

Conceptualizing Learner Engagement in Japanese University EFL Contexts

Brent A. Jones

Konan University, Hirao School of Management

【Abstract】

In this paper, the author introduces a mixed-methods research design that was used to explore how learner engagement manifests itself in university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses in Japan. This research involved a unique protocol for classroom observations, which was supplemented by teacher and learner interviews, questionnaires, and support documents. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data identified several instructional practices, teacher characteristics and contextual features that had either positive or negative influences on levels of learner engagement during classroom meetings. This research supports a conceptual framework involving self-determination theory, identity, investment, willingness to communicate and flow.

【Keywords】

Learner Engagement, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Identity, Investment, Flow

1. Introduction

Learner or student–engagement is now a firmly-established field of scholarly inquiry (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009; Parsons & Tyler, 2011) and has become a cornerstone of teacher-training programs around the world. Sadly, only scant mention of this important precursor to learning and academic achievement (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008; Zyngier, 2008) is made in published research related to tertiary-level education and curriculum development (Jones, 2018). This void is also still evident in second-language acquisition (SLA) and related research. With this in mind, the author undertook a doctoral-level investigation at the Institute of Education (University of Reading) aimed at clarifying the construct, especially as related to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction and learning at universities in Japan (Jones, 2018). The current paper aims to distill the structure and findings of that investigation, and is offered here in this collection of papers as an example of a fairly large-scale action research project.

While conceptualizations of learner engagement are still in a state of flux, there seems to be some consensus that a three-dimensional model (behavioral, emotional, cognitive) provides a solid foundation for studying and promoting engagement (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Also, we now recognize that engagement and motivation are distinct but related constructs, and that conceptual frameworks such as self-determination theory (SDT), flow, identity and investment are just some of the lenses through which to view engagement. My review of existing literature (Jones, 2018) has further convinced me of the following:

- (1) learner engagement is a well-established construct in school settings but not in SLA,
- (2) learner engagement has been approached mainly from educational psychology and developmental psychology perspectives,
- (3) learner engagement has been identified as a key intermediary between motivation and achievement,
- (4) there is conceptual overlap and lack of consensus regarding the relationship between motivation and engagement,
- (5) the construct of L2 motivation has dominated the field of SLA,
- (6) SLA theory and practice could benefit from advances in learner engagement theory, and
- (7) most research into learner engagement and L2 motivation has been dominated by cross-sectional quantitative studies but there are calls in both fields for more longitudinal, context-specific qualitative studies.

From this starting point, I investigated how engagement is experienced in university EFL classes in Japan, especially in terms of how instructional strategies, teacher characteristics and contextual features influence levels of learner engagement in the classroom. Through this study, I was hoping to contribute to SLA scholarship by:

- drawing together key concepts from motivation and engagement studies into a novel conceptual framework that can advance our understanding of the two constructs,
- adopting and adapting established qualitative methods and quantitative research instruments into a flexible and powerful research design, and
- offering a context-specific view of how engagement is manifested in EFL classrooms in Japan.

In the next section, I briefly outline my design for collecting and analyzing data with the aim of compiling qualitative case studies for three university EFL classes in Japan. I then highlight key findings and pedagogical implications. I conclude with an expanded conceptualization of learner engagement. More detailed descriptions can be found in the original thesis (Jones, 2018).

2. Research Design

Although there are numerous theories used to conceptualize and explore learner engagement, I identified four as particularly potent for my investigation: self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), learner identity (Norton, 2000), investment (Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; McKay & Wong, 1996) and flow theory (Egbert, 2003; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider & Shernoff, 2003). My decision to consider these theoretical perspectives in my study was that they are all firmly established in both educational research and SLA studies. At the same time, these frameworks complement

each other and had great promise for helping clarify learner engagement as a construct. In Skinner and Pitzer's (2012) theoretical model (Fig. 1), they include the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness from SDT, which has been a cornerstone of both engagement and L2 motivation research.

