

An Overview of Language Engagement: The Importance of Student Engagement for Second Language Acquisition

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Received: May 7, 2015 Accepted: June 22, 2015 Published: June 24, 2015

doi:10.5296/jsel.v3i1.7891 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/jsel.v3i1.7891>

Abstract

Student engagement has become a frequently used term in the vocabulary of Higher Education, and particularly among those involved in research associated with teaching and learning. It has been shown that despite the passage of time, the importance of engaging all students in their education continues to resonate strongly with families, students, educators, and researchers (Appleton, 2008). Student engagement in education has been gathering more and more attention; however, most of the studies in this field focus on the school engagement in general. It is currently argued among educators that student engagement is very significant concept, where individual differences between students in terms of their ability, cultural background and motivation are more considerable (Brown, 2005; Biggs, 2003; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999).

This study investigates the importance of language engagement in second language acquisition. One of the significant roles of engagement in language acquisition is its perspective on reading. Much research has focused on engagement and it is clear from these studies that as students are more engaged academic performance is hence improved.

Key words: student engagement, engaged reader, involvement, challenge

1. Introduction

The phrases “student engagement” or “engagement in school ” are often cited (Haymore, Ringstaff,& Dwyer, 1994; Bangert-Drowns& Pyke, 2001; Cumming& Owen, 2001; Dodd, 1995; Finn, 1989; Fullarton, 2002; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider et al., 2003) as an essential component of programmatic interventions for students “at risk”.

Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) considered the potential of engagement as a meta construct and providing an opportunity to examine how these subsumed constructs interact. Nevertheless, Fredericks et al. (2004) also noted that there is considerable inconsistency in the concepts and terminology used across studies (see also Furlong et al., 2003; Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003). According to Zyngier (2008), student engagement has been identified as an important precursor to student learning. Engagement is now at the centre of mainstream education discussion and debate. Each discourse produces its own distinct understanding of what really defines student engagement. Coates (2007) holds that student engagement is a broad term, often perceived to encompass academic and non-academic features of the student learning experience, including active and collaborative learning or feeling supported by university learning communities.

According to Campbell, Voelkl, and Donahue (1997, online document) , in the United States, a national sample of students at three ages (9, 13, and 17 years) showed that the readers who were more engaged revealed higher achievement than the less engaged readers. In cross-age comparisons, 13-year-old students who were more engaged with reading achieved at a higher level than did 17-year-old students who were less engaged. Guthrie, Schafer, and Huang, (2001) stated Engaged readers can overcome obstacles to achievement and become agents of their own reading growth. Based on these views it can be said that engagement is strongly related to reading achievement.

If an engaged reader try to comprehend a text it’s not only because she can do it, but because she is motivated to do it and may enjoy it. Oldfather and Dahl (1994) and Turner (1995) demonstrate students’ enjoyment in reading for its own sake as essential to engaged reading. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1991), engaged reading is as a state of total absorption or “flow.” Cambourne (1995) discusses that engagement is a merger of multiple qualities that entails holding a purpose, seeking to understand, believing in one’s own capability, and taking responsibility for learning.

Guthrie, McGough, Bennett, and Rice (1996) believe that engaged readers are motivated, strategic, knowledgeable, and socially interactive. For a variety of personal goals engaged readers are motivated to read. They are strategic because of using multiple approaches to comprehend. They are knowledgeable for constructing new understanding from text. And they interact socially in their approach to literacy. Engaged readers can be considered as decision makers whose affects as well as their language and cognition play a role in their reading practices.

1.1 Engagement Theory

Guthrie and Wigfield (2000), writing about engagement and motivation in reading, argue that a theoretical rational literacy research can be generated from worthy of investigation in engagement theory. Anderson and Guthrie (1996, p. 1) believe that engagement theory which was created to express children's motivation for the task of reading, falls under the wider umbrella of motivation theory which suggests that motivation is a multifaceted construct containing (but not limited to) values such as personal goal-setting, the desire and willingness to pursue a goal in the absence of external reinforcement, and "curiosity, social interchange, emotional satisfaction, and self-efficacy".

Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) stated that engagement theory with a variety of descriptions, generally includes a vision of students who are eager to pursue the task at hand, actively involved in their work, and enjoy what they are doing which is similar to motivation theory. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) suggested a definition of engaged readers as "engaged readers in the classroom or elsewhere coordinate their strategies and knowledge (cognition) within a community of literacy (social) in order to fulfill their personal goals, desires, and intentions (motivation)" (p. 404). This description can be helpful in visualizing how engaged students of vocabulary instruction might appear. But, it is not directly applicable because Guthrie and Wigfield's definition is specific to engaged readers rather than to engaged students on the whole.

1.2 Definition of Engagement

The construct of engagement is defined in general as involvement, participation, and commitment to some set of activities. It is currently argued that engagement can be defined as a reflection or manifestation of motivated action and noted that action incorporates emotions, attention, goals, and other psychological processes along with persistent and effortful behavior (Skinner, Kindermann, Connell, & Wellborn, 2009a. According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), school engagement contains behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects.

Appleton (2006) articulates engagement as having multiple components. Finn's (1989) model, demonstrate engagement as it is comprised of behavioral (participation in class and school) and affective components (school identification, belonging, valuing learning). Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn(1992) and Marks (2000) offered similar definitions. According to Fredericks et al. (2004), nevertheless, it can be concluded that engagement was comprised of three subtypes: behavioral (e.g., positive conduct, effort, participation), cognitive (e.g., self-regulation, learning goals, investment in learning), and emotional or affective (e.g., interest, belonging, and positive attitude about learning) (see also Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003).

