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# Head-up Behaviors as Expressions of Learner Identity in Vocational College Classrooms: A Qualitative Study

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**Abstract**

This study adopts a learner identity perspective to examine how head-up/head-down behaviors, as visible attentional behaviors in vocational college classrooms, reflect students' classroom engagement and identity enactment. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 students from six vocational colleges in Guangdong Province, China. The interview data were analyzed using thematic coding and contextual analysis in NVivo, with attention to how students interpret and adjust their observable attentional behaviors across different course types, patterns of classroom interaction, and supervisory contexts. The findings are threefold. First, head-up/head-down behaviors are not a single indicator of attention but rather highly contextualized and strategic performances. Second, students' assessments of a course's perceived usefulness, the functional demands of classroom tasks, and external supervision (for example, roll call or classroom patrols) jointly shape their visible participation behaviors. Third, before being read by teachers or observers as a "lack of participation," head-down behavior is frequently justified by students as note-taking, information retrieval, reflection, or a strategy for conserving effort. Based on these results, this paper advocates adopting a composite of multiple indicators for assessing classroom engagement—combining visible attentional behaviors with verbal responses, task outputs, and implicit participation indicators such as resource searches—and offers practical recommendations to enhance vocational relevance in course design to promote substantive engagement.

**Keywords:** head-up behaviors, classroom engagement, learner identity, visible attentional behaviors, vocational colleges

## 1. Introduction

With the ongoing adjustment and refinement of the Chinese education system, the quality of education in vocational colleges has become a central concern in both educational research and policy debates (Ling et al., 2023). Improving quality of classroom instruction constitutes a core objective of curriculum reform in vocational education (Shafi et al., 2021). Within this context, classroom engagement is widely regarded as a key dimension for evaluating instructional quality and enhancing learning efficiency (Wang et al., 2022 ). Compared with other forms of higher education, whether students in vocational classrooms are able to sustain attention to instructional activities is often reflected through observable classroom behaviors, among which head-up behaviors serve as a particularly visible indicator of classroom engagement (Goldberg et al., 2021).

However, classroom behaviors cannot be explained solely by students' attentional states or classroom management factors. They are also closely associated with how students understand and interpret their roles as learners (Harefa, 2023). From a learner identity perspective, classroom behaviors reflect students' self-positioning and enactment of what it means to be a learner (Grbić and Maksić, 2022). Accordingly, approaching vocational students' classroom engagement through the lens of learner identity provides a robust theoretical foundation for interpreting variations in engagement, with head-up behaviors serving as a representative manifestation of these differences (Verhoeven et al., 2021).

Learner identity is grounded in learners' prior educational experiences and is continuously shaped and developed within new learning contexts (Collett, 2020). Existing research has applied the concept of learner identity to examine learners' levels of participation and dynamic engagement across a range of educational settings (Verhoeven et al., 2021). However, empirical attention to how learner identity is constructed in traditional face to face classrooms in vocational colleges, and how this construction relates to observable classroom behaviors, remains limited (Jonker et al., 2018).

Building on this theoretical foundation, learner identity among vocational students refers to how individuals perceive,

interpret, and articulate themselves as learners based on their accumulated experiences (Hegna, 2019). In particular, diverse schooling trajectories, together with individuals' social class, regional background, religious affiliation, and ethnic positioning, play a formative role in shaping students' levels and modes of classroom engagement (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012). Consequently, examining how vocational students construct learner identity within classroom participation contexts is especially critical for understanding variations in their engagement (Verhoeven et al., 2021).

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1 Learner Identity*

Learner identity refers to the construction and recognition of one's self as a learner through ongoing learning processes (Teng, 2019). From a sociological perspective, Gee (2000) proposed four interrelated forms of identity, namely nature identity, institutional identity, discourse identity, and affinity identity, which are mutually constituted and interdependent. In contrast, a sociocultural perspective conceptualizes learner identity as a dynamic cognitive structure that emphasizes identity formation as an ongoing process (Garner & Kaplan, 2019). This perspective highlights how learners develop a relatively sustained self-image as learners across diverse learning experiences, viewing identity formation as a process of experiencing, negotiating, and adjusting learner identity to fit specific learning contexts (Lakkala et al., 2020). Accordingly, the construction of learner identity is context-dependent and transitional, and it may be shaped positively or negatively through learners' levels of classroom engagement and their interactions with others in learning settings (Tovar, & Esau, 2013).

The learning processes of vocational students are closely intertwined with the development of learner identity (Hegna, 2019). Through participation in classroom learning activities, students acquire new knowledge and skills while simultaneously deepening their understanding of themselves as learners (Prianto et al., 2022). Active engagement in classroom learning enables students to recognize their perceived strengths, competencies, or learning advantages, which in turn facilitates the internalization and affirmation of learner identity (Lund & Jolly, 2012). Over time, situated perceptions arising from concrete learning experiences are gradually integrated into more abstract and stable understandings of oneself as a learner (Järvenoja et al., 2015 ).

