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FACTORS DETERMINING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL)

Abstract: The paper presents how selected individual factors influence student engagement in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). It emphasises the role of student's interpersonal relationships with their environment and other participants of the educational process, and their influence on the quality of received language education. The concluding paragraph proposes solutions for encouraging and managing student engagement during EFL classes as well as suggestions concerning the creation of suitable, safe, and encouraging classroom environment for the fruitful development of student's foreign language proficiency. The paper concludes with a statement concerning the role of an educator/teacher and their support in the process of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL).
Keywords: Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), factors influencing student engagement, engaging methods of teaching foreign languages, personality variables

Introduction

Considerable emphasis is currently being placed on the effective and intensive learning of foreign languages from an early age. Aware of both the possibilities and the demands of modern times, the educators strive to modify the curricula and teaching offer in such a way that they not only meet the internal requirements of the specific educational institutions but are also fully adapted to the diverse needs of all those wishing to learn languages. It is this diversity that serves as the basis and "substrate" for creativity, but also as a challenge for contemporary language teaching at every educational level.

In today's society, children are encouraged to learn a foreign language from as early as kindergarten or nursery school. Consequently, their parents demand a more diverse and varied educational program. These demands demonstrate the constant and rapid challenges that each individual faces on a daily basis. Across all educational levels, English is the language that is most frequently selected by parents, and it is the

language that is most widely available in both public and private schools. Foreign language knowledge is indispensable, as it offers multiple opportunities for professional and personal development. Many individuals regard foreign language knowledge as a tool, but there is no question that there are considerably more benefits than only the prospect of better employment opportunities. Despite the popularity and great demand for English, students often find the learning process uninviting, unengaging, and uninteresting. As a result, teachers must modify their teaching methods to reflect current reality and keep up with dynamic socioeconomic developments.

The utilisation of teaching approaches that engage students in their educational process is becoming increasingly important in properly preparing young people for contemporary challenges. However, in order to make the EFL teaching most effective – for the learner to achieve a certain level of proficiency and fulfill their foreign language learning goals – the foreign language classes must be designed in such a way that the educational curriculum, as well as the individual tasks performed during the classes, are adapted in accordance with the learner's needs, to ensure that they are as engaged and committed as possible. The paper emphasises the significance of classroom and student participation in the educational process, discusses various elements involved in creating engaging foreign language classes, and recommends techniques to improve student engagement.

Student engagement and its importance for the educational process

The term 'engagement' has been defined variously in the literature. Some sources focus on the outward signs of engagement i.e., being in a state of readiness, being responsive or following the teacher's instructions, while others focus on its inner aspects such as passion for the studied subject and curiosity. Corso et al. (2013), believe that the term 'student engagement' is "best understood in a way that recognises students' internal thoughts and beliefs about being engaged as well as their external experiences with the various aspects of school life" (p. 52). Overall, student engagement consists of three intertwined modes. An individual may be engaged in an action (participate in school activities focused on learning or performing a certain academic task), in feeling – concerning the feeling of being in close relationships with all the participants of the learning process (teaching staff, classmates etc.) and having the sense of belonging to the school environment, and in thought – indicated by strong psychological involvement in one's learning process (Amerstorfer, Freiin von Münster-Kistner 2021).

According do Christenson, Reschly, and Wylie (2012), school-based engagement refers to students' active participation in the learning process. The researchers claim

that several distinct, but interconnected, and mutually supportive aspects of behaviour, emotion, cognition, and agency are part of this construct (Veiga et al. 2014, Hiver et al. 2021, Dörnyei 2019). As Skinner, Kindermann, and Furrer (2009b) explain, emotional engagement is defined as the presence of positive emotions, such as enthusiasm in task participation, and the absence of negative emotions, such as anxiety. Cognitive engagement, however, relates to how a student seeks to learn strategically by employing complex rather than superficial learning techniques, such as elaboration rather than memorization, to reach their learning goals/objectives. Student's behavioural engagement is determined by how deeply invested they are in the learning process (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer 2009b). Among the four aspects of student engagement, the agentic engagement is a recently proposed concept that describes how students contribute constructively to instruction through asking questions, expressing preferences, and informing the teacher about their needs (Reeve, Lee 2013). Reeve and Lee (2013) strongly underline the value of agentic engagement, presenting it as both proactive and transactional. When students are proactive, they act before the learning activity begins and before the instructor finalises the framework of the future learning activity. In transactional agentic learning environments, students bargain with the provider (e.g., the teacher) to find a motivating learning environment, attempting to tailor the learning activity so that it meets their needs, contributes to their goals, or is personally relevant. To acquire information and competence, students use effort, and strategic thinking, as well as teacher-supplied instruction (Reeve, Lee 2013). By engaging themselves effortfully, enthusiastically, strategically, and proactively, students create multiple effective pathways to translate their constructive motivational states (e.g., needs, goals) into better developed skills, achieved educational objectives, and academic progress more generally speaking.

