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Personal and social facilitators of student engagement: transition into higher education

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Facilitating student engagement at all levels of higher education is critical, but since transition-year experiences pave the way for further engagement, it requires more attention. Considering its significance and impact on students' life–changing decisions and attitudes, this study was designed with a major focus on the personal and social facilitators of engagement. It was conducted with 165 university students, who were both language learners and the transition- year students. In line with a theoretical model, how well personal facilitators would predict the performance of transition-year students and what expectations these students held concerning social facilitators were questioned. The former investigation required the correlational method, whereas the descriptive survey method was preferred for the latter one. The results of analyses indicated that the theory partly validated the significance of personal facilitators, whereas it provided evidence for the facilitative role of social facilitators for transitional year student engagement. Therefore, it was concluded that the more responsive the schools and teachers are to student needs, the more likely students feel engaged.

KEYWORDS

student engagement, higher education, transition-year experiences, personal facilitators, social facilitators

Introduction

In addition to its general description as active involvement in school tasks/activities (Fredericks et al., 2004; Appleton et al., 2006), from a social-psychological lens, student engagement is interpreted as "the conceptual glue that connects student agency (including students' prior knowledge, experience, and interest at school, home, and in the community) and its ecological influences (peers, family, and community) to the organizational structures and cultures of school" (Lawson and Lawson, 2013, p. 433). Both historically and currently, it is approached as a way to reduce the risks of low achievement, student alienation, and school dropouts, and its contribution to educational outcomes has been proven by research (Finn, 1989; Connell and Wellborn, 1991; Appleton et al., 2006; Skinner and Pitzer, 2012).

In today's educational understanding, the concept has an inclusive and comprehensive nature; however, when its historical roots are investigated, it becomes evident that engagement was initially perceived as an essential educational experience only for marginal students to be more connected to school life. Based on the results of his previous longitudinal study on college dropouts, Astin (1984) generated the first discussions.

In his student involvement theory, he suggested that the energy devoted by students to academic experiences requires more attention than resources or teaching techniques and warned administrators and faculty members against possible dropouts unless student involvement was accomplished. A few years later, Finn (1989) proposed an engagement model entitled the participation-identification model, where attention was given to the impact of behavior (participation)–affect (identification) interaction on academic achievement. Encouraged by the same purpose, Connell and Wellborn (1991) introduced the self-system process model and shifted the focus to the development of positive self-systems for student engagement. Similarly, in 1995, to be part of the solution, University of Minnesota, USA developed an intervention program called Check and Connect for the marginalized students.

With the school reform program of National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2004), student engagement became a requirement for all students. The extension of support to all groups inspired many researchers, including Appleton et al. (2006) and Martin (2007). Appleton et al. (2006) referred to engagement as a meta-construct with four sub-dimensions (academic, behavioral, cognitive, psychological), whereas in the motivational model of Martin (2007), its components were categorized as (mal)adaptive cognition and (mal)adaptive behavior. Similar to Martin (2007), Skinner et al. (2008) approached engagement from a motivational perspective. In their self-system model, they underlined the fact that the components of engagement were not independent of one another; instead, contextual factors (teacher support) and student self-perceptions (competence, autonomy, relatedness) were strongly related. However, since the cognitive dimension of engagement suffered neglect, Skinner and Pitzer (2012) felt a need to revise the model and republish it. Focusing more on the antecedents (structural and psychosocial influences) and consequences (academic and social) of student engagement, Kahu (2013) aimed to contribute to the engagement literature with a conceptual framework. Feeling a need to add an educational interface to this framework, Kahu and Nelson (2018) refined their perspective by suggesting that student engagement results from the dynamic interaction between students and institutional practices, making the significant partnership role of higher education more apparent. In Trowler et al. (2021) published a paper in which they both complemented and contrasted the ideas of Kahu and Nelson (2018). Building on the researchers' student engagement perspective, Trowler et al. (2021) have proposed a more comprehensive conceptual framework. In their theoretical model, they not only underlined the significance and necessity of the replacement of "engagement interface" with "educational interface" but found it essential to differentiate engagement in compulsory education from higher education contexts for practical purposes.

As could be seen, the scope of the engagement concept was initially narrow. However, thanks to various contributory discussions and complementary attempts in theorizing the concept, the level of significance given as well as the meaning attributed to student engagement has mostly changed and such a shift has been felt in all educational arenas, including the post-secondary institutions.

Similar to the other education cycles, this re-established framework has brought a world of both opportunities and challenges to higher education contexts. There is no doubt that student engagement has evolved into a concept compatible with current higher education aims, needs and dynamics. The expansion of the scope from marginals to wider social contexts has made it possible to foster student engagement at different levels of higher education ecosystem (i.e., micro, meso, macro) with reference to psychological, psycho-social, socio-cultural, or socio-political perspectives (Zepke, 2021). Moreover, since it is no longer confined to quality learning and teaching in the classrooms, its new scope has created new opportunities to reach various educational settings (Zepke, 2015).

