: it asks curriculum makers to build observed practice into programmes, and it asks for sustained guidance for both trainees and the teachers who mentor them. It changes what programmes measure, not only what they offer.

The second is to (2) **design structure before selecting tools**. Gökoğlu et al. (2024) recommend reducing the felt distance between learners and teacher and strengthening the class as a community. Structure alone is not sufficient, however. Consoli and Curle (2025) found that task modes must be adjusted to the learners at hand, and that teachers first need to know which emotions drive their students. Knowing the course is not the same as knowing the class. One caution should be stated: designing around what is currently fashionable is not supported by the evidence, since the one study built on a novel environment could not separate engagement from novelty (Pazakou et al., 2025). Although, if the novelty factor is used knowingly, it can start the engagement but afterwards it is up to the teacher to sustain it. A teacher who rotates novel formats is spending a resource that decays and should plan for what follows.

The third is (3) **institutional support**, the only recommendation that spans the emergency and the contemporary studies (Sum & Oancea, 2022; Castañeda-Trujillo & Jaime-Osorio, 2021; Hu & Shen, 2024). The first question showed that teachers can make progress without it. It also showed the price: the work migrates into personal networks and unpaid hours. Hu and Shen (2024) conclude that personal effort cannot compensate for missing institutional policy support, and the anxiety gap between Ministry and university teachers reported earlier points in the same way. By writing digital pedagogy into curricula and policy, institutions will be required to turn previously voluntary effort into a requirement, and a requirement is harder to abandon. No study, however, specifies what this support should consist of.

The fourth is (4) **mediated use of AI with explicit AI literacy** (Al-Azzawi & Saeed, 2026; Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2024). The mediation practices stand in Table 1. Policy is beginning to follow. Slovakia, for example, has issued a plan for the responsible use of artificial intelligence in education for 2025 to 2027, which includes dedicated support for future teachers as established by the Ministry of Education, Research, Development, and Youth of the Slovak Republic [MŠVVaM SR] (2025), and comparable initiatives can be expected elsewhere. Two problems remain. Moorhouse and Kohnke (2024) report that teacher educators expected to develop AI literacy have limited confidence with the tools themselves. The tools change faster than literacy programmes can be designed, so any curriculum in this area aims at a moving target.

The fifth is to (5) **verify engagement** rather than assume it, through real-time assessment and learner feedback (Consoli & Curle, 2025). The recommendation carries a risk its authors do not explicitly address, and their own data reveal it. If assessment anxiety is a force acting on these learners, as their study found, then feedback given to the person who assigns the grades is compromised by the same anxiety. Anonymity reduces the pressure but removes the ability to respond to individual students, and even

anonymous answers may still aim to please the teacher. The habit is worth forming and its results should be read as one signal among several, not as a final measurement.

The sixth is (6) **written chat tasks**. Korvesi and Michel (2022) conclude from fifteen learners in one in-person class that teachers should not hesitate to use text chat. The channel earned its rank through convergence, since it carried the surviving interaction during emergency teaching. The evidence, however, comes from small groups. Nothing shows that the same strategy scales to large-enrolment courses, where following tens or even hundreds of parallel chats exceeds one teacher's attention.

The last, seventh, is (7) **peer networks and shared reflection among teachers**, worked in the emergency data precisely where institutions didn't deliver (Castañeda-Trujillo & Jaime-Osorio, 2021). It is honest but fragile. It asks teachers to supply what their employers do not, and it has no quality control: a network spreads whatever its members know, sound or not.

These rankings should be read with caution. Several rest on very small samples: five tutors in Consoli and Curle (2025), twenty learners in Pazakou et al. (2025), fifteen in Korvesi and Michel (2022). Isaee and Barjesteh (2025:594-596) advise only that "it sounds wise to incorporate digital training courses into curriculum for prospective emergencies", and conclude that teachers, learners, "and all teaching and learning communities in general should be trained in technology" with no word on what the training should contain. Ayar (2026) likewise endorses teacher training without specifying it. Among the studies calling for training, only Al-Azzawi and Saeed (2026) name its content, AI literacy and prompt engineering. A recommendation with no content and no measure of success cannot fail, and advice that cannot fail cannot guide. Although, caution is not a reason for inaction. Evaluated in this way, the recommendations give teachers something concrete to construct and to test. The decisive measure sits with the students, and with their responses to the teacher's relentless ritual of trial and error.

Conclusion

This review finds that passivity during emergency remote teaching was produced primarily by inadequate preparation and design, rather than by distance education itself. The pandemic moved face-to-face routines online before teachers could redesign tasks, build dialogue, or address unequal access. When educators introduced collaborative tools and feedback, participation improved. Contemporary evidence reaches the same conclusion: peer tasks, sequenced text chat, emotional design, and mediated AI use do not generate engagement automatically. Their value depends on task sequence, appropriate difficulty, facilitation, and feedback.

Active learning is indispensable in digital environments; it reduces transactional distance by turning physical separation into dialogue, feedback, and collaborative inquiry. The priority is teacher preparation that tests pedagogical decisions in observed practice, backed by institutional support instead of individual goodwill. Course teams should establish interaction and assessment structure before choosing technologies, use AI as a scaffolded tool, and verify engagement through more than satisfaction surveys.

This review is limited by its small, purposively selected corpus of thirteen studies, several of which use small samples or perception data, so its conclusions also cannot be generalised without caution. Future research should test these designs across larger, fully online EFL settings and measure learners' actual interaction and language development, not only through their perceived experiences. By shifting attention from platforms to pedagogical design, the field can make distance education a setting for active language use rather than passive access.

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