Student engagement and language learning: what, why and how?

Student Engagement in the Language Classroom

Edited by Phil Hiver, Ali H. Al-Hoorie, and Sarah Mercer. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2021, 320 pp. paper, $59.95.

As positive psychology has shed new light on the discipline of second language acquisition (SLA), researchers in the field of applied linguistics begun to examine the effects of positive emotions(affectivity) and traits on language learning and the mechanism that helps language learners work up to their potentials (MacIntyre, 2016). Among all the psychological qualities, engagement has received considerable scholarly attention and been referred to as "responsiveness to the school and classroom context" (Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012, p. 99). It is a key element--the E in PERMA--in Seligman (2011)'s PERMA model of his well-being theory.

However, since Wellborn (1991) carried out a pioneering work on the subject of engagement, it has long been reviewed as a relevant subject of academic engaged time for improving student performance and achievement. Reeve (2012) defined it as "the extent of a student's active involvement in a learning activity" (p. 150) and applied the self-determination theory dialectical framework to explore the nature and function of student engagement. Student engagement is also viewed as a basis of theory and interventions related to education reform, school satisfaction and school dropout (Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012).

The domain of SLA is still just beginning to understand engagement and its relation to language education in a range of contexts; this is where this important work comes into play.

Extending Engagement Research to SLA

What we know about engagement is largely based upon the bulk of studies in educational psychology investigating how it contributes to students' academic achievement and motivational satisfaction and what kind of intervention language teachers adopt can promote the progress during instruction (Reeve, Jang, Dan, Jeon, & Barch, 2004). For all intents and purposes, the number of studies on engagement with language has been a steady and remarkable rise. In a recent review article, Hiver, Al-Hoorie, Vitta, & Wu (2021), two of whom are also editors of the book under review, systematically synthesized a report pool of 112 reports from 21 major journals in SLA and highlighted the application of heterogeneous methods and conceptual frameworks of language engagement of the last 20 years. The publication of this edited collection, signal of an increased interest and need of engendering engagement in language classroom, will greatly benefit those who want to take up the engagement issue in their classrooms or research.

This volume covers engagement in every way that a term can be inspected. Besides chapter 1 and chapter 15 (by Phil Hiver, Sarah Mercer, & Ali Al-Hoorie) serving as introductory and concluding chapters of the book，the rest 13 chapters fall under two headings: conceptual part and empirical part. The conceptual part comprises 4 chapters (chapters 2-5), which probe into a thorough theoretical elaboration about the construct of engagement in language learning and teaching, ranging from the definition of engagement (chapters 2, 3, 4) to its measurement issues (chapter 5). The empirical part presents 9 fully specified studies in various contexts under diverse themes, which can be divided into three thematic strands: studies on engagement-related factors (chapter 6, 7, 9, 10, 13), empirical practices under exceptional circumstances (chapter 11, 12, 14) and evaluation of engagement (chapter 8).

WHAT Makes Engagement Different?

Phil Hiver, Sarah Mercer and Ali H. Al-Hoorie provide a classic overview of the whole volume in the introductory chapter. They differentiate engagement from motivation by specifying 4 distinctive characteristics of engagement in language learning context, attempting to disentangle the ambiguity over a different use of terminology.

It is essential to note that Engagement is primarily a highly context-dependent notion of action. The first chapter, presented by Yuan Sang and Phil Hiver, addresses a comparative retrospective of engagement and other interrelated notions: investment, interest and motivation. Despite the fact that they share many features from the perspective of educational psychology, these constructs vary in many ways. Authors draw a clear line among one another and anticipate four "focuses" in future engagement studies in language classroom. Agneta M-L Svalberg takes the definition issue further in chapter 3, emphasizing "motivation…concerned with what drives behavior while engagement…focus on the behavior itself" (p.43). She instantiates engagement with language (EWL) of social, cognitive and affective dimension and brings affordance into the discussion of engagement-generating contexts. Suggestions with regard to different task types in form- and meaning-focused teaching that might result in different impacts on language learners would be conducive to teachers intending to provide engaging instruction in class (see also chapter 7).

Additionally, engagement, unlike motivation, always has an object. Students are engaged specifically with the teacher, an activity or task. This feature requires a domain-specific stand to examine student engagement. For instance, in research on L2 writing, Fan and Xu (2020) exemplified how students engaged with written feedback from their peers. Their finding reveals interconnectedness and imbalance of student engagement with different type of peer feedback in L2 writing. Ye Han and Xuesong

(Andy) Gao (Chapter 4) critically reviewed recent research on learner engagement with written feedback, especially written corrective feedback (WCF). They arrange a retrospective framework of language engagement with WCF and categorize 5 different types of engaged written feedback receivers, whose portraits help a better understanding of factors mediating learner engagement. With the aim of advancing engagement study with WCF, at the end of their review, they proposes possible future directions concerning with more innovative research methodology and diverse groups of participants rather than EFL university students.

As engagement is dynamic and malleable, the last chapter (chapter 5) in this part by Shiyao (Ashlee) Zhou, Phil Hiver and Ali Al-Hoorie dwells on measurement and assessment issues in second language (L2) engagement. They introduce data collecting methods and available instruments for data analysis, as authors mention in the review, which should be in line with research purposes for measuring L2 engagement. The reliability and validity, as well as advantages and disadvantages of these research methods are examined in this chapter. By clarifying different concepts (e.g. interests, motivations) and different research purposes, the authors exhibit a systematic set of tools that enlighten and guide subsequent research on L2 engagement.