However, as every change presents new challenges, all these developments bring new points to consider. First, in order to address current higher education goals and needs, the impact of student engagement has to extend beyond university education, which requires the revision of long-term goals. Although the major aim of student engagement is to offer students pathways to be a more engaged and effective individual with better educational outcomes, nurturing engagement as a habit of mind for post-university life (Lawson and Lawson, 2013) is one of today's most significant higher education policies. Most importantly, as successful transition-year experiences pave the way for further engagement, the transition-year students require more special attention.

Of all these challenges, this study specifically focuses on the final need and aims to provide insights for transitional year experiences. Needless to say, as also highlighted by Schreiner et al. (2020), each kind of transition contributes to growth, yet it brings change from familiar to unknown as well. Therefore, although mostly perceived as a linear process, the transition from school to university is multidimensional in nature (Money et al., 2020). As stated by Skinner and Pitzer (2012), students enter this new context with their psychological needs, and this environment welcomes them with new academic and social challenges (Cleary et al., 2011). More importantly, when the transition year is spent for a specific purpose, the scope of the challenge widens. For instance, in some countries including the research context of this study, if the medium of instruction at a university is different from the official language, students are obliged to satisfy language proficiency requirement to be permitted to take department/faculty courses. Unless they meet the requirement, they are supposed to get language education for at least one semester. At first glance, learning a language seems to be the primary challenge. However, as stated by Norton (2013), language learning is a socio-cultural practice, and the difficulty stems from the fact that a language learning process inevitably paves the way for an identity transformation. Therefore, students in this group go through an enculturation process both as a newcomer to university and a foreign language learner. If successfully completed, such transitions will certainly help students make the most of their education; however, unless the opportunities are perceived as positive experiences or healthy coping skills are developed, transitions might negatively alter student responses (Schreiner et al., 2020).

To understand students' transition year (first-year) experiences, researchers have conducted various studies (Meehan and Howells, 2018). Some are mainly concerned about the engagement of international students (Darmody et al., 2022), while some focus on the experiences and challenges regarding the transition from face-to-face to online education (Basdogan and Birdwell, 2023).

When it comes to language education, the proven impact of student engagement has attracted the attention of researchers in applied linguistics as well (Dörnyei, 2019). However, more extensive research embodying these two is still needed. Moreover, several researchers in second language education have proposed exemplary initiatives to reduce educational risks (e.g., Norton, 2008; Svalberg, 2009), yet despite the emphasis in second language classrooms, it has not been adequately investigated in foreign language education settings (Taylor et al., 2013). Also, a group of studies concentrated on either the indicators of engagement or the possible relationship of indicators with the outcomes, so extending knowledge on the facilitators of engagement is still essential.

To address these gaps and needs, this research has been designed and carried out for the doctoral dissertation[1] by being aware of the significance and necessity of student engagement for transition-year students and keeping its dynamic, contextual, and discipline specific nature in mind (Leach, 2016). Therefore, the study particularly aims to understand: (1) How well do personal facilitators of engagement (*sense of belongingness*, *self-efficacy*, *language learning strategy use*, *language learning autonomy*) predict the performance of transition-year students (English language learners) in the (TOEFL ITP) exam, controlling for the student status (new vs. repeat student) and the number of (TOEFL ITP) exam taken after university enrolment?; (2) What are the expectations of the transition-year students (English language learners) concerning social facilitators of engagement (*teacher and school practices*)?

To find accurate answers to these research questions, the transactional model of Skinner and Pitzer (2012), who successfully combined a psychological perspective with a socio-ecological lens, was adopted as the theoretical framework. Grounded upon the principles of the self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (1985), the model asserts that learners are born with three basic needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, and they have inner motivational resources to meet these needs. If these inherent capacities are promoted in appropriate contexts, the students are more likely to feel engaged and less likely to experience negative educational outcomes such as disaffection, decrease in motivation, alienation, poor academic performance, course withdrawals, school dropouts, or life-long resistance to learning. In the model, engagement is referred as a multi-dimensional construct embodying behavior, emotion, and cognitive orientation. It is believed to exist in multiple levels starting from learning activities and to pro-social institutions. It has a dynamic nature shaped with the interactions between context, self, action, and outcomes. The realization of engagement depends on the quality of social interactions in healthy contexts. If built properly, they help facilitate student self-perceptions, which is mostly understood through consistency checks with the expected indicators and outcomes.

Of all these components, this study has limited its scope to the social and personal facilitators of engagement. Need-supporting teacher practices (pedagogical caring and provision of structure) and school practices (organizing extracurricular activities such as clubs and seminars, creating peripheral learning opportunities, and having language resource centers) are approached as social facilitators, whereas learners' sense of belonging, competence, and autonomy are investigated under the title of personal facilitators. Additionally and different from the model, language strategy use has been added as the fourth personal facilitator.

