

Unlocking Effective Language Learning: The Crucial Role of Engagement and its Multifaceted Components

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Abstract

This “Opinion” discusses the importance of engagement in second language acquisition, emphasizing that motivation alone is insufficient for successful learning. Drawing on research, it highlights the multifaceted nature of engagement, examining its behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social aspects. By focusing on the central roles of behavioral and cognitive engagement, the paper demonstrates the interrelatedness of these aspects and their collective impact on learning outcomes. To foster effective foreign language learning, the author suggests leveraging these engagement characteristics and evaluating learners’ efforts from an integrated perspective.

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I aim to decrease the time spent on my smartphone; however, I find it difficult to resist browsing social networking sites. I desire to lose weight for the summer, but I often succumb to the temptation of sweets. It is common for individuals to make decisions or have strong desires, yet fail to follow through. In essence, our thoughts and actions do not always coincide. This inconsistency is also evident in language learning (e.g., aspiring to learn English, but struggling to maintain consistent study). Al-Hoorie’s [1] research provides a compelling illustration of this phenomenon. In his study, he conducted a meta-analysis of 32 studies, encompassing 32,078 participants. The findings revealed that subjective efforts (referred to as “intended effort,” such as “I believe I am studying English diligently”) exhibited a negligible correlation ($r=0.12$) with learning outcomes. Although motivation plays a vital role, desire and/or intent alone are insufficient for achieving foreign language proficiency. Instead, concrete actions must accompany these intentions.

In recent years, the field of second language acquisition research has increasingly emphasized the inclusion of behavioral components within the concept of motivation. The term “engagement” has gained considerable attention as a result. While engagement can be defined in various ways, its primary meaning refers to “active involvement, participation, and commitment” [2]. Motivation sets the stage for learning, but engagement is crucial for learning to take place. Engagement is a broad concept that encompasses a learner’s motivated state, which includes behavioral (e.g., persevering through challenges, attentively listening to teachers and peers), cognitive (e.g., evaluating study methods, analyzing errors), emotional (e.g., expressing interest in learning, enjoying new information), and social aspects (e.g., collaborating with classmates, sharing knowledge with one another). In this “Opinion,” I will concentrate on the central behavioral and cognitive aspects of engagement and explore them in more depth.

Behavioral engagement

Behavioral engagement pertains to active participation in, or commitment to, a specific activity. This state encompasses initiating action, focusing on the task, and persevering. Engaged individuals become fully absorbed in the task, and they may not necessarily perceive a sense of “effort.” Lei et al. [3] conducted a meta-analysis of 69 studies, involving 196,473 participants, to investigate the relationship between three aspects of engagement (behavioral, cognitive, and emotional) and learning outcomes. The results indicated that behavioral engagement demonstrated the strongest correlation ($r=0.35$) with learning outcomes, suggesting it is the most critical direct predictor of learning success. To evaluate learners’ behavioral engagement, researchers employ observable and quantifiable indicators, such as task duration, notes taken during class, and utterances or conversational turns with a partner. If a pair frequently interacts using the target language or actively participates in the activity, they are considered to exhibit high behavioral engagement. However, a high volume of speech or turn count does not guarantee deep thinking (high cognitive engagement) or positive feelings (high emotional engagement). Consequently, learner engagement must be understood and assessed holistically.

Cognitive engagement

Teachers often assess students’ active participation in activities (high behavioral engagement) by observing their physical engagement (e.g., raising hands, speaking during class). However, students might be deeply engaged mentally, even if they are not visibly active. This state, referred to as “cognitive engagement,” entails focused thinking and problem-solving. The key lies not merely in participating in an activity but in being deeply cognitively engaged. Students with high cognitive engagement independently utilize learning strategies. For example, in my recent study on collaborative writing [4], pairs exhibiting high cognitive engagement actively employed strategies such as planning their composition (planning), asking questions about unfamiliar words (inquiring), and critiquing each other’s writing (evaluating). In contrast, pairs with shallow cognitive engagement primarily focused on increasing word count and fixating on spelling. It is easy to imagine that these interactions did not promote deep learning.



Concluding Remarks

What insights can we gain about effective foreign language learning from the perspective of engagement? First, the aspects of engagement are closely interconnected. Enhancing one aspect can positively influence others, thereby increasing overall effort. For instance, even if you lack interest in a task, committing to it for 10 minutes (behavioral engagement) may reveal that it is surprisingly enjoyable, leading to enthusiastic engagement (emotional engagement). Capitalizing on this characteristic of engagement can improve learning outcomes. Second, learner engagement is often assessed based on visible (superficial) behaviors. Observations indicate that some learners may seem actively engaged (high behavioral engagement) but merely engage in casual conversation (low cognitive engagement), while others appear quiet (low behavioral engagement) yet think deeply about the subject matter (high cognitive/emotional engagement) [4]. To determine “authentic engagement,” we must observe and evaluate learners’ efforts from an integrated perspective.

References

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