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Multi-Dimensional Classroom Engagement in EFL Contexts

Abstract: This study seeks to extend our present knowledge of language learners' classroom engagement by exploring the relationship between the multi-dimensional classroom engagement and the group variables: course achievement, course absence and motivational orientation to learn English. A survey research design was adopted, and 122 EFL learners provided insights into the factors related to their multi-dimensional classroom engagement. ANOVA analyses were conducted to display group differences. The results indicated that EFL learners had an average level of classroom engagement in terms of four dimensions of the engagement and their engagement dimensions had distinct characteristics with respect to the group variables. The results showed that the students having a higher course achievement, higher attendance, and intrinsic motivation to learn English had a significantly higher classroom engagement than the learners with lower means on these variables. The study with its insights about the influential factors related to classroom engagement is important for the language teachers aiming to contribute to EFL achievement in their teaching contexts.

Keywords: Absence; achievement; intrinsic motivation; multi-dimensional classroom engagement.

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Introduction

Engagement is a buzzword being used alongside labels such as student, classroom, or course engagement in the educational research domain. Though much research about engagement exists in the literature, there is little evidence about what it means and how many underlying constructs it has. Then it remains an ambiguous term in the literature. The only consensus about the engagement is its significant role in effective learning. Considering the importance of engagement for effective lifelong learning and the little research in the field of English as a foreign language (EFL), the present study deals with the issue of engagement in detail by accepting it as a multi-dimensional construct (i.e., behavioral, emotional, cognitive and agentic engagement). By defining each construct and their characteristics in the frame of language teaching, this study researches the relationships between engagement and the variables such as course achievement, attendance and orientation to learn English. In the study, the term "classroom engagement" will be used to indicate different names such as student engagement, course engagement, etc.

Literature Review

Engagement reminds a romantic relationship in a general sense. Within the analogy of engaging two lovers for a long-lasting relationship, engagement looks like engaging the learners with course activities in the educational domain. Within the metaphor of engagement and romance, educators and teachers try to find ways to have foreign language learners engage in English language learning process and to play a matchmaker role in this engagement and long-term relationship.

It is hard to define the concept of 'engagement' in the education domain as there is not a consensus about the names and types of – engagement (Harris, 2008). In the literature, one can meet names such as academic, student, classroom, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, psychological, emotional, institutional, intellectual (engagement) and so on (Dinçer, 2014; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). In spite of the higher number of types and definitions, each type or definition is just one of the windows of a big building in reality. Then each type or description just focuses on a part of a whole construct. The easiest way of defining the construct may be to focus on the similarities which the literature has a general agreement on (Harris, 2008). Whatever its definition or type is, engagement is associated with student achievement, positive behaviors, a sense of belonging to an intended topic, and life-long learning (Taylor & Parsons, 2011).

According to the recent studies of engagement and the academicians (see for a review Reeve, 2012), instead of handling engagement as a simple construct having

one dimension, accepting the engagement as a multi-dimensional construct will be much more rational and helpful in understanding what counts as student engagement. The previous studies take two-dimensional, three-dimensional models of engagement including behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement. The most recent engagement research divides engagement into four sub-dimensions. According to Reeve (2012), behavioral engagement is related to putting effort and high task persistence; emotional engagement is about affective reactions and emotions; cognitive engagement comprises self-regulatory strategies; agentic engagement is about proactive, intentional and constructive contributions during a learning activity.

These dimensions have important roles in impacting classroom engagement and they are not the product of one or another. Instead, they play a cumulative role in the learners' learning process (Lin, 2012; Reeve, 2012; Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2008). In the language learning field, most of the studies accept the engagement as a one-dimensional construct and use participation, attendance and involvement interchangeably. These studies take the engagement as an outcome variable and disregard emotional, cognitive and agentic issues (see for a review Dinçer, 2014). Also, there is less research about the multi-dimensional construct; this study investigates classroom engagement within four sub-types to deepen our present knowledge. It researches whether there are group differences regarding students' achievement, course attendance and their motivational intensity to learn English.

Research question

This study seeks to answer the following research question:

“Do differences exist between EFL learners regarding their course achievement, absence rate and motivational orientation to learn English in multi-dimensional classroom engagement?”

Methodology

In this part, the research methodology was detailed under subheadings.

Research design

A cross-sectional survey design was employed in the study. The ultimate goal of a survey research is to collect generalizable quantitative data about a large population by studying the characteristics of a sample group of the population. In addition, as the most popular form of survey research, a cross-sectional design

which is about collecting data at one time (Rea & Parker, 2014) was conducted for the aim.