1.3 Student Engagement

Appleton (2008) professes the view that engagement is a primary theoretical model for understanding drop out and is necessary to promote school completion and defines it as graduation from high school with sufficient academic and social skills to partake in post

secondary enrollment options and/or the world of work (see also Christenson et al., 2008 and Finn, 2006). In fact sufficient engagement with school does not occur for far too many students.

According to Barton (2004), completing school with an appropriate set of skills is vital, and is even more significant as work positions with adequate compensation become increasingly less accessible to lower skilled applicants. In addition, Christenson et al. (2000) discusses that youth who do not complete high school are more likely to be incarcerated and experience long term dependency on social services. According to Sharkey et al. (2008), within academic literature, student engagement is often presented as a meta construct with two to four dimensions, containing behavioural, academic, psychological, and cognitive dimensions of engagement.

Previous research has established that in spite of a growing rhetoric about independent and autonomous learners (Thorpe, 2002) the teaching profession have no confidence that our students know how to learn best. Goodhew (2002) argues that how instead we offer them modularization and centralisation, a system where each topic has been packaged as a module which has been both delivered and examined within a single semester. These modules are centrally coordinated, and although wide choice exists in theory, teachers are able to screen out ‘undesirable’ students with numerous ‘prerequisites’ (where students have to have studied another module the previous year before accessing the module of choice).

Land and Bayne (2002) explains that when students engage with these offerings, there is no trust in their ability to complete them, leading to regimes of surveillance. Sinfield et al. (2004) expresses that the rhetoric of personalization and student centeredness constructs the individual learner primarily in the deficit, a shaving individual needs requiring individual support, and this hides and denies how people have been excluded from education because of their class or group position not because of individual flaws or lack of aspiration.

1.4 Importance of Engagement in Learning

Mosher & MacGowan (1985) expresses that student engagement with school is significant, as is the observation that far too many students are bored, unmotivated, and uninvolved, that is, disengaged from the academic and social aspects of school life. Appleton, J. (2008) believes that laws may regulate the structure of the educational system, but student perspectives and experiences substantially influence academic and social outcomes.

Zyngier (2008) states that while many authors argue about student engagement, that it is “strongly related to achievement” (Guthrie, 2001) and that “there is considerable evidence in the research literature of the association between engagement and positive academic outcomes” (Fredericks et al., 2003), others maintain that engagement is not a predictor of academic success (Willms, 2003) and that while the prevalence of disengaged students varies between countries and among schools with in countries this is not attributable solely to family background, or to academic achievement.

Willms (2003, p. 11) stated that while the “contextual affects” of school are important, a high percentage of minority or low socioeconomic status students in a school led to higher

dropout, but not necessarily disengagement Schlechty (2001, 2002) on the other hand, found that even such students who withdraw or retreat from school learning and activities are making conscious decisions about their schooling.

Likewise, Bangert Drowns et al. (2001 & 2002) in attempting a taxonomy of engagement view student engagement as a multifaceted and complex concept, arguing that engagement can also be problematic, unsystematic or even frustrated as well as structured, self-regulated, literate and finally critical.

Newmann (1992), developing an increasingly complex understanding of engagement, identifies the factors that affect engagement in academic work as (i) school membership (clarity of purpose, fairness, personal support, success and caring) and (ii) authentic work (extrinsic rewards, intrinsic interests, sense of ownership, connection to real world and fun (Newmann, 1992, p. 18)).

Haberman (1991) believes that even with exciting material, students may remain apathetic. According to Dodd (1995, p. 65), what is needed to engage students is not necessarily learning that is fun, but learning over which they have ownership; that empowers them to make a difference to their lives.

1.5 Engagement Perspective on Reading

According to the engagement perspective on reading, which was developed by Guthrie and Wigfield (2004), classroom instructional practices connects to students' motivations, strategy use, conceptual knowledge, and social interactions, and ultimately to their reading outcomes. Based on this engagement perspective, students' motivation includes multifaceted aspects such as goals, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, values, self-efficacy, and social motivation.

These motivational aspects of the reader propel students to choose to read and to use cognitive strategies to comprehend. The strategies in the model refer to students' multiple cognitive processes of comprehending, self-monitoring, and constructing their understanding and beliefs during reading. Conceptual knowledge refers to the notion that reading is knowledge-driven. Social interactions include collaborative practices in a community and the social goals of helping other students or cooperating with a teacher. These in turn influence students' reading achievement, knowledge gained from reading, and the kinds of practices in which they engage.

2. Conclusion

It is clear from the literature that as schools become more effective, students are more engaged and academic performance is hence improved. Greater student engagement is assigned therefore of effective schooling or school improvement. Such studies seek to establish a strong relationship between engagement and performance, such that student participation leads to academic success "across diverse populations" and that engagement has a "consistent, strong correlation with academic performance" and also race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Finn, 1989, p. 118; Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003, pp. 323–324).

According to Marks (2000, p. 171), socioeconomic status consistently predicts engagement form idle school students reinforcing the conclusion of the QSRLS (Lingard et al, 2001a, b) and Schlechty (2002) concludes that while middle class students and middle class schools have a higher overall engagement and academic success, it seems also that the longer a student stays at school the lower is their engagement. This view that there is equivalence and correlation between student engagement and academic success is now addressed.

This review also, identifies the classification of engagement (i.e., behavioural, academic, psychological, and cognitive engagement) and puts forward that these do not necessarily lead to the same outcomes. For example, Shernoff and Schmidt (2006, 2008) state that behavioural, academic, and psychological engagement appear related to positive social outcomes, it is questionable if they lead to increased learning for all students as engagement/achievement paradoxes have been found.

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