Learner identity has been shown to be shaped by classroom learning environments (Oyserman & Dawson, 2024). Positive learning experiences encourage students to adopt more active roles in subsequent classroom learning and to construct a positive and sustainable learner identity (Ramzan et al., 2023). Conversely, learning difficulties encountered in classroom instruction may undermine students' self-perceptions as competent learners, thereby exerting a negative influence on their acquisition of knowledge and skills (Einat, 2017). These patterns indicate that learner identity is closely associated with students' levels of classroom engagement, effort, and investment, and constitutes a key factor in enhancing learning efficiency (Teng, 2019).

When students' understandings of learning approaches and learning content diverge from institutional learning expectations, they may gradually disengage from learning activities (Peters & Romero, 2019). Previous studies have also demonstrated that difficulties in understanding classroom-taught knowledge and skills can lead to resistance at the level of identity recognition (Muhammad et al., 2024). However, most existing literature focuses on identifying the sources of such misalignments, while paying comparatively limited attention to how students continuously develop and sustain their learner identity in response to institutional learning contexts (Melguizo et al., 2021).

Research indicates that students adopt different strategies when confronted with tensions or conflicts in learner identity positioning (Collett, 2020). First, students may shift their perspectives and positions, attempting to expand their existing learner identities and allow them to coexist with new identity expectations across learning contexts (Sung, 2022). In addition, students may seek to reconstruct one or more dominant learning beliefs within particular contexts, thereby establishing new forms of learner identity (Mili & Towers, 2024). Alternatively, when faced with incompatible or incomprehensible learning ideologies, students may choose to align with one set of learning beliefs while distancing themselves from those associated with another context (Kiraz & Yılmaz Yıldız, 2025 ).

### *2.2 Classroom-Based Behavioral Engagement*

Research on classroom engagement has consistently treated students' observable classroom behaviors as a core dimension of learning participation (Alimoglu et al., 2014). Within the engagement literature, behavioral engagement refers to students' overt involvement in instructional activities, including sustained attention, focused classroom conduct, and adherence to classroom norms (Gomes et al., 2023). These behaviors are not understood as isolated or mechanical actions, but rather as meaningful indicators of students' learning orientations and their positioning within instructional contexts (Culver et al., 2021). For example, maintaining visual attention toward teachers or instructional materials has been widely discussed as a manifestation of focused classroom behavior and active engagement in learning processes (Goldberg et al., 2021).

From a classroom-based perspective, student engagement is not a stable individual trait but a contextualized and relational phenomenon, shaped by instructional practices, interactional expectations, and classroom social dynamics (Ryu & Lombardi, 2015). Classroom-oriented pedagogical research emphasizes that students' attentional behaviors fluctuate in response to instructional cues, teacher and student interactions, and perceived demands regarding visibility and participation (Han et al., 2025). Accordingly, observable behaviors such as sustained attention, gaze aversion, or strategic disengagement are increasingly interpreted as context-sensitive responses, rather than as straightforward indicators of motivation or effort (Sharma et al., 2025).

Importantly, recent theoretical work suggests that classroom engagement cannot be fully understood without considering students' subjective interpretations of participation and its relationship with learner identity (Wong & Liem, 2022). Participation behaviors reflect not only students' attentional states, but also how they perceive their roles, legitimacy, and sense of belonging within classroom settings (Keyes, 2019). When students recognize themselves as competent and socially acknowledged learners, they are more likely to display forms of overt engagement that align with classroom expectations (Chang & Hall, 2022). In contrast, when participation is experienced as a risk, a performative demand, or as misaligned with students' self-concepts, learners may adopt less visible modes of engagement or deliberately reduce overt attentional displays (Schnitzler et al., 2021 ). From this perspective, behavioral engagement in classrooms constitutes a key site where learner identity is enacted, negotiated, and at times resisted in everyday instructional practice (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018).

Existing literature has predominantly examined how adolescent learner identity is constructed across educational contexts and how such identity formation facilitates classroom engagement (Verhoeven et al., 2019). However, empirical evidence regarding how vocational college students understand, enact, and sustain learner identity in traditional face-to-face classrooms remains limited (Khanal, 2024). Moreover, the specific mechanisms linking classroom engagement and learner identity, particularly within vocational education contexts, have yet to be sufficiently explored (Keijzer et al., 2022). How learner identity is continuously formed and cultivated within institutional teaching environments therefore remains an open empirical question (Nazari et al., 2023).

