Review

Explore Strategies of Learning Engagement in Junior High School

Qianqian Zhu [1],* and Yasmin Binti Hussain [1]

[1] City University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

* Correspondence: Qianqian Zhu, City University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract: Learning engagement is a critical factor influencing junior high school students' English learning outcomes and overall academic development. Under the current educational context that emphasizes core competencies and efficiency-oriented burden reduction, enhancing students' engagement in English learning is of great practical significance. Based on theories related to learning engagement, this research first defines the concept of English learning engagement and then systematically analyzes practical strategies for improving junior high school students' engagement in English learning. The study focuses on three dimensions: strengthening teachers' emotional support, enhancing students' English learning self-efficacy, and promoting home-school collaboration. It explores how creating a supportive classroom atmosphere, reinforcing positive learning experiences, and establishing a collaborative educational mechanism can effectively promote students' learning engagement. The findings suggest that coordinated efforts across multiple dimensions and stakeholders can significantly enhance junior high school students' engagement in English learning, providing valuable implications for English teaching practice.

Keywords: junior high school students; English learning engagement; teachers' emotional support; self-efficacy

1. Research Background

Learning engagement, also referred to as learning participation, generally denotes the sustained behavioral effort, active cognitive involvement, and continuous emotional investment that students demonstrate throughout the learning process. It reflects the extent to which learners devote their time, energy, and attention to learning tasks and is widely recognized as a crucial indicator for evaluating the quality of learning processes as well as for predicting learning outcomes. Compared with purely outcome-oriented indicators such as test scores, learning engagement provides a more comprehensive and dynamic perspective for understanding how learning occurs and how instructional practices influence students' academic development [1].

From the perspective of educational psychology and learning sciences, learning engagement occupies a central theoretical position, functioning as a key mediating variable that connects learning environments with learning outcomes. Learning environments characterized by appropriate instructional design, supportive teacher-student interactions, and positive classroom climates are more likely to foster higher levels of engagement, which in turn contribute to improved learning effectiveness. Conversely, insufficient engagement often manifests as passive participation, reduced persistence, and weakened self-regulation, ultimately leading to unsatisfactory learning outcomes. Therefore, enhancing students' learning engagement has become a core objective in contemporary instructional research and educational practice [2].

Within the field of second language learning, learning engagement has received increasing attention due to its close association with language input processing, skill

development, and communicative competence. Foreign language learning is a complex and long-term process that requires sustained effort, frequent practice, and active cognitive processing. Learners with higher levels of engagement tend to demonstrate greater willingness to participate in classroom activities, stronger persistence in overcoming learning difficulties, and more effective use of learning strategies. As a result, learning engagement plays a critical role in promoting the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities, as well as in facilitating overall language proficiency [3].

In addition to its academic significance, learning engagement is also closely related to learners' affective and psychological dimensions. A high level of engagement is often accompanied by stronger learning motivation, greater academic self-confidence, and a more positive learning experience [4]. These factors contribute not only to immediate learning performance but also to students' long-term academic development and personal growth. In contrast, low engagement may lead to learning burnout, reduced interest, and negative emotional experiences, which can have lasting effects on learners' attitudes toward language learning.

Junior high school represents a crucial transitional stage in students' educational trajectories, serving as a bridge between primary education and senior secondary education. During this period, students experience significant changes in cognitive development, learning demands, and emotional regulation. English learning at the junior high school level becomes more systematic and academically demanding, requiring students to adapt to increased vocabulary load, more complex grammatical structures, and diversified learning tasks. Consequently, how to effectively enhance students' English learning engagement at this stage has become a key concern in classroom teaching practice.

Against this background, examining learning engagement in junior high school English classrooms is of both theoretical and practical significance. On the one hand, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the internal mechanisms through which instructional practices influence learning outcomes. On the other hand, it provides empirical support for optimizing teaching strategies and improving classroom effectiveness. Therefore, exploring factors related to English learning engagement among junior high school students and identifying effective approaches to enhance such engagement constitute an important research focus in current English education [5].

2. Definition of Learning Engagement

Learning engagement has been conceptualized in diverse ways, with different studies emphasizing distinct perspectives and analytical focuses. Despite variations in terminology and theoretical orientation, existing definitions generally converge on the idea that learning engagement reflects the degree to which learners actively invest their behavioral effort, cognitive resources, and emotional energy in learning activities. As a result, learning engagement is commonly regarded as a comprehensive construct that captures both the intensity and quality of learners' involvement in the learning process.

From a behavioral perspective, learning engagement is often defined in terms of observable participation and effort devoted to academic tasks. In this view, learning engagement refers to the extent to which learners persist in learning activities, demonstrate sustained concentration, and maintain effort when facing learning difficulties. Such engagement emphasizes learners' autonomous investment in instructional activities, including perseverance, task commitment, and continuous attention [6]. This perspective highlights the external manifestations of engagement and provides a practical basis for observing and measuring students' learning behaviors in classroom contexts.