In the theoretical model of Skinner and Pitzer (2012), need-supporting teacher practices are regarded as social facilitators of engagement. In the contexts where teachers prioritize *pedagogical caring*, it is more likely for students to develop positive self-perceptions, build a stronger sense of belonging, feel engaged, and become academically successful. According to the researchers, if teachers are familiar with student interests and traits, become a good role model, be attentive to student concerns and needs, promote mutual understanding, and openly show their care, this will facilitate student engagement and learning (Noddings, 1992; Skinner and Pitzer, 2012; Fredericks, 2014).

Another teacher practice highlighted in the framework is the *provision of structure*, which is as essential as pedagogical caring for student engagement. While teachers' caring attitude has positive impact on learners' sense of belonging, optimal structure helps promote competency feelings (Reeve, 2008). When teachers inform students about the expectations, give constructive feedback about their progress, and guide them about what to do for better learning outcomes, students are more likely to feel safe, competent and engaged as they are familiar with all aspects of the structure they are in.

In addition to teacher practices, school (out-of-class learning) practices are believed to create opportunities for supportive social interactions, help develop better self-perceptions, and facilitate student engagement as well (Skinner and Pitzer, 2012). In the theoretical model, it is emphasized that learning should not be confined to the classrooms; instead, students should be guided into social interactions such as academics, sports or extracurricular activities. Based on this perspective, organizing extracurricular activities (clubs and seminars), creating peripheral learning opportunities, and having language resource centers are added to the research under the title of school practices.

When it comes to the personal facilitators of engagement, in line with the theoretical model, this study draws attention to three basic personal needs: sense of belonging (relatedness), competency, and autonomy. In addition to these, considering the nature of language learning, language strategy use has been added to the study as the fourth personal facilitator.

Sense of belonging is the personal facilitator of affective engagement and refers to the feelings which students develop toward the educational contexts and communities they are in. Similar to various researchers (e.g., Finn, 1989; Voelkl, 2012), Skinner and Pitzer (2012) emphasize the fact that this sense helps develop positive emotions and acts as a catalyst for student engagement. It is particularly important when it comes to critical issues such as alienation or dropouts.

Perceived self-efficacy (sense of competency) is another personal engagement facilitator integrated into the current study. As the facilitator of cognitive engagement, it is a significant component of a person's self-belief system (Bandura, 1994; Skinner and Pitzer, 2012). In the existence of strong self-efficacy, the individuals perceive even the difficult tasks as opportunities to learn, feel motivated when they are challenged, persist in the face of

1 The link for the dissertation: http://etd.lib.metu.edu.tr/upload/12624186/index.pdf

TABLE 1 Description of study participants.

	f	%
Gender		
Female	94	57
Male	71	43
Student status		
Repeat	46	27.9
New	119	72.1
# of TOEFL ITP taken		
2	68	41.2
3	76	46.1
4	13	7.9
5	8	4.8

difficulties, and apply self-reflection as a habit of mind (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Schunk and Mullen, 2012).

Of three basic needs, similar to self-efficacy, *autonomy* is believed to engage students cognitively. Approached as a domain-free construct, it is defined as the capacity to take the responsibility of one's learning (Holec, 1981). Skinner and Pitzer (2012) claim that people are born with an innate need to act autonomously. If this need is met in educational contexts, students will have more positive self-perceptions, feel more engaged, and experience better achievements.

And as the final personal facilitator, this study integrates *language learning strategy use* as the facilitator of cognitive engagement. The construct refers to thoughts and actions consciously selected by learners to complete language tasks (Cohen, 2011). According to research (e.g., Weinstein and Mayer, 1986; Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2003), students using deep processing strategies are more likely to be cognitively engaged. Since the participants of this study are both transition year students and language learners, this facilitator is included as the representative of engagement in a specific discipline, namely, language learning.

Materials and methods

Research setting and participants

The target population of the study is all the transition-year university students, and the accessible population was those studying at the language school of a university in Türkiye.

From this higher education institution, 165 transition-year students contributed to the research and their profile is presented in **Table 1**.

The sample size was checked for its adequateness through the formula $N > 50 + 8$ k, where k stands for the number of predictors (Green, 1991). As the study had twelve predictors and the sample size calculated was $N > 146$, the number of the participants was found appropriate for the design of the study.

While determining the research setting and the participants, convenience sampling method was utilized. Although this non-probability sampling technique has some limitations, it was selected purposefully due to the advantages it brings to the data collection process. To begin with, various higher education institutions were contacted with an important criterion in mind, which was about the language proficiency test. Unfortunately, a great majority of them were applying home-grown language tests and were unable to present validity and reliability scores of these tests. However, this institution was administering the TOEFL ITP test under the authority of the ETS (Educational Testing Service). Benefiting from this institutional policy, this university as well as the participants were selected conveniently.

