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The Influence of Instructional Practices on Learner Engagement

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【Abstract】

This paper reports on research into learner engagement in English as a Foreign (EFL) contexts at universities in Japan. Findings related to instructional practices from a mixed-methods investigation conducted at two private universities in western Japan are presented with pedagogical implications and suggestions for further research. Three teachers and their 19 to 20 year-old Japanese learners were observed three times over a fifteen-week school term. These observations were followed up by interviews with the teachers and a small number of learners. Specific instructional strategies found to significantly influence levels of learner engagement (positively or negatively) were (1) strategic use of pair and group work, (2) patterns or rhythms of instruction, (3) questioning style, and (4) scaffolding techniques. Teacher authenticity and presence are discussed as key malleable elements that can be levered to increase learner engagement in classroom activities.

【Keywords】

Learner Engagement, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Instructional Strategies, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

1. Introduction

Learner engagement has become a hot topic among both teachers and researchers in a range of educational settings but has yet to make a major impact in English as a foreign language (EFL) and other second-language acquisition (SLA) contexts where the construct of language learning motivation reigns supreme. One attempt at highlighting and improving this asymmetry involved a detailed look at how instructional practices (or approaches), teacher characteristics, and contextual features influence levels of learner engagement in university EFL contexts in Japan (Jones, 2018). That mixed-methods investigation included classroom observations, interviews, surveys, guided journaling and support documents. The current study reports on one aspect of that larger study, namely how instructional practices in that context positively and negatively influence learner engagement in classroom activities.

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The terms instructional practice and instructional approach are used in this paper interchangeably to mean ways in which the instructor interacts with the instructional content and learners. This includes, for example, when and how teachers use repetition, ask questions and promote interaction among learners. At the same time, this includes choices made by teachers regarding material, tasks, transitions between tasks, etc. In other words, instructional practices are the interface that the teacher provides between the curriculum and the learners.

In the next section, brief overviews of learner engagement and related conceptual frameworks are presented in the form of a condensed literature review. This is followed by a summary of how data was collected and analyzed. Key findings are then presented before concluding with a short list of pedagogical implications. It is hoped that this study provides some theoretical and practical support for increased interest in an emphasis on learner engagement among language teachers and researchers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Learner Engagement

Learner–or student–engagement is often mentioned as being an important precursor to learning and academic achievement (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008; Zyngier, 2008), and has thus gained the attention of teachers, school administrators, parents and researchers. One indicator of increased scholarly attention is the number of recent reports on the topic of learner engagement (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009; Fredricks & McColskey, 2011; Jolly, Campbell & Perlman, 2004; Parsons & Taylor, 2011). Other indicators are the book-length publications (Coates, 2006; Shernoff, 2013), special issues of academic journals (Sinatra, Heddy & Lombardi, 2015), anthologies (Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012) and references to as many as 32,000 published articles (Azevedo, 2015).

Yazzie-Mintz and McCormick (2012) note that educational research into student engagement has emerged relatively recently, and grown in prominence over the last twenty years. The focus of early studies on student engagement were mainly concerned with “at risk” or disadvantaged youth, while later investigations broadened the scope to include all learners (Parsons & Taylor, 2011). Earlier studies were also mainly concerned with behavioral markers such as school attendance and submission of homework, while more recent studies have shifted focus to enjoyment and challenge (i.e., emotional or cognitive forms of engagement).

This shift hints at the possible merits of focusing on *experiences*–both learner and teacher–in EFL/SLA contexts, but also underscores that motivation, attitudes and how engagement is experienced are all subject specific. This is especially important in university EFL in Japan where most learners are not majoring in English but are required to study the language.

As mentioned above, learner engagement has been identified as an important precursor to learning and academic achievement. However, it has proved to be a slippery concept when it comes to definitions (Chapman, 2003; Parsons & Taylor, 2011). Reeve

(2012) borrows from Connell & Wellborn (1991) to describe engagement as, "the extent of a student's active involvement in a learning activity" (p. 150). While the term "student engagement" is most prevalent in published research, "learner engagement" is used in the current study as a broader term that includes all learning contexts, not necessarily primary and secondary school settings.

Several authors have lamented the confusion caused by the lack of agreement in defining engagement. Roger Azevedo (2015) offers the following:

> *Engagement has been used to describe everything including student academic performance and achievement; classroom behaviors; approaches to interacting with instructional materials; students' self-perceptions of beliefs in handling individual and contextual aspects of learning situations; students' enactment of cognitive, motivational, affective, metacognitive, and social processes, particularly in academic contexts (e.g., classrooms, intelligent tutoring systems); teacher practices in learner-centered classrooms; and features of instructional and learning contexts designed to initiate, sustain, and foster learning. (p. 84)*

Hu and Kuh (2002) view engagement as "the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes" (p. 555), while Philp and Duchesne (2016) have a much broader conceptualization, describing engagement as "a state of heightened attention and involvement, in which participation is reflected not only in the cognitive dimension, but in social, behavioral and affective dimensions" (p. 3). This broader view of engagement is also evident in a report by Dunleavy and Milton (2009), who conceptualized engagement as including the holy trinity of behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement within a wider framework of academic and social engagement (Fig. 1).

