

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract: Academic engagement in tertiary education involves cognitive, metacognitive, affective, social, task, communicative, and, in the context of this study, foreign language engagement. These interconnected components support higher-order thinking, emotional regulation, and effective communication, particularly for students learning in a non-native language. Teachers play a vital role in fostering engagement by creating supportive environments, designing motivating tasks, and providing constructive feedback. Feedback focused on effort and process, rather than personality or outcomes, nurtures growth mindsets and academic confidence. By building positive student-teacher relationships characterised by trust and respect, teachers can further enhance engagement. This study underscores the need for a holistic approach to engagement, emphasising teacher behaviours and strategies that inspire sustainable learning and meaningful connections.

Key Words: academic engagement, teacher feedback, student-teacher relationships

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic engagement occurs when students immerse themselves deeply in learning activities, becoming mentally and emotionally absorbed in their study materials. This often involves interaction with peers and extends beyond mere “surface learning” [1] such as rote memorization or completing tasks solely to pass a course. Instead, academic engagement fosters higher-order thinking, including analysing and comprehending concepts, rationalizing methods, and deducing meanings. It also incorporates social interaction, where students exchange experiences, knowledge, opinions, and support with peers and instructors.

While much research on learner engagement focuses on primary and secondary education, various models share common physiological, behavioural, and psychological components despite terminological differences [2], [3]. For example, Linnenbrink and Pintrich [2] identify behavioural engagement (e.g., effort, persistence, help-seeking), cognitive engagement (e.g., strategy use, metacognition), and motivational engagement (e.g., interest, value, effect). Academic engagement at the tertiary level shares similarities with earlier education levels but requires a distinct definition due to its unique context.

University students typically have greater autonomy compared to primary and secondary school learners. They can choose their courses and participation modes and are more responsible for managing their own progress. This autonomy brings increased responsibility and higher societal and familial expectations, often shaped by cultural norms. Transitioning to tertiary education can be cognitively and emotionally challenging, potentially impacting students’ self-concept, resilience, and anxiety. Unlike younger students, university learners may hesitate to seek help, fearing judgment from peers. Social standing becomes more significant, and students may grapple with internal conflicts about self-confidence. However, they also tend to exhibit more advanced cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural maturity, along with clearer aspirations and well-developed personal interests.

Given these contextual and individual factors, we broadly define academic engagement at the tertiary level as all behaviours related to planning, managing, and completing a university education. Based on literature and teaching experience, we identify the following components of academic engagement:

1. **Cognitive Engagement:** Involves mental activities such as focusing attention, acquiring and processing information, and retrieving knowledge from memory.
2. **Metacognitive Engagement:** Refers to managing and reflecting on cognitive actions, including planning, coordinating tasks, evaluating progress, and addressing knowledge gaps.
3. **Affective Engagement:** Encompasses regulating emotions, managing curiosity and boredom, handling anxiety, fostering interest and motivation, and showing empathy toward others.
4. **Social Engagement:** Includes forming supportive networks, building relationships with peers and instructors, contributing to group efforts, and assisting others.
5. **Task Engagement:** Reflects the intensity and manner of interaction with learning materials, influenced by personal motivation, resilience, and goal-setting behaviours.
6. **Communicative Engagement:** Involves effective communication through writing, speaking, and non-verbal cues. This includes active listening, interpreting body language, presenting arguments, and engaging respectfully with others.

2. PART ONE

The university course discussed in this article is conducted in English, which is not the student's native language. Therefore, language engagement is a critical component of academic engagement in this study. Closely tied to communicative and affective engagement, language engagement adds complexity to academic engagement by addressing students' self-concept and individuality as users of English as a foreign language (EFL). As a result, the model of academic engagement includes an additional element.

Foreign language engagement encompasses students' efforts to use a foreign language for academic purposes. This includes general language skills (e.g., reading, listening, writing, speaking), linguistic competence (e.g., vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation), metalinguistic awareness (e.g., academic style, tone, contextual appropriateness, cultural variations), and psychological factors (e.g., language anxiety, willingness to communicate).

The components of academic engagement are interconnected and cannot be viewed in isolation. For example, there is an overlap between metacognitive and task engagement when students plan their approach to completing a task. These components are influenced by students' knowledge (e.g., subject-specific knowledge, cultural norms), skills (e.g., strategic planning, academic writing), and abilities (e.g., empathy, language proficiency). Unlike other engagement models, this approach views academic engagement in tertiary education as a holistic concept shaped by its constituent components.

Teachers aim to foster deep student engagement because dedication and effort positively impact learning outcomes [2],[4],[5]. Teachers are crucial in shaping engagement by creating motivating, supportive learning environments [3]. For example, Mercer and Dörnyei [5] suggest using the Socratic method—posing questions to encourage critical thinking—and encouraging students to prepare questions for each other, promoting sustainable learning. Additionally, a discovery-based approach, which allows students to independently find answers and solve problems for the intrinsic reward of learning, engages students in meaningful cognitive processes like analysing, comparing, and reflecting, rather than passively consuming information.

Designing engaging tasks is another way to enhance academic engagement. Emotionally captivating tasks are visually appealing, feature activities students enjoy, and include content they find meaningful, valuable, and interesting, which can trigger positive emotions [2],[5]. Effective task design includes a clear focus, helping students understand what is expected. Explicit instructions, carefully planned and communicated in both spoken and written forms, are essential for successful task execution.

