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## EDITED BY

Priscilla Roberts,  
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## REVIEWED BY

Noble Lo,  
Hong Kong Polytechnic University,  
Hong Kong SAR, China  
Hamed Mohammad Hosseini,  
Islamic Azad University Central Tehran  
Branch, Iran

## \*CORRESPONDENCE

Xiaolan Ye  
✉ CSUyexiaolan2006@126.com

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# A review of classroom environment on student engagement in English as a foreign language learning

Xiaolan Ye\*

School of Foreign Languages, Qiongtai Normal University, Haikou, China

The construct of learning engagement is receiving increasing attention since it has been proved by a majority of researches that higher learning engagement is linked to positive educational outcomes. While a list of learner-internal factors (e.g., academic emotions) and learner-external factors (e.g., teachers' working engagement) have been revealed as important antecedents of English as a foreign language (EFL) students' learning engagement, the role of classroom environment (CE) as a salient factor has received scant attention. Notably, to the best of the author's knowledge, no review study has been conducted on this issue. Thus, inspired by this gap, the purpose of the present review article is to evaluate the existing literature on the influence of CE on EFL students' learning engagement, which is a relatively less charted territory but with great significance, to illuminate the ways of securing, maintaining and enhancing students' engagement in foreign language classrooms by means of creating a positive CE. The central information of the article is organized into three parts. First, based on educational research, an overview of the constructs of learning engagement and CE is explicated. Second, the influence of CE on EFL learners' engagement is highlighted. At last, implications of the existing studies are summarized and suggestions for further studies are provided.

## KEYWORDS

learning engagement, classroom environment, academic achievement, EFL, classroom climate

## 1 Introduction

Foreign language learning is an arduous and emotionally-laden journey. There is widespread consensus among applied linguistics researchers that learning engagement is of paramount importance along this journey. Positive educational outcomes of high learning engagement include, but are not limited to, meaningful learning (Hiver et al., 2021a,b), enhancement of learning efficiency and achievement (Dörnyei, 2019; Mercer, 2019), amelioration of academic boredom and disaffection (Fredricks et al., 2004), high academic aspirations and increased mental health (Archambault et al., 2009), as well as higher school completion-rates (Reschly and Christenson, 2012). Unfortunately, students become increasingly disengaged as they progress through school (Klem and Connell, 2004; Wang and Holcombe, 2010; Fredricks, 2011). Competing for students' attention and keeping them engaged in meaningful and persistent learning in face of multitudinous distractions is an ongoing challenge for educators and researchers globally (Barkley, 2010; Mercer and Dörnyei, 2020).

Consequently, it is vital to comprehend and develop knowledge regarding the factors that foster EFL learning engagement, in order to maximize the power of learning engagement in yielding more favorable educational outcomes. A few studies have disclosed that the variances in EFL learning engagement can be attributed to both contextual factors (e.g., teachers' working engagement) and personal factors (e.g., growth mindset, self-regulation, emotion, trait emotional intelligence) (e.g., Reschly and Christenson, 2012; Jiang and Dewaele, 2019). It is noteworthy that a proportion of these studies have supported CE as a significant determinant in language learning (Fraser, 1994; Fisher and Khine, 2006; Hattie, 2012). In fact, due to the distinctive interpersonal and social nature of EFL classrooms, CE is a key element contributing to EFL learning engagement (Pishghadam et al., 2021). CE is constituted by the quality of emotional and social interactions in the classroom (Ryan and Patrick, 2001). In EFL learning, a positive CE is requisite to promote active participation in communicative activities and interactions (Derakhshan et al., 2022a,b). The crucial role of CE has been succinctly summed up by Earl Stevick (1980) when he stated that in language learning, "success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom" (p. 4). However, to the best of the author's knowledge, apart from some recent studies (e.g., Hiver et al., 2021a,b; Qiu, 2022), the impact of CE on learning engagement in EFL research has received scant attention. Moreover, as the review of available literature reveals, no theoretical review has been carried out on the role of CE in EFL learning engagement. Given that the classroom is the major micro-context in which English is instructed as a foreign language, understanding the essential ingredients of an optimal CE in which learners' engagement thrives is of great significance. Therefore, building on previous studies, the present conceptual review intends to present the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of CE and EFL learning engagement, and particularly the role of CE in EFL learning engagement.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Methods and data