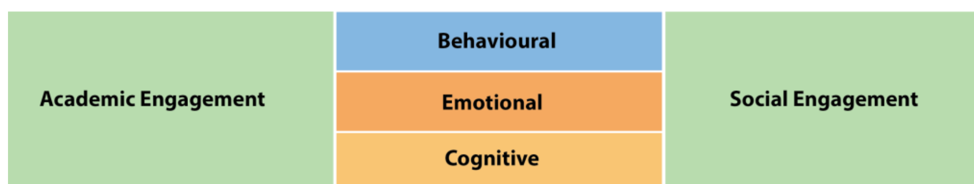

Figure 1 Definitions of student engagement (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009, p. 7)

2.2 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

One of the more promising frameworks for theorizing and investigating learner engagement is Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as described by Ryan and Deci (2000). In their extensive review of literature related to SDT, Deci & Ryan (2000) highlight competence, autonomy and relatedness as innate and necessary psychological nutriments for healthy development and effective functioning. They cite empirical evidence that social contexts supportive of these basic psychological needs (a) maintain or enhance

intrinsic motivation, (b) facilitate the internalization and integration of extrinsic motivation, and (c) promote or strengthen aspirations. Two points seem to have particular relevance to the current study of learner engagement. One is the central role played by the three basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness. Another is the recognition that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are part of a continuum which includes several different types of motivation, and that individuals can experience specific endeavors at different points along this continuum based on self-regulated behaviors such as internalization and integration (Table. 1). This second point is key if we recognize that instructed English will likely not be everyone's cup of tea, especially in the university EFL context in Japan where past EFL classroom experiences might not have been so successful or rewarding.

Table 1 Internalization Continuum of Extrinsic Regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000)

External Regulation	Least self determined form of extrinsic motivation - External sources such as rewards or threats of punishment
Introjected Regulation	Externally imposed rules that the individual accepts as norms that should be followed
Identified Regulation	Engaging in an activity that an individual highly values and/or identifies with
Integrated Regulation	Most developmentally advanced form of extrinsic motivation - Involving choiceful behavior that is fully assimilated with an individual's values, needs and identity

2.2.1 Competence - Competence, or at least perceived competence, is recognized as having a powerful influence on engagement (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand & Kindermann, 2008), and Deci and Ryan (2000) cite evidence that perceived competence predicts well-being as well as positive school attitudes and performance. Christenson, Reschly, Appleton, Berman-Young, Spanjers and Varro (2008) assert that effective schools and teachers promote students' "understanding of what it takes to learn and confidence in their capacity to succeed in school" and that they do this by "providing challenging instruction and support for meeting high standards, and by conveying high expectations for their students' success" (p. 1101). Goto Butler (2015) cites studies in Japan (Kunimoto, 2006; Nishida & Yashima, 2009) that found perceived classroom atmosphere influenced Japanese children's perceived competence, which in turn "led to their willingness to communicate" (p. 318). Discussions of motivation and engagement in EFL contexts like Japan have highlighted this willingness to communicate (WTC) as a powerful conceptual model.

2.2.2 Autonomy - One of the key influences on motivation and thus engagement appears to be locus of control (autonomy), and studies on the importance of agency and autonomy-supportive teaching styles have increased (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Reeve, 2012). In studies of competitive swimmers, researchers found that persistent athletes reported that coaches were more autonomy supportive than their less persistent peers (Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand & Brière, 2001). These findings seem to mirror what happens in university EFL classes in Japan, although corroborating this with any existing SLA literature is challenging.

In their study of high school teachers who were trained in autonomy supportive behavior, Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon and Barch (2004) found that highly engaged students exhibited higher levels of focused attention, effort and persistence. The authors noted that this engagement was “highly associated with teachers’ autonomy support” and that these teachers were better able to motivate their learners.

2.2.3 Relatedness - Hawk, Cowley, Hill & Sutherland (2002) bring together findings from studies of students with lower socioeconomic status in New Zealand. These studies highlight the importance of teacher-learner relationships in boosting motivation to learn and increasing the likelihood of effective learning. This seems to apply to a range of ages (from primary to tertiary). Context (or environment) is also noted as being a great influence on engagement. For example, several authors have commented on the reciprocal and bidirectional nature of teacher-student interactions (Bundick, Quaglia, Corso, & Haywood, 2014; Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Relatedness is one psychological need that seems to be well met at Japanese secondary schools, and this tendency might provide a key to investigating how engagement is experienced in the current context.

2.2.4 SDT in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Studies. Several SLA theorists have adopted an SDT framework for investigating L2 motivation. This comes as no surprise since SDT has its roots in the study of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Dörnyei (2009) notes the graded internalization of external motives as an area of conceptual overlap with possible selves theories that informed his development of the L2 Motivational Self System.

3. Research Methods

As mentioned in the Introduction, the larger study involved classroom observations, interviews, surveys, guided journaling and support documents. In this section, a description is presented of how data was gathered and analyzed in that study. A fuller description can be found in the original thesis (Jones, 2018).

The main source of data was classroom observations. Three experienced language teachers and their 19-21 year-old students at two private universities in western Japan agreed to participate in the study. Each group of students and their teacher were observed during three separate 90-minute sessions over the course of a fifteen-week semester.

These nine sessions were video recorded and the observation protocol was a slightly modified form of the Classroom Observation Protocol for Undergraduate STEM (COPUS) project (Smith, Jones, Gilbert & Wieman, 2013), as it allowed for focus on 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 less students engaged), medium, and high (80% or more students engaged).

Following each of these classroom observations, all students completed a short questionnaire (described below) and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teacher and at least one student volunteer. These 30-45 minute interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Following the first two sessions with each group, students completed 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, it was determined that a third administration of the LCQ would likely not add to these findings, and for the final observation an adapted version of the Task Engagement Questionnaire (TEQ) was administered. The TEQ 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, a Japanese translation was prepared with the help of colleagues who are proficient in both English and Japanese, and individual items were confirmed via back translation from Japanese into English.