Other studies have approached learning engagement from a psychological perspective, focusing on learners' internal states during learning. From this standpoint, learning engagement is understood as a relatively stable and positive psychological

condition characterized by enthusiasm, interest, and emotional involvement in learning tasks. Learners who exhibit a high level of psychological engagement tend to experience enjoyment, interest, and a sense of meaning in learning, which supports sustained participation and deeper involvement. In this sense, learning engagement is not merely a behavioral response to instructional demands but also reflects learners' intrinsic attitudes and affective experiences during the learning process [7].

Building upon these perspectives, learning engagement has increasingly been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that integrates behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components. Behavioral engagement refers to learners' active participation in learning activities, such as completing assignments, responding to instructional tasks, and maintaining on-task behavior [8]. Emotional engagement involves learners' affective reactions to learning, including interest, enjoyment, and a sense of belonging or immersion. Cognitive engagement focuses on learners' use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, such as deep processing, self-regulation, and reflective thinking, to understand complex knowledge and solve problems. These dimensions are not independent of one another; rather, they dynamically interact and jointly shape learners' overall learning experiences.

In addition to these general frameworks, research conducted in the Chinese educational context has further enriched the understanding of learning engagement. Some studies have emphasized a two-dimensional structure, highlighting behavioral participation and emotional experience as core components of learning engagement. From this viewpoint, learning engagement reflects both the degree of learners' active involvement in learning activities and the quality of their emotional responses during learning [9]. Other studies have adopted a broader perspective, defining learning engagement as learners' willingness to learn, level of concentration, participation intensity, and accompanying emotional experiences throughout the learning process. This definition underscores the integration of motivation, behavior, and emotion in shaping effective learning.

Furthermore, learning engagement has been described as learners' active participation in diverse learning activities, proactive thinking and problem solving, and positive emotional attitudes toward both learning processes and outcomes. In technology-supported or online learning environments, learning engagement has been extended to include learners' interaction quality, sense of presence, and overall learning experience, reflecting the evolving nature of learning contexts. Some definitions have also combined behavioral performance with psychological states, suggesting that learning engagement involves maintaining positive attitudes toward learning tasks, accurate cognitive understanding, and focused learning behaviors [10].

3. Strategies for Enhancing Learning Engagement

3.1. Strengthening English Teachers' Emotional Support

In the process of English learning, students often encounter challenges such as language barriers, self-doubt, and anxiety related to self-expression. These challenges are particularly prominent at the junior secondary level, where English is learned as a non-native language and affective factors play a central role in shaping students' motivation, persistence, and overall engagement. English teachers serve not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as facilitators of emotional growth and psychological support. Strengthening teachers' emotional support can help alleviate students' negative feelings, enhance motivation, and ultimately foster deeper learning engagement [11].

Establishing a harmonious teacher-student relationship forms the foundational core of emotional support. Positive relationships help create a learning environment in which students feel safe to take risks, express themselves freely, and make mistakes without fear of judgment. Teachers can foster such an environment by actively engaging with students both inside and outside the classroom, understanding their interests, learning experiences,

and emotional needs. Through genuine communication, respectful interactions, and equitable attitudes, teachers can gradually build trust and rapport with students. For learners with lower academic proficiency or introverted personalities, teachers should demonstrate patience, avoid labeling or bias, and provide individualized guidance that responds to each student's unique emotional and cognitive needs [12].

Attention to students' emotions and psychological states during learning is equally important. Teachers can enhance engagement by providing tailored guidance, designing appropriately challenging tasks, and posing open-ended questions that stimulate curiosity and critical thinking. Simultaneously, they can help students develop confidence and enjoyment in English learning. Particularly in activities that place high emotional demands on learners, such as writing and oral presentations, teachers should encourage risk-taking, normalize mistakes as part of the learning process, and create a culture that values both effort and personal growth. By fostering positive emotional experiences, teachers can help students sustain motivation and deepen cognitive involvement.

To implement emotional support systematically, schools should strengthen their mental health education infrastructure and provide teachers with targeted training and practical guidance on supporting students' emotional well-being. This may include employing professional counselors, establishing counseling facilities, offering mental health education courses, and organizing professional development programs focused on psychological support skills. Such measures equip teachers with the ability to detect emotional changes, intervene effectively, and provide timely assistance when students experience learning difficulties or emotional challenges.