WHY Engagement Happens in Language Classrooms?

The first thematic strand of empirical part comprises studies focusing on engagement-related factors in language classroom. Giulia Sulis and Jenefer Philip's report (chapter 6) explores the relation between environmental complexity in classroom and learner engagement. The data collected over a L2 French course of two academic terms explained the impact of environmental challenges and social support from teacher and peers on student engagement. Tetsuya Fukuda, Yoshifumi Fukada, Joseph Falout and

Tim Murphey (chapter 10) also inquire into how classmates act on priming engagement to fight against negative emotions in learning, even the classmates are imaginary.

Apparently, it is not difficult to point out myriad factors that can influence engagement in classroom. In chapter 7, Carly Henderson, Daniel Jung and Laura Gurzynski-Weiss's study set out to investigate whether and how cognitive, affective and behavioral engagement in different communication modes predict learning in L2 Spanish class. The result indicates that students in face-to-face (FTF) interaction exhibited significantly higher engagement as compared to synchronous computer mediated communication (SCMC). Chapter 9 by Linh Phung, Sachiko Nakamura and Hayo Reinders stresses how choices influence students' affective engagement in task-based instruction. They suggest that teacher develop and manipulate task conditions to offer learners more freedom in creating their own content for the task, which can foster higher affective engagement when they perform the task later.

Furthermore, not only external factors in language class lead to student engagement, but L2 emotions and L2 grit components within individual students also play a significant part in enhancing engagement. With the aim of examining how L2 engagement is longitudinally intertwined with emotions, motivation, grit, and L2 reading comprehension, Gholam Hassan Khajavy (chapter 13) applied structural equation modeling to reveal that positive emotions and grits, such as perseverance, consistent interest and L2 enjoyment, positively predicted L2 engagement. His final path analysis model showed that L2 engagement was "the strongest predictor" (p. 253) of L2 reading achievement in language classroom.

Throughout these five empirical studies, although we cannot determine a straight cause-effect relationship between all these variables and engagement in classroom,

these studies indeed provide us with an implicational guide to manipulate teaching conditions and encourage active engagement.

HOW We Can Relate Engagement to the L2 Classroom?

The second thematic group addresses engagement in diverse contexts, along with novel inspiration and suggestions on future engagement study. Nicole Mills (chapter 11) invited virtual reality (VR) narratives into a multimodal immersion project about French language and culture and highlighted how practical implementations on a virtual platform engendered student engagement from all dimensions. Based on the descriptive data collected from 4 language learners' virtual "Parisian lives" and their interactive writing assignments, the author found that instructional practices enhanced student engagement better with contextualized content, which validates the statement of Hiver *et al.* (2019, p. 88), "people create meaning and purpose through the construction of life stories".

Unlike most engagement investigations conducted at university level, W. L. Quint Oga-Baldwin and Luke K. Fryer (chapter 12) analyzed engagement changes in language classrooms of Japanese elementary schools. 477 pupils in 16 classes from five schools participated in the research project for 2 years. The authors innovatively adopted Latent Growth Curve (LGC) analysis to measure student engagement from a developmental perspective. Their results show significant positive change in cognitive engagement, week growth trend in behavioral engagement and emotional disengagement caused by compulsory learning.

The pyramid model of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) and the concept of Willingness to Participate (WTP) inspire the study in chapter 14 by Isobel Kai-Hui Wang and Sarah Mercer. The authors synthesized latent individual variables and

proposed Willingness to Engage (WTE) Model considering learner engagement beyond L2 classroom. WTE Model is a highly operable instrument for further investigation on learner engagement in- and off-class.

Sarah Mercer, Kyle Talbot and Isobel Kai-Hui Wang's chapter (chapter 8), Fake or Real Engagement – Looks can be Deceiving, working in concert with chapter 5, dives into identification and evaluation of engagement in learning, concentrating especially on procedural versus substantive engagement. They conducted a 2-stage investigation within five exploratory focus groups and collected data from focus group survey and individual interview to find out that students might intentionally manipulate their behaviors to pretend to be engaged in class. What throws this chapter into sharp relief is that it calls for a closer examination on reliability issue in engagement studies, which alerts both educators and researchers to fake engagement in classroom.

Toward a Research Agenda for Engagement with Language Learning

We turn now to several suggestions for current and future engagement research in language classrooms. What remains unclear, however, is that whether engagement is a explicitly commendatory term, and few studies discuss the condition of less engaged students and disengagement in language learning. Hiver et al. (2021) also mentioned in their 20 years review that current work barely investigated the dynamics of engagement development of individual learner. One way that comes to mind is taking a person-specific approach that tries to better capture the diversity and heterogeneity of student engagement.

Taken as a whole, this anthology helps language teachers and novice researchers to establish a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of engagement. The final chapter of the volume summarizes the key terminological and measurement issues,

main concerns in the discipline of engagement. The three editors also acknowledge the fundamental contribution of assembling this collection, namely, a valuable lesson that sorts out principal theories, specified frameworks and methods and reveals the malleability and complexity nature of engagement in language learning.

This book opens up new avenues heading to a more well-rounded perspective of studies in learner affects and contributes concrete pedagogical implications for educational psychology researchers, as well as L2 teaching practitioners, postgraduates, and language teacher educators in the field. We believe that, with the papers in this collection as an inspiring guide, readers will soon find themselves engaged deeply by this book and get useful information for their own work.

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