At around the time of the second round of observations, volunteers were solicited from the three classes to participate in a guided reflective journaling (Meel, 1999; Ross, 2016) portion of the study. The decision to include this method was motivated by worries regarding the adequacy of the other methods to provide robust evidence to answer the research questions of how instructional strategies, teacher characteristics and contextual features influence learner engagement. Specifically, intact dialogs or verbal interactions between participants in their pair or group work were not being fully obtained. During the observations, the researcher was sitting too far away, while the noise levels made transcription of these interactions impossible. Eventually, three students (one from each class) agreed to take notes during each of their four ninety-minute English classes for one full week.

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, course outlines, lesson plans and course materials were provided by the instructors. To gain a clearer vantage point on participant perspectives, we 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 (names blacked out).

Although data reduction is most often associated with quantitative research methods, Miles and Huberman (1994) include it as the first step of their framework for qualitative data analysis: "Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appear in written up field notes or transcriptions" (p. 10). They see this as a necessary step in ensuring that data are manageable and can be used to address the research questions. Data reduction was achieved in the current study by writing up vignettes, which included descriptions of the physical setting, flow of the lesson, interactions among participants and classroom atmosphere. Participant impressions gleaned from the interviews were included, as well as the researcher's own initial thoughts and possible areas for follow-up. The vignettes also included a short introduction for each of the three stages as well as a follow-up with some general commentary on each round of observations and interviews. This commentary dealt mainly with issues related to the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness, but also included other topics from the literature on learner engagement and L2 learning motivation and that seemed to merit further analysis.

4. Findings

Analysis of the vignettes as well as raw data from the observation sheets, interviews and support documents soon uncovered the challenges of delineating instructional practices from both teacher characteristics and contextual features. Despite some obvious overlap, the decision was made to keep the focus on teachers' actions in the classroom. Several instructional practices that were observed in the classroom and discussed with participants surfaced as influencing learner engagement, some positively and others negatively. Four instructional practices that clearly facilitated learner engagement were identified, namely (1) 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 recurring themes that appeared in the thematic coding of qualitative data and were supported by classroom observation sheet data. This section concludes with findings regarding practices that appear to hinder learner engagement, as well as how findings related to instructional strategies help to answer the bigger question of how "learner engagement" is experienced in university EFL classrooms in Japan.

4.1 Strategic Use of Pair and Group Work

Drawing on data from the observation sheets and interviews, the highest levels of learner engagement in each class meeting for all three teachers were observed when teachers got

their learners to communicate with each other in English or with the teacher, and when there was a clearly perceived need to convey or gather information in the target language. This observation was based on learners' facial expressions such as raised or furrowed eyebrows, body language such as forward leaning posture or gesturing with hands, as well as length and content of verbal interactions (indicators). Length was subjectively judged by apparent willingness to communicate (i.e. not retreating from interaction) and elaboration or questioning. These "indicators" of engagement constituted the operationalization of the term "learner engagement" in the larger study (Jones, 2018). The high perceived levels of engagement in pair or group work were confirmed in interviews with both teachers and learners. Student A, for example, when discussing levels of engagement during Teacher A's week three content and language integrated learning (CLIL) class, expressed feeling most engaged when listening to her partners' presentation about research they were doing on EU and non-EU countries. The following excerpt comes from the follow-up interview:

Researcher: *Okay, about food or culture—*
Student A: *Yes.*
Researcher: *—something like that?*
Student A: *Or the location about the movie.*
Researcher: *Oh, okay, where they shot the movie?*
Student A: *Yes.*
Researcher: *Oh, really? Which country was that?*
Student A: *It was Hungary, about Kiki's Delivery Service.*
Researcher: *Right. That's the Miyazaki—?*
Student A: *Yes. And Heidi.*
Researcher: *And Heidi. That's the location?*
Student A: *Yes.*

She mentioned this interaction as especially engaging because she had to listen carefully to catch what her partner was saying and that she liked learning something new about a country she had never visited. In discussions with Teacher A, he explained that learners were responsible not only for information they were gathering for their own EU or non-EU countries but also information they recorded from classmates' presentations. Reflecting on my own classroom experiences, *laissez faire* or hands-off approaches to pair or group work are often unsuccessful, and the teacher needs to provide structure, offer or facilitate feedback, and remain engaged themselves. The following comment by the above student on how Teacher A keeps her and her classmates engaged in pair and group work reminded me of this (all direct quotes are presented verbatim):

It happens when we have to work with partner, and after we finish, he—while we work, he always goes around to see if they are working, and also if they have a question or not

because Japanese people feel shy to ask question in front of the class, so when he ask, like, "Do you have a question or something?" or people say, "Yes, I don't know this," or something. And then he always explain about extra information.

The researcher's field notes also highlight on another occasion that while students are checking their partner's paper, Teacher A is moving from group to group and is down at eye level asking individual students what their partner's main argument is.

Three other episodes stand out as showing the power of well-structured pair or group work in this context. One was an activity in Teacher B's week nine intensive reading class where students worked in groups to prepare an illustration (visual representation) that reflected contents from a paragraph they were reading on megalopolises. The second was an inflection activity in Teacher C's week ten Business Communication class where students would read a paragraph to a partner while using voice inflection to stress certain content. The final example was an information gap in Teacher B's week fourteen class where students were assigned one of two paragraphs, completed a worksheet, confirmed their understanding with classmates who had read the same paragraph, and eventually summarized the paragraph for a student or students who had read the other paragraph.