At this university, it is compulsory for all students to get the score of 500 (or above) on the TOEFL ITP test to be permitted to take the faculty/department courses. The ones who satisfy the language requirement become eligible to enter the department, while those failing to get the required score are placed into different levels at the language preparatory school. If a student is unable to pass the test in the first year, they repeat the program in the second year. As a result of these policies, the transition-year students differ from each other in terms of student status and/or exam experience, which was also observed among the participants of the current study.

Design of the study

The methodological approach adopted in the present study essentially included four major stages. Initially, the related literature was reviewed to identify the current knowledge and previous research studies on student engagement perspectives and the role of student engagement in higher education. The close analysis pointed at a need for a socio-ecological investigation into the facilitators of engagement for transition-year university students. The model of Skinner and Pitzer (2012) was preferred as the theoretical map. However, in line with the research purposes, only the components focusing on the facilitators of engagement were included into the study. The framework determination was followed with the context and the participant selection. One hundred sixty-five students were asked to contribute to the research by responding to six different instruments. Finally, the results were analyzed with the aim of identifying personal and social facilitators essential for the first-year students, specifically those getting foreign language education.

To gain better perspectives on the phenomenon, the multi-method concurrent research design was preferred for the current study. In this method, two (or more) quantitative or qualitative research methods are used in single research (Hunter and Brewer, 2015). It requires the concurrent collection of (at least two) separate data sets and separate analysis plans (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015).

In this study, two quantitative research methods were used, and two research questions were addressed. For the first research purpose, since the aim was to understand the relationships among some variables without any intervention, the principles of correlational method were followed (Jackson, 2014). Concurrently, the expectations of the participants about language teacher and school practices were gathered and the descriptive survey design was adopted to "describe behaviors and gather people's perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and beliefs about a current issue in education" (Lodico et al., 2006, p. 12).

TABLE 2 Exploratory factor analyses results.

Instruments	Factors	Reliability scores for each factor	Factor loadings (min-max)
Sense of University Belonging Scale	F1: Perceived pedagogical caring (4 items)	F1: 0.77	0.61 → 0.72
	F2: Identification with university (3 items)	F2: 0.74	−0.58 → −0.97
English self-efficacy scale	F1: Self-efficacy for receptive skills (12 items)	F1: 0.89	0.30 → 0.85
	F2: Self-efficacy for productive skills (9 items)	F2: 0.88	−0.34 → −0.89
Language learner autonomy scale	F1: Taking responsibility of language learning (17 items)	F1: 0.90	0.41 → 0.80
	F2: Associating the language with real life (5 items)	F2: 0.81	0.56 → 0.74
	F3: Taking part in language learning activities out of school (6 items)	F3: 0.78	0.44 → 0.74
Language learning strategy use scale	F1: Planning and organizing the language learning process (5 items)	F1: 0.80	0.50 → 0.78
	F2: Monitoring the language learning process (5 items)	F2: 0.82	0.62 → 0.75
	F3: Elaborating on new knowledge (3 items)	F3: 0.75	−0.50 → −0.73
Teaching practices questionnaire	F1: Pedagogical caring (20 items)	F1: 0.94	0.48 → 0.79
	F2: Provision of structure (12 items)	F2: 0.92	0.48 → 0.89
School practices questionnaire	F1: Organizing extra-curricular activities (clubs) (6 items)	F1: 0.85	0.43 → 0.88
	F2: Organizing extra-curricular activities (seminars) (5 items)	F2: 0.91	−0.70 → −0.86
	F3: Creating peripheral learning opportunities (5 items)	F3: 0.85	0.30 → 0.86
	F4: Having language resource centers (3 items)	F4: 0.72	0.37 → 0.76

Data collection instruments

To collect data for the first research purpose, participants were asked to respond to (a) Sense of University Belonging Scale adapted from Freeman, Freeman et al. (2007) by Capa-Aydin (2011), (b) English Self-Efficacy Scale adapted from Wang et al. (2012) by Açıkel (2011), (c) Language Learner Autonomy Scale developed by Ozturk (2007), and (d) Language Learning Strategy Use Scale developed by the researcher for the current study.

For the second research question, two questionnaires were designed. The first tool was developed after a close investigation of the facilitative role of teachers in both previous research and teacher evaluation forms such as National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Türkiye by The Council of Higher Education (2024),[2] and Teacher Self-Assessment Rubric shared on the website of National Council of Teacher Quality (2023).[3] By the help of this questionnaire, students' opinions regarding the role of need-supporting language teacher practices (provision of structure and pedagogical caring) on the promotion of their engagement were gathered. The second questionnaire aimed to understand student expectations about language school practices that were likely to foster engagement. The participants were presented some practices and asked to express their opinions. In addition to all these data, the TOEFL ITP exam scores of the participants were secured as the indicator of their language proficiency and outcome of their engagement.