Engagement may also be categorised as internal and external. In the former, time and effort are put into the learning process, while in the latter, institutional measures are taken to make sure resources are managed alongside other learning options and support services that promote participation in activities that lead to possible outcomes, such as consistency and satisfaction (Harper, Quaye 2009). One sign of students' strong engagement in their learning process may be for example, the number of extra-curricular activities organised by the school which the student chooses to attend in their free time, or the sense of belonging to the student fraternity.

Various factors e.g., students' interests, the time needed to complete tasks, the way in which the material is presented etc. have a significant influence on the students' level of engagement in their learning process. Classroom factors will have the greatest impact on learner engagement in one of three categories: the learner and his/her internal relationships, the learner and their relationships with other participants in the

educational process (otherwise known as the school environment), and the learner and the content (City et al. 2009).

Personality variables may also be related to the learner's engagement in the foreign language lesson as the specific type of activity and the way of working during a lesson force the learner to reveal certain qualities they already possess or to develop/discover new qualities necessary to perform the tasks. According to the authors, "Students may be inclined to think, feel, and act in typical ways in different settings according to their personalities, but the degree to which they *actually* think, feel, and act in a given setting will vary based on what and who they encounter in that particular setting" (Corso et al. 2013, p. 53). Therefore, methods that engage the learner can be defined as those that impart knowledge in a specific area and develop learners' creativity, critical thinking skills, include their interests and provide motivation for further learning.

Factors influencing student engagement

As the previous chapter shows, student engagement is a complex and multidimensional construct (Kahu 2013). A wide variety of factors have a significant impact on the foreign language learning process as well as on the student engagement itself. In this chapter, the focus will be placed primarily on the selected individual differences and how their absence (deficiency) or presence (adequate level) affect student engagement. Nevertheless, it is worth adding how teachers, their approach to the taught subject and the student, certain concepts or methods and strategies of language teaching and learning, play an important role in shaping positive engagement in foreign language lessons.

Self-esteem

As previously mentioned, an important aspect of the learning process is the ability to set real, achievable goals. Although to be motivated and able to set such goals oneself, the student's self-esteem should be at an adequate, stable level. It is self-esteem, among other personality factors, that influences which challenges we take on and how engaged in the educational process an individual is. It is worth noting that self-esteem can be measured in different spheres: physical, emotional, social, moral, and intellectual (Janiszewska-Nieścioruk 2000).

An adequate self-esteem is in accordance with the person's actual abilities and skills, while threatened self-esteem occurs when the individual has doubts about their abilities and struggles to assess their surroundings accurately. High self-esteem is described as a positive attitude towards oneself and acceptance of one's identity. In contrast, low self-esteem is seen as a rejection of the 'Self' and the belief of being inadequate (cf.

Dzwonkowska et al. 2008, Niebrzydowski 1974, 1989). Unstable self-esteem can result in passivity and low motivation, leading to a lack of initiative and therefore lower engagement in all kinds of activities (cf. Janiszewska-Nieścioruk 2000).