To address these gaps, this study adopts a qualitative research design and draws on semi-structured interviews with 23 students from six vocational colleges in Guangdong Province. The study explores how students construct understandings of learner identity through observable attentional behaviors within concrete classroom teaching contexts. By foregrounding the contextual and identity-related meanings of classroom engagement, this study is guided by the following three research questions:

RQ1: How do vocational college students understand and construct their learner identity through observable attentional behaviors in classroom settings, such as head-up and head-down behaviors? RQ2: What meanings do students ascribe to head-up and head-down behaviors, and how do these meanings interact with their learning motivations, role perceptions, and patterns of classroom interaction? RQ3: How do classroom interactional features and institutional arrangements influence students' willingness and modes of displaying overt attentional engagement?

## 3. Method

### *3.1 Research Context*

This study was conducted in higher vocational colleges located in Guangdong Province, China.Within the Chinese education system, higher education comprises both general undergraduate universities, which primarily emphasize theoretical knowledge and academic research, and higher vocational colleges, which focus on preparing highly skilled technical personnel to meet the practical demands of production, construction, and frontline service sectors (Xiong, 2011). From a learner identity perspective, students in higher vocational colleges tend not to define themselves primarily through academic achievement, but rather through their perceived proficiency in vocational skills and their capacity for workplace competence (Winch, 2023). They are more likely to seek recognition of their learner identity through participation in skills competitions, the acquisition of vocational skills, and the attainment of relevant professional certificates (Bravenboer & Lester, 2016). This identity logic leads vocational students to place greater value on the practical applicability of skills than on the depth or breadth of theoretical knowledge. As a result, classroom learning contexts in vocational colleges may give rise to stereotypical expectations that differentiate between the perceived importance of practical skills and long-term career development (Yan & Liu, 2025). These differences are most visibly reflected in varying levels of classroom engagement between theoretical and practice oriented courses, manifesting in distinct observable behaviors such as sustained attention, gaze aversion, or strategic disengagement, particularly through head-up and head-down behaviors during classroom instruction (Gomes et al., 2023).

### *3.2 Research Design*

This study adopted a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were

conducted with 23 students from six higher vocational colleges in Guangdong Province, China, and the interview data served as the primary source for addressing the research questions. Students were selected as participants because they were able to draw on their own experiences and reflections to articulate how their learner identity informed specific forms of classroom engagement, as well as how they continuously adjusted, developed, and sustained their learner identity over time. In addition, student interviews allowed participants to narrate their learner identities from their own perspectives, relatively independent of particular classroom practices, thereby providing insightful and reflexive accounts of their learning experiences.

*3.3 Respondent Selection and Data*

This study aimed to explore the descriptions of students' learner identities and classroom engagement behaviors, with the aim of exploring potential relationships between learner identity and classroom engagement. A purposive sampling strategy was employed, as it enabled the selection of participants who possessed relevant characteristics and learning experiences, thereby facilitating the generation of in depth insights and enhancing the rigor and credibility of the findings. Accordingly, the inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) students enrolled in higher vocational colleges, and (2) students representing different academic majors. These criteria were intended to ensure a diverse and representative sample of vocational college students, thereby offering a broader basis for understanding how learner identity may be associated with classroom engagement across disciplines. Following the screening process, a total of 23 vocational college students met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic Data

| Participant | Institution | Major | Year of Study | Gender |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Student A | College A | Preschool Education | Third year | Male |
| Student B | College B | Analytical Testing Technology | First year | Male |
| Student C | College A | Social Work | Second year | Male |
| Student D | College A | Preschool Education | Second year | Male |
| Student E | College A | Preschool Education | First year | Female |
| Student F | College B | Elevator Technology | Second year | Male |
| Student G | College A | Preschool Education | Third year | Male |
| Student H | College A | Preschool Education | Third year | Female |
| Student I | College C | Cross Border Commerce | First year | Female |
| Student J | College C | Information Security Technology | Second year | Female |
| Student K | College D | Big Data and Accounting | Second year | Male |
| Student L | College A | Preschool Education | Second year | Female |
| Student M | College D | Big Data and Accounting | Second year | Female |
| Student N | College D | Big Data and Accounting | Second year | Female |
| Student O | College B | Digital Design and Manufacturing Technology | First year | Male |
| Student P | College B | Digital Design and Manufacturing Technology | First year | Female |
| Student Q | College B | Digital Design and Manufacturing Technology | First year | Male |
| Student R | College E | Application of Information Security Technology | First year | Female |
| Student S | College E | Application of Artificial Intelligence Technology | Second year | Male |
| Student T | College F | Furniture Art Design | First year | Female |
| Student U | College F | Visual Communication Design | Second year | Male |
| Student V | College F | Digital Media Art Design | First year | Male |
| Student W | College A | Preschool Education | Third year | Female |

*3.4 Data Collection and Analysis*

This study employed a qualitative research approach, with data collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to express their views more freely and enable researchers to compare and categorize themes from the participants' perspectives, as suggested by Creswell (2013). Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, after which the interviews were audio recorded and conducted entirely in Chinese. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim. Interview excerpts reported in this article were translated into English for publication purposes. To ensure that the data accurately reflected their original meanings, both the original Chinese transcripts and the corresponding English translations were retained throughout the research process, thereby minimizing the risk of data loss or misinterpretation.