4.1.1 The Illustration Activity. In the week nine Intensive Reading class, learners were working through a challenging textbook passage on the topic of economic corridors (or megalopolises) that have developed in different parts of the world. While much of the textbook reading is assigned out of class, the basic approach for this and other similar readings during the class is for (1) Teacher B to present the topic or focus of the text verbally and/or with slides she has prepared, (2) Teacher B to assign a paragraph or section of the text for students to discuss and answer prepared comprehension and/or personalization questions, and (3) Teacher B to follow up with a whole class discussion. In my three observations of this class, engagement levels and focus normally dropped while learners (re)read the text and struggled through some awkward silence with their partners, but eventually the energy levels rose and most learners exhibited facial expressions and body language that hint at cognitive engagement. With the illustration activity, the dynamic was different. Students still struggled to get going at the beginning, but quickly seemed to immerse themselves in the activity and became quite animated (emotional engagement).

The high levels of engagement during this activity were also mentioned by the teacher and the two students who were interviewed following the lesson. Both Student B and Student C singled out this part of the lesson as being most engaging. Student C expressed that she and her partner were struggling to interpret the numbers in the sentence and that this kept her focused on the activity. Student B mentioned the novelty of the activity, "Also, writing the image of the topics from these sentences. It's a new idea for us in English class for a long time."

In the following excerpt, Teacher B responds to my question about a time when she saw that either one student or a group of students was completely engaged in what was happening during a lesson:

Mmmm, I saw in today's class, they were pretty good at, you know when they had to do that illustration thing, they were really thinking how to interpret those numbers. I could tell because they were talking in pairs and some of them got their illustration totally wrong. They thought that 660,000,000 was the total world population rather than 10%. And they're really thinking in pairs, and some of the students on the participation sheet wrote "Oh, my partner really helped me understand." So I thought they were engaged in that moment.

One additional comment here is that the teacher had changed the seating arrangement earlier in the class, so students were working with a new partner. The researcher commented in fieldnotes that this would likely impact levels of engagement, especially in this class where students seemed to regularly sit with the same partner in the same part of the room near the back. However, energy and engagement levels through the first part of the lesson fluctuated between low and medium (on the observation sheet) and it was only for this illustration activity that high engagement was sustained (9 consecutive 2-minute intervals). During the interviews, I found out that this group of students were taking four English classes a week together. So, while changing seating arrangements might impact levels of engagement, I interpreted the high levels of engagement as resulting from how Teacher B had set up this activity (instructional practice) rather than seating arrangement or partner (contextual features).

4.1.2 The Inflection Activity. Another pair work activity that impressed me as greatly promoting learner engagement was observed in Teacher C's week ten Business Communication class. At about thirty-three minutes into the class, the teacher distributed a worksheet and explained that one point which concerned him in the Company Expo (a semester-long research and presentation project) was that some students did not effectively use voice inflection such as stress or tonal variation. He emphasized that this was a very important part of public speaking and informed students that they would review something they had done in their year-one public speaking class. Using the worksheet (with an excerpt of a short speech), he asked students to listen and repeat each sentence without inflection. He then asked students to go through the worksheet and underline any words or phrases that they felt should receive emphasis or stress when they next read it out loud. Finally, he had students stand up and JANKEN (rock-papers-scissors - used to decide speaking order) with a partner to decide who would speak first. He explained that the winners should read one sentence at a time without emphasis and the loser should (without looking at their paper) repeat each sentence with the proper inflection. Students got started right away and the energy level quickly rose. Students

were focused on their partner and facial expressions and gestures hinted at high levels of engagement. As the noise level began to die down after both partners had read with inflection, Teacher C asked them to stop, praised their efforts and advised them to say each sentence with the inflection and gestures two or more times. He then told everyone to find a new partner and try the activity again. This was repeated one further time so that all students were assured three chances for practice. While the students were still standing, the teacher emphasized to students that deciding what to stress and then practicing is an important step in preparing for their presentations.

After students returned to their seats, Teacher C asked them to take out their textbooks again and turn to the last page of the chapter which included instructions for preparing their upcoming sales presentations. This was basically a review of key points from the chapter, and the teacher asked students to JANKEN (rock-paper-scissors) one last time, and read either the first paragraph or second and third paragraphs. Even though they were working in the textbook (normally accompanied by lower levels of engagement), the level of engagement remained high and students were much more focused than before the voice inflection activity. High levels of engagement were recorded on the observation sheet from the forty-minute interval (when they began working in pairs) through the fifty-four minute interval (when they finished the pair work) to the sixty-two minute interval (where they completed the textbook activity).

In the follow-up interviews, Teacher C and the two students Student D and Student E all felt the highest level of engagement in the lesson was achieved during the inflection practice. Student D talked about her interest and confidence in public speaking, and that this activity had some meaning (relevance) for her. She and Student E both agreed that they had to stay focused to hear what their partners' were saying and work out where to stress or what tonal variation to use. The teacher mentioned that he was basing his interpretation of higher levels of engagement on body language and perceived levels of concentration (indicators). Again, it is interesting that these higher levels of engagement during the voice inflection activity also seemed to carry over into the following textbook activity.

4.1.3 The Information Gap. Information gaps are a staple part of the EFL teacher's repertoire, likely because they encourage interaction and provide a structured communication activity with clear goals and immediate feedback. Towards the end of Teacher B's week fourteen intensive reading class, where students were working through the last part of a textbook reading on mortality rates in preparation for the final quiz the following week, the teacher organized an information gap that resulted in the highest levels of perceived learner engagement witnessed during any of the three observations. Here are the teacher's instructions:

Okay. I have divided you guys into two groups. Okay. Half of you have paragraph 10. The other half have paragraph 12. Okay. If you have paragraph 10, could you come over

here? [pointing to front right corner of room]. And if you have paragraph 12, could you sit over there? [pointing to left side of room] Okay? And your job is to really, really understand the assigned paragraph. Okay? And you can work together with people who have the same worksheet. Later, you have to explain this paragraph to your new partner who doesn't have the same one. Okay? And, I made some comments on the side with questions. Okay? This will help you understand the reading. So, try to answer the questions. Also some words are underlined. That means I want you to explain the meaning of the words. Okay? So, paragraph 10 can you come over here? Paragraph 12 can you please come over here? You can work in a group. Go ahead.

