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Exploring Student Engagement: When you engage, you begin with ABC…

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Abstract: Student engagement is a multidimensional construct used to address frequently occurring problems in education, such as low achievement or high dropout rates. As student engagement has been shown to be connected to learning outcomes, the role that teachers can play in supporting student engagement is paramount. This paper introduces the student engagement construct and student engagement as it relates to a second language learning context. The paper concludes with three suggestions for methods that may lead to increased student engagement: goal setting, autonomy support, and engaging classrooms.
 (Note: A version of this paper was presented at TILES 2018: Engagement in English Classrooms)

The student engagement construct has become increasingly prominent in both engagement research in primary and secondary schools in America as well as in second language acquisition (SLA) settings. This paper outlines the student engagement construct (sometimes called school engagement), discusses its origins and how it is used both in the US and in SLA settings, and suggests three ways that teachers can support student engagement in classrooms.

What is engagement?

Any discussion of the student engagement construct must be prefaced with an understanding of exactly how engagement is defined. Many people have general ideas about what form engagement takes. Experienced teachers can look at students and can tell who is engaged. In my classroom, this is usually the students who are paying attention to what is being said, who are focused on their work and who care about the subject. It is students who stay on-task, or students who have an energy for learning. This is my starting point in defining student engagement.

In the literature, engagement is defined in many different ways. The construct used in this paper is the student engagement construct as proposed by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004). They consider engagement to be a multidimensional construct composed of affective, (or emotional,) behavioral, and cognitive engagement. To borrow a term from

Parsons, Nulland, and Parsons (2014), the ABCs of engagement, where A is affective, or emotional, engagement, B for behavioral, and C for cognitive.

There is another important aspect of engagement that has recently been identified: agentic engagement (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). This is a type of engagement where students take an active role in the learning process (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Increasingly, agentic behavior has come to be included in student engagement research.

What does student engagement look like?

Moving from the general definition of engagement put forth at the beginning of this paper, presented below is the multidimensional framework of student engagement.

A – Affective engagement includes a sense of belonging in the school or classroom. It usually manifests in being enthusiastic for learning (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). In the classroom, this may be manifest as students having fun or enjoying themselves, *while learning*. The key point being that the students are enjoying the learning process, rather than just enjoying chatting with their friends. Affective engagement is the students' ability to feel a part of the learning experience and have emotional investment in the process.

The research on affective (emotional) engagement is lacking. A lot of the ways that this is assessed in the research is simply asking students if they had fun, or when analyzing students in a class, counting the number of times they laugh or smile. This may not be an effective method to assess affective engagement as student may be experiencing it without outwardly expressing it.

Affective disengagement may also take place in the classroom. Skinner, Kindermann, and Furrer (2009) explain that this state is exemplified by traits such as "mental withdrawal" or "ritualistic participation" (p.496). These are students who are in the classroom for a variety of reasons, but they have committed no emotional resources to the learning process. These affectively disengaged students don't have any positive emotions towards school and may have 'given up'.

A - Agentic engagement is used to measure how students take charge of the learning process. Students who are agentically engaged will give feedback to the teacher and make sure that their individual needs are being met. Agentically disengaged students are likely to be passive in class. They will remain silence even if given the chance to express their preferences or when asked for feedback.

There are some culturally specific problems with aspects of the construct in a Japanese context. The idea of asking the teacher questions and giving feedback on the learning process may be considered out of place in a Japanese classroom. Indeed, a study by MacWhinnie (in press) showed that Japanese students were neither agentically engaged nor disengaged. The paper concluded that the construct may not be appropriate in a Japanese context where traditional Confucian student-teacher relationships persist. Clearly, more research is needed to clarify the value of agentic engagement in a Japanese context.

B – Behavioral engagement is usually on-task behaviors, and active participation in class, or school. These are students who follow the rules of the school. This construct sometimes also includes elements like participation in extracurricular activities. This construct was designed with American schools in mind. In a language classes whether or not students participate in extracurricular activities may not have any influence on their engagement in your classes.