To systematically examine the constructs of learning engagement, CE, and their relationship, a systematic literature review has been conducted in one of the most reliable database: Web of Science. The time frame for the search was not limited, because it was more appropriate to include both not the latest but highly cited literature and the latest ones. We formulated a search string based on our understanding of and knowledge of EFL learning engagement and CE, and referred to the search string used in other related studies. The search was first conducted by combing key words: "learning engagement" OR "student engagement" AND "EFL" OR "L2"; "classroom environment" OR "classroom climate" AND "EFL" OR "L2." Then in order to focus how CE can influence learning engagement, more search was performed with the combination of the key words: "learning engagement" OR "student engagement" AND "classroom environment" OR "classroom climate." The selected articles are representative and of high quality, including journal articles and book chapters. Publications written in non-English language were excluded.

### 2.2 Learning engagement

The construct of engagement originated from educational psychology and the learning sciences (Hiver et al., 2021a,b). Despite numerous studies devoted to examining engagement in science, technology, mathematics and engineering, research on engagement in foreign language learning has lagged relatively behind (Philp and Duchesne, 2016; Oga-Baldwin and Fryer, 2018; Mercer, 2019). Nevertheless, language learning engagement research has increased exponentially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century since Dörnyei and Kormos (2000) proposed that "active learner engagement is a key concern" for all instructed language learning (Hiver et al., 2021a,b). Notably, it has recently become one of the most prevalent research topics among positive psychology researchers who focus on the role of positive emotions in educational outcomes (Macintyre et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2021).

In a broad sense, engagement refers to action. Action constitutes the defining and central characteristic of learning engagement (Skinner et al., 2009; Skinner and Pitzer, 2012; Lawson and Lawson, 2013; Fredricks et al., 2016; Mercer, 2019), which is a notion reiterated across frameworks and definitions (Hiver et al., 2021a,b). For instance, Skinner et al. (2009) described engagement as "energized, directed, and sustained actions." Indeed, it is precisely this defining characteristic that distinguishes this construct from its related and easily confused companion constructs such as motivation. While motivation represents the initial intention, engagement represents the subsequent action (Reschly and Christenson, 2012). However, compared with the richness and width of research on motivation, the research on learners' engagement in language learning is relatively limited (Mercer and Dörnyei, 2020). In fact, in the language teaching domain, where the key notion of "learning-by-doing" is deeply embedded in the predominant pedagogical approaches, engagement is particularly crucial, for active participation in practice and communication through utilizing the language is essential for learners' language development (Hiver et al., 2021a,b).

In a narrow sense, learning engagement has been conceptualized variably and diversely with a lack of consensus due to the varied research contexts and foci in the literature (Reschly and Christenson, 2012). For example, Skinner and Pitzer (2012) proposed four nested contexts, namely, prosocial institutions, school, classroom, and learning activities, with different aspects of engagement highlighted in each context. According to them, among the four contexts, classroom engagement is particularly critical and is defined as "constructive, enthusiastic, willing, emotionally positive, and cognitively focused participation with learning activities." Similarly, Platt and Brooks (2010) described second language (L2) learning engagement as "learners' meaningful involvement and expenditure of effort, as a natural result of deliberate attention and active participation." Considering the domain-specificity of learning engagement in language classrooms, Svalberg (2009) pioneered the model of Engagement with Language (EWL), which is defined as "a cognitive, and/or affective, and/or social process in which the learner is the agent and language is object." In brief, it refers to learners' thinking and talking about language. Additionally, Svalberg (2009) also stresses the social nature of engagement and the importance of classroom relationships (e.g., peer, group and teacher-student relationships), for interaction is the key to language development. With the impact of EWL, the quantity, quality and form of discourse

and interaction used by the learners have been focused on as the indicators of engagement in a considerable amount of engagement research in second/foreign language learning (Baralt et al., 2016).