As with almost every pair or group activity in all three cases, there were a range of responses and it took most groups several minutes to begin interacting with their partners. The teacher seemed to recognize this and began prodding each group to check their understanding. There was a slow but noticeable increase in levels of engagement, and there was a distinct change in the type of interactions within groups. Individual members seemed much more determined to get their meaning across (repetition, gestures and facial expressions), and there was much more give and take to these interactions. Fieldnotes at around twelve minutes into this activity read:

The highest observable level of engagement occurred when students were trying to explain something to another student - there seemed to be an authentic need to make oneself understood or convey the content that one was responsible for.

With just a few minutes left in class, Teacher B assigned new groups of four with two members having the same paragraph. She instructed students to share what they learned from their respective paragraphs. This transition was the smoothest of the day (possibly because class was nearly finished) and all groups seemed to get started right away. Students who were explaining were using gestures and checking with their partner who had read the same paragraph. The other two members were writing notes and asking questions. Again, fieldnotes read:

Definitely highest level of engagement comes right at the end of this lesson. Students intent on explaining and listening to their partners. The fact that students stay after the bell and continue with the task into their break time is a good indicator of high levels of engagement - not everyone though? Clear goal to the task and cognitive and linguistic challenge of the task seems to be important contextual/task factor that influences levels of engagement.

In our follow-up interview, Teacher B also mentioned this last activity as being the most engaging for the students. She said her impression was that students were intent

on both conveying their information and listening to their partners, to the point that staying late did not matter. The following is an excerpt of our interview:

Teacher B:	*Ummmm, and then I think, as you can see probably, the information gap part was the most exciting for them.*
Researcher:	*Sure, it changed . . . The whole atmosphere of the class changed.*
Teacher B:	*Right. So I think they were engaged in . . . after . . they didn't mind staying after the . . . even after the bell rang.*
Researcher:	*Yeah, that one group in the middle in the front, especially the one, the one guy right he was kind of leading that discussion. But they probably could've kept talking for another 20 minutes. (laughs)*
Teacher B:	*Right, right. And I saw one kid from one group who couldn't quite understand their partners, so he went to another friend and they explained it to him too.*
Researcher:	*Oh good.*
Teacher B:	*So they just kept on going, so that was good. I don't like keeping students late...that was the first time in the semester...but yeah, I think they got really into the topic. So . . .*

Student B was the one student that was interviewed immediately after the lesson. Most of the interview was spent talking about the guided journaling (mentioned earlier) she was doing as part of the research project, but she did make a point of describing how the worksheet that Teacher B had prepared helped her and her classmates understand the contents of the reading and also provided structure for their conversations about the respective paragraphs. She also mentioned that the pressures of the test the following week had helped to keep her invested in the activity. Some conflicting results came out of the classroom observation sheet, where the initially high level of engagement at the sixty-four minute interval was not maintained. Medium levels of engagement were recorded from the sixty-six minute mark through to the eighty-eight minute interval and the end of the lesson. In reviewing the video recording, we can see two pairs (four students) during the first phase and one group (five students) in the second phase that cut the activity short and/or seem preoccupied with something other than the task. The conservative cutoff for high engagement at 80% or more is described in Smith, Jones, Gilbert and Wieman (2013) and this was used in the current study. This may account for the drop from high to medium soon after the start of the information gap, while Student B and other participants perceived the activity as being engaging.

It should be noted that learner engagement in all nine classroom observations varied greatly from task to task and from student to student. Thus, even when high levels of overall engagement were recorded, there were individual students who exhibited signs of not being as engaged as their classmates.

4.2 Patterns or Rhythms of Instruction

One thing that became clear in the observations was that each teacher has their own patterns or rhythms of instruction but also that there is a general pattern which looks something like this: (1) the teacher introduces a topic or issue via a lecture, reading or video clip, (2) the teacher assigns some type of pair or group task, (3) the learners work collaboratively on completing the task, (4) the teacher checks on outcomes by leading a class discussion or debriefing session. From my experiences in the classroom, this pattern is pretty standard and accounts for the majority of interactions in many educational settings. The predictability of these patterns likely have a settling effect in that learners can anticipate what is coming and can prepare behaviorally, cognitively and emotionally. The downside is that this predictability also allows students to tune out (Ainley, 2012). In our follow up interview after Teacher C's week ten Business Communication class, Student D said that she was fairly engaged throughout the class, with an estimate of eight out of ten, but that she had grown accustomed to the video tasks where a bad example is followed by a good example. She expressed that this had become boring for her and that she sometimes catches herself thinking, "enough already, let's move on." In the same interview, Student E estimated that four out of ten was her low, and said these dips came when she could anticipate what was coming and didn't need to listen that carefully or concentrate on what was happening.

The influences that these patterns or rhythms of instruction have on levels of engagement were seen in all three cases, and I will present here three instructional practices that illustrate this point: Pulling Learners in with Quizzes or Tests, Mixing it Up, and Well-Timed Shifts. Again, these categories emerged mainly from recurring themes in the thematic coding of qualitative data and were supported by classroom observation sheet data.

