Research Article https://doi.org/10.12973/ejels.4.1.1

European Journal of English Language Studies
Volume 4, Issue 1, 1 - 11.
ISSN: 2770-9752
https://www.ejels.com/

A Mixed-Methods Approach to Students' Engagement in English Learning in the Chinese Context

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Received: October 17, 2023 ▪ Revised: January 19, 2024 ▪ Accepted: March 5, 2024

Abstract: Since language use is at the center of language learning, learners' active engagement in learning activities is crucial for successful language learning. Answering the call for positive language education, the present study investigated the levels and influencing factors of engagement in English learning among 437 Chinese senior high school students. This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, collecting data through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The results showed that students were generally well-engaged in English learning. Moreover, students were more inclined to engage in English learning behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. Students' agentic engagement in English learning was relatively low and mainly reflected after English classes. The relatively low agentic engagement might be shaped by a series of personal and contextual factors, including the traditional Chinese concept of "honoring and respecting the teacher", teachers' teaching strategies, students' learning strategies, English proficiency, learning climate, and teaching styles. Pedagogical implications for English teachers concerning enhancing students' English learning engagement were provided.

Keywords: *Agentic engagement, Chinese students, engagement, English as a foreign language, mixed-methods research.*

To cite this article: Yang, X., & Liu, H. (2024). A mixed-methods approach to students' engagement in English learning in the Chinese context. *European Journal of English Language Studies*, *4*(1), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.12973/ejels.4.1.1

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, positive psychology has drawn growing attention in educational psychology and SLA. In response to the "positive psychology turn" (MacIntyre et al., 2016), a new wave of psychology studies in SLA has flourished. The centrality of language learners' positive psychological factors, such as engagement (e.g., Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021) and flow (e.g., Liu & Song, 2021), has gained growing recognition. Applying constructs from positive psychology to SLA research "fits(fit) the zeitgeist of modern language pedagogy", as positive psychology emphasizes "the development of the language learner as a person" (MacIntyre et al., 2016, p.3).

Engagement refers to students' active involvement and participation in learning activities and tasks (Fredricks et al., 2004). It has perennially remained a pivotal research topic in positive psychology. Embedded within the framework of the PERMA model proposed by Seligman (2011), engagement stands as one of its foundational pillars. The PERMA model, as a cornerstone of positive psychology, has found extensive application in both psychology and educational psychology (e.g., Fang et al., 2024). This has contributed to sustained attention on engagement.

"Engagement defines all learning" (Hiver et al., 2021, p.2), and it has been a continuing concern in foreign language education (Hiver et al., 2021; Mercer, 2019; J. F. Ryan, 2005). It is well-established that engagement defines successful language learning and is a powerful predictor of learners' well-being (Guo, 2021; Mercer, 2019). It is a desirable educational outcome and has been proven to be a reliable forerunner of other positive educational outcomes and students' well-being, such as academic achievement (Lee, 2014), school completion rate (Finn & Rock, 1997), positive emotions (Dewaele & Li, 2021), and motivation (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). In addition, research has suggested that engagement is malleable and can be improved through interventions (Harbour et al., 2015), making learner engagement a meaningful domain to explore.

As researchers have not reached a consensus regarding the specific dimensions of engagement (Mercer, 2019), research on language learning engagement has been conducted with multiple theoretical models. Among various conceptualizations, the three-dimensional model proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004) has been widely accepted (e.g.,

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Qiu & Cheng, 2021; Zhang & Hyland, 2022), assessing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. However, this model fails to capture the fact that students show behavioral, cognitive, and emotional responses to what they have learned and also proactively enrich what they have learned, ignoring students' agency in the instruction they receive (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). To better understand how students contribute constructively to the instruction they receive through personalizing and reinforcing the learning content, Reeve and Tseng (2011) added agentic engagement to the three-dimensional structure based on the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). While agentic engagement appears to be an essential component of learner engagement, there has been little empirical research in SLA adopting Reeve and Tseng's (2011) model. Against this backdrop, this study aimed to explore language learning engagement with Reeve and Tseng's (2011) four-dimensional model to gain a more comprehensive understanding of language learning engagement.

