

Introduction

Imagine your ideal language class. What would the students be like? How would they behave? We – Sarah and Zoltán – asked ourselves these same questions. We agreed that we would like our ‘dream’ classroom to be buzzing with activity; we would wish for students to be actively involved in language-related tasks, clearly focused on what they are doing, and finding their participation emotionally satisfying and academically beneficial. Such a state of active involvement has been described in educational psychology under the rubric of ‘student engagement’, described in the *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* as ‘effortful learning through interaction with the teacher and the classroom learning opportunities’ (Christenson, Reschly and Wylie 2012: vi). Indeed, in a recent special issue of the journal *Educational Psychologist* dedicated to this subject, engagement was characterised as ‘the holy grail of learning’ (Sinatra, Heddy and Lombardi 2015: 1).

Engagement is one of the hottest research topics in the field of educational psychology. Research shows that multifarious benefits occur when students are engaged in their own learning, including increased motivation and achievement.

(Sinatra et al. 2015: 1)

Sometimes the dream scenario of having an entire class of engaged learners who pursue learning proactively, with focus and passion, does come true, making these periods some of the most memorable and fulfilling times in a teacher’s career. At other times, however, classroom reality turns out to be less rosy, with students remaining distant, distracted and disengaged. Rather worryingly, Pekrun, Goetz, Daniels, Stupnisky and Perry (2010) report that boredom is one of the most frequently experienced emotions by pupils in schools. Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider and Shernoff (2003: 159) explain that:

research has found high rates of boredom, alienation, and disconnection with schooling. Studies have characterized high school students, in particular, as bored, staring out classroom windows, counting the seconds for the bell to ring, and pervasively disengaged from the learning process.

Such less-than-ideal states of student involvement are alarmingly common. Shernoff et al. (2003), for example, report that in one study, 50% of students evaluated their classes as boring, and this estimate has been confirmed by a recent Gallup (2015) survey in the US, involving over 900,000 public school students from over 3,300 schools. The results

revealed that only half of the students were engaged in school, while 29% of them were not engaged and 21% were actively disengaged. Furthermore, when the data was broken down to specific grades, a consistent trend of decline emerged: while in the fifth grade (ages 10–11) only about a quarter of the students reported being disengaged, this proportion increased to two-thirds by Grade 11 (ages 16–17).

What's happening? Why are so many schools failing to engage such a high percentage of their learners? Why are some learners not engaged, while some of their classmates are? How can the situation be improved to ensure more, if not all, learners are engaged? What can we as teachers do to strive towards realising our ideal language classroom? Finding answers to these questions has been the main motivation for us behind writing this book. In order to set the scene, this introduction will address four main issues: (a) What is 'engagement' and what is it not? (b) Why is student engagement particularly important in language classes? (c) What are the benefits of focussing on engagement rather than other related concepts such as motivation or self-regulation? (d) And, finally, what is this book intended to offer and how?

What is 'Student Engagement'?

The most telling answer to the question of what 'student engagement' is has probably been given by Barkley (2010: 4) who said, 'Well, the answer is that it means different things to different people.' This variability is partly caused by the fact that the word *engage* and its derivatives (e.g. *engagement*, *engaging*) are used both in everyday language and as technical terms, which means there are a wide range of acceptable meanings. The essence of the notion is seemingly straightforward: it concerns *active participation* and *involvement* in certain behaviours – in the case of student engagement, in school-related activities and academic tasks.

What complicates things is the fact that this student involvement has both external and internal dimensions, with the former concerning the amount of actual learning behaviours a student displays through their observable actions, and the latter relating to internal aspects, such as a learner's cognitive and emotional engagement. In the ideal scenario, the two dimensions go hand in hand. However, it is well known that it is possible for someone to merely 'go through the motions', that is, to exhibit seemingly active participation in a task without involving themselves at the level of thought or affect. Indeed, some students can become very good at merely keeping up a pretence, complying with expected norms without engaging in active learning in a meaningful manner. In such 'shallow' engagement, the external dimension is not augmented by the internal dimension, and this imbalance considerably reduces the learning potential of the activity.

The realisation that engagement can have different dimensions that do not always align with each other has led scholars to define the notion as a multifaceted concept. A number of different taxonomies have been proposed over the past two decades, typically distinguishing between behavioural, cognitive, affective and social aspects (see e.g. Finn and Zimmer 2012). However, while it is clear that there are different levels and dimensions of engagement, we have chosen to agree with Skinner, Furrer, Marchand and Kindermann (2008: 778) in that the 'core construct, most prototypical of engagement, is behavioural participation in the classroom'. This active, participatory aspect of the concept is the most attractive characteristic for us, especially for the language classroom, and, in our view, this is indeed one of the features that commends considering this construct over other related concepts such as motivation and self-regulation (which refers to learners' managing and directing their thoughts, feelings and actions around learning). Thus, in this book, we perceive 'engagement' to be always associated with *action*, ideally combined with internal dimensions of cognitive and affective involvement.

