Review

A Review of Student Engagement in Second Language Teaching

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Abstract: Student engagement plays a crucial role in second language teaching and serves as an important indicator for evaluating pedagogical quality and instructional effectiveness. This study systematically collected relevant literature indexed in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) from 2000 to 2025 and analyzed prevailing research trends related to student engagement using Vosviewer. The analysis revealed that research on student engagement primarily falls into two categories: investigations into the influencing factors of student engagement and studies on pedagogical innovations aimed at enhancing engagement. Specifically, the first category examines how individual, social, and environmental factors affect learners' active participation, motivation, and cognitive involvement, while the second category explores instructional strategies, technological interventions, and curriculum designs that foster higher engagement levels. Based on these findings, the study proposes targeted suggestions for future research, emphasizing the integration of multi-dimensional factors and innovative pedagogical approaches to comprehensively enhance student engagement in second language classrooms.

Keywords: second language class; student engagement; literature review; factors

1. Introduction

Student engagement, including both individual and class engagement, plays a critical role in second language education. The concept of "student engagement" was first introduced by Tyler in the 1930s, who defined it as the amount of time students dedicate to learning knowledge during class [1]. Research examining the interactions between students, classrooms, and engagement continues to attract considerable attention in the field of second language education. This sustained interest can be attributed to two main factors. First, education is constantly evolving, with ongoing reforms and innovations in teaching models within second language classrooms. Second, scholars hold diverse perspectives on the nature, measurement, and enhancement of student engagement.

Allwright and Bailey categorized student engagement into two types: observable activity and unobservable activity [2]. This classification highlighted the fact that not all forms of engagement are externally visible, as many originate from students' internal cognitive processes. Since then, scholars have actively debated both the definition of student engagement and strategies to enhance it. Some argue that teachers should reform instructional models and incorporate innovative pedagogical designs in second language classes. Others emphasize the integration of information technology to stimulate engagement and motivation. A separate line of research has investigated factors contributing to classroom silence among Asian students, offering further insight into the complex dynamics of engagement.

Given the continued importance of student engagement in second language education, this study systematically analyzes relevant literature indexed in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) from 2000 to 2025. The objective is to examine

evolving research methods and directions within the field and to provide evidence-based suggestions for enhancing student engagement in second language classrooms.

2. Research Background

With the development of the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis proposed by Krashen in 1985, research on student engagement in second language classrooms has attracted increasing attention [3]. Second language education at the college level is expected to help students acquire practical language skills applicable to both professional work and academic research [4]. However, many courses struggle to achieve this goal, often proving time-consuming yet relatively ineffective. Studies have consistently shown that student engagement significantly influences learning outcomes and overall academic performance.

Students' engagement in some classrooms tends to be silent, passive, or inactive [5]. This finding was informed by the theoretical framework of Allwright & Bailey [2]. Much of the research focused only on observable activities, overlooking cognitive and motivational processes that are less visible but equally important. This discrepancy has prompted scholars to explore more nuanced classifications of engagement. Engagement has been categorized into types such as "static learning behavior" and "dynamic learning behavior," though the distinction between them remains somewhat unclear [6]. Other approaches divide engagement into verbal and non-verbal activities, with further subdivisions providing a more detailed framework for understanding the forms and manifestations of student participation in the classroom [7].

In response to these insights, current research emphasizes strategies to enhance student engagement and improve classroom efficiency. Broadly, these studies fall into two main categories: pedagogical innovations and factors affecting engagement. Influencing factors are often grouped into four domains: psychological factors, student-related factors, teacher-related factors, and cultural factors [8].

Instructional reforms have become a major focus in promoting engagement. Approaches such as the Presentation-Assimilation-Discussion (PAD) model and flipped classroom techniques have been integrated into second language teaching to stimulate active participation. The use of multimedia and information technology has also been widely applied, addressing challenges such as uneven classroom participation and time management issues [9,10]. Overall, these innovations aim to enhance both student engagement and teaching effectiveness by optimizing classroom design and instructional strategies.