While student-teacher relationships (TSRs) in higher education are less researched than those in primary and secondary education [6], they remain essential. Positive relationships between students and teachers are built on honesty, respect, trust, safety, care, and support [7],[8]. These relationships depend on the frequency and quality of interactions and include two key dimensions [6]:

1. **Affective dimension:** Refers to the emotional bond between students and teachers, fostering secure and positively experienced relationships.
2. **Support dimension:** Refers to the assistance teachers provide to promote students' success, such as setting clear expectations and responding to inquiries promptly.

Caring teachers are characterized by their "emotional intelligence" [9] and their willingness to understand students' perspectives. They engage in meaningful dialogues with students, fostering relationships built on care and trust, which enables them to achieve "empathic accuracy" [10]. These teachers are attentive to students' verbal expressions of emotions and skilled at interpreting non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, and eye contact [11]. They listen and observe without judgment, strive to understand students' thoughts and feelings [5], and demonstrate "compassion and tender-heartedness" in their interactions [12].

Caring teachers go beyond focusing solely on academic content, acknowledging the effort students invest in their learning. They monitor and evaluate both the processes and outcomes of learning to provide feedback that supports not only academic growth but also students' overall well-being. Such feedback is delivered with respect and appreciation and includes motivational comments to encourage students.

Effective feedback is specific, concrete, and free of personal judgment. It is distributed equitably among students and focuses on fostering growth. Caring teachers are deeply invested in the academic and personal development of their students. They encourage students to perform to the best of their abilities [13] while normalizing temporary setbacks as part of the learning process. They emphasize the value of mistakes as opportunities for growth and assist students in developing strategies to handle challenges, thereby preventing setbacks from negatively affecting their self-concept. These teachers help students set realistic goals, build self-confidence, and develop a growth mindset [1],[14].

Caring teachers also involve students in planning and provide opportunities for retrospective input on courses. They encourage students to share their opinions about various aspects of the course, such as content, structure (e.g., weekly vs. block schedules), format (e.g., in-person, online, hybrid), teaching methodologies, and the teacher's communication style.

Caring teachers emphasize the voluntary nature of feedback and make it clear that participation has no impact on grading. Feedback collection can take multiple forms, each with its advantages and limitations. For instance, in-

class group discussions may discourage some students from speaking openly, while anonymous written feedback, particularly online, offers greater privacy unless the class size is very small. Caring teachers also carefully consider the timing: feedback collected during the course allows for immediate adjustments, while end-of-term feedback can guide revisions for future iterations. In all cases, feedback is invaluable to caring teachers, reflecting their respect, trust, and appreciation for their students. Providing these opportunities not only enhances teaching but also fosters a sense of partnership and mutual understanding. Teacher feedback can target either the individual (their abilities, personality, or character) or their performance (observable actions or behaviours) [15]. This distinction is crucial, as the focus of feedback can significantly impact students. Feedback centred on the individual can encourage a fixed mindset, while feedback aimed at behaviour and performance supports the development of a growth mindset [16]. A growth mindset involves the belief that abilities can be improved through effort and practice, whereas a fixed mindset assumes that abilities are innate and unchangeable. Most students fall somewhere along a spectrum between these two mindsets [16],[14]. Educators should strive to help students cultivate a growth mindset because learners with this perspective are more likely to seek challenges and pursue learning opportunities through learner-oriented goals. They experience more positive emotions and make more adaptive explanations for poor performance, leading to higher future expectations and increased motivation.

Effective performance feedback emphasizes the process rather than the outcomes of students' work. Process feedback is beneficial for facilitating behavioural adjustments and immediate course corrections, whereas outcome feedback tends to feel like a definitive judgment [15]. Process-oriented feedback can stimulate academic engagement

[17] and enhance students' self-efficacy by making their efforts and progress more visible [18],[5].

Experiencing success through effort and receiving positive feedback on the strategies that led to success can boost self-confidence (belief in one's abilities) and self-esteem (overall sense of self-worth). Conversely, negative feedback may have the opposite effect, causing students to react defensively, reject feedback, or avoid it altogether [19].

To mitigate these risks, Mercer and Dörnyei [5] recommend that teacher feedback focus on "highlighting the effort, strategies, and approaches taken" (p. 63), even when the outcome is not successful. This approach helps foster resilience and encourages students to continue improving.

1. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Academic engagement in tertiary education is a multifaceted concept that requires a holistic approach to support student success. The integration of cognitive, metacognitive, affective, social, task, communicative, and language engagement highlights the complexity of fostering meaningful learning experiences. Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping engagement through thoughtful practices, including designing emotionally and cognitively stimulating tasks, maintaining clear communication, and building supportive relationships.

Constructive feedback is essential to this process. By focusing on effort and process rather than innate abilities, teachers encourage students to develop a growth mindset, bolstering resilience, motivation, and self-confidence. This approach not only enhances academic outcomes but also fosters emotional well-being, helping students navigate the challenges of tertiary education with a positive outlook.

Equally important are the relationships teachers build with their students. Trust, respect, and care form the foundation for effective teaching and learning. When teachers actively seek and value student feedback, they demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement and partnership, creating a learning environment where students feel supported and empowered.

Ultimately, academic engagement is both a personal and shared endeavour. Through intentional teaching strategies and genuine care, educators can inspire students to fully immerse themselves in the learning process, unlocking their potential and preparing them for lifelong success.

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