Despite the heterogeneous conceptual frameworks and definitions, it is widely agreed that engagement is a multidimensional construct. Especially in relatively recent researches in the field of applied linguistics, engagement is widely considered as comprising four overlapping and interdependent components, namely, cognitive, behavioral, emotional (affective) and social (Svalberg, 2009; Baralt et al., 2016; Philp and Duchesne, 2016; Lambert et al., 2017). For instance, Philp and Duchesne (2016) defined it as “a state of heightened attention and involvement, in which participation is reflected in cognitive, social, behavioral and affective dimensions as well.” Cognitive engagement refers to sustained attention and mental effort in learning process (Philp and Duchesne, 2016). Behavioral engagement concerns the amount and quality of students’ participation in class and time spent on tasks (Fredricks et al., 2004; Reschly and Christenson, 2012), with learners’ degree of effort, persistence, and active involvement as leading indicators (Philp and Duchesne, 2016). Emotional engagement pertains to the affective quality of students’ participation (Zhou et al., 2021), relating to learners’ feelings of attachment, belonging, and interest (Núñez and León, 2019), with enthusiasm, interest, and enjoyment identified as essential indicators (Skinner et al., 2009), and can be operationalized as degree of willingness, purposefulness and autonomy (Svalberg, 2009). It may also include students’ feelings of connection or disconnection with their peers in the class (Philp and Duchesne, 2016). Lastly, social engagement, pertaining to the quality and amount of interactions with and participation between interlocutors, characterizing the relational nature of language learning (Philp and Duchesne, 2016; Zhou et al., 2021). Though not included in all engagement models, social engagement occupies a particularly significant role in language learning since social interaction offers opportunities for language practice (Philp and Duchesne, 2016) and can facilitate overall engagement (Svalberg, 2009). Learners tend to be more effective in language learning when they are socially engaged (Storch, 2008; Moranski and Toth, 2016; Svalberg, 2017). Emotional engagement and social engagement are closely linked to each other (Philp and Duchesne, 2016). The four dimensions are distinct but interrelated (S. Mercer, 2019). According to Oga-Baldwin and Nakata (2017), optimally engaged learners are on task, thinking and enjoying the learning process. So in respect to foreign language learning, it should be fair to conclude that emotional engagement and social engagement should be paid particular attention to due to the inherently relational nature of language learning process, in which positive interactions such as encouragement and listening, and positive emotions such as enjoyment and enthusiasm are particularly salient. Learners’ willing to interact and communicate in EFL classrooms is influenced by the quality of relationships with peers and teachers. Therefore, it is crucial to create an optimal CE in which positive emotions and interactions can thrive.

What’s promising for educators is that learning engagement is not a static attribute of students. Instead, it is an dynamically malleable and mutable state or process (Svalberg, 2009), situated and highly context-dependent (Reschly and Christenson, 2012; Hiver et al., 2021a,b), thus alterable and various in response to learning environments (Skinner and Pitzer, 2012; Shernof et al., 2016). In other words, learning engagement itself is not a psychological variable, but

connected more to learners’ relationships and responses to the learning environment (Järvelä and Renninger, 2014). A learner’s engagement does not emerge in a vacuum, but partly grows out of cultures, communities, peers, classrooms and specific tasks and activities within the classrooms (e.g., Finn and Zimmer, 2012; Pianta et al., 2012; Shernof, 2013). This dynamic and context-dependent nature indicates a potential for capitalizing well-constructed interventions to enhance learning engagement through both intrapersonal and contextual conditions (Hiver et al., 2021a,b). Since contextual factors are the area where EFL teachers can exert relatively greater influence on, the present study delves into the impact of CE on learning engagement as well as strategies to engage EFL learners through optimization of CE.