Literature Review

Defining Engagement

Reeve (2012) defined engagement as "the extent of a student's active involvement in a learning activity" (p. 150). Philp and Duchesne (2016) theorized engagement as the "heightened attention and involvement" of students in learning (p. 51). Although it has been widely accepted that engagement is a multi-dimensional construct, researchers have not reached a consistent conclusion on the types of dimensions (Christenson et al., 2012). Conceptualizations for the dimensions of engagement have evolved dramatically over time. For example, Marks (2000) assumed that engagement was a combination of behavioral and emotional aspects. Fredricks et al. (2004) theorized engagement as a three-dimensional model containing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, which has been widely accepted in engagement research. Behavioral engagement refers to the amount of effort students spend on academic tasks, the quality of their involvement in academic, social, or extracurricular activities, and the extent to which they are actively engaged in the learning process. Behavioral engagement plays a crucial role in achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing students from dropout (Fredricks et al., 2004; Sang & Hiver, 2021). Students' behavioral engagement in L2 learning can be reflected by, for example, the word count produced in a task and the amount of time on a task (Qiu & Lo, 2017). Emotional engagement involves students' feelings or perceptions about learning materials, teachers, peers, and schools (Fredricks et al., 2004). Expressions of task-facilitating emotions such as enjoyment and enthusiasm represent students' emotional engagement. And expressions of task-withdrawing emotions such as anxiety and boredom represent emotional disengagement or disaffection (Mercer, 2019; Reeve, 2012). Individuals emotionally engaging in language learning have "a positive, purposeful, willing, and autonomous disposition" toward the language learning content, teachers, and peers (Svalberg, 2009, p.247). Cognitive engagement refers to the amount of intellectual effort that learners put into the learning process and their mental activities. Cognitive engagement can be reflected by careful thinking and willingness to exert effort to understand complex concepts or master difficult skills (Fredricks et al., 2004; Hiver et al., 2021). Students' cognitive engagement in language learning can manifest through self-repairs during language output (Qiu & Lo, 2017).

Based on the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Reeve and Tseng (2011) refined the three-dimensional model by adding agentic engagement to the original model to gain a more comprehensive picture of how students engage in learning activities. SDT is a macro-theory of motivation that explores how individuals' inherent motivational resources contribute to personality growth and self-regulation (Reeve et al., 2004; R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000). It assumes that students possess innate psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—which serve as the motivational foundation for their autonomous motivation and psychological well-being (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Agentic engagement refers to "students' constructive contribution into the flow of the instruction they receive" (Reeve & Tseng, 2011, p.258), concerning how students consciously and proactively try to personalize or reinforce the learning content or the learning context. For instance, agentic engagement may be reflected when students make suggestions, ask for clarification, and request an example in class. It stems from students' high motivation and can potentially induce changes in the learning environment. Moreover, agentic engagement can also be regarded as a continuous dialectical activity between student and teacher in the classroom (Reeve, 2013). In such activities, student-initiated questions may influence the teacher's subsequent instruction, which in turn may change students' engagement.

In addition, research in educational psychology has built a domain-specific approach to explore a series of psychological constructs, such as self-concept, motivation, and buoyancy (Martin & Marsh, 2008). Informed by this trend, language learning research has extended in a domain-specific way (Hiver et al., 2021). Hence, exploring language learning engagement is needed. This study investigated language learning engagement with the model proposed by Reeve and Tseng (2011). Research that explores engagement in language learning using the four-dimensional model will be reviewed.

Engagement in SLA

Since previous studies have generally validated the contribution of engagement to positive outcomes such as academic achievement and student well-being, engagement has become a continuing concern in foreign language education (Hiver et al., 2021; Jiang & Zhang, 2021). Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of studies investigating language learning

engagement using the four-dimensional model proposed by Reeve and Tseng (2011). Research on language learning engagement adopting the four-dimensional engagement model has focused on learners' engagement levels (e.g., Halili et al., 2018) and the relationships between engagement and learner factors (e.g., Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021; Eren & Rakıcıoğlu-Söylemez, 2020) and teacher factors (e.g., Jiang & Zhang, 2021). For example, Halili et al. (2018) explored the effects of offline and online learning on the engagement of Malaysian secondary school students. It was found that the students' levels of all four dimensions of engagement in online learning were significantly higher than those in offline learning. Moreover, students' behavioral engagement level in online learning was moderate, and the remaining dimensions in the online and offline settings were all at low levels. In the Chinese EFL context, Liu et al. (2022) investigated the structure and level of English learning engagement with secondary school students. The study found that students' English learning engagement comprised three dimensions: cognitive engagement, agentic engagement, and behavioral engagement. The students' overall engagement, behavioral engagement, and cognitive engagement were at moderate to high levels, and their agentic engagement was at low to moderate levels. To conclude, less attention has been directed to language learning engagement level and structure. More studies are needed to explore language learning engagement levels in diverse cultural and learning contexts.

