



Student Engagement in the Language Classroom (2021)

Phil Hiver, Ali H. Al-Hoorie and Sarah Mercer, Editors

Multilingual Matters

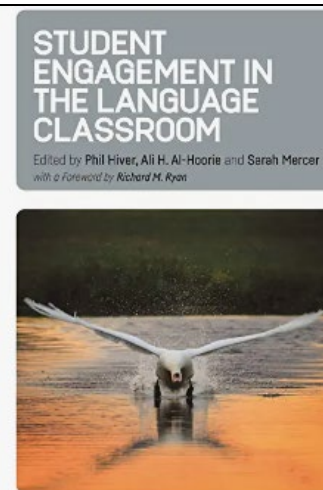
Pages: xvii + 300

ISBN: 978-1-78892-359-0

Cost: \$52

Reviewed by Cheryl Kirchhoff

The University of Nagano kirchhoff.cheryl@u-nagano.ac.jp



Student engagement is active involvement in learning tasks and positive emotions toward learning which both support the long-term objective of learning a foreign language. Engagement is a research construct that takes a wholistic view of learning by including cognitive, behavioral, affective, and social elements of learning. *Student Engagement in the Language Classroom*, edited by Hiver, Al-Hoorie and Mercer, provides reasoning and methods for more attention on student engagement research in second language acquisition (SLA). Defining and describing the construct of engagement in SLA is the main contribution of this edited volume. Engagement is closely related to motivation yet distinguished from it as “the active manifestation of the learner’s motivation” in “proactive learning behavior” (p. 280). The book is a part of the Psychology and Language Learning and Teaching series by Multilingual Matters. The authors of this edited volume show that, “While understanding how to motivate learners remains a pressing concern, educators today need to know how to also engage learners - to help them focus on their learning with their heart, their mind and their actions” (p. 4). However, engagement of language learners is a fairly new theme of research which has revealed “a need for greater consistency and clarity in operationalizing and measuring engagement” (p. 31). Thus, the aim of the book is to develop a research construct of student engagement in SLA and to showcase research in various language learning classrooms. Following the editors’ aims, the book is organized in two parts: Part 1 Conceptual Chapters, and Part 2 Empirical Chapters.

Part 1 begins with a chapter that defines engagement by Sang and Hiver. The defining characteristic of student engagement is action, a learners’ active involvement in learning. Student engagement is seen as having 4 interconnected components: behavioral, cognitive, affective and social. Behavioral engagement is seen in effort and initiative in language learning tasks. It can be measured by observing learners’ time on task and active involvement with language. Cognitive engagement involves learners mental effort to learn. Although cognition is not observable, sustained attention on a task or a goal, and verbal expressions of ideas and opinions are indications of cognitive engagement. Affective engagement refers to positive emotions (enjoyment and interest) and negative emotions (anxiety, boredom and frustration). Learners’ emotions are influenced by classroom tasks, peers, and teachers. Social engagement is particularly salient to language learning because communication is an important means of

learning. The writers credit Norton's earlier conception of investment in SLA for identifying the influence of language learners' complex social identity and goals. The chapter ends with suggestions for future research including, further descriptions of the nature of engagement, necessary conditions, and changes over time.

In Chapter 3 Svalberg describes her pioneering notion of engagement with language and discusses criteria for identifying it. Opportunities or 'affordances' for engagement to emerge is presented as a way to evaluate types of classroom language tasks. With these criteria and evaluation methods, presentation-practice-production and form-focused tasks are unlikely to lead to learner engagement. Chapter 4 is an update to the debate on written corrective feedback with a focus on learner engagement. Han and Gao offer a critique of research methods and suggestions for future research.

Measuring the construct of engagement is the objective of Chapter 5. Zhou, Hiver and Al-Hoorie analyze the advantages and disadvantages of measurement methods including self-reports surveys, experience sampling, observations and interviews. Although others have measured an isolated component of engagement, the current view of engagement is a combination of 4 components. The writers suggest that engagement should be measured as a wholistic construct in which behavior, emotional involvement and social functions are interconnected. Following this complex view of engagement, a self-report survey was designed for language learners. The survey is being used in research and is included in the Appendix.