The child's personal experiences in the family environment, at school, and in the local community are linked not only to objective experiences, but also to their subjective interpretation. Thus, psychosocial, or social factors play a very important role in the formation of self-esteem. They are related to the individual's (often) inadequate perception of the opinions and judgements of those around them concerning their abilities, successes, and failures. Prolonged stress caused by challenging circumstances and incorrectly chosen assignments or instructional techniques has a particularly damaging impact on self-esteem. When students have unpleasant experiences at school and in their peer environment, they may create a state that promotes sense of danger, which negatively impacts their self-worth and encourages the development of negative defensive mechanisms indicative of low self-esteem (Janiszewska-Nieścioruk 2000). Therefore, the ability to assess one's own qualities and abilities correctly and adequately is important for the development of all students, their relationships with others, their later achievements and classroom engagement, and the challenges they take on at subsequent educational stages. Indeed, self-esteem has important implications for children's functioning in the family, school, and local environment. Therefore, to foster the proper development of the pupil and thus the correct level of self-esteem, the teacher needs to demonstrate social competence and organisational skills, plan and manage the educational process and the classroom environment in such a way as to provide the pupils with a sense of security and understanding in the first place. Thus, one may conclude that self-esteem has a significant impact on academic engagement. Additionally, high levels of academic self-efficacy, which refers to an individual's belief in their ability to succeed academically, are positively related to academic engagement. Overall, it is important to highlight the significance of self-esteem and academic self-efficacy in promoting student engagement. Therefore, students are in need of an effective social support system to enhance perceived social support and academic engagement (Zhao et al. 2021). Individuals who are confident in their academic ability have the tendency to put out more effort into academic work, whereas students who lack confidence in themselves will be less involved in their studies and are more likely to fail.

Motivation

Motivation plays a vital role in language teaching and learning. George Yule (2010) distinguishes between two types of language learning motivation: instrumental – stemming from the desire to achieve a goal, and integrative – coming from the need and

eagerness to establish contact and social relationships with native speakers of a foreign language. The author also points out that motivation increases with success in communicating in a foreign language. This clearly indicates that motivation can be both a cause and an effect in language learning. The learner should therefore, be encouraged to communicate and thus to be challenged and to fail, in order to learn from their errors (cf. Chłopek 2009).

Motivation may also be categorised into intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation refers to the enjoyment and pleasure of language learning itself, while extrinsic motivation is driven by external factors such as academic requirements or rewards and punishments. Intrinsic motivation is thought to be more powerful than extrinsic motivation in an educational process. Thohir (2017) points to the distinction between orientation and motivation in language learning, where orientation refers to the context or purpose for learning and motivation refers to the intensity of one's impetus to learn. The author also emphasises the importance of the teacher's attitude towards the language and the task of learning, as well as the need for teachers to maintain and arouse students' interest and motivation.

Intrinsic motivation is crucial to the success of any foreign language learner because it influences how frequently students employ foreign language learning techniques and strategies (Oxford, Shearin 1994). Said strategies are deliberate thoughts and behaviours employed to assist in the acquisition of new knowledge (Richards, Platt 1992). As an illustration, foreign language learners employ the techniques of questioning native speakers and collaborating with friends or acquaintances via verbal dialogue (Oxford 1990). The employment of these and other learning techniques is positively related with enhanced competence and accomplishment in foreign language acquisition, which students are likely to find inspiring (Oxford, Shearin 1994, Hardan 2013). For instance, according to Anjomshoa and Sadighi (2015), students who apply strategies for learning a foreign language to communicate with native speakers are more persistent in their learning and more likely to retain the language over time (Marszalek et al. 2022, Rathunde 2003, Tardy, Snyder 2004, Anderson 2010). Students' motivational states and their desired educational outcomes are connected through classroom engagement as a multidimensional educational construct (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer 2009b, Skinner et al. 2009a, Chłopek 2009). In order to make the connection between motivation and student engagement, it is necessary to understand that motivation is a driving force that affects students' academic behaviours and their decisions. A motivated student is more likely to actively participate in learning and have a positive attitude toward it. Their participation in educational activities is reflected in their active involvement and positive attitude. As a result, motivation and engagement are inextricably linked and mutually reinforce one another (Peng, 2021). Therefore, active participation in L2

classroom activities should be increased to minimise disruptive behaviours and reduce the valence of negative feelings such as anxiety, frustration, and boredom. (Reeve, Lee 2013, Li 2021).