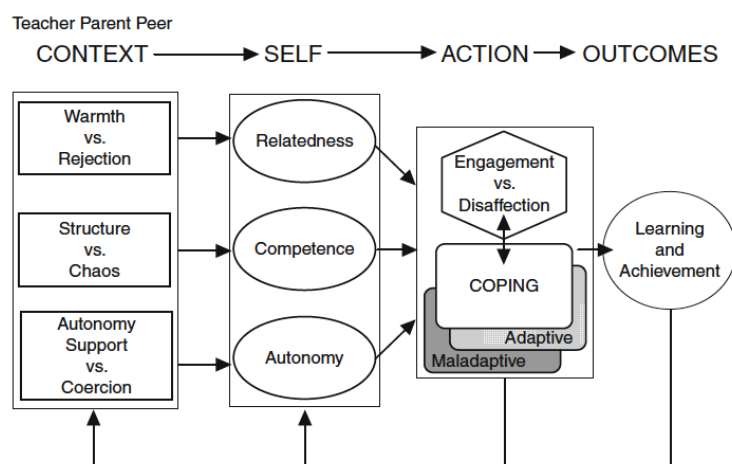


Figure 1 Initial conceptual framework for investigating classroom engagement

I was drawn to this depiction of motivation, especially the inclusion of both contextual features and self characteristics. Thus, I embarked on my study with an adapted conceptual framework as depicted in Figure 2. As I have chosen to focus on classroom (meso level) engagement, I have highlighted in the framework key contextual features identified in the literature and my own personal experience, namely classroom climate, instructional strategies and teacher characteristics. In this framework, these contextual features combine to influence engagement. Classroom engagement in this framework is depicted as the continuum of the engagement-disaffection continuum interacting with willingness to communicate. There are also paths back to context and self from classroom engagement (action) as well as learning and achievement (outcomes).

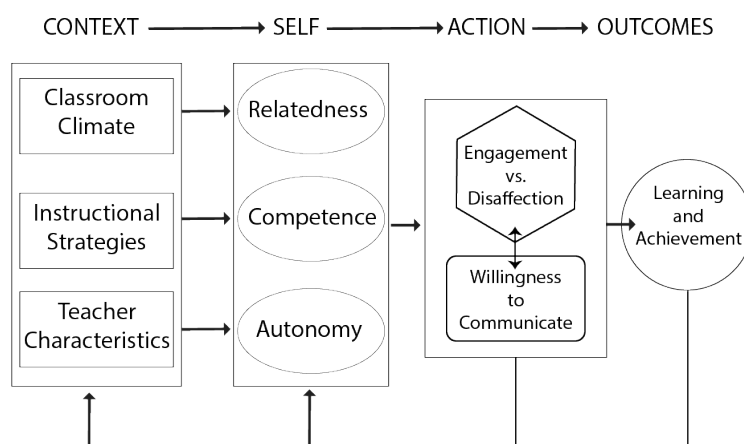


Figure 2 Initial conceptual framework for investigating classroom engagement

Initially, the three types of engagement (behavioral, emotional & cognitive) were operationalized in my study as the observable outward indicators that the learner is focused on and involved in classroom language activities. Table 1 outlines specifically how each of the dimensions were eventually operationalized in my study.

Table 1. Behavioral, Cognitive and Emotional Engagement Operationalized

Behavioral Engagement	Active participation in classroom activities, completing assignments, preparing for class, following instructions
Cognitive Engagement	Exerting mental effort to learn or use the target language as evident in facial expressions, body language and discourse (e.g., questioning, repeating)
Emotional Engagement	Expressions of enjoyment, caring, curiosity or other positive emotions in facial expressions, body language and discourse, going beyond minimum requirements

As mentioned in the introduction, the focus of this research was to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of engagement in university EFL contexts in Japan. Specifically, I was interested in how “engagement” is experienced in this setting and how various contextual features interact with individual characteristics to either promote or hamper engagement at the classroom level. A qualitative case study design was adopted as it accommodated in-depth analysis of classroom practice with attention paid to subtle processes by which individuals make decisions (Yin, 2014). The cases involved three EFL instructors and their non-English major students at two private universities. The rationale for focusing on these groups was that roughly seventy-seven percent of universities in Japan are private and the vast majority of university students in Japan are non-English majors (MEXT, 2017).

To compile these case studies, my plan was to follow three teachers and their students for a full 15-week school term, observing and meeting with each participant teacher and volunteer students at the beginning, middle and end of one full school term. I decided early on that classroom observations would be a useful and effective method for collecting data on learner engagement, but also that observations alone would probably not provide a full enough picture. Getting at the sources of this engagement or disengagement would require other approaches, and I decided on follow-up interviews, questionnaires and supporting documents such as course outlines and student participation sheets.