## 2.3 Classroom environment

The learning environment of a classroom milieu consists of physical environment and psychological environment. Though physical environment such as facilities, spaces and lighting plays a role in students’ safety and comfort, psychological environment has been historically focused on in most educational research (Dorman, 2008), both as an outcome measure and an antecedent variable (Fraser, 1986). In educational settings, CE refers to the “atmosphere, ambience, tones or climate that pervades the particular setting” (Dorman, 2008). Similarly, Cheng (1994) defined CE as the social quality of the classroom, relating to perceptions and feelings about social relationships among students and teachers. This also resonates with Gabrys-Barker’s (2016) definition of CE as “the overall feeling of milieu inhabitants (i.e., students and teachers) regarding classroom interactions, involvement, and academic experience.” The terms classroom (psychological) environment, classroom atmosphere, and classroom (social) climate are often used interchangeably when scholars refer to classroom learning environment (Cheng, 1994). Emotion and relationship (e.g., friendliness, competitiveness, cooperation, cohesiveness, support) are the central features of CE (Harve et al., 2012). CE is most often measured subjectively in that it is the perception of the situation that governs behavior in that situation instead of the objective reality (Fraser, 1986).

CE theory has been theoretically underpinned by Moos (1973) conceptual framework for human environments, which understood the relationship of humans to the environment from a holistic and ecological point of view and believed that human behavior is a function of both the person and the environment (Moos, 1973). The framework classified human environments into three basic dimensions, namely, Relationship Dimension, Personal Growth Dimension, and System Maintenance and Change Dimension. While relationship dimension focuses on the nature and intensity of personal relationships within the environment, personal growth dimension focuses on opportunities for personal development and self-enhancement. System maintenance and system change dimensions assess the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in expectations, maintains control and is responsive to change (Moos, 1973). Moos’ theory has become the foundation for understanding the nature of any setting considered as a human environment, especially school environment and CE. Accordingly, Moos and Trickett’s (1974) Classroom Environment Measure characterizes CE as having four levels: the relationship level, with involvement, affiliation and teacher

support as indicators; the individual-growth level, with task-orientation and academic competition as indicators; the system-maintenance level, with order and organization, rule clarity and teacher control as indicators; and finally system-development level, with teaching innovation as indicator.

The internal characteristics and evolution of the learner group made up of teachers as the central figures and students as active members determine CE over time (Dörnyei and Murphey, 2003). In other words, teachers, peers, self and content together establish CE (Holley and Steiner, 2005). The nature of the teacher-student interaction is one of the key variables determining a successful CE (Fisher and Khine, 2006). Teacher-student rapport stimulates a pleasant CE, induces beneficial classroom experiences, boosts positive academic emotions, and finally results in better academic performance (Reyes and Torio, 2021). Besides, student-student relationship is also important (De Ruiter et al., 2019). Supportive and sympathetic interactions with peers is a salient feature of a positive and productive CE (Taherian et al., 2021). Therefore CE is mutually constituted instead of solely by teachers (Dorman, 2008). However, teachers are the main figures in creating a positive CE in class (Batubara et al., 2020), possessing leadership influence on CE (Cheng, 1994). Teacher support is crucial for creating a positive CE and protecting students against social marginalization (Andersen, 2023). Teachers also play a major role in establishing, directing and sustaining constructive and active interactions (De Ruiter et al., 2019). A teacher's warmth and sensitivity contribute to healthy teacher-student relationships and CE (Pianta et al., 2002; Sun et al., 2022). Teacher care stimulates creating a CE of mutual respect (Dickinson and Kreitmair, 2019). Happier teachers are more likely to create a happier class for students, since foreign language enjoyment is relatively more teacher-dependent (Moskowitz and Dewaele, 2019; Dewaele and Li, 2020). Teachers with growth mindset are more likely to create a positive CE (Hoose, 2021). Moreover, teachers' social and emotional competence and well-being are important factors contributing to create a conducive CE (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). Socially and emotionally competent teachers set the tone of the classroom by developing supportive and encouraging relationship, while burned-out teachers and the CE created by them can be harmful to students (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). Furthermore, teachers' leadership style and use of power also shape CE (Cheng, 1994).