Participants

122 (*male* = 27, *female* = 95) adult EFL learners from the faculty of education of a Turkish state university participated in the study. Their departments are primary education (*n* = 27), elementary mathematics education (*n* = 26), and psychological counseling education (*n* = 69). Their age ranges from 18 to 22 and the mean is 19.38 (*SD* = 1.20).

Data collection instruments

The data were collected with a self-report questionnaire including items related to the students' last English exam score, the number of absences and motivation, and also a multi-dimensional classroom engagement scale.

After giving demographic details, the learners wrote their exam score which is between 0 and 100. This exam was a multiple choice test corresponding to A1-A2 level English proficiency. Students' scores were categorized as Low (1–49), Medium (50–74) and High (75–100). Students rated their course absence number in the classroom. They have the right to a maximum of nine hours of absences according to the regulation. Having ten or more absences indicates that student will fail the course. A range from 1 (0), 2 (1–3), 3 (4–6), to 4 (7–9) was used for the students' course attendance. The learners marked their motivational orientation to learn English and it was categorized as extrinsic or intrinsic motivation. While the reasons for participation such as “getting marks”, “it is a must” were extrinsic, the reasons such as “because I love this course”, “I want to be superior in English proficiency” were accepted as intrinsic motivation.

The classroom engagement scale was a combination of different scales related to the engagement variable. It was a five-item Likert-type scale which was answered by rating from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In the study, a four-dimensional typology of the engagement (Reeve & Tseng, 2011) was adopted and the Turkish version of the scale (Dinçer, 2014) was used. The details about the reliability of the scale are as follows: Behavioral engagement with three items has $\alpha = .81$; Emotional engagement with five items has $\alpha = .89$; Cognitive engagement with five items has $\alpha = .89$; Agentic engagement with four items has $\alpha = .84$.

Data collection and analysis

The data were collected during the second semester of the 2013–14 academic year from EFL learners at one time and the students' voluntary participation in the study was encouraged. The application lasted about ten minutes.

After the data collection, the data were transferred into the computer and analyzed with SPSS 20.00. ANOVA analyses were conducted to determine if any differences exist among the groups in the sub-dimensions of engagement. Tukey HSD posthoc tests were run to determine the mean differences. The results were presented in tables.

Results

In this section, answers were given to the research question. In the first step, to gather a general view, descriptive findings were computed and then group differences were presented in order.

Descriptives

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationships between the sub-dimensions and the relevance of the types of engagement according to the theoretical frame.

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Matrix of the Types of Engagement

Engagement Types	1	2	3	4	M	SD
1. Behavioral	—				3.57	.92
2. Emotional	.65**	—			3.79	1.06
3. Agentic	.39**	.52**	—		2.99	1.13
4. Cognitive	.46**	.62**	.57**	—	3.80	.94

** . Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

The mean of all engagement items is 3.54 ($SD = .82$) and almost all engagement types have high means ($M > 3$; 3 = Moderately Agree). It seems that the students agree with the engagement items and they show a higher agreement rate in emotional and cognitive engagement items.

The Pearson correlation matrix showed that all engagement types were positively correlated to each other (e.g. behavioral vs. emotional: $r = .646$, $n = 122$, $p = .000$; Agentic vs. Cognitive: $r = .567$, $n = 122$, $p = .000$). There are strong positive correlations between sub-dimensions of engagement (behavioral, emotional,

agentic and cognitive) ($p < .01$). This finding verifies the theory and indicates that each type of the engagement is a part of a whole construct.

The findings for the research question

a) *Course achievement*: The table showed that classroom engagement changes according to the achievement. There are significant meaningful differences among the groups' scores (respectively behavioral $F(2, 119) = 10.46$, $p < .001$; emotional $F(2, 119) = 22.64$, $p < .001$; agentic $F(2, 119) = 7.86$, $p \leq .001$; cognitive $F(2, 119) = 13.12$, $p < .001$).

Table 2: ANOVA Results for Variables According to Achievement

Variables		SS	df	MS	F	p	Difference
1. Behavioral	B. Groups	15.344	2	7.672	10.463	.000	1-2, 1-3, 2-3
	W. Groups	87.254	119	.733			
	Total	102.597	121				
2. Emotional	B. Groups	37.201	2	18.600	22.636	.000	1-2, 1-3, 2-3
	W. Groups	97.783	119	.822			
	Total	134.984	121				
3. Agentic	B. Groups	18.044	2	9.022	7.863	.001	1-3
	W. Groups	136.540	119	1.147			
	Total	154.584	121				
4. Cognitive	B. Groups	19.123	2	9.561	13.117	.000	1-3, 2-3
	W. Groups	86.744	119	.729			
	Total	105.867	121				

The groups were compared to each other with the Tukey test in the Multiple Comparisons table.