In addition, researchers have found that language learning engagement is positively related to a range of learner factors, such as learning orientation (e.g., Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021), enjoyment (e.g., Guo, 2021), boredom (e.g., Liu et al., 2022; Wang & Liu, 2022), motivation (e.g., Wang & Liu, 2022), and academic achievement (e.g., Eren & Rakıcıoğlu-Söylemez, 2020; Guo, 2021). For example, previous research has revealed a facilitative effect of engagement on foreign language enjoyment (FLE) (e.g., Guo, 2021). Guo (2021) explored the relationship between FLE and engagement and their effects on academic achievement and absence among Chinese non-English major students. Results showed that FLE and engagement were positively correlated, and the effect was reciprocal. Moreover, FLE and engagement had a significantly low positive correlation with academic achievement.

Furthermore, research has shown that engagement may moderate the effects of other learner factors on academic achievement, with the research primarily focusing on the recently proposed dimension, agentic engagement (e.g., Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021; Eren & Rakıcıoğlu-Söylemez, 2020). For instance, Almusharraf and Bailey (2021) examined the relationships between online collaborative learning orientation, academic learning expectations, and agentic engagement in an English video class during the pandemic among Korean college students. Results showed that agentic engagement was significantly and positively related to collaborative learning orientation and academic learning expectations. Furthermore, agentic engagement mediated the relationship between collaborative language learning orientation and academic learning expectations.

Apart from student factors, significant effect of teacher factors on engagement has been uncovered (e.g., Jiang & Zhang, 2021). Jiang and Zhang (2021) explored the effects of three teaching styles (perceived autonomy support, social relatedness, and controlling) on the agentic engagement of Chinese non-English majors and the moderating effect of goal orientations (mastery-approach goals and performance-approach goals) on the relationship between the two variables. Different teaching styles were found to have different impacts on agentic engagement, with perceived autonomy support being a positive predictor of agentic engagement and perceived controlling being a negative predictor of agentic engagement. Goal orientations had a positive predictive effect on agentic engagement and were moderating factors for the association between teaching styles and agentic engagement.

To summarize, research on language learning engagement using the four-dimensional model has uncovered engagement levels and the relationships between engagement and other factors. To date, research has tended to adopt quantitative research designs, with a predominant use of questionnaires. Some studies employed mixed-method designs with qualitative data collected through interviews (e.g., Guo, 2021). In terms of research participants, college students were the primary research samples. Future research should employ richer data collection methods to investigate secondary school students' language learning engagement.

As such, the present study aimed to explore language learning engagement with Chinese EFL learners. Specifically, this study examined the levels of English learning engagement and investigated how students' English learning engagement pattern was shaped. The research questions are as follows:

1) What are the levels of students' English learning engagement?

2) What are the influencing factors of students' English learning engagement?

Methodology

The study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), collecting quantitative and qualitative data via a questionnaire and an interview protocol. The quantitative phase was conducted first to identify levels of engagement. Then the qualitative research built on the quantitative results was carried out to explain the initial quantitative results in more detail. The adoption of the qualitative method makes it possible to explore why a specific phenomenon occurs rather than merely describing happenings and attitudes (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Participants

In Chinese senior high schools, English is a compulsory course for students from all grades. Respondents to the questionnaires in this study were 473 senior high school students from Northeast China (207 males and 266 females). Among them, 198 students were from grade 1, 105 were from grade 2, and 170 were from grade 3 (see details in Table 1).

Table 1. Basic Information of Participants

		Male		Female		Total	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Grade	Grade 1	83	41.9	115	58.0	198	41.9
	Grade 2	59	56.1	46	43.8	105	22.2
	Grade 3	65	38.2	105	61.8	170	35.9

Five students among the respondents to the questionnaires were chosen to participate in the interviews. The sampling strategy for the interviewees was the maximum variation in terms of the interviewee's grade and gender. Information on the interviewees and their scores on each dimension of the scale are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Interviewees' Scores Engagement

Student	Gender	Grade	BE	CE	EE	AE
S1	male	3	4.00	3.00	3.25	2.40
S2	male	1	4.80	4.50	5.00	4.60
S3	female	3	5.60	5.13	5.50	5.00
S4	male	3	5.40	3.75	5.50	5.80
S5	female	2	4.60	4.75	5.50	4.60