Thematic coding was conducted using NVivo 15 software, which enhanced the rigor and reliability of the qualitative analysis. The analytic procedures followed the guidelines outlined by Creswell and Poth (2016) and involved several iterative stages. First, initial codes were generated to identify key concepts and recurring patterns within the interview data. Second, similar codes were systematically compared and grouped into broader categories. Third, these categories

were further refined and synthesized into overarching analytical themes. These stages required ongoing comparison, discussion, and revision among the researchers, ensuring that the final coding structure and themes accurately represented the participants' intended meanings.

Data saturation was systematically assessed throughout data collection and analysis to confirm the theoretical sufficiency of the sample. Aligned with established methodological standards for qualitative interview research, saturation was defined as the point at which no new thematic categories, conceptual patterns, or distinctive insights emerged from successive transcripts (Guest et al., 2006). After iterative coding of the first 19 interviews, all core themes regarding students' interpretations of head-up/head-down behaviors and learner identity enactment had been fully identified and consistently replicated. The remaining 4 interviews yielded no novel themes or substantive deviations requiring revision of the analytical framework, confirming that thematic saturation was achieved with the 23-participant sample. This sample size falls within the empirically validated range for constructivist qualitative inquiry, providing adequate empirical grounding for the study's core conclusions.

It is noteworthy that the proportion of male students in the preschool education sample from College A is notably higher than the average gender distribution of preschool education majors across China, where female students account for the overwhelming majority. This pattern reflects the institutional context of College A, which operates a targeted male preschool teacher training program with a higher male admission ratio to address the gender imbalance in the early childhood education workforce. This demographic feature carries implications for interpreting the findings: gender dynamics intersect with vocational learner identity construction, as male students in female-dominated vocational fields often negotiate distinct identity positioning and classroom participation strategies to align their gender roles with professional expectations. Meanwhile, this sample characteristic means that findings related to preschool education students should be generalized to the broader national preschool education student population with caution, and gender differences in learner identity enactment deserve further exploration in future research.

### *3.5 Validity and Reliability*

To enhance the trustworthiness and reliability of the findings, this study employed a triangulation strategy (Moon, 2019). First, data were collected from 23 participants, allowing for the identification of shared viewpoints and the development of convergent themes across interviews. Second, two researchers independently completed open coding of all interview transcripts, and inter-rater reliability was quantified using Cohen's Kappa coefficient. The initial coding yielded a Kappa value of $\kappa = 0.86$, representing substantial agreement per standard interpretive criteria. All coding discrepancies were resolved through systematic discussion and consensus calibration, and unified coding rules were finalized before full thematic analysis. In addition, the interview data were originally collected in Chinese, and selected excerpts were translated into English for analytical and reporting purposes, ensuring that participants' intended meanings were preserved throughout the analytic process. The study strictly followed the procedures outlined by Creswell and Poth (2016). After initial categorization, the researchers engaged in repeated comparison, discussion, and refinement, ultimately arriving at the key themes. This iterative process minimized potential researcher bias and strengthened the reliability of the identified themes.

To further align with qualitative research standards, we supplemented the validity framework with member checking and researcher reflexivity practices. For member checking, we shared the preliminary core themes and representative interpretations with 5 volunteer participants after initial coding; all respondents confirmed the themes accurately reflected their classroom experiences and identity perceptions, with no major misinterpretations identified. Full member checking across all 23 participants was not feasible due to the anonymous study design and limited post-interview contactability, which we acknowledge as a procedural limitation. Regarding researcher reflexivity, all authors are vocational education researchers with teaching and research experience in learner identity, but none held teaching or administrative positions at the participating colleges or had prior relationships with participants. The team documented pre-existing assumptions about vocational students' classroom behaviors in reflexive memos prior to coding, and consciously bracketed these presuppositions throughout analysis to ensure themes were grounded in participant narratives, with regular team discussions to mitigate interpretive bias.

### *3.6 Ethics in Research*

This study drew on data from 23 students and adhered to established ethical guidelines to protect the identities of both institutions and participants. All school names and participant identities were anonymized and replaced with coded labels, ranging from Student A to Student W. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Participants' rights and well being were carefully safeguarded throughout the research process, and efforts were made to minimize any potential influence on their responses. Participants were informed that all data and feedback would be kept strictly confidential and used solely for research purposes (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). Consent for audio recording was obtained prior to each interview, and in cases where recording was declined, detailed written notes were taken instead.