4.2.1 Pulling Learners in with Quizzes or Tests. One somewhat surprising finding for me was the power that quizzes or tests have to focus the attention of learners in this context. Upon reflection, however, learners in this context are accustomed to test taking (Jones, 2019) and are familiar with this style of study. Also, I have noticed this tendency for Japanese university students to dive right into quizzes or tests in my own classes as well. In my analysis of the nine vignettes, I found four examples where teachers started their lesson with a quiz, test or test-related activity. First, in Teacher A's week three CLIL class, he had pairs of students quiz each other on information researched for their EU and non-EU countries. Then, in the same teacher's week eight class, he uses a more formal quiz to check learners' understanding of other information they had collected about these same countries using a teacher-prepared worksheet. Next, in Teacher B's week nine intensive reading class, she passes back the mid-term test that students had taken the previous week and leads a debriefing session on parts of the test that students struggled with. Finally, in her week thirteen class, Teacher B leads off with a vocabulary quiz. My observation notes for all four instances include comments about how these quizzes or

activities seem to pull learners in. The topic of quizzes or tests did not come up with any regularity in the interviews and I am relying here on my observation notes, commentary in the vignettes, and remarks by learners on the participation sheets. Beginning the lessons with these quizzes, tests or test-related activities may or may not have been a strategic instructional practice on the part of the teachers, but it did seem to have the favorable outcome of increased learner engagement (at least behavioral and cognitive) early in the lesson for these two groups of learners in their 9:00 a.m. classes. Both teachers and learners made more than one mention of engagement levels at the beginning of these classes as normally being particularly low.

4.2.2 Mixing it Up. Also related to the patterns or rhythms of instruction, was how teachers wove together activities and either stretched or shortened tasks in ways that influenced (and were influenced by) levels of learner engagement. When observing Teacher A's classes, I saw examples of mixing it up in the ways he varied the style of quizzes (mentioned earlier), how he shifted the order of regularly-occurring tasks (country presentations, e-portfolio work, mini-lectures with note-taking). This teacher also used at least one instructional practice that caught me off guard. After learners finished the quiz at the beginning of the week eight class (mentioned above), he called on each student and asked them to publicly report their score on the quiz. When I queried him about this in the interview, he explained that he did this to put a fire under some students who had gotten off to a slow start and were not doing much research on their countries or preparation for the classes. This teacher also picked up on learner interest and stretched out a couple of classroom exchanges. One of the lengthier interactions involved the topic of false friends, or loan words from English into Japanese that have completely different meanings from how they are used in English. The words "mansion" and "tension" are two of the examples he touched on. This topic seemed to be of interest to students and Teacher A picked up on this and expanded on the topic.

Although my general impression was that Teacher B mixed things up less than the two other teachers, likely due to the restraints placed on her by the textbook, she did have her own ways of switching things around to keep students engaged. Despite the general pattern of classroom interactions outlined earlier, this teacher would vary the types of questions she prepared for the slides, interject with personal stories or advice, or organize supplementary tasks like the illustration and information gap activities mentioned above. In her week nine class, she and the learners were struggling through a particularly challenging part of the text on the megalopolises. There were several rounds of students reading and discussing with a partner, followed by Teacher B checking comprehension and trying to personalize the material. In one of these exchanges where the topic of light emissions mapping came up, she closed the shades and played a short video of satellite images of light emissions from the Earth at night that was accompanied by music. Students were focused on the screen throughout, and the teacher followed up by switching back to the slideshow and questions about what these light emission maps tell us. This

interjection (although rated as a medium level of engagement for the sixty-two and sixty-four minute intervals) seemed to have the desired result of refocusing the learners and helping them through this part of the text.

My observations of Teacher C revealed similar practices to the other two teachers, namely the shifting of order of regularly-occurring tasks, interjecting with personal stories or advice, and expanding on topics of perceived interest to learners. One example of an attempt to mix it up came in his week four class where they were preparing to watch one bad and one good example of a business presentation. In preparation for the bad example, he asked students to work in pairs, and assigned one student to focus on what was wrong with the manner in which the speech was delivered (physical message) and the other to focus on the content of the talk (story message). The assignment of roles or areas of focus for the listening task seemed to have the desired effect, and most students seemed highly engaged, even Student D who later reported some boredom with these video activities. This strategy was mentioned in the teacher's manual and Teacher C had slightly altered it to good effect for his class.

4.2.3 Well-Timed Shifts. Another instructional practice related to patterns or rhythms of instruction are short, strategic shifts in direction or jolts that are used by the instructor to grab attention or shake learners out of a lulled state. In the three classrooms that I observed, these shifts sometimes came when teachers seemingly recognized drops in engagement or when an activity was winding down. I am relying here mainly on my observation notes and commentary related to the vignettes. However, these findings were supported by interview data. The two most prominent of these shifts were the game of rock-papers-scissors used by Teacher C to decide speaking order or student roles and short breaks used by Teacher B to wake up or refresh learners. After students are in pairs in Teacher C's week three class, he tells them to JANKEN (rock-paper-scissors). He uses the Japanese word JANKEN and later explains that this is one of his strategies he often uses for getting students' attention and keeping the class engaged. He refers to the winner as JANKEN Master (a twist on a Jackie Chan movie) and the loser as Lucky Loser. In our follow up interview, the teacher makes a point of mentioning his use of JANKEN to keep students focused:

Yeah. I—I've sort, I did -- I taught in high school, and it's – part of the culture isn't it? With janken I think if it's there why don't you use it? [. . .] Because they're used to that kind of action. And sometimes I noticed them sort of dropping off a bit if I speak too much. I ask them to do janken they're awake suddenly, so it's a good quick thing to get them back into the lesson.

This was obviously a go-to strategy for this teacher, and I observed him using it between three and seven times per lesson on the three occasions that I observed his class. In my vignette for the week fourteen class I note at the beginning of the lesson that the

teacher asks students to open their textbooks and again uses JANKEN to decide reading order. The students seem quite accustomed to this routine and the winners immediately start reading their part (problems) aloud while their partners follow along in the textbook.

