



Academic Engagement in Self-Regulated, Cooperative Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

The academic engagement of learners is not a clear-cut, rigid construct. Instead, it depends on a multitude of factors that can relate to the individuals involved in the learning processes, their relationships with each other, the applied teaching methodology, and fluctuating contextual influences. The overlapping, interacting components that shape engagement in foreign language learning can be cognitive, metacognitive, affective, social, task-related, communicative, and foreign language-related [1]. These components feature with varying magnitude in the relationships learners maintain with others, which creates opportunities for teachers to enhance the academic engagement of their students and increase their enthusiasm for learning (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). In this paper, we present an inspirational example of three passionate teachers – firm believers in self-regulated cooperative learning – who advocate a combination of meaningful, enjoyable learning experiences and caring, supportive teacher guidance. After defining the concept of academic engagement and its essential components, we explore how the individual components of learner engagement intertwine and what other potential influences there are. The second part of the paper focuses on teacher actions to benefit learner engagement and draws on practical experiences with coaching and learner self-study in the context of cooperative learning. The presented empirical information, which is part of a larger-scale study [2], was collected in semi-structured interviews with teachers who apply a modern adaptation of the Dalton pedagogy (Parkhurst, 1922) and integrate other engagement-enhancing measures in their teaching. Rather than instructors, they view themselves as coaches whose job it is to support their students according to individual abilities, needs, and contextual circumstances.

Key words: *Academic engagement, self-regulation, cooperative learning, coaching*

1. Introduction

This paper addresses teacher perception of the academic engagement of students of English as a foreign language (EFL) in the context of self-regulated, cooperative learning. It also focuses on teacher actions to enhance learner engagement in EFL teaching, in particular, coaching. Based on theoretical information as well as empirical data collected in interviews with three EFL teachers, this paper confirms previous knowledge and invites further research about academic engagement.

2. Academic engagement

Academic engagement in foreign language learning depends on a number of physiological, behavioural, and psychological components as previous models of the concept confirm [4, 5, 6, 10]. Based on an extensive literature review and personal teaching experience in higher education, Amerstorfer and Münster-Kistner [1] define academic engagement as “all student behavior related to planning, managing, and completing” their studies. They identify seven fundamental components of academic engagement, which are strongly interrelated and dependent on learners’ knowledge, skills, and abilities:

- **Cognitive engagement**
Thinking activities related to the involvement and participation in academic tasks.
Examples: paying attention; acquiring, processing, and storing information; retrieving information from memory.
- **Metacognitive engagement**
What students do to manage and reflect on their cognitive actions.
Examples: short-term and long-term planning; coordinating learning tasks; evaluating learning progress and outcomes; compensating for knowledge gaps



- **Affective engagement**
What students do to regulate their own and their peers' emotions.
Examples: managing boredom and curiosity; acknowledging and controlling anxieties; evaluating, generating, and maintaining interest and motivation; demonstrating empathy towards others.
- **Social engagement**
Interactions with fellow students and teachers.
Examples: Establishing a facilitative network of peers and teachers; cultivating supportive relationships with individuals; contributing to group efforts; being available for others in need.
- **Task engagement**
Manner and intensity with which students engage with learning materials in meaningful ways. Strongly influenced by personal attributes like interest, motivation, resilience, and endurance.
Examples: practicing academic skills; setting obtainable goals and prospective rewards.
- **Communicative engagement**
What students do to effectively communicate with others in writing, speaking, and non-verbally. Patience and respect are important.
Examples: Receptive activities (e.g., attentive listening; observing body language, gestures, and facial expressions); productive activities (e.g., building and presenting arguments; refuting the arguments of others; agreeing and disagreeing).
- **Foreign language engagement**
Students' efforts in using a foreign language for academic purposes.
Examples: General language skills (e.g., being able to read, listen, write, and speak); linguistic knowledge and ability (e.g., vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation); metalinguistic awareness (e.g., style, tone of voice, contextual appropriateness, cultural and regional variation); psychological aspects (e.g., foreign language anxiety, willingness to communicate).

(adapted from [1])

The manner in which these components interact depends on situational circumstances. Tasks for teaching EFL which emphasise learner self-regulation and cooperation require all of the above-mentioned engagement types. The degree of intensity of each individual engagement type and the dynamism between the various types may fluctuate during task completion.

3. Dalton pedagogy in Austria today

The pedagogical principles of the humanistic Dalton pedagogy [9] are at the basis of CoOperative Open Learning (COOL) [3], which was introduced in Austrian schools in 1996. COOL emphasises learner self-regulation and cooperation and is currently applied in 60 Austrian schools. In COOL, students receive self-study assignments, which they complete together with peers by a given submission date. The students' timetables contain fixed hours or days that are reserved for COOL. The teachers facilitate the learning processes by supporting individuals and groups at regular times and on demand. For example, a self-study day starts with guided goal-setting in the morning and ends with guided self-reflection in the afternoon. Additional support is provided in individual coaching sessions.