Note. BE= behavioral engagement; CE=cognitive engagement; EE= emotional engagement; AE= agentic engagement

Instruments

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was written in Chinese and consisted of two sections. The first part collected the participants' demographic features, including their genders and grades. The second part was the Chinese version of the learner engagement scale (LES), containing 22 items measuring students' English learning engagement. The original LES was established by Reeve and Tseng (2011). Although LES is not a scale specifically designed to measure engagement in language learning, research has validated the high reliability and validity of LES in language learning contexts (e.g., Guo, 2021). All items were measured on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The scale measured four dimensions of students' engagement: behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic engagement. In this study, minor modifications were made to the original items to make the scale more applicable to English learning contexts. For example, item 1, "I listen carefully in class" was changed to "I listen carefully in English class". The LES in the present study showed high internal reliability (see details in Table 3). Moreover, the willingness of respondents to participate in the follow-up interview was collected at the end of the questionnaire. Students who were willing to participate in the interview left their contact details.

Table 3. Dimensions, Reliability, Items, and Sample Items of LES

Dimension	Cronbach's Alpha	Items	Sample Items
Behavioral Engagement	.93	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	Item 1: I listen carefully in English class.
Emotional Engagement	.90	6, 7, 8, 9	Item 6: I enjoy learning new things in English class.
Cognitive Engagement	.92	10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17	Item 15: When I'm learning English, I stop once in a while and go over what I have been doing.
Agentic Engagement	.90	18, 19, 20, 21, 22	Item 21: During English class, I express my preferences and opinions.

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data to validate and complement the quantitative data, thereby "putting flesh on the bones" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 45). The interview protocol was developed based on the quantitative results of the present study. The interviews were carried out using open-ended questions and conducted in Chinese to ensure complete understanding and expression. The interview questions were centered on participants' English learning experiences and the influencing factors of their engagement in English learning.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process was conducted in two phases: the questionnaire and the interview phases. In the first phase, a questionnaire was distributed online through Wenjuanxing, an online website. Students were invited to fill out the questionnaire voluntarily after their online consent. Before filling out the questionnaire, the participants were informed that the purpose of this study was to understand their English learning process, and the data would be used for research purposes only. Participants were further assured that participation or non-participation would not affect their school life, and no identifying information would be included. In the second stage, the first author randomly contacted some students who left contact details in the questionnaires. Five students participated in the interviews via phone calls. Interviews were conducted individually with each participant and recorded with the interviewees' permission. The average length of the interviews was 14 minutes. All the interviews were done in Chinese, the students' first language. The excerpts presented in this paper were transcribed and translated into English by the first author.

Accordingly, data analysis proceeded in two phases. In the first phase, descriptive analyses were conducted using SPSS 23.0 to have a panoramic view of students' engagement. In the second phase, the qualitative data were analyzed following the thematic analysis guide proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis of the interview data adopted a deductive approach with research questions and quantitative results in mind. The analysis was a recursive process, with the authors moving back and forth among the interview transcripts, codes, themes, and reports. The first author familiarized herself with the data by performing verbatim transcriptions of the interview recordings and then repeatedly listening to the recordings for accuracy. Next, the qualitative data was coded around the quantitative results. The two authors conducted the initial round of coding on the transcriptions seperately. The authors then discussed the coding results and finalised the codes. Then, the codes were combined to form overarching themes. After reviewing the codes and extracts for each theme and the entire interview data, the report of the qualitative findings was written.

Results

The first research question considered the levels of students' English learning engagement. Students' engagement was measured by a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Averages of 4.00-6.00 were considered high levels; 3.00-3.90 were classified as moderate levels; and 1.00-2.90 were regarded as low levels. The descriptive statistics of engagement are presented in Table 4, including extreme scores, means, and standard deviations. The global engagement mean was 4.01(*SD*=.92). This revealed that students reported a high level of global engagement, indicating that Chinese senior high school students were generally well-engaged in English learning. In terms of the levels of dimensions of engagement, the study found that students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement levels were all at high levels, and their agentic engagement was at a moderate level. Among the four dimensions of engagement, students' behavioral engagement (*M*=4.57, *SD*=1.00) was the highest, followed by their emotional (*M*=4.40, *SD*=1.06) and cognitive engagement (*M*=4.10, *SD*=1.02). Their agentic engagement level (*M*=3.31, *SD*=1.23) was the lowest.