At around forty-five minutes into Teacher B's week three class, she comments to learners on the waning energy level in class and tells students to take a short break, get up and walk around, stretch, get some coffee, etc. There is a palpable sigh of relief and the energy level spikes upwards as students move around and talk in Japanese. Although I did not complete an observation sheet for this meeting, my field notes included mention that a majority of learners exhibited signs of cognitive engagement when they came back from the break and continued working through the text. In the follow up interviews, the teacher mentioned this break was an attempt to bring the students back, and both Student B and Student F also mentioned high levels of engagement when the teacher gave them a break. In one of my follow up questions after the week nine class, I asked Student B and Student C what they would do if they were in the position of the teacher. Student B offered the opinion that students are often very busy, stressed or tired and she said she would offer them more breaks and concentrate the study into shorter chunks. This topic of the packed schedule of students came up in earlier interviews and I will need to return to this in my further analysis. In my notes for the week nine class, I entered the following:

Although [teacher] has asked students to check with a partner, most students are working by themselves. My impression is that some are not sure how to proceed. The contents are quite challenging, with information about how these economic centers attract global talent and of how global talent is mobile. [Teacher] recognizes that students are struggling to stay focused on the reading and uses different strategies to maintain interest. She tries to connect the contents of the reading to Japan and students' realities, offers words of encouragement, and eventually tells learners to take a short break and passes around a bag of candies.

In talking with the three teachers, it was clear that they recognize engagement when they see it. They described "reading" students or the class and making adjustments. These teachers also seem to have strategies for boosting engagement (Teacher C using JANKEN and giving students responsibility, and Teacher B providing students with breaks). These strategies seem to be part of the interface between motivation (context and self) and engagement (action), in that teachers are interpreting contextual and self features in ways that help them translate learner motivation into action.

4.3 Questioning Style

Another instructional practice that impressed me in the observations and interviews as impacting levels of engagement was questioning style. Questions that were directed at getting the learners to connect the content to their own experiences or reflect critically on their own assumptions or beliefs clearly had a positive impact on overall levels of

engagement. Conversely, questions straight from the textbook or restricted to comprehension seem to be less engaging. Questioning styles where the teacher is looking for one correct answer seemed least engaging. This type of questioning might be necessary to gauge student understanding, but there clearly seems to be a downside. Teacher B having students discuss particularly challenging passages from the text seemed to be much preferable to just asking comprehension questions or dishing out the answer and teacher interpretations.

Questioning style also refers to how the teacher poses questions: to the class in general, by asking one student, or questioning a limited number of students engaged in group work. When asked about things the teacher does to keep students interested or engaged, Student A talked about how Teacher A moves from group to group during the activities and checks their understanding and progress. She mentioned this as especially important since she and her classmates are normally shy about asking questions in front of the class, and felt that everyone appreciates that he always offers explanations and extra information. Three other issues that came up in this same interview were calling students by name, active participation in class, and classroom atmosphere. Student A mentioned that in some of her other English classes, the teacher asks questions to the group but all members are reluctant to raise their hand even if they know the answer (contextual feature). She feels that Teacher A does a good job of calling students by name, making it much easier for students to answer and reducing the amount of wasted time.

When talking with Teacher B after her week three class, she highlighted that different questions impacted engagement in different ways. With some questions, students find the answer right away and then tend to drift off with little or no interaction with their partner. At other times, when the question is too difficult, they also switch off. She feels the most engaging questions are open-ended, opinion type questions and said she was still testing what worked with this group of students. During the same interview, this teacher expressed feeling that a big part of her job was to think on her feet and make adjustments when delivering lessons. This discussion comes up in the literature on expert teachers (Goodwyn, 2010) and reflective practice (Farrell, 2008), and might be an area requiring further analysis. Teacher B talked about picking up on some eye contact and body language from students which she interpreted as expressing engagement and a desire to be called on. She also recognizes that students do not react well to questions aimed at the class, but sometimes does this intentionally with the understanding that students will likely be faced with this questioning style when studying abroad. In talking with Student B and Student F after this same class, their feeling was that the average level of engagement was up around eight (out of 10). Student B felt her engagement was highest when the teacher was asking questions, especially questions outside of the textbook that required students to use their imagination.

I commented in my observation notes that Teacher B sometimes asks a question to the whole class, and that these questions are mainly met with an uncomfortable silence, but that eventually the same two or three students speak up. In talking about posing

questions to the class, this teacher expressed that this is something he still struggles with. He says he doesn't expect students to put their hands up right away, but feels putting them on the spot a bit is a form of positive pressure. He tries to offer hints and tries to read students' expressions for signs that they understand the question and/or know the answer.

Returning to the conceptual framework of SDT, we need to ask how certain questioning styles meet or thwart learners' psychological need for competence, autonomy or relatedness. Both Teacher B and Teacher C mentioned using easy questions to promote feelings of competence. Teacher B commented in interviews that competence is extremely important, and offered the observation that Japanese students are especially hard on themselves and require a boost in confidence. She feels she promotes feelings of competence through the use of easy questions, praise and positive reinforcement. My impression is that listing up the various questions on slides, having students discuss possible answers and then checking answers as a class is one way this teacher's lessons can potentially boost feelings of competence. As for autonomy, the open-ended, experience-based and opinion-type questions provide learners with room to exert their autonomy and agency. In terms of relatedness, we can recognize a preference for questions aimed at individuals rather than the group, and calling on students by name is well received in this (and likely most) contexts. Again, we see questioning style as one more interface between motivation and engagement, i.e. getting learners to translate their motivation into language learning behaviors in the classroom.