For the classroom observations I decided to use an observation protocol that involved focusing on teacher and learner behaviors as well as recording roughly how many of the learners were showing signs of engagement. This observation protocol was slightly modified from the Classroom Observation Protocol for Undergraduate STEM (COPUS) project (Smith, Jones, Gilbert & Wieman, 2013), as it allowed me to focus on and record

what both learners and teachers were doing throughout the 90-minute classes. At the same time, this instrument afforded the opportunity to record observed levels of engagement as low (20% or fewer students engaged), medium, and high (80% or more students engaged). During the in-class observations, I was also watching for signs of engagement (as operationalized above) as well as verbal and nonverbal ways in which these teachers promote learner engagement and mitigate or avoid disengagement (instructional practices, teacher characteristics), and ways in which learners interacted with their classmates and surroundings (contextual features). I kept detailed field notes with my observations of classroom activities and interactions as well as my reflective notes on these observations.

To overcome my limited perceptions, gain a fuller picture of the classroom interactions and triangulate data from the observations, I chose to conduct audio-recorded interviews with teachers and students as soon after the observations as possible. I prepared starter questions for these semi-structured interviews with the aim of gaining a general sense of perceived levels and sources of engagement during different parts of the lessons, as well as participants' feelings as to the relevance of the psychological needs in this context. An ancillary aim was to find how well teacher intent aligned with student experiences, expectations and perceptions.

To further triangulate data, I considered several existing questionnaires. Eventually, I decided on the Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ), which was adapted by Williams and Deci (1996) from the Health-Care Climate Questionnaire (Williams, Grow, Freedman, Ryan & Deci, 1996). The LCQ is a self-report instrument that measures learners' perceptions of autonomy support in their classrooms. This seemed particularly important for triangulating data from the observations and interviews. After the first two rounds of observations, LCQ data revealed fairly high levels of perceived autonomy support in all three classrooms and consistent responses between administrations. Thus, I determined that a third administration of the LCQ would likely not add to these findings. Thus, for the final observation, I decided to administer an adapted version (Lee, 2012) of the Task Engagement Questionnaire (TEQ), which was designed by Joy Egbert (2003) to gauge task-engagement in SLA contexts along the four flow dimensions of interest, control, focus and challenge. For both questionnaires, I prepared Japanese translations with the help of colleagues who are proficient in both English and Japanese, confirmed individual items via back translation, and test piloted the final versions with a group of second-year university students.

Several types of support documents were collected as an additional window into understanding the context of these classrooms and various participants. To better understand the context, I relied on course outlines, lesson plans and course materials provided by the instructors. To gain a clearer vantage point on participant perspectives, I also referred to teacher-developed participation sheets that were used by one of the teachers in the study to solicit simple feedback from students. Learners used these sheets to rate their own participation (not good, okay, excellent) and share with the teacher comments or questions on the lesson (prompts – What did you do well? What can you do

better? Anything you don't understand?). Students agreed to let the researcher view these participation sheets on the condition of anonymity.

The two programs chosen for this research were comparable in that neither offers an English major, both are relatively new, and both have coordinated English programs. One aim was to include teachers with a range of backgrounds and experiences while at the same time observing teachers that were fairly representative. I identified three candidate teachers who met these criteria, and both Japanese and non-Japanese were represented, while candidates also received their education in different countries and had teaching careers of different lengths and contexts. The students in these three classes were second and third-year non-English majors since the novelty of studying English at university would have worn off and students would likely be accustomed to their university studies. This was deemed as important to avoid temporary or artificial expressions of engagement as well as the Halo Effect (Thorndike, 1920). The sampling frame for follow-up student interviews included gender, language proficiency, and personality type as subjectively judged by their teacher and/or myself.

Data analysis proceeded according to the major phases of data analysis described by Miles and Huberman (1994), namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction in the current study involved writing up vignettes for each case at each stage of the study, including descriptions of the physical setting, flow of the lesson, interactions among participants and classroom atmosphere. The seven phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were then used to qualitatively analyze the vignettes and other data such as the short answers on the TEQ.

Data from the classroom observation sheet were entered into a spreadsheet, with the number 1 being entered under each code where a student or teacher's behavior was observed during each two-minute increment. The number of entries for each code were added up and divided by the total number of observed behaviors. This calculation was made separately for student and teacher behaviors, and resulted in percentages for each observed behavior.

As my focus was not on determining correlation, factor loadings or generalizations, no inferential statistical analysis was conducted on questionnaire data, and instead results for numerical data were simply listed up and calculated for means and standard deviation. I move now to a distillation of findings and my initial interpretations regarding how engagement is experienced in these university EFL classrooms.

3. Findings

So, how is “learner engagement” experienced in university EFL classrooms in Japan? In this section, I highlight findings that helped me answer the following subsidiary questions: (1) In what ways do instructional practices influence engagement? (2) In what ways do teacher characteristics influence learner engagement? (3) In what ways do contextual features influence learner engagement?