The Empirical Chapters of Part 2 present applications of engagement research and offer implications for classroom practice. The first is Chapter 6, "Exploring Connections between Classroom Environment and Engagement in the Foreign Language Classroom," by Sulis and Philp. The writers define student engagement as a state of focused attention and involvement in learning which involves not only observable behavior, but also has cognitive, social and emotional components. These 4 interrelated components of engagement are concisely described and form the base of a questionnaire given to British university students studying French. Questionnaire results, classroom discourse, outward actions of engagement, and interactions between students and the teacher were gathered. Analysis of data resulted in rich descriptions of how the learning environment (peers, teachers and tasks) impacts student engagement. In particular, an appropriate level of challenge and support from peers, teacher and tasks influenced students' levels of engagement.

Chapter 7 is a study that compares engagement in a face-to-face language course and a computer-mediated text chat language course before the pandemic. Face-to-face course participants were evaluated to be more engaged due to non-verbal expression which was not a part of the text chat course. Common use of computer with live camera makes this study seem outdated.

Chapter 8, "Fake or Real Engagement - Looks can be Deceiving" by Mercer, Talbot and Wang, reports on results from focus groups and in-depth interviews of Austrian university students in English language courses. Participants described faking engagement during class because of disinterest, tiredness or other attentional priorities. Faking interest in a lesson may reflect politeness toward the teacher and power dynamics of the classroom. The authors caution that when researching students engagement, the psychology of learners must be kept in mind.

Chapter 9, "The Effect of Choice on Affective Engagement: Implications for Task Design" focuses on affective engagement, particularly learner's enjoyment and anxiety in a speaking task. Thai university students participated in two discussion tasks, one with few constraints where students needed to produce (choose) their own ideas, and one discussion with constraints where discussion ideas were already determined. Data from transcriptions of the two discussions and a questionnaire about enjoyment, anxiety, and freedom of expression during the discussions led to observations of higher affective engagement in the discussion with low constraints than the discussion with constraints. The writers attribute few constraints

and a need to suggest ideas in discussion to greater enjoyment, focus and feelings of self-expression. The writers discuss similarities between these findings and ideas of supporting learners' sense of autonomy in Self-Determination Theory.

Chapter 10 describes a classroom activity that increases students' awareness of how they can be positive language partners and thus improve social engagement. In Chapter 11, a virtual reality project that immersed learners of French into culturally relevant language experiences is analyzed by the four components of engagement. Mills suggests ways for incorporating engagement in instructional design.

Measuring longitudinal engagement in foreign language classrooms is the topic of Chapters 12 and 14. In Chapter 12, Oga-Baldwin and Fryer surveyed elementary school children on elements of engagement 5 times over two academic years. Latent growth curve analysis revealed increases in behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement. Children who began with the lowest levels of engagement grew the most, and girls were found to have higher engagement than boys. Chapter 14 examines longitudinal growth of an adult learner's engagement over 6 months using interviews. The writers, Wang and Mercer, propose a willingness to engage model that includes the psychological and social-contextual factors that influence a language learner to take action.

A path modeling study is the subject of Chapter 13, "Modeling the Relations Between Foreign Language Engagement, Emotions, Grit and Reading Achievement" by Khajavy. Data from an IELTS reading comprehension test was analyzed with data from questionnaires about engagement, emotions (anxiety and enjoyment) and grit in a foreign language classroom. Enjoyment and grit could predict engagement, and engagement could positively influence reading comprehension scores.

The concluding chapter written by the editors is a fine summary of the progress made in the book. Just as the word 'engagement' implies connection, student engagement in language learning connects multiple dimensions of learning. Student engagement research brings together an understanding of student agency in a classroom environment and instructional approaches. This book provides valuable guidance for those who want to pursue research on engagement in language learning classrooms.