In classrooms in Japan, behaviorally engaged students are generally those who have the answer to any question that comes up in class and are well aware of what assignments might be due and will remind the teacher if homework is not collected.

There is an important distinction between being behaviorally engaged and enjoying the learning process. It is unlikely that a student will be fully behaviorally engaged and also miserable in class, but there may be some degree of behavioral engagement without emotional engagement.

How behavioral disengagement is defined is not clear in the literature. Some argue (Skinner, Kindermann, Connell, & Wellborn, 2009) that it is simply a lack of engagement. Behavioral disengagement, when defined as being a lack of engagement, is students who are not on-task and who do not actively participate. Jang, Kim, and Reeve (2016) argue that behavioral engagement and behavioral disengagement are distinct constructs and should be measured as such. They add a dimension of willfulness to the lack of engagement.

C – Cognitive engagement is meta-cognitive and self-regulatory strategies. (Parsons et al., 2014). It can be thought of as investment in learning. Greene (2015) calls it "energizing investment" (p.16). This is similar in nature to *deep learning* (Senko & Miles, 2008). Indeed, Jang et al. (2016) make the argument that cognitive engagement and deep learning are the same thing. They apply a measure of deep learning when assessing cognitive engagement.

Cognitive disengagement is more difficult to operationalize when doing research. It is often defined as *study disorganization* (Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999). It is hard to say that students who are not using meta-cognitive strategies are particularly disengaged. Simply because students do not have meta-cognitive strategies or self-regulatory strategies probably does not mean that they are cognitively disengaged, rather it might simply be a lack of skills or training.

Why study engagement?

The student engagement construct arose out of research in US schools in the late 80s and early 90s. The research was done to look at the reasons why students drop out of school. The pioneers in the field were Finn and Voelkl who published "School characteristics related to Student Engagement" (1993). This was perhaps the earliest attempt to understand the connection between engagement and success in schools.

In SLA research student engagement is used primarily as an indicator of learning achievements. In the US, the major goal of school (student) engagement research is still analyzing causes of drop out or failure in school, or why students have low achievement scores (Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016). This is often accomplished through large scale surveys which are given to school children. Those students' grades are then tracked. This allows researchers to make the connection between different types of engagement and success in school. A lot of this research and those survey instruments were particularly useful in the aftermath of the no child left behind act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). A growing amount of research has been done making use of the student engagement construct in SLA settings. Most of this research is concerned with student achievement.

One problem in much student engagement research is that some researchers talk about engagement in vague terms. For the last 40 years there has been a boom in motivational research in SLA and due to overlap between engagement and motivation, some research equates engagement with motivation. This clashes with many definitions of motivation, which state that it is the private, unseen beliefs or intentions that a person has (Lamb, 2016), whereas engagement is more observable behavior. There are certainly overlaps between the two, but it is important to separate motivation from engagement.

There may be students who engage in class, but who are not motivated. They may affectively engage because they like their friends or the teacher. They might behaviorally engage simply because they are in the habit of following rules. It is possible to study the connection between motivation and engagement, but the distinction between the two is

important. Motivational researchers also know that intended action does not always lead to action. This might lead to a situation where students are motivated, but do not succeed in transferring that intended effort into action or engagement.

Overlaps between engagement and motivation research

One easily confused engagement construct in SLA is the engagement with language construct (EWL) (Svalberg, 2009, 2012). This is more connected to language awareness and students looking at, or 'noticing' aspects of language in the learning process. This also has aspects of behavioral and cognitive engagement, but it is much more narrowly focused on how students interact with language in the classroom. While the ABCs of engagement look at learning in a school (or a classroom) EWL is focused very narrowly on language as the object and/or subject of study (Svalberg, 2009).