3.1 Instructional practices that influence learner engagement

Several instructional practices that I observed in the classroom and discussed with participants surfaced as influencing learner engagement, some positively and others negatively. The four instructional practices that clearly facilitated learner engagement, were (1) the strategic use of pair and group work, (2) patterns or rhythms of instruction, (3) questioning style, and (4) scaffolding techniques. These categories emerged mainly from the thematic coding of qualitative data and were supported by classroom observation sheet data. In terms of detrimental influences on learner engagement, the lowest levels of engagement came when learners were in a passive role as receivers of information from the teacher, or when they perceived the task or material as either too difficult, too easy or too predictable. One female student brought up the fact that students in her program are expected to work in small groups and be active. She contrasted this to her experiences in secondary school classes, where, “We have to sit, and we have to stay silent, and we just have to write or read something. It’s not like we are join. We are just working about one thing.”

Although not directly related to any of the instructional practices outlined above, another female learner mentioned her disappointment when teachers do not collect homework assignments. She feels it is frustrating when she has put the effort into doing a good job and then the teacher does not make the effort to check.

Relating back to our main research question, we can see that learner engagement in this context is experienced through the instructional practices, with active interactions with fellow learners and the teacher offering the most engaging experiences. At the same time, instructional practices that are personalized, meaningful (relevant to the learners’ realities) and appropriately scaffolded promote the highest levels of engagement.

3.2. Teacher characteristics that influence learner engagement

Qualitative content analysis of classroom observations and interviews were supplemented with quantitative data generated from the Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ), especially in terms of indications of perceived levels of autonomy support in these classes. The main teacher characteristics that were identified as influencing learner engagement were (1) teacher preparedness, (2) teacher investment, (3) approachability, and (4) supportive attitudes. There was ample evidence of positive influences that some characteristics have, as well as hints at characteristics that might have negative influences on behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement. At the same time, findings here supported the notion that learner engagement in this context is closely linked to the basic psychological needs of competence and relatedness, while the relationship to the need for autonomy is not as clear cut. Based on the categories that emerged from my analysis of the data, we can visualize these influences along a series of continua, with higher expressions of each teacher characteristic as promoting engagement and lower expressions as creating a contextual climate conducive to disengagement. However, we need to interpret these findings with caution in that teachers express their preparedness,

investment, approachability and supportive attitudes in different ways and also that students do not perceive these expressions uniformly. Several authors have noted the importance of relationships with teachers in the student engagement equation (see, for example, Bryson & Hand, 2007), and we have here the beginnings of a list of characteristics that possibly form the foundation of those relationships.

3.3. Contextual features that influence learner engagement

The main contextual features that came up in my analysis as influencing levels of engagement were (1) physical features, (2) general classroom climate, (3) interlocutors and (4) curriculum and tasks. There are likely other contextual features which influence learner engagement that fall outside the above-mentioned categories, and further situation-specific studies will be required to uncover these. However, we have here the foundations of a theoretical framework of potential contextual influences on learner engagement in the university EFL class in Japan. Information related to the specific features for each category could, for example, be used to visualize relative supports and thwarts for engagement via radar graphs or some other visual representation.

In setting out on this research project, I fixed the boundaries for the study to what goes on in the EFL classroom at universities in Japan. However, some contextual features outside the boundaries of our study that also came out as impacting levels of engagement are the heavy class loads at most Japanese universities and the competing priorities held by individual learners. I will have to leave these for future studies.

4. Discussion

Returning to our overarching question for the study, we see that instructional practices, teacher characteristics and contextual features combine to shape learner experiences in the Japanese university EFL classroom. We saw that active interactions with fellow learners and the teacher offer the most engaging experiences, and that instructional practices that are personalized, meaningful (relevant to the learners' realities) and authentic promote the highest levels of engagement. In terms of teacher characteristics that influence learner engagement, we discovered positive influences that some characteristics have as well as characteristics that might have negative influences on engagement. Based on the categories that emerged from my analysis of the data, it is theorized that higher or fuller expressions of these teacher characteristics (professionalism, investment, approachability, supportive attitudes) would potentially lead to higher levels of engagement while lower or weaker expressions would lead to lower levels of engagement. Finally, my analysis identified several key contextual features within the boundaries of the EFL classroom that influence levels of engagement. Specifically, it appears that both content (what) and delivery (how) of tasks and the curriculum influence engagement in different ways. At the same time, the positioning of a task within the overall curriculum or the individual lesson plan can influence how individuals or groups experience engagement. Tasks or materials that are too easy or

difficult are experienced as less engaging, making it imperative that teachers finely match the level of challenge to the current skills of learners as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) in his theory of flow. The findings also appear to lend support for theorizing teacher characteristics as a mediator between engagement and the other influences. In other words, teacher characteristics can leverage contextual features and instructional practices to maximize learner engagement and mitigate disengagement.