Table 4 Results of Descriptive Analysis of Engagement

Variables	Min	Max	M	SD
Behavioral Engagement	1.00	6.00	4.57	1.00
Emotional Engagement	1.00	6.00	4.40	1.06
Cognitive Engagement	1.00	6.00	4.10	1.02
Agentic Engagement	1.00	6.00	3.31	1.23
Global Engagement	1.00	6.00	4.01	.92

The quantitative results identified the English learning engagement pattern of Chinese senior high school students, implicating that students were generally well-engaged in English learning. However, they were less agentically engaged in English learning. The qualitative findings of this study provided possible explanations for this characteristic, identifying a series of influencing factors of engagement.

The qualitative analysis yielded two themes regarding students' engagement characteristic of lower agentic engagement: manifesting in specific occasions and influenced by personal and contextual factors. The interview data revealed that Chinese senior high school students' agentic engagement could be categorized into in-classroom agentic engagement and out-of-classroom agentic engagement, depending on the occasions in which it was manifested. The findings showed that students had lower in-classroom agentic engagement. Their agentic engagement was mainly manifested outside the English class.

All five interviewees indicated that they seldom or did not actively express their opinions about the learning contents or teachers' teaching styles in class. They preferred to discuss their thoughts with their teachers after class, indicating low in-classroom agentic engagement. Four interviews uncovered the influence of the traditional Chinese concept of "honoring and respecting the teacher" on students' low in-classroom agentic engagement. When asked what they would do if they had questions in class, the students responded as follows:

Extract 1

I will not argue back and just hide my thoughts. I just do not want to be confrontational with the teacher. (Student 1)

Extract 2

If I interrupt the teacher in class, I may affect the teacher's teaching progress, which is also not good for the teacher. (Student 3)

Extract 3

If I interrupt the teacher in class, I may show doubt about the teacher's teaching method. It may show distrust toward the teacher, and it may also have a negative effect on my classmates. (Student 3)

Student 1 indicated that he "hide" his ideas in class because he did not want to "be confrontational with the teacher". Furthermore, Student 3 stated that expressing one's opinion in class might reflect "doubt" and "distrust" of the teacher and disrupt the teacher's teaching progress. The above extracts suggested that students respected the teacher's authority and were reluctant to initiate questions in class, which they perceived as disrespectful.

Teachers' teaching strategies might also be an influential factor on the occasions when students' agentic engagement in English learning was manifested. The interviews with Student 1 and Student 2 confirmed this view.

Extract 4

Our teacher is a little rushed if he/she has to explain something in class. I think he/she mainly wants to progress the teaching process. If I talk to him/her after class, he/she will teach more patiently. In English class, his/her main objective is to make the majority of the students understand the lesson. He/she asks the small group of students who do not understand the learning contents to come to him/her after class. (Student 1)

Extract 5

Many students in my class are good at English, so I often ask them questions after class or ask the teacher during the evening study period. Our teacher has a seat outside the classroom, and he/she sits there. So we can go out and ask him/her questions when we have time during the evening study period. (Student 2)

Student 1 said his English teacher's teaching strategy was to "make the majority of the students understand the lesson". His teacher asked those who had questions to address them after class. Like Student 1's teacher, Student 2's teacher also had a specific time and place to address students' questions, and students tended to express their opinions and solve their problems at that time. In other words, since students were aware of their teachers' teaching strategies and were reluctant to disobey them, their agentic engagement was usually reflected after class.

Students' learning strategies might also influence the occasions when their agentic engagement in English learning was manifested. Interviews with Student 1 and Student 2 lend support for this argument.

Extract 6

If the teacher is teaching something when I ask questions in class, I will not be able to hear this knowledge point. That is, I will miss some knowledge, which is not good. (Student 2)

According to Extract 4, Student 1 thought that if he expressed his opinions after class, his teacher would "teach more patiently". Furthermore, Student 2 believed that if he expressed his views in class, he would interrupt his teacher's teaching and "miss some knowledge". These interviews indicated that students' learning strategies might explain their low in-classroom agentic engagement.

As noted above, the findings revealed that Chinese senior high school students' agentic engagement was mainly expressed after class, which was influenced by the traditional Chinese concept of "respecting teachers", teachers' teaching strategies, and students' learning strategies. The above three factors inhibited students' agentic engagement in English class, resulting in lower levels of in-classroom agentic engagement. This provided a possible explanation for students' relatively low agentic engagement in English learning.