## 2.4 The role of CE in EFL learning engagement

CE may interact with students' personal characteristics and finally affect students' learning motivation and engagement (Lewin, 1943). Perhaps the most commonly used model for understanding the impact of perceptions of CE on engagement is grounded in self-determination theory (SDT). According to Ryan and Deci (2002), educators can foster learners' learning engagement by meeting their three fundamental psychological needs: the needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness in that individuals seek experiences that fulfill these needs through interaction with the environment. In other words, to the degree that the learning environment supports opportunities for students to develop senses of competence, autonomy and positive relations with others, to such a degree students' learning engagement and achievement will be enhanced (Wang and Holcombe, 2010). Of note, Reeve (2013) suggests that learner engagement also

change the nature of the environment. In short, environmental affordances for learning and learning engagement influence each other reciprocally.

Results of a few recent empirical researches have also provided convincing evidence that the quality of CE is a significant determinant of student learning engagement. For instance, Nazne et al. (2019) inspected the effect of CE on student's attitude toward school. Altogether 203 students from different private and government schools in Pakistan through cluster sampling technique participated in the study via questionnaires. The study showed that CE is a significant predictor of students' attitude toward school. Likewise, Cheng (1994) investigated the relationship between CE and student's effective performance via questionnaires through a large sample of 21,622 students. The results of Pearson and canonical correlation analyses revealed that students' attitude toward school and teachers are most sensitive to CE variation. Though these studies did not examine the impact of CE on overall learning engagement directly, the construct of attitude toward school or learning is an important emotional/affective component of student engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004).

It's worth noting that personalized environment is of great importance to learning engagement. For example, in Cayubit (2022) study, the hierarchical multiple regression revealed that a conducive CE increases students' academic motivation and predicts students engagement. Personalization and satisfaction were identified as important facets of CE, making unique contributions to learning engagement. Similarly, according to Klem and Connell's (2004) longitudinal study, when students perceive teachers as creating a caring, well-structured learning environment where expectations are high, distinct and fair, they are more apt to report engagement in school. Creating more personalized educational environments, with teacher support as a major indicator, can result in higher student engagement, attendance and scores, for personalized learning environment make students feel more supported by and connected to school.

Moreover, teacher support and peer support are influential factors of learning engagement. For instance, Lu et al. (2022) investigated the relationship among learning environment perceptions, personal characteristics and situational engagement (dynamic engagement). For this purpose, longitudinal real-time data were collected from 105 college students in smart classrooms at a university in central China. The study found that perceived teacher support was the most influential factor for deep cognitive and emotional engagement, for in collaborative learning, teachers' evaluation, guidance and feedback are crucially important for promoting deep cognitive and emotional experiences. The study also found that the perception of social support (peer support) predicted all situational engagement dimensions. The reason might be that connectedness contributed to reflective thinking and inquiry learning. Peer interaction promotes students' interests, motivation, active participation, and positive emotional experience as well. The study also indicated that personal motivational factors can moderate the relationship between environment perception and learning engagement. Furthermore, Miao et al. (2022) examined the impacts of teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction, and social presence on learning engagement in online learning environments. To this end, they collected data via 3 questionnaires from 354 full-time undergraduate students of various majors in a large public Chinese university. The data analysis confirmed the effects of classroom interaction and social presence on students' learning engagement. They pointed out that it is crucial for teachers to provide organizational and educational support as a scaffoldings process in the



early phases of collaboration so as to sustain group regulation, enhance interaction and group acquaintance. Teachers should also help group members avoid internal conflicts in order to create an attractive and motivating learning environment, which will have a positive influence on students' emotional engagement.