Coaching in a COOL context can be described as a guided self-reflection of individual students' learning performance combined with discussing future plans and prospects. The main aims of coaching are to facilitate learning and to support the personal and academic development of students. The coach takes a holistic perspective of individual students and the learning processes in which they engage. Before the coaching session, the student fills in a self-evaluation form which they then discuss together with the coach. Additionally, they can talk about any topics that appear relevant on the day of the coaching. These may include the student's evaluation of their accomplishments, contentment with the grades they received, organisational issues (e.g., keeping the learning materials in order, clarifying issues when they arise), and psychological matters (e.g., test anxiety, motivation). A coaching session in COOL may further include questions related to self-study assignments, peer cooperation, and group dynamics in the class. Towards the end of the coaching session, the coach



and the student reflect on the time that has elapsed since the previous meeting. They determine the student's improvements, successes, and remaining difficulties. Finally, they jointly investigate how the latter can be managed, which problems can be solved independently, and where the student requires the help of others.

In COOL, mistakes should be regarded as opportunities for growth and results as new beginnings [9]. Individual learner differences should be acknowledged, and learners' personal assets identified, analysed, and fostered. Suitable evaluation methods enable teachers to appreciate students' accomplishments and hence increase their motivation and engagement. Such methods include the evaluation of 1) learning *processes*, 2) the *presentation* of learning outcomes, and 3) final task *outcomes*. All assessment should be based on transparent criteria. Furthermore, students should be integrated in the evaluation of their own work and the work of peers [9].

4. The study

The central question of this paper is how teachers who apply COOL in EFL teaching perceive and enhance learner engagement. Data were collected in semi-structured interviews with three EFL teachers. The analysis of the interview data focused on expressions of learner engagement and related aspects such as the teachers' efforts to enhance learner engagement.

The findings of the study can be grouped into three clusters concerning the COOL approach, the teachers, and the learners. They indicate that

COOL ...

- places the student at the centre of learning.
- fosters a learning atmosphere that is more relaxed than in conventional EFL teaching.
- creates a learning environment in which student engagement and enjoyment are observable.
- enhances positive student-teacher relationships, which support learner engagement.
- enables teachers to offer a larger variety of topics and tasks that match student interests.
- integrates the teaching of EFL and life skills (e.g., self-regulation, time management, conscientiousness, team work).

COOL teachers ...

- care about students and about getting to know the students personally.
- perceive themselves as coaches rather than teachers.
- perceive their students as more open for conversation (both study-related and private issues) in comparison to students who do not participate in COOL.
- actively foster individual students' engagement in COOL activities.
- receive positive feedback from students implicitly and explicitly.

COOL students ...

- require time and practice to increase their efficiency in COOL.
- become increasingly efficient in completing COOL assignments.
- insist that cancelled COOL lessons be made up.

5. Discussion

The engagement of EFL learners in COOL expands across all components of academic engagement: cognitive, metacognitive, affective, social, task, communicative, and foreign language engagement. Coaching seems to contribute to learner engagement because students receive professional guidance for the continuous self-evaluation of their accomplishments, learning gains, and personal strengths as well as for the regular identification of areas for improvement, goal setting, and suitable means to achieve new goals. The teacher interviews indicate that COOL students experience the life-skills they acquire as sustainably useful. Taking responsibility for the learning processes, cooperating with peers, and studying in a relaxed atmosphere seem to increase students' enjoyment in EFL learning. This enjoyment seems to reinforce a positive cycle of strengthened learner motivation and engagement



that contribute to pleasant peer cooperation, which leads to learning success and consequently more enjoyment. Positive student-teacher relationships, which were confirmed by all three interviewees and evidenced by frank conversations about school-related and private issues, seem to be reinforcing this cycle further. The relationships as well as the teachers' increased flexibility and creativity regarding lesson topics and task formats also seem to positively affect the teachers' motivation, which again seems to have positive ramifications on the academic engagement of students in COOL.

6. Conclusions

Overall, it appears that COOL is a teaching approach that both teachers and learners enjoy implementing. The teaching approach itself as well as the teachers' actions seem to be pivotal for increased academic engagement in COOL. It appears that there exist strong connections between learner engagement and motivation as well as between learner engagement and learning strategies, both of which require further research. More research is also needed to determine how teachers' perception of COOL informs their own agency and thus performance in the classroom as well as student-teacher interaction.

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