## 4. Findings

To clarify the relational logic among core constructs and enhance analytical transparency, we synthesized a thematic framework based on the interview findings, as presented in Figure 1. Thematic framework of learner identity and visible attentional behaviors in vocational college classroomsThis framework visualizes how three interrelated dimensions perceived course usefulness, classroom task and supervisory context, and learner identity enactment jointly shape students' strategic display of head-up and head-down behaviors. Specifically, learners' instrumental evaluation of course value drives substantive head-up engagement; institutional supervision and task requirements trigger performative head-up compliance; and students' self-positioning as legitimate learners further legitimizes head-down behaviors as an implicit mode of participation. In turn, the deployment of visible attentional behaviors feeds back into the ongoing negotiation and construction of vocational learner identity.

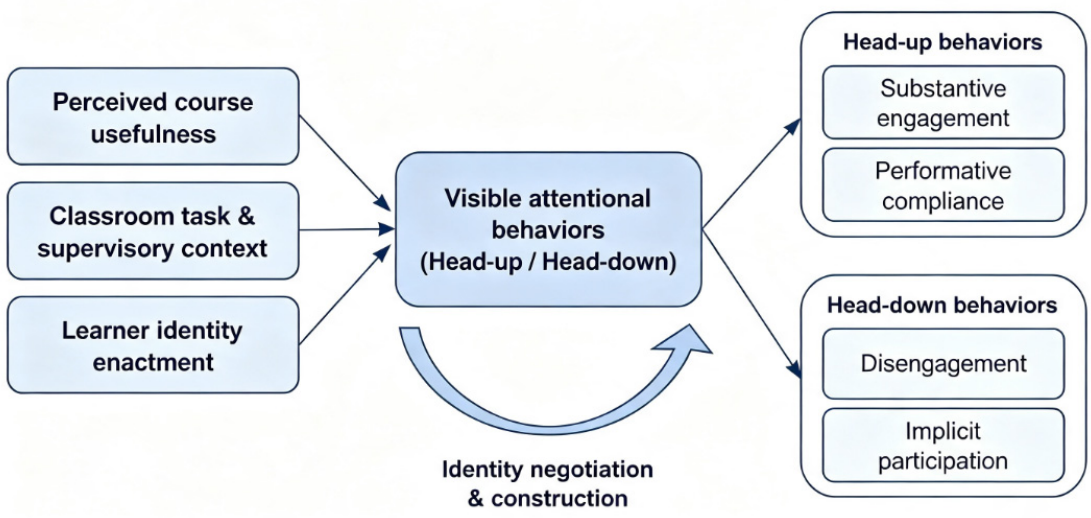



Figure 1. Thematic Framework of Learner Identity, Context, and Behaviors

### *4.1 Head-Up Behavior as a Visible Intersection of Classroom Engagement and Learner Identity*

Based on the analysis of semi-structured interview data from 23 vocational college students, head-up and head-down behaviors observed in classrooms cannot be understood as direct or straightforward indicators of students' attention or engagement in learning activities. Instead, participants' narratives suggest that head-up behavior represents a contextualized form of classroom engagement, jointly shaped by learner identity and students' expectations of classroom learning. Across different course types, instructional contexts, and students' individual career aspirations, vocational students use head-up and head-down behaviors to express, negotiate, or protect their positioning as learners.

The findings indicate that head-up behavior is not an isolated behavioral trait, but rather an observable point of convergence where learner identity and classroom engagement intersect within instructional contexts. The following themes are presented to systematically elaborate this perspective.

### *4.2 Instrumental Learner Identity and a Usefulness Oriented Logic of Engagement*

Analysis of the interview data revealed that many students evaluated whether to maintain head up engagement in class by considering the perceived relevance of course content to future employment and vocational skill development. Within this logic, classroom engagement was understood as a form of instrumental investment, in which attention was allocated based on anticipated utility. Maintaining head-up behavior toward the teacher and instructional content functioned as a visible indicator of whether the lesson was deemed worthy of sustained attention.