The various data also support the notion that learner engagement in this context is closely linked to the basic psychological needs of competence and relatedness, while the relationship to the need for autonomy was slightly less convincing. The findings outlined above appear to lend support for the four motivational factors of interest, relevance, expectancy and satisfaction reported in Crookes and Schmidt (1991). These same motivational factors seem to describe how engagement or disengagement are manifested in these classrooms, and it is the learners' perceptions of how interesting and relevant the classroom instruction is, and how well the instructional practices and contextual features meet their expectations. It is not clear if the basic psychological needs were part of the authors' concept of satisfaction, but it has helped describe how learners experience the instructed EFL classrooms in this study. In my expanded conceptual framework (Fig. 3), these variables would be somewhere at the intersection between context (instructional strategies, teacher characteristics, contextual features) and self (competence, autonomy, relatedness), and influence engagement via learner identity and investment.

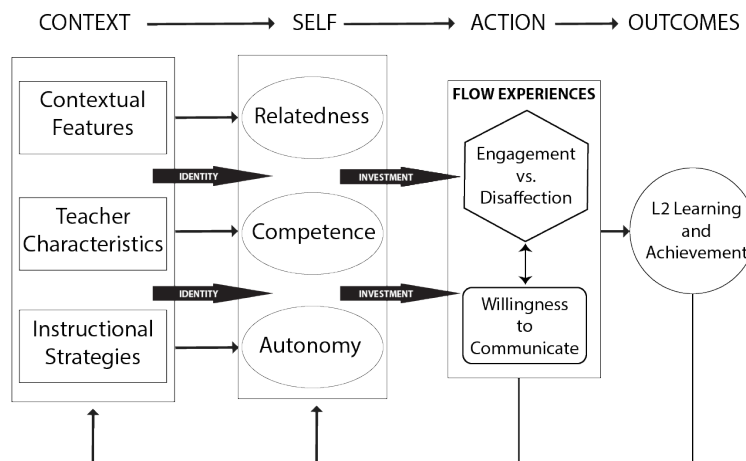


Figure 3 Fuller conceptual framework for investigating classroom engagement

In this framework, identity is viewed as being part of the self system and influencing learner perceptions of basic psychological need fulfillment, but also with the context as a contributing source or influence on this identity. Investment, on the other hand, is viewed as the interface between motivation (context & self) and engagement (action). Conceptually, this investment will strengthen as a person's perceived competence, autonomy and relatedness increase. Finally, I have included the concept of flow experiences in the action stage, and highlighted (bold lettering) it as the highest

expressions of classroom engagement. The choice of “flow experiences” over “flow” was intended as a way of keeping the focus on experiences that learners have in the classroom.

This theoretical model attempts to capture the major influences on motivation, engagement and L2 acquisition during instructed EFL. Although the current study did not include data on L2 acquisition, this model rests on the assumption that high quality engagement leads to high quality acquisition through improved retention and learning. This conceptualization also highlights how instructional practices are mediated by teacher characteristics while contextual features are mediated by learner characteristics, and how these classroom influences occur both where/when motivation is translated into engagement (possibly via identity and investment) and where/when engagement facilitates L2 acquisition.

Another finding from the study was the wide range of expressions of engagement in this context. The outward signs of engagement (body language, facial expressions, quantity and quality of discourse) expressed by these learners hint at a range of individual experiences. Ushioda and Dörnyei (2012) discuss how a more situated analysis of motivation in classroom settings highlights the unstable nature of motivation. We see this instability when using outward signs of engagement as an indicator of motivation. The same classroom activity can result in a range of levels of engagement, while the same learner can express differing degrees of engagement during different points in the lesson.

Theorizing engagement and disaffection as lying at two ends of a continuum (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) also seems to work in this context, with the various data revealing quite convincingly the behavioral involvement in learning, positive emotions, and perseverance in the face of challenge (engagement) as well as passivity, lack of effort, boredom, lack of persistence, and negative emotions (disengagement or disaffection) described by these authors.