In addition to uncovering factors that influence students' in-classroom agentic engagement, this study also identified factors that affect students' overall agentic engagement in English learning, including English proficiency, English learning climate, and teaching styles. The interview with Student 1 revealed the impact of English proficiency and English learning climate on agentic engagement. As Student 1 accounted:

Extract 7

> Because our knowledge is limited, we may not be able to ask too many questions. And my classmates are less proactive. It may be quite a long time until one or two students propose questions (about the English class). (Student 1)

As indicated in Extract 7, due to his "limited" English proficiency and the lack of a positive and active English learning climate, Student 1 and his classmates generally had low agentic engagement in English learning. Student 1's accounts revealed that the lack of enough English proficiency and a positive learning climate might suppress students' agentic engagement.

The interviews also suggested that teaching styles exerted an influence on students' agentic engagement in English learning. As evident in the interview extracts below.

Extract 8

> Well, (the teacher's teaching method) it also has much influence. Because the class is student-oriented, and the teacher plays a supporting role. He/she guides us to propose questions and figure them out. (Student 3)

Extract 9

> The teacher said that if he/she had any problems, we could give him/her advice, that is, to help each other, to improve together. We will actively talk to the teacher if we have any problems with English learning or if the teacher has any problems. (Student 2)

Extract 10

> My teacher usually starts the lesson by asking questions, and he/she spends about a quarter of the class asking questions. After that, he/she may explain the exercises. Because the main purpose of our study is to do exercises. He/she often asks us to do the exercises first, then explains them. That is, he/she analyzes the text and talks about the methods. It is like learning English for the sake of doing exercises. (Student 1)

When it comes to the teacher's influence on students' agentic engagement, Student 3 recalled that her English classes were "student-oriented", with the teacher playing "a supporting role" in guiding students to take the initiative to discover their problems in learning. This teaching style facilitated the students' agentic engagement. Student 2 also mentioned that his English teacher encouraged students to actively express their views, which contributed to their agentic engagement. In contrast, the agentic engagement levels of Student 1 and Student 4 were generally low. They indicated that their English classes were teacher-oriented, with students following teachers' instructions. The above extracts suggest that teaching styles that encourage student autonomy may promote students' agentic engagement, while controlling teaching styles may suppress students' agentic engagement. Therefore, teachers' teaching styles might account for part of the low agentic engagement among Chinese senior high school students. Traditional English class is mainly controlled by teachers, with students exhibiting less autonomy over their learning, which may lead to lower student agentic engagement.

Discussion

This study uncovered the English learning engagement levels and characteristics in the Chinese EFL context. The influencing factors of English learning engagement were also identified. The results showed that students' global engagement in English learning was high, indicating heightened attention and involvement were relatively prevalent in Chinese senior high school students' English learning. This study echoes the findings from previous studies, in which Chinese EFL learners reported high global engagement levels (Guo, 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Wang & Liu, 2022). To elaborate, students had high levels of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement and moderate agentic engagement. This suggested that Chinese EFL learners were more inclined to engage in English learning behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. Students' agentic engagement in English learning was lower. This result is consistent with previous findings that Chinese EFL learners were more likely to engage in English language learning from the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive aspects and had relatively low levels of agentic engagement (Guo, 2021; Liu et al., 2022). Moreover, some researchers conducted studies specifically on agentic engagement and uncovered that students' agentic engagement was at a moderate level, partially corroborating the findings of the present study (e.g., Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021; Jiang & Zhang, 2021).

The characteristic of less engaging in English learning agentically might be shaped by personal and contextual factors. Consistent with this paper, previous research has confirmed that students' English learning engagement was influenced by both personal and contextual factors (Sulis, 2023). In addition, the interviews revealed that students' agentic engagement in English learning mainly manifested after English class. Their low in-classroom engagement may account for their relatively low agentic engagement. This study found that affected by the traditional Chinese concept of "honoring and respecting the teacher", teachers' teaching strategies, and students' learning strategies, students were reluctant to take the initiative to express their views in class. Representations of students' agentic engagement in class, such as proactively offering their views and opinions, might be recognized as disrupting the class and disrespecting the

teacher. Consistent with the present study, Guo (2021) conjectured that Chinese EFL learners' agentic engagement might be influenced by traditional Chinese concepts of respecting the teacher. This tradition may lead to students' reluctance to challenge teachers' authority and prestige, thus resulting in low agentic engagement. Moreover, some teachers set a precise time and place to address doubts. As a result, students tend to comply with the teacher's teaching strategies and do not express their opinions in class, resulting in lower in-classroom agentic engagement. Such delayed expressions may reduce the accuracy of students' initial opinions (Muir, 2020), and they may continue to hold back their ideas. Furthermore, students' learning strategies may also contribute to the suppression of their in-classroom agentic engagement. For example, Student 2 was unwilling to express his ideas in English class because he did not want to miss what the teacher was explaining.