Table 3: Descriptives for ANOVA According to Achievement

Group	Sub-group	n	M	SD
1. Behavioral	1. Low	15	2.93	.94
	2. Medium	41	3.30	.81
	3. High	66	3.88	.86
	Total	122	3.57	.92

Group	Sub-group	n	M	SD
2. Emotional	1. Low	15	2.60	.92
	2. Medium	41	3.51	.89
	3. High	66	4.23	.91
	Total	122	3.79	1.06
3. Agentic	1. Low	15	2.09	.80
	2. Medium	41	2.86	.99
	3. High	66	3.27	1.17
	Total	122	2.99	1.13
4. Cognitive	1. Low	15	2.77	.67
	2. Medium	41	3.84	.92
	3. High	66	4.02	.85
	Total	122	3.80	.94

The test results indicated that the groups' means significantly differed in the components of engagement.

b) *Course absence rate*: Table 4 shows that classroom engagement significantly differed according to the absence rate (respectively behavioral $F(3, 118) = 4.21$, $p < .05$; emotional $F(3, 118) = 7.02$, $p < .05$; agentic $F(3, 118) = 2.94$, $p < .05$; cognitive $F(3, 118) = 4.41$, $p < .05$).

Table 4: ANOVA Results for Variables According to Absence Rate

Variables		SS	df	MS	F	p	Difference
1. Behavioral	B. Groups	9.910	3	3.303	4.206	.007	1-4, 2-4
	W. Groups	92.687	118	.785			
	Total	102.597	121				
2. Emotional	B. Groups	20.430	3	6.810	7.015	.000	1-4, 2-4
	W. Groups	114.554	118	.971			
	Total	134.984	121				
3. Agentic	B. Groups	10.734	3	3.578	2.935	.036	-
	W. Groups	143.850	118	1.219			
	Total	154.584	121				
4. Cognitive	B. Groups	10.661	3	3.554	4.405	.006	1-2, 2-4
	W. Groups	95.206	118	.807			
	Total	105.867	121				

Means of each group in each component of engagement are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Descriptives for ANOVA According to Absence Rate

Group	Sub-group	n	M	SD
1. Behavioral	1. (0)	29	3.83	.90
	2. (1-3)	68	3.64	.86
	3. (4-6)	14	3.31	.79
	4. (7-9)	11	2.79	1.11
	Total	122	3.57	.92
2. Emotional	1. (0)	29	3.86	1.04
	2. (1-3)	68	4.01	.95
	3. (4-6)	14	3.49	.92
	4. (7-9)	11	2.60	1.13
	Total	122	3.79	1.06
3. Agentic	1. (0)	29	2.63	1.23
	2. (1-3)	68	3.25	1.07
	3. (4-6)	14	2.81	.93
	4. (7-9)	11	2.56	1.16
	Total	122	2.99	1.13
4. Cognitive	1. (0)	29	3.51	.88
	2. (1-3)	68	4.04	.85
	3. (4-6)	14	3.73	.82
	4. (7-9)	11	3.18	1.28
	Total	122	3.80	.94

Three components of engagement significantly varied according to the number of course absences, but not the agentic engagement.

c) *Motivational orientation to learn English*: There are significant meaningful differences among the groups' scores (respectively behavioral $F(1, 120) = 16.48$, $p < .001$; emotional $F(1, 120) = 29.26$, $p < .001$; agentic $F(1, 120) = 16.07$, $p < .001$; cognitive $F(1, 120) = 14.60$, $p < .001$).

Table 6: ANOVA Results for Variables According to Motivational Orientation

Variables		SS	df	MS	F	p	Difference
1. Behavioral	B. Groups	12.385	1	12.385	16.474	.000	1-2
	W. Groups	90.213	120	.752			
	Total	102.597	121				

Variables		SS	df	MS	F	p	Difference
2. Emotional	B. Groups	26.458	1	26.458	29.255	.000	1-2
	W. Groups	108.526	120	.904			
	Total	134.984	121				
3. Agentic	B. Groups	18.256	1	18.256	16.069	.000	1-2
	W. Groups	136.328	120	1.136			
	Total	154.584	121				
4. Cognitive	B. Groups	11.478	1	11.478	14.592	.000	1-2
	W. Groups	94.389	120	.787			
	Total	105.867	121				

The mean scores of each group are shown in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Descriptives for ANOVA According to Motivational Orientation

Group	Sub-group	n	M	SD
1. Behavioral	1. Extrinsic	57	3.23	.90
	2. Intrinsic	65	3.87	.84
	Total	122	3.57	.92
2. Emotional	1. Extrinsic	57	3.29	1.03
	2. Intrinsic	65	4.22	.88
	Total	122	3.79	1.06
3. Agentic	1. Extrinsic	57	2.58	1.06
	2. Intrinsic	65	3.35	1.07
	Total	122	2.99	1.13
4. Cognitive	1. Extrinsic	57	3.47	1.00
	2. Intrinsic	65	4.09	.78
	Total	122	3.80	.94