My analysis of these few instances of deeper (emotional) engagement helped me to answer the subsidiary questions. Stepping back from the data, I can now offer a few assertions regarding how learner engagement is experienced in this teaching context. Specifically, I recognize learner engagement in these classes as experienced:

- through the interactions with peers and the instructor,
- through instructional activities that are appropriately challenging,
- at a variety of levels (individual, small group, and whole-class),
- dialogically between the individual and the context (i.e., individuals are influenced by the context and exert influence on the context),
- differently by each individual, and
- when individuals are involved in personally meaningful activities.

Expanding on this, we can delineate ways that the teacher, learner and context influence how learner engagement is experienced in the university EFL classroom in Japan. Figure 4 is offered as a visual conceptualization of these influences.

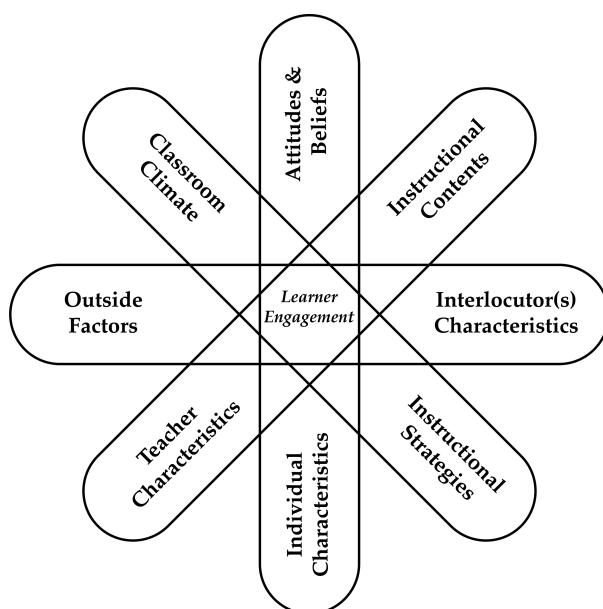


Figure 4 Influences on learner engagement

I acknowledge that these factors could be organized in a number of ways but have chosen this arrangement as it reflects several key issues that I hoped to highlight. First, I separated individual characteristics from attitudes and beliefs, and arranged these on the vertical axis to convey my understanding that learners themselves are a key contributor to how engagement is experienced. The separation was based on my interpretation of individual characteristics being less malleable than attitudes and beliefs, and also that teachers would likely approach individual characteristics (personality traits) such as introversion or neuroticism differently than attitudes and beliefs. Teachers would normally not try to change learner characteristics, but instead incorporate or work around them by for example allowing less outgoing or gregarious learners to express themselves in different ways. Attitudes and beliefs though can be targeted by instructional interventions such as awareness-raising activities.

The two factors on the horizontal axis are in most cases outside the influential reach of both teachers and learners, but both were found to influence learner engagement in the classroom. The central role of interlocutors cannot be overstated, and classroom training in ways to become a better conversational partner might be one teacher intervention that could be pursued.

Finally, the four factors on the diagonal axes are teacher related or within their realm of influence. The two items on the left side (teacher characteristics & classroom climate) are somewhat more fixed than the other two but can be leveraged or influenced in ways that have a positive impact on learner engagement at both the individual and class level. The

two factors on the right (instructional strategies & instructional content) are two areas that the teacher likely has the most power to influence.

It must be noted that these various factors can unite in favorable and less favorable ways to impact learner engagement. For example, certain instructional practices and/or teacher characteristics might work independently or synergistically to negate contextual inhibitors to engagement. Conversely, certain practices or characteristics might actually compound negative dynamics in the classroom.

Findings also support the notion that emotional engagement is related to identity and investment. One way of conceptualizing the role of identity and investment is as a mediator between L2 learning motivation and engaged language learning (Fig. 5).

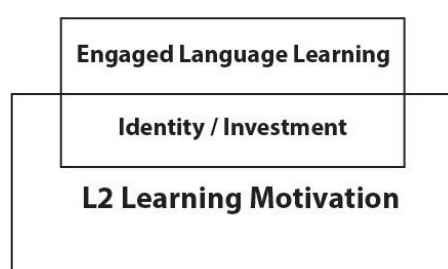


Figure 5 Identity and investment as mediator between L2 learning motivation and engagement.

This conceptualization places L2 learning motivation as the bedrock on which engaged language learning occurs. Without this motivation, learners will have great difficulty engaging in language learning activities and will likely give up rather than persist in the face of difficulty. We also see here that motivation and engagement are related but mostly distinct concepts, while L2 learning motivation is viewed as translated into engaged language learning through the learner's identity and investment. In the current study, we saw examples of individual learners who clearly had an EFL user identity, milking classroom target-language interactions for their learning opportunities, while others had more of a EFL learner identity and would quickly retreat from these interactions after completing the minimum requirements of the activity. These different identities result in different levels of investment, whether it be investment of psychic energy, emotional investment or just investment of time and effort. Together, these identities and investment act as an interface between motivation and engagement, with stronger language user identities and deeper levels of engagement translating into higher quality language learning.