Behavioural engagement draws on the idea of participation; it includes involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities and is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropping out.

(Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris 2004: 60)

Why is Student Engagement Particularly Important in Language Classes?

It is easy to understand why the notion of engagement has made such an impact in educational psychology over the past two decades: it promises meaningful learning accompanied by active participation in classrooms and school life. The emphasis on active task engagement is equally important in the second language (L2) classroom – in fact, one might argue that in language education the significance of student involvement is even greater than in pursuing other subject matters. This is because the automatization of L2 skills requires an extended practice period, not unlike learner drivers having to go through a lot of hands-on practice on the road in order to reach mastery.

Most language teaching professionals would agree that mastering communicative language skills simply will not take place without participating in extensive communicative practice, and this requires the learners' willing engagement: students have to 'stick their necks out' and actively take part in what is a rather face-threatening and stressful activity (i.e. communicating in a foreign language with limited language

resources). Accordingly, one of the key principles of communicative language teaching – and of task-based language learning in particular – has been the ‘learning-through-doing’ tenet, which foregrounds the learners’ participatory experience in meaningful L2 interaction within communicative tasks. No method of language teaching can deliver results without ensuring that students are actively engaged in the process.

The term *engagement* is appearing with increasing frequency in the literature on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and language teaching methodology. In her article on ‘Engagement with language’, Svalberg (2009) offered the first systematic discussion of the concept in our field. However, as the title of her paper indicates, she adopted a language awareness perspective (i.e., engaging with the ‘language’), whereas the current conceptualisation concerns the motivational dimension (i.e., engaging with ‘language learning’). In her recent overview, Svalberg (2018) reaffirms her use of the term as ‘Engagement with Language’ and acknowledges how this differs from the meaning adopted by us in this book. However, engagement with learning is also gradually gaining increased scholarly attention within SLA (e.g. Philp and Duchesne 2016; Quint Oga-Baldwin and Nakata 2017; Stroud 2017; Snyder and Alperer-Tatli 2007).

Saying ‘I taught students something, they just didn’t learn it’ is akin to saying ‘I sold them the car, they just didn’t buy it.’

(Barkley 2010: 16)

What are the Benefits of Focusing on Engagement in Contemporary L2 Classrooms?

Most teachers would agree on the significance of engagement. However, is this the best thing to focus on when trying to improve instructional practices in the language classroom? After all, teaching methodologists and educational psychologists have been successfully examining a range of other factors related to classroom performance and student achievement; for example, in our own work, we have focused on issues such as motivation, metacognition, self-regulation, self-concept, learner beliefs, mindsets and group dynamics amongst others (e.g. Dörnyei 2009; Dörnyei and Ryan 2015; Mercer 2011; Mercer, Ryan and Williams 2012; Williams, Mercer and Ryan 2015), and we hope that these efforts have generated useful insights for scholars and practitioners.

Discussions of engagement, on the other hand, have been largely absent from the literature of L2 learning and teaching. This is not because language teachers do not want to see active and involved students in their classes; in fact, as we have argued above, student involvement is

arguably even more important for the purpose of effective communicative language teaching than for many other subject matters. Instead, the reason behind this neglect has more to do with the fact that most language specialists focusing on the psychological dimension of instructed SLA have traditionally turned to another term, *motivation*, when discussing the students' overall academic commitment and their attitudes towards the process and the contexts of language learning.

The study of L2 motivation has a history of five decades, producing considerable theoretical and practical insights (see e.g. Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011). Because it has been a highly fruitful direction in explaining student success and failure, motivation research has become a success story in applied linguistics (see e.g. Boo, Dörnyei and Ryan 2015). As a result, one could almost say that the high level of interest in motivation has 'stolen the show' and diverted attention away from engagement. In addition, there has also been a great deal of work in SLA on certain cognitive and behavioural factors that are also connected to 'engagement' in psychology – most notably learning strategies and self-regulation (e.g. Cohen 2011; Cohen and Macaro 2007; Griffiths 2013; Oxford 2011). In this way, the field of SLA has already included strong and constructive lines of inquiry to examine student performance. This, then, begs the question of why we propose in this book to digress from these established avenues and open up yet another pathway, this time centred around *engagement*. What are the specific benefits of focusing on engagement, and in what way does this line of thinking promise to be more useful than other factors examined in the past?

Our answer to these questions concerns three key features of engagement: its inherently *active*, *holistic* and *practical* nature. We would like to propose that: (a) the term's emphasis on active involvement suits well the changing nature of contemporary classrooms; (b) the term is fully compatible with recent calls in the field of SLA for a more dynamic and holistic consideration of the multiple factors that contribute to language learning success; and (c) the term suggests an intuitively appealing, teacher-friendly and practical approach to involving students in their learning. Let us look at these three points in a bit more detail.