To ensure validity and reliability, all instruments were piloted with 420 students from the same language school, and the alpha level was set 0.05 for all analyses. The examination of the correlation between items in each scale pointed at values above 0.30 (Hair et al., 2006), and the results of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity confirmed the correlation among items. Besides, univariate normality was validated as the Skewness and Kurtosis values were between the critical values (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). However, the significant Mardia's test value ($p > 0.5$) pointed at a violation for the multivariate normality assumption, creating a need for Principal Axis Factor Analysis technique with direct oblimin rotation. After these assumption checks, the exploratory factor analyses were computed. Since the results highlighted a necessity for modifications in some items, considering the factor structure and the related literature, some changes were made (e.g., the transfer of the item #23—*being able to understand new lessons in the English book* from the factor self-efficacy for productive skills to self-efficacy for receptive skills), all tools were improved, and the instruments were prepared for the real administration. The final factor structure of each instrument, factor reliability scores, and factor loadings are presented in **Table 2**.

Data collection procedures and data analyses

Before the main data collection process, the instruments were approved by the Ethics Committee and the official permission was taken from the institution where the research would take place.[4] Due to the number of the instruments, the main data collection was carried out in two sittings, each of which lasted about 20 min. Each administration was conducted under the supervision of the course instructors, who were informed about all the details significant for

2 http://tyyc.yok.gov.tr/?pid=48

3 https://www.nctq.org/dmsView/RISE_Rubric

4 The link for the approval document: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Htl7tU8IlLJize8wU9KP4bGHMMUvmO69Wxghx8NtKT4/edit?usp=sharing

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics for variables.

Variables	N	f	%	M	SD	Min	Max
# of TOEFL ITP exam taken	165						
2		68	41.2				
3		76	46.1				
4		13	7.9				
5		8	4.8				
Student status	165						
Repeat		46	27.9				
New		119	72.1				
Sense of belongingness							
Perceived pedagogical caring	165			15.06	2.97	5	20
Identification with the school	165			8.65	2.66	3	15
Self-efficacy							
Self-efficacy for receptive skills	165			62.83	9.27	34	83
Self-efficacy for productive skills	165			52.04	6.87	19	63
Language learning strategy use							
Planning and organizing the language learning process	165			13.44	3.72	5	22
Monitoring the language learning process	165			17.85	3.71	6	25
Elaborating on new knowledge	165			8.71	2.64	3	15
Language learning autonomy							
Taking responsibility of language learning	165			48.95	11.15	21	82
Associating the language with real life	165			10.8	3.56	5	23
Taking part in language learning activities	165			23.54	4.02	13	30
TOEFL ITP listening comprehension score (LC)	165			53.2	4.44	40	65
TOEFL ITP structure and written expression score (SWE)	165			50.46	4.78	35	64
TOEFL ITP reading comprehension score (RC)	165			50.33	3.27	41	58

the process. Moreover, the students that were not in class during the first sitting were not invited to the second part. Thanks to the number assigned for each student as well as the instrument, the responses in both sessions were easily matched prior to the analysis.

As mentioned earlier, one dimension of the study was to understand how well the personal facilitators of student engagement predicted English language learners' performance in the TOEFL ITP exam. However, the student status (new vs. repeat student) and the number of TOEFL ITP exam taken after university enrolment seemed likely to interfere with the results. To avoid such an effect, it was found appropriate to conduct a hierarchical analysis where these two variables were controlled at the first step. Once the adequacy of sample size and the regression assumptions were validated, the analyses were carried out. Additionally, participants were asked to share their expectations about the social facilitators of engagement, which was investigated through a descriptive analysis.

Results

The results of the study are presented in the order of the research questions. Before sharing the major analyses results, the general characteristics of the data are reported as well.

Descriptive statistics

To become more familiar with the data, descriptive analysis was performed. The results could be seen in **Table 3**. To ensure the multicollinearity assumption, the intercorrelations between the TOEFL ITP scores and predictors as well as the correlations among all predictors were checked. No correlation higher than 0.90 was detected, so the results were considered interpretable (Field, 2009).

Hierarchical regression analyses for the personal facilitators of engagement

A series of hierarchical regression analyses were carried out to figure out whether the personal facilitators of engagement predicted English language learners' performance in the TOEFL ITP exam (LC: Listening Comprehension, SWE: Structure and Written Expression, RC: Reading Comprehension). To avoid any confounding effects, the student status and the number of TOEFL ITP exam taken after university enrolment were entered into each analysis as the first model. As shown in **Table 4**, The results pointed at a significant relationship between these variables and

TABLE 4 Significant results of the hierarchical analyses for the personal facilitators of engagement.

	Listening comprehension (LC)				Structure and written expression (SWE)				Reading comprehension (RC)			
	t	sr^2	R^2	ΔF	*T*	sr^2	R^2	ΔF	*t*	sr^2	R^2	ΔF
Confounding variables			0.41	56.5*			0.06	5.41*			0.22	23.21*
# of TOEFL ITP exam taken	3.36*	0.04			3.03*	0.05						
Student status (new /repeat)	10.47*	0.40			2.56*	0.04			6.44*	0.20		
Sense of belonging							0.11	4.18*				
Perceived pedagogical caring					2.20*	0.03						
English self-efficacy			0.45	6.32*			0.11	3.86*				
Self-efficacy for receptive skills		3.12*	0.03									
Self-efficacy for productive skills					2.74*	0.04						
Strategy use											0.29	3.16*
Monitoring the language learning process									2.55*	0.03		
Elaborating on new knowledge									−1.99*	0.02		

*$p < 0.05$.

all the outcome variables (LC, SWE, RC), validating their possible effects.