As mentioned earlier, I decided on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a core feature of my conceptual framework from which to view learner engagement in this context. This decision was not made lightly, and I endeavored to remain open to other perspectives or lenses which I could use for analyzing the data. With all of this in mind, it seemed appropriate to begin my analysis by looking at how well the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness were being met in these teachers' classrooms.

Placing SDT as a key component of the conceptual framework offers a useful way forward with future studies. This SDT perspective on the data allows me to claim the following:

- Learner engagement is experienced in this context when individuals perceive themselves as competent in a language learning endeavor that is meaningful to them.
- Learner engagement is experienced when individuals perceive that they have some control over the learning event.
- Learner engagement is experienced when individuals feel connected with other learners and/or the instructor.

One key distinction here is between the actual fulfilment of these basic psychological needs and learner perceptions regarding the fulfilment of these needs. Gaps between the two result from different past experiences as well as the attitudes and beliefs that are derived from those past experiences. I mention this here because individual learners will experience classroom interactions in different ways and will perceive those interactions as being supportive or thwarting of the basic psychological needs regardless of teacher intentions or lack of intentions. In my conceptual framework, these experiences would influence and be influenced by the learner's identity and would in turn determine or influence levels of investment.

6. Conclusion

My overall impression during the classroom observations was that although the teachers tried very hard to get and keep learners engaged, the majority of the students during all nine observations exhibited few outward signs of sustained engagement beyond behavioral types. Students appeared somewhat cognitively engaged at different points in each lesson, but signs of emotional engagement were scarce. However, data from the interviews, questionnaires, learning journals actually pointed to deeper engagement than my impressions. This mismatch might be explained in a number of ways, including students' reluctance to give a bad impression of themselves as a student or to reflect poorly on their teacher. Another explanation might be that these students are comparing these classroom experiences to those in high school.

So, what has this journey revealed in terms of theoretical and practical implications? First, my study offers tentative support for adopting a more engagement-focused theoretical perspective on SLA over the motivation-heavy research agenda. The dimensions of behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement also appear to offer a solid theoretical foundation for classroom EFL learning studies, with other types of engagement (social, academic, agentic) potentially adding to a more nuanced understanding of sources, indicators, facilitators and outcomes of engagement in this and related contexts. The psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness also

provide a useful theoretical framework for understanding how various classroom events and interactions work to promote or thwart learner (and teacher) engagement, especially when combined with the concepts of identity and investment.

In terms of pedagogical implications, my study offers suggestive evidence for designing overall curriculum and specific classroom activities that maximize interaction among learners and with the instructor. Both types of interactions were revealed as generally more engaging than individual tasks or passive roles for most learners in my study. Also, there is support for using a combination of predictable, easily negotiable activities and those that are more novel and cognitively challenging. These need to be skillfully woven into the patterns or rhythms of instruction mentioned in my findings. To capitalize on such well-intentioned instructional practices, teachers in these types of EFL classes can and should consider how physical features and the psychological climate of the classroom influence engagement. As examples, teachers can use visual or tactile supports (e.g., maps, cuisenaire rods, multimedia presentations) to guide, scaffold and intrigue learners, as well as consider what learner pairings or groupings might create the best dynamic. It is also clear that instructional content plays a key role in pulling in or pushing away learners and turning over to learners some of the decisions related to content should boost a sense of autonomy and investment (Lambert, Philp & Nakamura, 2016). Reeve and colleagues (2004) see autonomy-supportive teachers as facilitating congruence between students' self-determined inner motives and their classroom activity. The way this is done is by identifying and nurturing students' needs, interests, and preferences as well as "creating classroom opportunities for students to have these internal motives guide their learning and activity" (p. 148).

I recognize clearly from the research and my own experiences that asking or expecting teachers to change their personality or characteristics is somewhat futile. However, it is important to recognize the power that teacher characteristics have in mediating the instructional practices and contextual features mentioned in this study. Specifically, great benefits in terms of learner engagement, and thus achievement, can be reaped from deeper investment in learners, classes and programs. Belief in learners and expressing high expectations of learners also appear to have great potential in boosting engagement, especially when combined with the appropriate use of praise, expressions of encouragement, and meaningful feedback—although how, when and what form of feedback to deliver remains a big question in instructed SLA. Conveying a sense of approachability to learners and a sensitivity to student needs also hold promise in terms of return on investment in the classroom.