Engagement Includes Active Involvement That Suits Contemporary Classrooms

The notion of 'engagement' offers a crucial advantage over motivation and other relevant learner characteristics, one we believe is critical for effective teaching practice in the fast-paced reality of the twenty-first century: its direct link to concrete classroom behaviours. Most learner characteristics are not manifest directly in the students' actions, but only *indirectly*; they only indicate a student's *potential* for successful learning, rather than how this potential is actually realised. Let us consider motivation, which is the concept most closely related to engagement; it is clear that although

a motivated student is likely to do well at school, this cannot be taken for granted, because various distractions can cancel out, or put on hold, even relatively strong motivational commitments. In today's globalised, digital age, young people are continuously bombarded with information and communications through multiple channels, all intended to captivate their attention, and the pace of social life has been intensified by social media in an unprecedented manner. Consequently, there are simply too many competing influences on a student's mind at any time, and this creates a whole new situation for educators and psychologists to consider.

Teachers in institutions across the country tell me that teaching today can be tough. The "twitchspeed" pace and multi-layered delivery of modern media can make a lecture feel incredibly slow and boring ... Globalization and open door access have filled our classrooms with learners reflecting such a dizzying array of backgrounds and academic preparedness that teachers are often hard-pressed to find a collective starting point or the commonalities that create a sense of community. ... For many of us teaching today, competing for the attention of our students and engaging them in meaningful learning is a profound and ongoing challenge.

(Barkley 2010: xi-xii)

It appears, therefore, that in the changing educational and social landscape of the contemporary classroom, it may not be enough to merely create a facilitative learning environment for students to take advantage of (as has traditionally been recommended); we need to also ensure that the students' positive disposition is *realised in action*, without being hijacked by the plethora of other pressing and ever-salient distractions. To be sure, motivation is undoubtedly necessary for 'preparing the deal', but engagement is indispensable for *sealing the deal*. As Jang, Reeve and Deci (2010: 588) conclude, 'In classroom settings, engagement is particularly important because it functions as a behavioural pathway through which students' motivational processes contribute to their subsequent learning and development, including the skills they develop and the grades they make.'

On the basis of these considerations, we propose that the main benefit of exploring the notion of engagement over motivation is that it allows us to address both the motive and its activation *together*, in a *unified* concept: when students are engaged, they are inevitably fuelled by some motivation that gives direction to their action, but the fact that they are engaged also means that this motivational drive has succeeded in cutting through the surrounding multitude of distractions, temptations and alternatives. One could almost say that focusing on engagement is like killing two birds with one stone: by engaging students we motivate them *and* ensure that their motivation is realised.

Engagement Suits a Holistic Consideration of Factors Contributing to Successful Language Learning

The integrative nature of the notion of 'engagement' described above offers a second, and perhaps somewhat unexpected, bonus: it makes the concept compatible with the recent focus in the field of SLA on complex dynamic systems. A complex dynamic system is a system which comprises multiple components which all interact together. Such a system has emergent characteristics, which means that the characteristics of the whole system are more than merely the sum of its component parts. In other words, the system as a whole develops its own unique characteristics through the interaction of the component parts.

L2 scholars and teachers have long known that language learning success requires the combined and interactive operation of a number of different elements and conditions that are relevant to specific learning situations. Over the past two decades, there has been a paradigm shift in several areas of applied linguistics towards adopting the principles of complex dynamic systems theory in order to better account for such a dynamic and holistic perspective (see e.g. Larsen-Freeman 2012; Verspoor, de Bot and Lowie 2011). This approach has been prominent in the study of language learning psychology and of L2 motivation in particular (see Dörnyei, MacIntyre and Henry 2015).

As part of an attempt to reconceptualise learner characteristics in a holistic and dynamic vein, Dörnyei (2009) has proposed that we should focus on the interaction of three fundamental ingredients of the human mind – cognition (i.e. thoughts), motivation and affect (i.e. emotions) – and that we should see every learner characteristic as emerging from their dynamic relationship with each other. We can appreciate the special value of the notion of engagement against this backdrop: in line with the above proposal, engagement does indeed emerge from the interaction of cognition, motivation and affect while also involving corresponding *behaviours* and actions. In this sense, Fredricks et al. (2004: 60) are right to conclude that, 'engagement can be thought of as a "meta" construct'. In other words, it is more than the sum of its dynamically interacting parts.

The fusion of behaviour, emotion, and cognition under the idea of engagement is valuable because ... these factors are dynamically interrelated within the individual; they are not isolated processes. Robust bodies of work address each of the components separately, but considering engagement as a multidimensional construct argues for examining antecedents and consequences of behaviour, emotion, and cognition simultaneously and dynamically, to test for additive or interactive effects.