4.4 Scaffolding Techniques

One additional practice that seemed to help learners engage with the instructional task or material was the skillful use of scaffolding. The practice mentioned above of preparing slides with questions and having learners read and discuss possible answers is one example. Others were the worksheets that Teacher B used to facilitate the information gap described earlier and the ones that Teacher C used to facilitate the company expo meetings in his class. In discussing the meetings, Teacher B stressed that the detailed worksheets seemed to be working but that his plan was to slowly offer less structure so students would not become too dependent on them. In the interview with Teacher B after her week nine class, she described another class where she had provided scaffolding for listening comprehension and how this had engaged her students:

Uhh, also today in the second period, we were studying content words and function words and I used uhh Eric Clapton's "Change the World." Uhh, they had to listen to it and especially pay attention to content words, so I took out some modals, you know, "I can change the world, I would . . . could be the king" and for the highest level students I took the modals out, I say "Listen carefully because he uses "can" and "could" differently," he uses "can" in the beginning and changes to "could" because he feels less confident about this woman he wants to get, so when I play the song I could tell my higher level students are really listening and say "Oh that was can" or "That was could" so I could

tell they were really listening carefully, talking to their partner, asking me questions like "Oh wasn't it will" or "Why was it would. Let's listen again." I thought that they were quite engaged.

Teacher A's use of scaffolding was apparent in several parts of each meeting that I observed. Some of the more salient examples were (1) the detailed agendas and lists of learning outcomes that he wrote up on the whiteboard each week, (2) the information cards used on week three to focus attention on the types of information learners should be investigating, and (3) the e-portfolio examples he used to illustrate what was expected of learners. Additionally, this teacher transitioned to a mini lecture in his day fourteen class by asking students to discuss with their partner the meaning of capitalism. This scaffolding or priming also seemed to bolster learners' sense of competence and encourage deeper investment in listening to the lecture. In the researcher's conceptual framework of learner engagement (Jones, 2018), these deeper levels of investment in classroom activities are theorized as promoting better quality language learning.

5.2.5 Detrimental Instructional Practices

I will conclude this section with a few instructional practices that seemed to have a detrimental impact on learner engagement, and reflect back on our main research question. Based on observation sheet data and the vignettes, 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. Student A 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, Student E 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.

5. Discussion

One convincing finding from the study was the general preference for active types of learning and well-structured pair and group work. Instructional practices identified as having a positive influence on learner engagement were those that were personalized, meaningful and appropriately scaffolded. With the understanding that second language learning in this context is not itself intrinsically motivating, teachers will need to find ways to help these learners with the identified or integrated regulation discussed by Deci and Ryan (2000). Assor (2012) addresses this issue by stating, "when students are provided with clear and convincing rationale for actions they do not find particularly interesting or valuable, they tend to feel less coerced" (p. 426). The use of novel

instructional practices also came up as positively influencing learner engagement, but at the same time there were learners who expressed an appreciation for instructional practices that are familiar, clearly understandable and predictable.

Relating back to the larger question of how learner engagement is experienced, 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. These instructional practices work with other contextual features to meet or thwart the psychological needs (self), and thus strengthen or weaken the motivation (via learner identity). The strength of the resulting motivation is then translated into action (engagement) via learner investment.

5.1 Pedagogical Implications

The current study offers some 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 (not discussed in this paper) 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 (authenticity). 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 (presence) also hold promise in terms of return on investment in the classroom.

5.2 Areas for Further Study

One of the many areas that merit further investigation is the construct of willingness to communicate (MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010; Yashima, 2002), especially how the concept might be used in this and other similar contexts as a window onto motivational orientations, for example Yashima's (2002) concept of international posture, and manifestation of motivation into classroom engagement. The great lack of willingness to communicate expressed by a significant number of learners in this context may account for the generally poor performance on standardized measures of English fluency mentioned in Jones (2019). A detailed look at how this lack of willingness to communicate is translating into fewer opportunities to practice and develop target language skills should be pursued, possibly following on studies reported in Norton (2000).

Related to the topic of willingness to communicate, more empirical investigations are merited regarding why certain individuals tend to retreat or disengage quickly after completing a task. My impression is that this is a highly complex issue that could be approached from various angles, including language learning beliefs and attitudes, self theories or identity, and investment. One approach might be to capture in detail the verbal interactions of some of the more and less engaged pairs or groups, and subject resulting transcripts to discourse analysis. This could be combined with in-depth interviews and stimulated recall using video or audio recordings.

Findings regarding the psychological need of relatedness and the central role of relationships among learners and with the teacher point to a need for further research into the phenomenon of social engagement (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Specifically, a worthy line of research would be to clarify how social engagement relates to or aligns with the well-established tripartite of behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement. Intuitively,

the links with emotional engagement would seem to be strong, and one line of possible research would be to design and test survey instruments to tease out the distinctions and correlates between the two. This could be combined with or followed up by qualitative investigations aimed at theory building and finding practical applications.

Another line of related research would be longitudinal studies that compared and contrasted the typical pattern of fifteen-week semester EFL courses in Japan with shorter or extended timeframes. Findings from my study pointed to a general tendency for groups of students to "warm up" to one another and the teacher as the semester progressed. Empirical research related to the optimal frequency and duration of classroom groupings would benefit teachers, program coordinators and other stakeholders.

Last, but not least, it might be useful to explore learner engagement as related to teacher engagement. Findings in my study pointed to the key role played by the instructor and the reciprocal nature of engagement among learners. A better understanding of the sources, indicators and facilitators of teacher engagement in my teaching context and beyond would help teachers themselves as well as program coordinators, administrators, policy makers and other stakeholders.

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