Analyses for the research question showed that there were significant differences in mean scores according to groups based on achievement, absence rate and motivational orientation. The learners with higher course achievement based on their last midterm scores significantly overlapped with the classroom engagement items in the English course compared to the groups having a medium and low level of achievement ($p < .001$). The scores of the learners with high scores in the English course were significantly different from and higher than the other learners. This finding verifies that the students who are more engaged in the course are also the ones who are successful in the English course. The achievement scores change according to the rate of course engagement. Successful learners try to engage in

the course. According to the course absence rate, the group means of engagement, except for agentic engagement, significantly differed and the means changed according to the course attendance ($p < .05$). The learners who had no or one to three hours of absences have higher means than the students with more numbers of absences. In other words, those who try to at least physically attend the course have agreed with the engagement items and they are the ones who are more behaviorally, emotionally and cognitively engaged. Regarding the learners' motivational orientation, the learners with an intrinsic orientation to learn English have significantly higher mean scores than the learners with extrinsic orientations ($p < .001$). In other words, when the learners engage in the course with pleasure or excitement, they become behaviorally, emotionally, agentic and cognitively more engaged learners when compared to the learners engaging in the course for the external factors, like passing the course or to fulfill compulsory attendance.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to investigate possible group differences in terms of four components of classroom engagement in EFL settings to deepen our understanding of EFL learners' classroom engagement. The descriptive findings of the study showed that EFL learners agreed with all engagement items with a mean higher than 3.50 and they relatively have high scores in each engagement type. In other words, the learners try to follow the instructor, pay attention to the topics, feel good, enjoy learning, express their feelings and preferences, ask questions during the course and use some cognitive strategies in learning English like connecting the present knowledge with former, summarizing in their own words, etc.

The findings of the study showed that the learners' engagement dimensions had distinct characteristics on the group variables. In general, the learners with higher course achievement, attendance rates and intrinsic motivation to learn English had statistically significantly higher scores than the students having lower scores on these variables. The findings are in line with literature revealing that engagement, achievement, attendance and motivation are closely related to each other (Beran & Violato, 2009; Dinçer, 2014; Lin, 2012; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). As Beran and Violato (2009) found, the students with frequent attendance rate, high-grade expectations, motivation and interest in the course showed positive outcomes and a high rate of engagement. The motivated learners are likely to attend the course more and skip the course less. Engaged students are those who ask, answer questions, discuss, share, evaluate, apply knowledge and develop mastery in their learning (Beran & Violato, 2009).

However, it should be noted that though the analyses yielded significant mean differences regarding the sub-dimensions of engagement, the learners' agentic engagement scores were relatively low in all groups compared to the other engagement types. Particularly in the analyses of attendance rate, the agentic scores did not differ in groups and had a very low mean in both the groups of high and low attendance rate. This result may be related to the course atmosphere. According to Reeve (2012), a lack of student agency is associated with an autonomy-suppressive atmosphere, in other words, controlling the style in which the teacher gives less of an opportunity to ask questions, express opinions freely and pursue personal interest.

In sum, the results are important for gaining insights about the influential factors related to classroom engagement and helpful for the language teachers aiming to increase learners' classroom engagement. Classroom engagement is a fertile research topic and there is less definitive research about what engages students in learning and much empirical research is needed on this topic (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). As Youth and Studer (2004) say, a school context can increase the engagement in learning to some degree but for the highest level of engagement, some other elements such as family, community, and peers in the settings should be investigated as they have an influential role in learning. It should be noted that this quantitative study has some limitations such as limited participants in the groups and the research design. However, it provides insights into our present knowledge and raises some questions in need of answers in the literature of foreign language engagement considering the agentic engagement. Therefore, it would be much better to analyze the EFL contexts which are problematic in many countries in views of student achievement, course engagement, dropout rates, etc. in a detailed way. Then, the reasons for low ratings of the students regarding agentic engagement in English context should be investigated with mixed-method research designs and more empirical studies. Self-report rating of agentic engagement also can be fortified with the observation of classroom applications, too.

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This book is an outcome of the 9th ELT Research Conference organised by Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University. The papers in this volume illustrate some of the key research interests and priorities for English language teaching in Turkey and provide significant insights into a range of contemporary issues and practices in the field. The papers present research focusing on issues in the areas of technology, learners, teacher training and post-graduate education, which have been gathered together in four sections, each section containing articles covering several different aspects of the topic in question.

The Editor

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