In summary, to map the research trends of student engagement in second language education, this study collected relevant academic journals from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) covering 2000 to 2025. Using Vosviewer, the trends in research methods and directions were systematically analyzed, and suggestions were proposed to guide future studies in this area.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Tools & Data Sources

Keyword co-occurrence mapping and literature visualization are widely used methods for analyzing academic journals. Vosviewer is one of the most common tools for literature review and visualization. This study primarily utilized Vosviewer (version 1.6.19), Excel, and CNKI's visualization functions to analyze journals related to student engagement published from 2000 to 2025. The keyword "Student Engagement" was used to retrieve literature, with the subject area limited to foreign languages and literature, yielding 554 results. After further screening based on content relevance, 85 irrelevant articles were excluded, resulting in 469 relevant publications.

The selected literature was exported in Refworks format and imported into Vosviewer. A synonym library was created using Excel to merge keywords with the same

meaning. Vosviewer was then employed to visualize the relationships and link strengths among keywords through mapping and clustering. The bibliographic data from the 469 downloaded plain-text files were used to create the map. Co-occurrence analysis was performed using all keywords with full counting, and a minimum occurrence threshold of five was set. Out of 786 keywords, 40 met this threshold. The resulting map is presented in Figure 1, showing the clustering of keywords related to student engagement. As shown in Figure 1, the map illustrates clusters of keywords that are frequently associated with student engagement research.
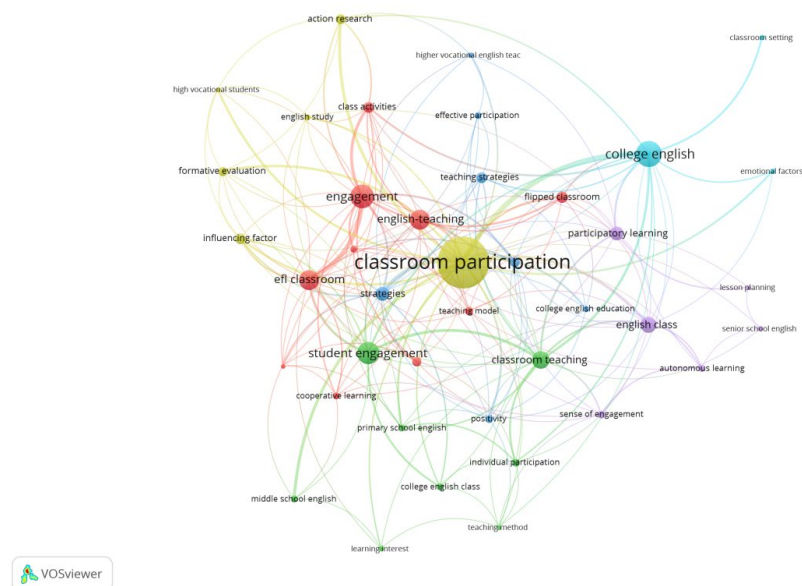

Figure 1. Clustering keywords relevant to student engagement.

3.2. *Analysis on Research Hotspots*

The keyword co-occurrence map allows for analysis of keyword frequency and relationships. In the map (Figure 1), each keyword is represented as a node, with larger nodes indicating higher frequency. Links between nodes reflect the co-occurrence frequency of two keywords, with thicker links indicating stronger co-occurrence. Analysis of the map indicates that current research on classroom participation mainly focuses on keywords such as "Student Engagement," "College English," "Strategies," "Influencing Factor," "English Teaching," "Flipped Classroom," and "Participatory Learning." Based on co-occurrence patterns, research on student engagement can be broadly categorized into two areas: studies on factors affecting engagement and the development of new teaching models.

3.3. *Results*

The study analyzed keyword frequency, link strength, and average publication year to categorize research directions in student engagement into four types: Embryonic Areas, Hot Topics, Core Themes, and Saturated Topics. Representative directions within each category are described as follows

3.3.1. Embryonic Areas

Embryonic Areas are characterized by relatively low link strength but a high average publication year, reflecting research that is still in its formative stage. These areas represent emerging hotspots in student engagement studies, where the scholarly attention is increasing but the conceptual and theoretical frameworks remain underdeveloped.

Research in these zones often explores innovative approaches, experimental methodologies, and emerging technologies, aiming to identify new mechanisms or factors influencing student engagement.

A prominent example within this category is the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) in classroom engagement. Studies in this area investigate how hardware such as multimedia devices, mobile phones, tablets, and computers can be systematically employed in second language acquisition or other subject classrooms to stimulate interest, foster active participation, and enhance learning outcomes [11]. This research not only examines the immediate behavioral responses of students but also considers cognitive and affective dimensions, such as attention, motivation, and collaborative learning dynamics [12].