Additionally, it was found that teaching styles, students' English proficiency and learning climate impacted their general agentic engagement. Teaching styles supporting students' autonomy promoted students' agentic engagement, while teacher-dominated teaching styles inhibited students' agentic engagement (Jiang & Zhang, 2021). According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), learners possess an inherent need to exercise agency in molding their learning experiences in accordance with their beliefs, values, and interests. Therefore, students typically exhibit greater engagement in tasks they have voluntarily selected. This provided a potential explanation for why teaching strategies and styles impacted students' agentic engagement. Moreover, uncertainty about their English proficiency may lead students to be concerned that they will "not be able to" give sound and effective opinions and suggestions, preventing them from taking the initiative to express their ideas about English learning. Competence is one of the three needs in SDT, encompassing learners' confidence in their ability to confront challenges and achieve desired outcomes through their actions. Uncertainty about their English proficiency may decrease their motivation and induce passive engagement during learning activities. In addition, the inadequate involvement of the majority of students within the class creates the lack of a positive classroom English learning environment. This may therefore lead to a lower willingness of individual students to actively construct English learning. This finding partially confirms previous studies that a positive classroom English learning climate facilitated students' agentic engagement (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021).

Conclusion

Considering the centrality of engagement for successful language learning (Mercer, 2019), it is appropriate and necessary to understand the state of student language learning engagement. The present study explored engagement in English learning in the Chinese EFL context, uncovering the levels and influencing factors of students' engagement. The study found that students were generally well-engaged in English learning. Furthermore, quantitative results identified specific characteristics of students' English learning engagement. That is, they were more likely to engage in English learning behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data further revealed that the relatively low agentic engagement was partially caused by students' low in-classroom agentic engagement. In addition, the findings identified a series of personal and contextual influencing factors of agentic engagement.

This paper adopted a mixed-methods approach, which, in addition to measuring levels of dimensions of engagement, incorporates interviews to identify the primary factors influencing Chinese students' levels of engagement. The qualitative phase revealed the impact of culture on student engagement. Based on these findings, future research could employed social-cultural perspective on the investigation of student engagement.

As for practical significance, the findings provide teachers with a clearer understanding of the dimensions of students' engagement in English learning. English teachers should devote more attention to students' agentic engagement. For example, teachers can establish an equitable communication environment with students to free them from the traditional teacher-student power dynamics which inhibit their agentic engagement. Teachers can also provide more learning support for students with poor English proficiency, which offers a sufficient knowledge foundation for their agentic engagement. Additionally, teachers are recommended to enhance students' agentic engagement by creating a positive classroom learning atmosphere and adopting teaching styles that promote student autonomy.

Recommendations

To increase data richness, future research should adopt various approaches to data collection, such as examining students' behavioral engagement in English learning by assessing their daily homework completion (e.g., Qiu & Lo, 2017). In addition, further investigations can increase data richness by triangulation among multiple data sources, such as conducting interviews with teachers to capture students' engagement. In terms of the accuracy of data, future research could use more immediate data collection methods. For instance, asking students to describe moments when engagement generated at the end of a lesson.

Limitations

The results of this study were subject to the following limitations. The primary limitation of this study was the lack of data richness. Although this study collected quantitative and qualitative data, the data type was constrained, and the data source was relatively homogeneous. The present study was further limited by the inherent limitation of the instrument. Although retrospective interviews have the advantage of exploring under-researched areas in social

science (Dörnyei, 2007), their reliability has been challenged. Due to the need for delayed recall of experiences, the accuracy of students' accounts may be harmed (Muir, 2020).

Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the Project of Discipline Innovation and Advancement (PODIA) - Foreign Language Education Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University (Grant number: 2020SYLZDXM011).

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Yang: Conceptualization, design, analysis, writing. Liu: Editing/reviewing, supervision.

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