Participants reported that when course content was closely aligned with their career development goals, they were willing to keep their heads up and actively participate in classroom interactions. In contrast, when students perceived a misalignment between their learner identity and the course, they tended to adopt head-down behaviors and engage in activities unrelated to learning. Notably, this pattern was consistently observed across students from different academic majors. as illustrated in the following excerpts:

> *"For ideological and political courses such as Maoism related subjects, I feel that they may have some relevance for future learning or work, but to be honest, they do not give me much advantage" (Student B).*
>
> *"Courses like financial accounting and management accounting are directly related to my future career path, so I tend to keep my head up more often and pay closer attention in class" (Student K).*

*"If I think a course will be useful for my future, I will listen carefully; if I think it has little relevance, I do not engage seriously" (Student M).*
*"When I feel that a course does not really help me, I stop listening. I usually keep my head down, scrolling through WeChat or reading novels" (Student A).*

Further analysis of the interview data indicated that practice oriented and skill focused courses were more likely to elicit sustained head-up behavior among students. This pattern reflects students' strong identification with a vocational learner identity, in which engagement with courses perceived as high value represents a rational and strategic response. In contrast, students tended to reallocate less time and cognitive effort to other courses, maintaining only limited forms of classroom engagement while negotiating and sustaining their learner identity in vocational education contexts. The following excerpts illustrate participants' perspectives:

*"In courses such as art, I really enjoy drawing, and in piano classes I am willing to practice and listen to the teacher explain techniques. When I can play something successfully, I feel a sense of achievement and comfort" (Student Q).*
*"For professional courses, I usually pay attention. In classes like fundamentals of mechanical manufacturing, if you do not listen carefully, you will fall behind, so you have to invest your time and attention in class" (Student P).*
*"In professional courses, I stay focused throughout the entire class. In other courses, I might use my phone or do my own things. In professional courses, I follow the teacher's pace from beginning to end" (Student F).*
*"Personally, I really enjoy some art related courses. I am willing to listen to the teacher and I do not keep my head down using my phone, because I am genuinely interested in the knowledge and I feel that I gain something meaningful from learning it" (Student A).*

These accounts demonstrate that head-up behavior in classrooms is not merely an indicator of attention, but a deliberate behavioral choice shaped by students' evaluations of the value of classroom engagement for their personal development and learner identity construction.

### *4.3 Head-Up Behavior as a Strategy for Enacting Learner Identity*

Beyond evaluating course value as a criterion for classroom engagement, head-up behavior also functioned as a strategic response to classroom norms and instructional demands. Participants commonly reported that during assigned learning tasks, roll calls, group work, and organized classroom activities, they would actively or passively maintain head-up behavior in order to meet instructional requirements. In such contexts, head-up behavior primarily signified compliance with classroom expectations, rather than indicating sustained or intrinsically motivated engagement.

Participants further noted that when assuming key roles in group collaboration or structured learning activities, active cooperation and visible involvement were required to complete the tasks successfully. In these situations, head-down behavior tended to be interpreted as resistance to the assigned tasks, and was often judged by peers or instructors as a lack of willingness to participate, thereby conflicting with expectations of an appropriate vocational learner identity. Consequently, such behaviors diminished quickly once the tasks were completed, indicating that this form of head-up behavior was highly context dependent and strongly functional in nature, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

*"In professional practice courses, especially those involving group discussions and task based activities, there is much less phone use or disengaged behavior, because the course demands a higher level of involvement" (Student L).*
*"In professional courses, we are basically keeping our heads up most of the time. In some other courses, there might be more head-down behavior, but overall the classroom atmosphere in professional courses is much more intense, and students rarely keep their heads down using their phones" (Student V).*

Similarly, classroom norms and institutional requirements can render head-up behavior performative in nature. In situations involving classroom inspections, roll calls, and heightened supervision, students deliberately maintained an upright head up posture to avoid being labeled as inattentive or unserious learners. However, such head-up behavior was not necessarily accompanied by genuine learner engagement, indicating that visible attention often coexisted with distraction or mind wandering. The following excerpts illustrate participants' perspectives:

*"In our professional courses with group work, the teacher is quite strict. He keeps walking around, asks questions constantly, and randomly calls on students. So you have to stay alert and listen carefully to what he is saying" (Student C). "Sometimes the teacher also checks how many students are keeping their heads up, saying that at least this way we are not sleeping or using our phones. Even if we are not fully focused, we might still catch part of what is being taught" (Student V).*
*"I usually look up first to see what the teacher is talking about, and after a while I lower my head again. This requirement feels like an external stimulus. If the teacher asks everyone to look up and pay attention, I will cooperate and raise my head" (Student A).*

These accounts illustrate the multiple meanings of head-up behavior in classroom participation: it functions both as an

immediate response to classroom norms and as a strategic form of identity management under conditions of supervision.

*4.4 The Legitimation of Head-down Behavior*

The analysis of the interview data revealed that participants questioned or resisted the assumption that head-up behavior directly equates to a high level of classroom engagement. Instead, respondents offered legitimizing interpretations of head-down behavior, emphasizing that lowering one's head does not necessarily indicate a lack of learning engagement.