Furthermore, topics within embryonic areas are highly novel and exploratory, often involving pilot studies, case analyses, or small-scale interventions [13]. Despite the promise and potential of these studies, there is a pressing need for theoretical consolidation. Future research should aim to develop coherent models and frameworks that explain the mechanisms through which technological and pedagogical innovations impact student engagement. Establishing such theoretical foundations will enable more robust experimental designs, facilitate cross-contextual comparisons, and guide evidence-based educational practices. As the field matures, embryonic areas are likely to evolve into more integrated and widely recognized domains of student engagement research, influencing both policy and classroom practice.

3.3.2. Hot Topics

Hot Topics represent the most actively researched areas within the field of student engagement, characterized by a high volume of recent publications and strong interconnections with other research directions. These areas reflect the current priorities and concerns of educational researchers, often combining theoretical advancement with practical applications. Key hot topics include flipped classrooms, student engagement strategies, blended learning, and broader pedagogical innovations.

In the context of second language teaching, research trends highlight a significant shift from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered approaches. This pedagogical transformation allocates greater autonomy and decision-making power to students, encouraging them to take active roles in their learning processes. Innovations such as flipped classrooms and PAD (Personalized, Active, and Digital) classrooms exemplify this shift, aiming to make instruction more interactive, adaptive, and responsive to individual learner needs. These approaches often integrate pre-class preparation, in-class active learning, and post-class reflection, thereby creating a continuous, cyclical learning environment that maximizes student participation.

Flipped and blended instructional models are particularly effective in targeting students' specific weaknesses, providing personalized feedback, and enhancing both cognitive and affective engagement. They stimulate autonomous learning, strengthen self-regulation skills, and foster collaborative problem-solving among peers. However, the implementation of these models presents challenges for educators. Teachers must possess advanced pedagogical knowledge, technological proficiency, and flexible instructional design capabilities to adapt content, facilitate interaction, and assess engagement effectively [14].

Pedagogical innovation remains the mainstream focus of student engagement research because it directly influences learning outcomes and classroom dynamics. Current studies emphasize not only the design and evaluation of innovative teaching models but also the measurement of student engagement, including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Additionally, research explores contextual factors such as class size, cultural differences, and technology accessibility, highlighting the complexity of fostering meaningful engagement. As the field evolves, these hot topics

continue to shape both theory and practice, bridging the gap between empirical research and effective classroom implementation.

3.3.3. Core Themes

Core Themes comprise foundational research directions that have established the theoretical and empirical basis for subsequent studies in student engagement. These areas are highly interconnected with other research topics, serving as the intellectual backbone of the field. Unlike embryonic or hot topics, Core Themes often have a longer publication history and a well-developed conceptual framework, providing scholars with established models, measurement tools, and methodological approaches for investigating student engagement.

Representative core themes include classroom silence, psychological factors influencing engagement, and student-oriented instructional strategies. Research on classroom silence, for example, explores not only the behavioral manifestation of non-participation but also its underlying cognitive, social, and emotional causes, such as anxiety, lack of motivation, or perceived classroom hierarchies. Similarly, studies on psychological factors examine constructs such as self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and learner autonomy, highlighting how internal student characteristics interact with instructional design to shape engagement outcomes. Student-oriented approaches focus on tailoring learning environments to meet diverse learner needs, emphasizing differentiated instruction, personalized feedback, and collaborative learning frameworks.

Although some core themes may receive less attention in recent publications compared to hot topics, they continue to provide essential references and theoretical grounding for new research. These established areas guide the development of innovative pedagogical strategies, inform the design of engagement measurement instruments, and offer insights into the complex interplay between cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of learning. By linking past theoretical insights with contemporary educational challenges, Core Themes remain critical for sustaining rigorous research and supporting evidence-based instructional innovation across various educational contexts.

3.3.4. Saturated Topics

Saturated Topics are characterized by low recent publication frequency and weak connections with other research directions. Although a theoretical framework may exist, these areas still have potential for innovation and further study. Examples include research focused on higher vocational students and primary school English instruction. These contexts often emphasize exam performance and grades, with primary and secondary educators typically having limited access to research support. Despite receiving less scholarly attention, these topics remain significant for practical classroom improvement and warrant continued investigation.

4. Discussion

Based on the analysis of research trends and keyword co-occurrence, current studies on student engagement in second language education primarily focus on two key questions: the role of the teacher in the classroom and strategies to improve pedagogical quality. This section provides a detailed discussion and practical suggestions related to these issues.