The first analyses were conducted to test the predictive power of sense of belongingness on student performance. Two major conclusions emerged from the data. Initially, the data analysis showed that it significantly predicted their SWE scores with a 5 % contribution to the total variance, $R^2 = 0.11$, $\Delta F = 4.18$, $p < 0.05$. However, of two sub-dimensions, only perceived pedagogical caring variable revealed contribution to the SWE score with 3 % variance. On the other hand, it was discovered that this feeling did not contribute to students' LC and RC scores.

The second series of analyses aimed to understand the predictive role of self-efficacy, language learner autonomy, and language learning strategy use on the students' TOEFL ITP scores. After controlling for the confounding variables, the sub-dimensions of self-efficacy, language learning autonomy, and language strategy use were entered into the analysis hierarchically.

Results indicated that students' self-efficacy had a significant relationship with their LC and SWE scores. While this predictor explained 4 % variance in the LC score, $R^2 = 0.45$, $\Delta F = 6.32$, $p < 0.05$, it accounted for 5% variance in the SWE score, $R^2 = 0.11$, $\Delta F = 3.86$, $p < 0.05$. The results specifically showed that self-efficacy for receptive skills contributed to the LC score with a 3% variance, whereas self-efficacy for productive skills predicted the SWE score by explaining 4% of the total variance. Despite these significant associations, the third model, where the language learning autonomy predictor was entered, did not seem to be correlated with any of the TOEFL ITP scores. When it comes to the relationship between language learning strategy use and the TOEFL ITP scores, the predictive power of the variable was detected only on students' RC performance with a 4% contribution to the total variance, $R^2 = 0.29$, $\Delta F = 3.16$, $p < 0.05$. More specifically, the sub-dimension labeled as monitoring the language learning process was found to be positively correlated with the RC score by accounting for the 3% variance. On the contrary, a negative relationship was detected between the elaborating on new knowledge variable and the RC score with a 2% variance contribution, which could be seen in Table 4.

Descriptive analyses for the social facilitators of engagement

This study also questioned what language learners expected from both teachers and language schools to feel more engaged. To fulfill this aim, participants were asked to share their opinions by rating items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree) in two separate questionnaires.

The first questionnaire, entitled "teacher practices," was designed with a motive to investigate the role of need-supportive teacher practices (provision of structure and pedagogical caring). Descriptive analysis results indicated that the mean scores of the items ranged between 4.15 and 4.65, and most responses accumulated around "totally agree" option. These responses, some of which are presented at Table 5, indicated that to feel more engaged, students would like to be guided by instructors

TABLE 5 Teacher practices (the top 3 items getting the highest mean value).

Items	M	SD	F				
			a	b	c	d	e
Provision of structure							
Recommending some extra resources (books, websites etc.) that students can get help while studying English	4.45	0.68	1	14	59	90	1
Benefiting from instructional technology (computers, projectors etc.) during class	4.41	0.76	2	2	10	64	87
Giving constructive feedback related to the English language learning process	4.42	0.69	0	2	13	63	87
Pedagogical caring							
Valuing student opinions	4.61	0.63	0	1	10	41	113
Building a learning environment of love and respect	4.60	0.67	0	2	11	38	114
Being open to communication	4.65	0.59	0	0	10	37	118

a = totally disagree; b = disagree; c = somewhat agree; d = agree; e = totally agree.

TABLE 6 School practices (the items getting the highest mean value in each factor).

Items	M	SD	F				
			a	b	c	d	e
Creating peripheral learning opportunities							
Placing posters, newspaper/magazine clippings on the walls to increase exposure to English	4.21	0.93	5	3	18	65	74
Having language learning resource centers							
Sharing the names of the resources that can contribute to learning on the school's website	4.47	0.68	1	0	11	61	92
Organizing extra-curricular activities (clubs)							
Organizing an English movie club in the prep school	4.30	0.87	4	0	20	59	82
Organizing extra-curricular activities (seminars)							
Organizing a seminar on "Why is English necessary for your career?"	4.18	1.02	3	13	16	52	81

a = totally disagree; b = disagree; c = somewhat agree; d = agree; e = totally agree.

who support their learning process through practices such as recommending extra resources, enriching it with various instructional technologies, and providing constructive feedback about their learning.

The second questionnaire focused on the expectations of language learners about language school practices and was composed of four different sections.

Student responses ranged between 3.21 (somewhat agree) and 4.47 (totally agree). The items which received the highest mean value for each section are shared through **Table 6**. These results pointed at a need for school practices that aim to increase language exposure, which is supposed to lead to an increase in engagement.