Participants noted that head-down behavior may involve consulting materials, taking notes, engaging in individual thinking, or completing assigned classroom tasks. They emphasized that authentic classroom engagement is not always visibly observable, echoing earlier findings that head-up behavior is not fully synonymous with attentive participation. Some students further explained that temporarily lowering their heads helped them regulate attention and re-engage more effectively in subsequent learning activities, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

*"Sometimes when I lower my head, I am taking notes. If the teacher speaks too fast, I need to write things down first or I will forget later" (Student E).*
*"Sometimes the teacher asks us to complete tasks, so I keep my head down working on them or organizing materials. In that situation, I do not keep looking at the teacher all the time" (Student N).*
*"Sometimes I lower my head to look something up on my phone. It does not mean I am not listening, but when the teacher mentions a point, I want to check it myself first" (Student G).*
*"Even when my head is down, I might be thinking about what the teacher just said, so I am actually still listening" (Student M).*
*"Keeping my head up all the time can be tiring. Lowering my head briefly helps me reset, and afterward I can listen more clearly" (Student O).*

Furthermore, an excessive emphasis on classroom management or external order may provoke resistance among students, leading them to disengage through reduced interaction or head-down behavior as a means of regulating their learner identity. Such behaviors do not signify a rejection of learning; rather, they reflect an ongoing process of negotiation and adaptation between institutional demands and individual learner identities.The following excerpts illustrate participants' perspectives:

*"When discipline and head up rates are emphasized all the time, it actually makes people feel uncomfortable. It feels less like learning and more like being controlled" (Student I).*
*"If the teacher keeps watching whether you are keeping your head up, I feel pressured, and I become less willing to interact with them" (Student Q).*
*"Lowering my head does not mean I am not learning. It just makes me feel more comfortable and able to listen better" (Student P).*
*"You cannot say that lowering your head means not learning. Sometimes it is simply my own way of engaging" (Student U).*

These accounts indicate that students reconceptualize head-down behavior as a contextualized form of classroom engagement, rather than a simple manifestation of disengagement or a lack of learning commitment.

The findings indicate that head-up rate in this study does not function as a stable or singular indicator of classroom engagement. Rather, it is understood as a highly contextualized and visibly enacted behavior, through which students adopt specific strategies for participating in classroom learning by integrating their perceptions of learner identity within particular instructional settings.

Data analysis further reveals that students do not respond passively to instructional demands. Instead, they actively express their orientations toward course value, classroom norms, and preferred learning approaches through deliberate head-up or head-down behaviors. In this sense, classroom engagement is no longer a unidirectional display of student behavior, but a form of pedagogical practice deeply intertwined with learner identity. Accordingly, the interview findings position head-up behavior as an observable intersection between learner identity and classroom engagement, demonstrating that such behavior is shaped both by instructional contexts and by students' self understandings of who they are as learners.

## 5. Discussion

This study focuses on classroom teaching processes in higher vocational colleges and examines the interaction between students' head-up and head-down behaviors, learner identity, and classroom engagement. The findings demonstrate that head-up rate should not be understood as a simple indicator of attention or serious participation. Instead, it represents a behavioral strategy through which learners negotiate course value, task demands, and external supervision within specific classroom contexts. When course content is perceived as highly relevant to students' future occupational goals,

they tend to sustain head-up behaviors and remain visibly engaged in classroom learning. Conversely, when a course is perceived as low in instrumental value, students often redistribute their learning effort through head-down behaviors while still participating in learning activities in alternative ways, such as searching for information, taking notes, or engaging in self-directed learning. In addition, in situations involving classroom inspection or explicit instructional cues from teachers, students actively adjust their head-up behaviors to align with classroom norms and expectations. Taken together, head-up and head-down behaviors constitute an observable intersection between learner identity construction and classroom engagement.

Compared with previous studies that have treated visual attention as a core behavioral indicator of classroom engagement, this study extends existing observational perspectives by demonstrating that, within the context of higher vocational education, head-up and head-down behaviors function as dual indicators that simultaneously reflect learner identity management and strategic learning choices. Specifically, head-up behavior may signal students' genuine experiential recognition of course value, but it may also represent a compliance oriented response to classroom norms or surveillance. Similarly, head-down behavior may indicate reduced visible engagement, yet it may also reflect deeper cognitive processing, information verification, or task completion. These multiple functional interpretations illuminate the overt and latent dynamics of classroom participation and highlight the limitations of relying solely on surface level behavioral indicators. The findings are consistent with the theoretical framework outlined in the literature review and provide empirical support for the development of more nuanced observational models of classroom engagement in future research.