More recently and popular in the last decade there is Dörnyei's L2 motivational self system (L2MSS), which is concerned with how students picture themselves, and how this provides motivation to engage (Dörnyei, 2009). The three aspects of the system are *ideal L2 self* which is how you picture yourself in the future, *ought-to L2 self* which how you feel others expect you to be, perhaps parents or teachers, and finally *L2 learning experiences*, which is the motivation that results from your past experiences in learning. Measures of the L2MSS tend to ask students about behaviors, which could be confused with engagement.

There is also another prominent theory that is often talked about as being synonymous with engagement which is Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (SDT) (2000). This theory focuses on the connection between different types of motivation and behaviors that result.

The key point is that these are all theories of motivation are concerned with the internal beliefs of students. While they might be measured in terms of the expression of that motivation, the motivational constructs I mentioned are concerned with private thoughts and feelings. Engagement on the other hand is action and expression. It is what students actually do in the classroom.

It is possible to be motivated without being engaged. Students may be motivated to learn, but that motivation may not translate into action. Perhaps the students have decided what they want to do, but they cannot translate that desire into action. This would be an example of motivation without engagement. I put this forth with some caution, as some might argue that if the student was truly motivated, they would indeed be engaged.

The question of whether students can be engaged without being motivated remains to be answered.

Why is engagement important?

The research is clear – school engagement leads to learning results (Boekaerts, 2016). If students are engaged with school (or the English classroom), they are taking a more active role in the learning process. This leads to positive educational outcomes.

What can teachers do?

The research on student engagement indicates that the goal of teachers ought to be to engage students in school. The goal should not be to overly focus on any one aspect of the construct. Engagement that leads to learning results is more than just on-task behavior, it is more than students simply having fun, it is more than students who are employing meta-cognitive strategies, it is more than students who are active in directing their own learning. It is the combination of these factors.

What does the research show?

Overall, the research shows that the teacher is the number one influence on student engagement. If an environment which allows students to engage is not created, it is unlikely they will succeed.

Many teachers have witnessed highly motivated students who engaged in the classroom move up a grade and be faced with ineffective teaching methods. These students' engagement levels drop drastically due to the changes in the teaching environment. Motivational theories also support this idea that teachers and past learning experiences are crucial for successful outcomes.

Three ways to engage students

1. What can teachers do? Research shows that the environment is closely linked to student engagement (Parsons et al., 2014). It is here that teachers can strongly influence their students. Parsons et al. suggest that classroom contexts which are cooperative, rather than competitive, encourage engagement. Further, teachers can build engaging classrooms by showing that they care about students and maintaining "a positive social environment (p. 25).

The idea of creating a cooperative classroom may run counter to many teachers' practices. Many teachers like to use competition, particularly with younger students. This

may not be inherently bad, as long as the overall classroom environment in positive and the class as a whole can work together. Students who can compete, while understanding that the ultimate goal of the class should be learning, rather than winning, may be able to successfully engage in the classroom.

2. There are other ways that teachers can build student engagement. Jang, Reeve and Deci (2010) have found that autonomy in the classroom is highly useful in building student engagement. By allowing the students to make choices about what they do they become more invested in the learning, which in turn leads to engagement.

This does not mean allowing students complete control over the learning environment. Rather, it can be something as simple as giving students a choice in the order in which they do that days' tasks. This can make a difference as students will feel empowered and a part of the learning process.

3. From a motivational perspective another way that teachers can endeavor to engage student is to work on goal setting (Martin & Elliot, 2016; Miller, Behrens, Greene, & Newman, 1993). Students with clear goals for their future (some might argue this to be self guides), are linked to both motivation and high engagement.

Having a clear imagine of one's self in the future is helpful in building effective cognitive strategies. If the students have a clear picture of where they want to be when they finish the class, course, or graduate, they may be better able to self-regulate and move toward that goal.

Conclusion

Student engagement research has boomed over the last several decades and has looked at the reasons behind student drop out, low achievement, and lack of participation in school. In the process, researchers have found many variables that contribute to engagement. I have highlighted three ways that educators can influence students in class.

I hope that by giving some background and critically engaging with the literature, a better understand of both the construct and how to apply it in the classroom has become clear.

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