Furthermore, in language teaching field, researchers also conducted a few empirical studies in this regard. For one, [Derakhshan et al. \(2022a\)](#) investigated the relationship between teacher care, teacher-student rapport, and L2 learning engagement. To achieve this, both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained through three scales and interview from 223 Iranian and 208 Polish L2 students. The study demonstrated that both teacher-related factors such as rapport and care and context-related factors including a pleasant CE play significant roles in promoting students' engagement perceptions. In a same vein, [Derakhshan et al. \(2022b\)](#) explored the relationship among CE, growth language mindset, boredom, and student engagement among English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. To this end, 287 English major students from various universities in Iran participated in the study via an online survey. The structural equation modeling results revealed that CE significantly and directly predicated EFL learning engagement. Last but not least, [Bardakci et al. \(2018\)](#) investigated the relationship between school social climate, CE, attitude toward English course and student engagement. Data collected from 734 high school students showed that perceptions of CE, attitudes toward English course, and school social climate significantly predicted student engagement.

### 3 Discussion

To conclude, the main purpose of this study is to elucidate the role of CE in EFL students' learning engagement and thus generate some fresh insights for any parties concerned with EFL education. As such, this study has extended the previous understanding of CE and learning engagement and provided a fuller picture of their relationship. Supported by both theoretical underpinnings of the two constructs and empirical studies, this study asserts the following two points:

Firstly, CE perception held by students is a crucial influential factor of EFL learning engagement. From the literature reviewed, it can be inferred that a positive CE is essential in securing and ensuring learners' motivation and engagement, while a CE perceived as negative and threatening can be a barrier to students' learning engagement. A positive EFL CE including features such as warm, respectful, emotionally supportive and organized can provide more opportunities for interaction and communication in EFL classrooms, and thus can be a source of learning engagement. It is illogical to contend that the promotion of EFL students' learning engagement only relies on teachers' pedagogical or technical knowledge or skills. Authentic instruction and learning cannot happen unless teachers' pay attention to and handle properly the social and emotional aspects of learning ([Brackett et al., 2009](#)).

Secondly, in EFL classrooms, it is the teachers who play a crucial and leading role in developing a positive CE. So it is of great necessity for EFL teachers to make efforts to reflect on and improve their educational thoughts and practices in order to create a friendly, cooperative, safe, and caring CE, so that students' psychological needs such as competence, autonomy and relatedness can be met. Therefore, EFL teachers need to be equipped with not only a good mastery of linguistic knowledge and teaching methodology, but also a good understanding of psychological, interpersonal and affective aspects of language education, as these

aspects strongly influence students' learning engagement and ultimately learning performance. Thus, teacher educators should attach more importance to social and emotional skills in curriculum planning in order to cultivate pre-service EFL teachers' ability in maintaining good rapport with students, in making quality communication with students, and in caring about students in an appropriate way.

### 4 Limitations and suggestions for future studies

However, the limitations of this review study should be noted and addressed for future studies. The present study mainly has two limitations. The first limitation is potential publication bias. As with any review of the published literature, the researcher might have a tendency to handle positive reports. The second limitation lies in the lack of direct empirical data. This study only serves as a starting point for educators and researchers in their endeavors to develop more knowledge on the role of CE in EFL students' learning engagement. Therefore, more empirical studies need to be done to move the field forward. One line of possible research would be to investigate how the environmental conditions of psychological and social dimensions affect teachers. Another possible direction would be to explore the relation between teachers or students' individual characteristics such as trait emotional intelligence and classroom social climate. Moreover, investigation of CE from a cross-cultural perspective is also significant.

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### Conflict of interest

The author declares 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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