Discussion

This study was designed to expand existing knowledge on the facilitators of engagement for the transition-year students in higher education settings. One part of this research was to understand whether the personal facilitators of student engagement predicted student performance. The results regarding the confounding variables (exam experience and student status) indicated significant correlations and thus validated their possible confounding effects. More specifically, the relationship detected between the frequency of exam experience and TOEFL scores raised questions about its testing effect. Apparently, as also highlighted by Schweigert (1994), experience in standardized tests resulted in higher scores. Similarly, the other confounding variable, student status, significantly contributed to student scores. Although repeat group students were assumed to be more advantageous, new students had better scores, which could be explained in part by the placement of both groups in the same classrooms. Being with new students might have caused repeat group students to question their own competencies and display poorer performance. On the other hand, the performance of new students could be attributed to various reasons including their previous language education background, abroad experiences, or motivation to be in their department.

Regarding the first personal facilitator, sense of belongingness, the results indicated that although significantly related to their SWE scores, this sense did not contribute to students' LC or RC scores. One reason behind these insignificant correlations might be about the nature of the first year spent at the language school. If students had not considered this one-year education as a part of their university education, they might not have developed a sense of belongingness toward the language school.

Alternatively, some other variables such as motivation (Niemiec and Ryan, 2009) or positive academic emotions (Lam et al., 2015) are likely to exist between the sense and achievement in the role of mediators.

The significant correlations were interpreted as evidence of the facilitative role of sense of belongingness on students' SWE scores. Particularly, the results pointing at the relationship between perceived pedagogical caring and the student SWE performance called attention to the instructional behaviors of the language teachers. Any increase in the number of teacher-student interactions during grammar and vocabulary teaching might have created an atmosphere where students felt cared. A different explanation could be made considering the nature of these sub-skills. These two sub-skills always hold a place in the teaching of all major skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), so students have to interact with teachers more often for grammar and vocabulary. It is likely that as students interacted with teachers more and received more feedback, they began to feel more cared, which helped develop a sense of belongingness and display better performance. Or this relationship might be the consequence of students' self-efficacy feelings. One finding of the current research was that students' self-efficacy and their SWE performance were significantly related. Considering this result, as also assumed by Zumbrunn et al. (2014), it would be wise to claim that self-efficacy mediated the relationship.

The results regarding the second personal facilitator, self-efficacy, pointed at a significant relationship between self-efficacy and students' LC and SWE performance. These findings serve as an important complement to previous observations made by Deci and Ryan (1985), Bandura (1994), Schunk and Pajares (2005), and Skinner and Pitzer (2012). Specifically, the students with high self- efficacy for receptive skills (listening and reading) displayed better performance in the listening part. This finding was in agreement with that of previous research conducted by Todaka (2017), who provided evidence to the fact that students who believe in their performance in the listening skill are more likely to get better scores. In addition, those with high self-efficacy for productive skills (speaking and writing) received better scores in the grammar and vocabulary part of the exam. This could be explained by the fact that productive skills require the use of vocabulary and grammatical in a competent way. If an individual feels capable in both speaking and writing, this may indicate that s/he is satisfied with his/her grammatical and vocabulary knowledge, which apparently brings success in the end.

When it comes to the insignificant relationships between language learners' perceived self-efficacy and their RC scores, this study yielded contradictory results from some previous observations. In contrast to what Balci (2017) found, this research indicated no relationship, and this contrasting finding could be attributed to the demanding nature of the reading part of the TOEFL exam. In this test, students are given 55 min to read 5–6 reading passages together with 50 questions, which might be highly challenging for students with anxiety problems. If a student had felt anxious during the test, this might have barriered his/her self-efficacy to function.

The facilitative value of language learning autonomy was also questioned. Despite some previous empirical evidence (Liu, 2014), no support was found regarding its direct contribution to student achievement. However, the analysis of studies indicating indirect relationships (Rotgans and Schmidt, 2011) drew attention to the possible impact of autonomy on the learning process rather than the outcome. In addition to this possibility, this non-significant relationship reminded of the different interpretations of autonomy in cultures. As proposed by Palfreyman (2004), the definition of autonomy in Eastern countries is different from the West. Collectivist and mostly familial relationships dominate Eastern cultures (Kara, 2007), so a more detailed investigation on the role of autonomy might help interpret the reasons behind these findings.