Grit

According to Pawlak et al. (2021), grit may be understood as "a combination of perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 9). When an individual exhibits determination in his or her behaviour, he or she adopts the mindset of a "marathon runner" (p. 11), which means, that despite the experienced boredom and disappointment, they remain committed to their goals, continue to pursue them with consistency and perseverance. The more dedicated a person is, the better educated they are, the higher grades they obtain, and the less vulnerable they are to sudden changes in employment in the future (Duckworth et al. 2007). Researchers have established that individuals with greater determination learn the target language with greater interest, confidence in themselves, and hope of success by devoting time to the process and persevering in the related tasks (Lake 2013). In a recent study, Changlek and Palanukulwong (2015) demonstrated that learners' motivation and language learning anxiety are positively correlated with determination and that there is a close, positive link between the degree of determination and achievement in language learning. According to the findings, determination to learn a foreign language is favourably connected with competence in it and, determination and achievement acquired are somewhat positively correlated.

In their article 'The role of determination in learning English as a foreign language at an advanced level', Pawlak et al. (2021), present the results of a study on identifying the degree of determination in students of English philology, as well as its manifestations, which they conducted using a scale measuring determination specific to learning a foreign language, and semi-structured interviews. The participants of the project were university students (99 in total – 71 women and 28 men) ranging between the ages of 19 and 36. All respondents had been studying English for an average of 11.34 years. Data were collected using a personal questionnaire, a foreign language learning determination measurement scale and a semi-structured interview. The collected data were subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis. The research indicates that students in their first year were the most determined, followed by those in their second and third years. The greatest persistence of perceived interest related to learning a foreign language was shown by first-year students and the least by third-year students. Through the analysis of the data, it became apparent that determination in the foreign language learning process is not a fixed construct, but rather one that changes over time. Generally, the interview participants were not significantly motivated while attending

secondary school to learn the language in question, but their persistence increased once they began their philological studies. Participants interviewed individually, however, showed varying levels of intensity and conditioning of determination (Pawlak et al. 2021). The researchers also point to the scarcity of tools to reliably measure the level of this variable (grit), resulting in very limited research in this area.

Boredom

Many researchers also point to boredom as an important factor determining the quality of the foreign language learning process. However, it is an exceptionally complex and multidimensional issue. There are several descriptions that aim to capture the essence of boredom by addressing its numerous features. Pawlak et al. (2020) define boredom as "experiencing unpleasant feelings leading to uneasiness, reduced arousal and an impression of time slowing down" (p. 5; cf. Nett et al. 2010). Experiencing boredom frequently during foreign language lessons may have a negative impact on students' proficiency in the second language. It is worth adding here that boredom, although experienced by most students, is a highly individualised feeling/experience, as it is a part of individual learner characteristics (Pawlak et al. 2020, Xie 2021, Daniels et al. 2015, Nakamura et al. 2021).

However, experiencing boredom may also have its advantages. As Macklem (2015) suggests, functional negative emotions may help individuals focus on the problematic issues which hider their progress in language learning, or even motivate and encourage them to choose adequate behaviours and coping mechanisms they need in order to reach their goals. Therefore a conclusion may be drawn that boredom, thought to be predominantly a negative state, can be motivating. The author suggests, that boredom, in its temporary dimension is useful, as it helps the learner to establish new, appropriate goals and pursue them with confidence. Moreover, boredom can also be an impulse that indicates to the learner that the time has come to change the task or the environment they are in, as remaining in it for an extended period of time can be detrimental to the learner and thus hinder their progress.

Active countermeasures to negative boredom in the classroom are as important as awareness of the problem. Consequently, it is imperative to discuss the issue of boredom, its sources, and effective ways to cope with it. The learner will be able to gain a deeper understanding of their emotions and needs because of such training. Consequently, they will feel empowered, which is of great importance in the educational process. Pawlak et al. (2020) suggest giving learners the permission to self-select the partners to work with in class, freedom to choose topics for discussion, etc. Such freedom will strenghten the sense of control and result in increased levels of motivation. As the

researchers claim, "Individuals who set and pursue mastery goals are less prone to give up in adverse circumstances and at the same time more determined to search for task-related self-improvement" (p. 13). Last but not least, proactive, learner-centred interventions should be emphasized as conducive to enhancing engagement and, eventually, promoting meaningful, hands-on contexts that are appropriately challenging (Prince 2004, Pawlak et al. 2020). To minimise monotony, which has been identified as one of the most prominent causes of boredom, it is also thought vital to expose students to different language instructors throughout the school year so that students may witness varied teaching approaches and tactics. It may also be possible to reduce the boredom level found to gradually rise in higher grades (Kruk, Zawodniak 2017).