4.1. RQ1: What Role Should the Teacher Play in Second Language Class?

In traditional teaching models, teachers often dominate classroom interactions, primarily delivering content through one-way instruction. Such teacher-centered approaches, however, can limit student engagement and reduce opportunities for meaningful participation. To address this, teachers should assume the role of organizers

and facilitators, guiding the learning process while creating ample opportunities for students to actively participate in discussions and collaborative activities.

The integration of technology into education has further expanded teachers' roles. Modern educators are expected to possess digital literacy skills to effectively utilize online platforms, multimedia resources, and interactive software, thereby enhancing classroom engagement. Psychological factors also play a significant role in student participation. Teachers should monitor students' learning progress, recognize signs of anxiety or lack of confidence, and provide timely support to mitigate negative emotions and maintain a positive learning environment.

Classroom discourse constitutes another critical aspect of teacher influence. The quantity, quality, and clarity of teacher talk directly impact students' motivation and comprehension. In second language learning, teachers serve as models for pronunciation, vocabulary usage, and language structure. Effective communication, clear explanations, and structured guidance are therefore essential for facilitating student learning.

A teacher's personal style and classroom management approach also shape student engagement. Maintaining a relaxed yet focused classroom atmosphere, implementing interactive teaching techniques, and adopting a learner-centered philosophy can significantly enhance participation. Encouraging regular teacher-student interaction fosters rapport, supports language skill development, and cultivates intrinsic motivation. Overall, the teacher's role extends beyond knowledge delivery to encompass mentorship, facilitation, and active engagement with students.

4.2. RQ2: How to Improve Pedagogical Quality?

Improving pedagogical quality involves adopting innovative and student-centered teaching models, such as the PAD (Presentation-Assimilation-Discussion) classroom and flipped classroom approaches. These models aim to provide students with more autonomy, promoting active participation and increasing motivation. Flexible teaching formats and engaging instructional content are crucial for stimulating students' initiative and encouraging self-directed learning beyond the classroom.

Instructional design should be task-driven, fostering student involvement, critical thinking, and creativity. Interactive activities-including group discussions, problem-solving exercises, and teacher-student dialogues-allow learners to actively apply language skills in meaningful contexts. This approach not only strengthens practical language abilities but also supports deeper comprehension and cognitive engagement.

Assessment methods should be diversified to accommodate varying levels of student proficiency. Classroom participation, formative assessments, peer evaluations, and project-based tasks should complement traditional exams. Integrating multiple forms of evaluation encourages consistent engagement, provides timely feedback, and motivates students with different learning profiles. By aligning teaching strategies, interactive classroom design, and diversified assessment, pedagogical quality can be enhanced, leading to improved student engagement and learning outcomes.

5. Conclusion

This study systematically analyzed articles on student engagement collected from CNKI between 2000 and 2025. Using a keyword co-occurrence map generated by Vosviewer, popular research directions were identified and classified into two main categories: factors influencing student engagement and pedagogical innovations. In terms of classroom reform, emerging consensus suggests that second language courses should adopt learner-centered models, such as flipped classrooms and PAD classrooms, providing students with increased opportunities for active participation.

Additionally, research directions were categorized into four types based on keyword frequency, link strength, and average publication year: Embryonic Areas, Hot Topics, Core Themes, and Saturated Topics. Embryonic Areas represent emerging trends with

high potential for future research, while Hot Topics reflect current focal points with strong relevance to pedagogical innovation. Core Themes provide foundational knowledge for ongoing research, and Saturated Topics highlight areas that may benefit from innovation or renewed analysis.

Discussion of the relationship between teachers, courses, and student engagement underscores the central role of educators as organizers, facilitators, and guides. Teachers are encouraged to enhance instructional clarity, integrate technology effectively, and cultivate a passionate teaching style that fosters motivation and enthusiasm. Learner-centered course design, interactive classroom environments, and diversified evaluation systems are key strategies for improving student participation and overall pedagogical quality.

In conclusion, research on student engagement is critical for advancing second language education. By focusing on both theoretical foundations and practical applications, scholars and educators can develop strategies to enhance classroom participation, promote student motivation, and improve teaching effectiveness. This field holds substantial potential for future studies aimed at creating more effective and engaging second language learning environments.

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