In the final step, the facilitative role of language learning strategy use was investigated. The non-significant correlations indicated that language strategy use did not contribute to students' LC and SWE performance, which could be explained by the lack of motivation to use the strategies (Pintrich and De Groot, 1990) or the lack of ability and knowledge to apply these strategies (Graham et al., 2008). On the other hand, the results pointed at a significant association with the RC scores, providing evidence for its facilitative role. The students monitoring their language learning process received better scores in the RC part; however, those using elaboration strategies displayed poorer performance. The results regarding the monitoring strategies could be partly due to the consistency between monitoring strategies presented and the skills expected from the students in the reading part. Both items in the scale and the questions in the RC part require critical thinking, and critical thinking skills and RC scores in the TOEFL test are statistically correlated (Fahim et al., 2010). Those monitoring their language learning process might have transferred this tendency to the exam process. As far as the negative correlation between elaboration strategy use and the RC scores was concerned, the results drew attention to the nature of the strategies presented to the students. The strategies on the scale mostly required declarative knowledge, which is defined as the first stage for knowledge construction by using strategies such as filling in the blanks or imagining examples (Smith and Ragan, 2005). However, as the results indicate, students receiving higher scores most probably had procedural or conditional knowledge, offering a possible explanation for the negative correlation.

The second purpose of the study was to identify the expectations of the students about the social facilitators of engagement, particularly with a focus on teacher practices and school practices. As far as teacher practices are concerned, Skinner and Pitzer (2012) believe that the provision of structure is one of the essential need-supportive teacher practices and the opinions gathered from the students for the current study confirmed this assumption. When the structure of the learning process is well-defined and the expectations are clearly presented, the students feel more engaged (Hospel and Galand, 2016). Beside the provision of structure, pedagogical caring is also highlighted by Skinner and Pitzer (2012) as a requirement for student engagement and learning. As a part of this study, the investigation of this need-supportive teacher practice supported this view to a great extent. Similar to the findings of a previous study by Wang and Holcombe (2010), the results confirmed that pedagogical caring has a facilitative role for learning and engagement.

As far as school practices were concerned, in line with the findings of Demirag (2018), the results indicated a need for peripheral learning opportunities such as posters or newspaper/magazine clippings on the walls. Besides, consistent with the previous study findings (Morrison, 2008), the students indicated a need for centers such as language laboratories/libraries and school websites where language learning resources are shared. Moreover, student responses pointed at the possible facilitative role of clubs (e.g., a British/American culture club, speaking club, a movie club) and seminars (e.g., a seminar on "Why is English necessary for your career?") on their learning and engagement. The expressed necessity for such school practices was observed in previous studies as well (e.g., Yin, 2015).

To sum up, considering all these results, it was concluded that the emergence of evidence about the facilitative role of self-perceptions on achievement partially validated what Skinner and Pitzer (2012) claimed, which could be explained by the nature of the discipline or the interference of other variables. However, when it came to their assertions about the necessity of teacher and school practices for learner engagement, this study yielded supportive results: the more responsive the schools and teachers are to student needs, the more likely they feel engaged.

Recommendations

The study has helped make some critical educational recommendations for students who are both struggling with the transition-year routines and are challenged with institutional expectations such as compulsory language education. First and foremost, the institutions are advised to recognize that sense of belongingness is an essential component of student engagement, and this feeling should be fostered in appropriate social contexts. The results regarding its facilitative role on students' sense of belongingness imply that the transition from high school to university require pedagogical caring and therefore, the establishment of supportive and respectful learning environments is necessary for the development of this sense. Instructors should build a healthy and trustworthy relationship with students, show care, take time for their concerns, respect their feelings and ideas, rely on their abilities, express appreciation, and avoid judgment (Cleary et al., 2011; Skinner and Pitzer, 2012; Lam et al., 2015). As far as self-efficacy is concerned, the findings provided evidence for its facilitative role as well, which implies a need for contexts that nurture students' competency feelings. Therefore, to avoid negative self-perception, the provision of a clear structure by both administrators and teachers is of utmost significance. Consistent standards will help students develop better competency feelings. Keeping the challenge of the tasks at the optimal level, breaking tasks into meaningful and manageable chunks, giving feedback in a constructive and encouraging manner, applying instructional scaffolding, helping students interpret their failures correctly, and encouraging them to persist in the face of difficulties and failures are vital for both student self-efficacy and engagement (Bandura, 1994; Niemiec and Ryan, 2009; Schunk and Mullen, 2012; Skinner and Pitzer, 2012). In addition to all these, the facilitative impact of school practices such as peripheral learning activities, learning resources, clubs, or seminars deserves attention as they will help increase motivation and engagement among students.

To create long-term value and impact, (language) teacher education programs could be advised to emphasize more on student engagement and raise the awareness about the importance of engagement. Another important recommendation is to facilitate lifelong learning opportunities for professional development of teachers in cooperation with a student engagement office. Curriculum designers should also take active role in these practices. They are advised to carry out regular needs analyses to understand students' self-perceptions, inform all stakeholders, and revise the programs in line with the recommendations of all related stakeholders.

These findings have implications for further research as well. For a more comprehensive comparison, a new study could be designed with a larger sample including students from both state and public universities. Or a longitudinal study might be carried out with the contribution of various stakeholders. The inclusion of a qualitative dimension could also be helpful to reach a better and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by ODTU Insan Arastirmalari Etik Kurulu. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

SV-O: Writing – original draft, Software, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. AO: Writing – review and editing, Supervision.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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