Finally, in terms of research design, the current study offers a framework for gathering and analyzing qualitative data in a range of contexts beyond university EFL classes in Japan. Specifically, the combination of data gathering techniques and compilation of vignettes as a form of data reduction stand out as particularly useful in similar phenomenographic studies.

7. References

- Appleton, J. J., Christenson, S. L. & Furlong, M. J. (2008). Student engagement with school: Critical conceptual and methodological issues of the construct. *Psychology in the Schools, 45*(5), 369-386.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101.
- Bryson, C. & Hand, L. (2007). The role of engagement in inspiring teaching and learning. *Innovations in Education & Teaching International 44*(4)349-62.
- Connell, J. P., & Wellborn, J. G. (1991). Competence, autonomy, and relatedness: A motivational analysis of self-system processes. In M. R. Gunnar & L. A. Sroufe (Eds.), *Self processes and development* (Vol. 23, pp. 43-77) Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Crookes, G., & Schmidt, R. (1991). Motivation: Reopening the research agenda. *Language Learning, 41*, 469-512.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. London: Harper Perennial.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry, 11*(4), 227-268.
- Dunleavy, J. & Milton, P. (2009). *What did you do in school today? Exploring the concept of Student Engagement and its implications for Teaching and Learning in Canada*. Toronto: Canadian Education Association.
- Egbert, J. (2003). A study of flow theory in the foreign language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal, 87*, 499-518.
- Fredericks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C. & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research, 74*(1), 59-109.
- Jones, B. (2018). *An experiential look at learner engagement in University EFL courses in Japan*. EdD thesis, University of Reading. <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/80616/>
- Lambert, C., Philp, J., & Nakamura, S. (2016). Learner-generated content and engagement in second language task performance. *Language Teaching Research, 21*(6), 665-680.

Lee, H. G. (2012). *ESL learners' motivation and task engagement in technology enhanced language learning contexts*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), Washington State University, Pullman, Washington.

McKay, S. and Wong, S. (1996). Multiple discourses, multiple identities: Investment and agency in second-language learning among Chinese adolescent immigrant students. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(3), 577-608.

MEXT (2017). Statistical summary – 2016. Retrieved October 1, 2017 from www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/002/002b/1383990.htm

Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1984). Drawing valid meaning from qualitative data: Toward a shared craft. *Educational Researcher*, 13, 20-30.

Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.

Parsons, J. & Taylor, L. (2011). *Student engagement: What do we know and what should we do?* AISI University Partners, Edmonton: Alberta Education.

Reeve, J., Jang, H., Carrell, D., Jeon, S., & Barch, J. (2004). Enhancing students' engagement by increasing teachers' autonomy support. *Motivation and Emotion*, 28(2), 147-169.

Sherhoff, D. J., Csikszentmihalyi, M., Schneider, B. & Sherhoff, E. (2003). Student engagement in high school classrooms from the perspective of flow theory. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 18(2), 158-176.

Skinner, E. A., & Belmont, M. J. (1993). Motivation in the classroom: Reciprocal effects of teacher behavior and student engagement across the school year. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 85(4), 571-581.

Skinner, E. A., & Pitzer, J. R. (2012). Developmental dynamics of student engagement, coping, and everyday resilience. In S. Christenson, A. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 21-44) New York: Springer.

Smith, M. K., Jones, F. H. M., Gilbert, S. L., & Wieman, C. E. (2013). The classroom observation protocol for undergraduate STEM (COPUS): A new instrument to characterize university STEM classroom practices. *CBE-Life Sciences Education*, 12(4), 618-627.

Thorndike, E. (1920). A constant error in psychological ratings. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 4(1), 25-29.

Ushioda, E., & Dörnyei, Z. (2012). Motivation. In S. Gass & A. Mackey (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 396-409) New York: Routledge.

Williams, G. C., & Deci, E. L. (1996). Internalization of biopsychosocial values by medical students: A test of self-determination theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70, 767-779.

Williams, G. C., Grow, V. M., Freedman, Z., Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (1996). Motivational predictors of weight loss and weight-loss maintenance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70, 115- 126.

Yazzie-Mintz, E., & McCormick, K. (2012). Finding the humanity in the data: Understanding, measuring, and strengthening student engagement. In S. Christenson, A. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Student Motivation* (pp. 743-761) New York: Springer.

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Zyngier, D. (2008). (Re)conceptualizing student engagement: Doing education not doing time. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 1765-1776.