Conclusions

Learner's engagement in a foreign language lesson is conditioned by several factors, including personality variables such as self-esteem, motivation, and grit as well as other highly individualised factors – e.g. boredom. Low, and especially, inadequately low self-esteem affects the kind, amount and level of challenges undertaken by the learner. Thus, his/her commitment to participate in specific tasks such as speaking, group work or engaging in educational projects might become insufficient and scarce. Low intrinsic motivation and lack of grittiness also contribute to low engagement.

Individual factors can be shaped and improved primarily by choosing a correct, inclusive approach towards both the students and the entire language learning process. One of the solutions to the problem of insufficient student engagement may be an inductive approach in TEFL, which involves presenting latest information in the context of true, authentic life situations. This in turn allows the learner to not only relate to their previous experiences but also their existing knowledge. Learning through inquiry, finding solutions to problems and using observation as a primary source of data is considered more effective than the traditional deductive method/approach.

Moreover, the inductive approach to teaching English as a foreign language emphasises the importance of motivation in the educational process as well as underlines the need for teaching students about the usefulness and practical applications of the provided learning material. Overall, there is evidence supporting the use of the inductive learning method in foreign language education, as it promotes active participation, improves critical thinking skills and supports learner independence (Prince, Felder 2006).

Furthermore, a study mentioned by Padzik (2020) suggests that specific activities such as preparing a speech or joining a discussion in a foreign language led to higher-level comprehension compared to lecture-style teaching. The use of authentic materials is also recommended, as they may increase motivation due to their relevance to the

contemporary culture. Additionally, the latter enables learners to use specific language structures in a natural context. However, determining the relative merits of inductive and deductive teaching methods may pose some difficulty.

Hence, one might reach a conclusion that the most engaging plan for teaching English as a foreign language may be created through a skilful selection of tasks and their differentiation, as well as a focusing on supporting students, and their full inclusion. Learners' imagination, creativity, and ability to think critically and logically should be encouraged and developed. Students' deeper engagement will also be fostered by giving them a certain degree of freedom, for example in the choice of tasks or the way in which they are executed. Moreover, it is also important to ensure that classroom instructions are clear and transparent. The learner should be supported and encouraged in making choices and reaching goals that are appropriate to his/her abilities. These goals refer to challenges and activities that a student can undertake and achieve based on their skills, interests, and most importantly, resources. To enhance motivation and classroom engagement, constructive feedback must be combined with appropriate rewards. With such an approach, individuals can be successfully inspired to reach their fullest potential.

The most reliable testimony to the quality of the lessons are the participants of the learning process. They are the ones who, being fully immersed in the language learning process, have in-depth knowledge of all their experiences and can provide authentic feedback concerning the lessons. And although this feedback or the learners' opinions cannot be taken as the only qualitatively high indicator of the effectiveness of foreign language classes, it is still an indicator of their satisfaction. Thus, according to Theall and Franklin (2001, p. 49) "there is substantial research linking student satisfaction to effective teaching".

Nevertheless, as Gajek (2017) points out, it is impossible to establish a one-size-fits-all teaching method or strategy, which would satisfactorily fulfil the educational institution's guidelines, the goals set by the foreign language teacher, and meet all the expectations of both the student and their parents.

High-quality foreign language education is invaluable. It significantly improves the socioeconomic status of the student and their family. By learning a foreign language, individuals invest in their own and their children's future, giving them and themselves the opportunity for much-needed holistic development (Burrus, Roberts 2012). Therefore, all specialist in the educational field should collaborate not only with each other, but also with parents to arrange appropriate curriculum that promotes not only academic achievement, but also learners' holistic development and psychological well-being. It is therefore imperative that we understand what student engagement means to promote it in educational environments. A teacher's ability to create stimulating learning

environments tailored to their students' interests and needs depends on understanding engagement, which fosters active participation and deeper learning outcomes. Students can benefit from knowledge and education more if educators encourage the formation of a learning community, an environment in which knowledge is promoted, praises are given, and academic achievement is encouraged, which enhances the cognitive and emotional dimensions of student engagement (DeVito 2016).

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