(Fredricks et al. 2004: 61)

Engagement Offers a Practical Approach to Involving Students in Their Learning

We have argued above that teachers often face challenges – perhaps more so than ever before – when trying to involve students in contemporary classrooms, and, for this reason, the dynamic, action-oriented nature of the notion of engagement is appealing to educators across disciplines and contexts. Two further key characteristics make engagement especially attractive in practical terms: it is *teacher-friendly* and *malleable*.

- *Teacher-friendliness*. An observation that initially prompted us to start considering writing this book was the fact that whenever the phrase ‘engaging students’ came up in discussions with teachers, they seemed to respond to the concept keenly, showing great interest in it – more even than in the popular term ‘motivation’. Yes, they agreed, motivation is relevant and important, but their immediate classroom concern was more than merely motivating learners; they wanted to *engage* them in the various tasks and activities. The fact that engagement resonated with classroom practitioners so readily is fully consistent with the arguments cited earlier about the educational immediacy of the notion.
- *Malleable quality*. Teachers not only find the notion of ‘engaging students’ relevant and important, but also applicable. A traditional teacher role is to involve students as much as possible in the classes, and therefore an approach that foregrounds how to work with this is intuitively appealing to classroom practitioners. While a more abstract notion such as ‘motivating learners’ might raise the question of whose responsibility this task should be, engagement is more straightforward in this respect, as it emphasises actions and strategies that teachers can execute. Learner engagement is something teachers can proactively affect and develop, although, naturally, there remain a number of reasons beyond the teacher’s control why sometimes learners just do not engage. However, as Jang et al. (2010: 588) rightly point out, when students do engage in classroom learning, ‘there is almost always some aspect of the teacher’s behaviour that plays a role in the initiation and regulation of the engagement’. Pham (2019) used the wonderful metaphor that will be familiar to many, but with a twist. She explained that indeed teachers can take a horse to water but they can’t make it drink; however, they can make it thirsty! Focusing on engagement thus underlines the fact that who teachers are and what they do matter.

Another reason for the growing interest in engagement is that it is presumed to be malleable. ... Routes to student engagement may be social or academic and may stem from opportunities in the school or classroom for participation, interpersonal relationships, and intellectual endeavours. Currently, many interventions, such as improving the school climate or changing curriculum and standards, explicitly or implicitly focus on engagement as a route to increased learning or decreased dropping out.

(Fredricks et al. 2004: 61)

What is This Book Intended to Offer and How?

As we have outlined, engagement emerges from the interaction of a number of factors and is best appreciated from a holistic perspective. To that end, in Chapter 1 we look at how learner engagement is affected by contextual factors at various levels, including the level of the language and society, school as an institution, and learners' family settings. The following chapters are concerned with the aspects of learner engagement that the teacher can affect more directly. In Chapters 2, 3 and 4, we consider how the teacher can create the foundations for learners to engage. We focus in particular on learner mindsets, teacher-student rapport, and classroom dynamics and culture. Then in Chapters 5 and 6, we focus on classroom tasks and look at how teachers can design tasks which trigger and maintain learner engagement.

Chapters 2 to 6 are organised into a series of principles and action points. Our logic behind this structure was to begin with the ideas and thinking that can be distilled into a number of principles. We then draw on all these principles to differing degrees to suggest concrete actions that teachers could take in their classrooms to enact the principles. The principles do not match one-to-one with the action points, but rather multiple principles can be reflected in a single action point. We hope this structure will enable teachers to reflect on the rationale behind the principles and then take away some concrete actions to try out in the classroom – as well as allowing them to use the principles to think of their own action points.

Our intention is to be highly practical, focusing on strategies and approaches that we believe can work in a range of L2 classrooms without being too prescriptive; while we will draw on a solid theoretical foundation of existing research in psychology and language education, we will take a deliberately applied approach in discussing the various ideas in terms of classroom practices, illustrated by quotes and reflection tasks. However, we would like to stress that this book is not intended to be a 'recipe-style' teaching resource. We are sensitive to the diversity of language learners and teaching contexts across the globe and agree that one size does not

fit all; therefore, what we intend to offer is a guiding set of ideas and principles for an age where teachers must work with learners who have ever shorter attention spans and for whom visual stimuli and digital teaching are no longer a novelty or motivating per se.

As such, we do not advocate a specific set of tools to use or not use but rather propose a series of actions that teachers can select from to implement in ways which suit them, their learners, their available resources, and their intended teaching aims. We believe that introducing language educators to the whole breadth of the construct of 'engagement' may help many of them to reflect on how they can ensure that their teaching practice is engaging for their learners as well as for themselves. As we have mentioned earlier, our focus on 'engagement' has been motivated by actual (and reported) teacher needs, and we feel that this new agenda for the field is not only highly promising but also overdue.