Based on the findings of this study, several practical implications are proposed to enhance the substantive quality of classroom engagement. First, head up rate may be used as one indicator of classroom engagement, but it should be complemented with multiple measures such as oral questioning, in class activities, formative assessments, and classroom exercises. This multi indicator approach helps prevent misinterpretation when head-up behavior functions as a latent or compliance oriented strategy rather than genuine engagement. Second, students' perceptions of course usefulness and value should be strengthened by increasing the alignment between course content and vocational practice, skill development, task outcomes, and certification requirements. Such alignment enables students to recognize the relevance of coursework to their future career trajectories and to construct a more coherent learner identity. In addition, incorporating interactive group activities and task based learning can provide students with meaningful knowledge connections and tangible learning experiences, thereby reducing the likelihood of performative behaviors adopted merely to comply with supervision or classroom norms. Finally, a broader range of observable yet implicit learning behaviors should be integrated into evaluation frameworks, including note taking practices, participation in group discussions, information searching, and records of learning activities. Collectively, these recommendations allow for a more valid assessment of classroom engagement while enhancing the practical recognition of students' less visible forms of participation.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the findings are constrained by geographic bias stemming from the single-province sample. All 23 participants were recruited from six higher vocational colleges in Guangdong Province, a region with distinctive policy contexts, industry-education integration patterns, and labor market demands for vocational talent. Guangdong's advanced manufacturing and service sectors, alongside its localized vocational education reform policies, may shape students' instrumental evaluations of coursework and their strategic performance of attentional behaviors in ways that do not generalize to vocational colleges in inland regions or provinces with different industrial structures. This geographic concentration therefore limits the external validity of the conclusions, and findings should be extrapolated cautiously to other regional vocational education contexts. Second, the exclusive reliance on student perspectives restricts the comprehensiveness of the analysis. Data were drawn only from student self-reported narratives, with no complementary data from teachers, classroom observers, or administrative staff. This single-stakeholder design captures students' subjective interpretations of learner identity and attentional behaviors, but cannot account for how instructors perceive and respond to these behavioral displays, or how institutional classroom management policies are enacted in practice. The absence of triangulation across multiple perspectives leaves potential blind spots in our understanding of the interactive dynamics between identity construction and classroom engagement. Third, the cross-sectional design precludes definitive causal inference. Learner identity and classroom behavioral strategies are dynamic constructs that evolve over the course of students' academic trajectories. Our data capture these phenomena at a single time point, and thus can only identify patterned associations between identity orientations and head-up/head-down behaviors, rather than establishing causal direction or developmental trajectories. We cannot determine whether learner identity drives attentional behavioral choices, whether repeated behavioral practices in turn shape identity formation, or how both may shift across grade levels and course stages. Fourth, the gender composition of the Preschool Education subsample limits the generalizability of discipline-specific findings. The higher than average proportion of male students in this subsample deviates from the typical gender structure of preschool education

programs across China. Given the small scale qualitative design, we did not conduct systematic gender based comparative analysis; how gender dynamics intersect with disciplinary culture to shape learner identity construction and classroom behavioral strategies remains a valuable direction for future research.

This study provides empirical support for learner identity theory, yet its limitations also point to directions for further theoretical and applied development. Future research may adopt mixed methods designs by combining quantitative measures of student engagement with qualitative data from teachers and parents to enhance reliability and validity. Beyond higher vocational institutions, comparative studies across comprehensive universities and research oriented universities are needed to examine whether head-up behaviors associated with learner identity and classroom engagement exhibit contextual differences, thereby testing the broader applicability of the present findings. Moreover, experimental interventions that integrate head up rate with classroom tasks, information seeking behaviors, and in class questioning may offer a more robust framework for evaluating and enhancing classroom engagement.

## 6. Conclusion

This study draws on semi-structured interviews with 23 students from six higher vocational colleges in Guangdong Province, China, to examine the roles of head-up and head-down behaviors in the interaction between learner identity and classroom engagement. The findings indicate that head up rate cannot be treated as the sole indicator of classroom engagement. Rather, it represents a strategic response through which students evaluate course value, task requirements, and classroom norms, reflecting the dynamic construction of learner identity within instructional contexts. By moving beyond theoretical perspectives that prioritize visible head-up behavior as the primary marker of engagement, this study highlights the significance of less visible forms of participation in shaping learning outcomes. At the practical level, the findings support the adoption of multi dimensional classroom task designs that avoid the limitations of relying exclusively on head up rate as an evaluative criterion.

Despite the limitations related to its cross sectional design, participant scope, and sample size, this study offers clear directions for future research. Subsequent studies may adopt mixed methods approaches, expand participant groups, research scale, and regional coverage, and place greater emphasis on observable learning behaviors in classroom settings as experimental interventions to further examine the relationship between learner identity and classroom engagement. Such efforts may contribute to a more comprehensive and theoretically robust understanding of engagement processes in educational contexts.

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**Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

**Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

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