Schools can also enhance students' emotional experiences through structured campus-based programs, such as psychological well-being weeks, peer learning partnerships, and lecture series focused on personal growth and learning strategies. These activities create opportunities for students to experience emotional fulfillment, build social connections, and develop a sense of belonging within a supportive community. For students facing particular learning challenges, teachers can collaborate with counselors and homeroom instructors to develop individualized support plans. Coordinated interventions across multiple dimensions-including learning strategies, pacing, and emotional regulation-enable students to gradually build positive experiences, confidence, and self-efficacy.

In the context of modern education, the widespread adoption of blended and online learning models increases the demand for teachers' emotional support. Beyond traditional classroom instruction, teachers need to attend to students' emotional responses during online learning, offering timely feedback and encouragement. Clear communication of objectives, realistic task timelines, and careful monitoring of workload can prevent anxiety and disengagement caused by information overload. Additionally, teachers can foster a sense of presence and connectedness through online messaging, video interactions, and collaborative group work, ensuring that students feel guided and supported even in virtual learning spaces.

3.2. Enhancing Students' Self-Efficacy

Enhancing students' self-efficacy begins with a comprehensive understanding of their actual learning conditions, particularly the psychological states and behavioral characteristics of students with low self-efficacy. Through careful classroom observation, individual conversations, and consistent home-school communication, teachers can accurately identify the underlying factors contributing to students' lack of confidence. These factors may include limited recognition of effort, previous learning failures, or challenges arising from family environments and external support systems. By identifying these root causes, teachers can adopt targeted strategies, such as providing timely encouragement, affirming incremental progress, and showing concern for students' daily

lives, so that learners gradually develop positive perceptions of their own abilities through sustained guidance and emotional support.

A key component in fostering self-efficacy is the establishment of a positive and growth-oriented evaluation system. Teachers should balance objective assessment with constructive feedback, emphasizing individual progress and effort rather than relying solely on examination outcomes as the primary criterion. Recognizing and affirming specific achievements-such as improvement in language expression, active participation in classroom discussions, and positive shifts in learning attitudes-can significantly enhance students' sense of competence and belonging. When learners perceive that their efforts are acknowledged and valued, intrinsic motivation strengthens, which in turn fosters sustained engagement in learning activities.

Instructional practices play a pivotal role in building self-efficacy. Teachers can stimulate students' interest and active participation by designing diverse learning activities, including role-playing exercises, collaborative group work, language games, and speech or debate competitions. These activities not only engage students cognitively and emotionally but also provide opportunities to experience achievement in manageable tasks. Differentiated instruction is equally important: personalized task assignments and targeted feedback tailored to students' learning styles and proficiency levels help learners experience success incrementally, thereby reinforcing confidence and competence. Additionally, modeling strategies, such as demonstrating peers' successful experiences or sharing stories of overcoming challenges, can motivate students to internalize the belief that they too can succeed, particularly benefiting those who initially lack confidence.

Optimizing instructional design and feedback mechanisms further supports the development of self-efficacy. Teachers may implement tiered homework assignments, targeted explanations of common errors, and opportunities for students to articulate their reasoning and reflect on problem-solving processes. Such approaches help learners view errors as natural and valuable opportunities for growth rather than as failures. Teachers should also solicit students' feedback on task difficulty and instructional pacing, making flexible adjustments to accommodate varying proficiency levels. While encouraging exploration and providing differentiated support, teachers should guide students toward positive attribution patterns, helping them gradually develop stable and resilient self-efficacy beliefs.

Beyond classroom instruction, promoting self-efficacy requires attention to students' mental health and psychological well-being. Integrating mental health education and counseling into school programs can help students develop self-awareness, cope with stress, and strengthen resilience when encountering setbacks. Establishing egalitarian and respectful teacher-student relationships, actively listening to students, and responding with sincerity allow learners to experience psychological safety and a sense of value within the educational environment. With such comprehensive support, students can cultivate confidence, continuously strengthen self-efficacy, and maintain high levels of learning engagement, ultimately contributing to both academic success and personal growth.

3.3. Transforming Educational Beliefs and Promoting Home-School Collaboration

Learning engagement, as a core manifestation of the student-centered educational philosophy, serves as a critical indicator for evaluating the quality and effectiveness of educational practices. To comprehensively enhance students' engagement in learning, it is essential for all educational stakeholders-including teachers, school administrators, and parents-to shift their educational beliefs from an exclusive focus on examination results and academic achievement toward greater attention to students' emotional, cognitive, and motivational involvement. Emphasis should be placed on fostering positive learning experiences, emotional resonance, and active participation throughout the instructional process, rather than merely prioritizing outcomes measured by test scores.

In teaching practice, English teachers are encouraged to design contextualized, interactive, and strategy-oriented learning activities that combine clear instructional objectives with explicit guidance on learning strategies. Contextualization may include connecting language learning tasks to real-life situations, cultural content, or students' personal experiences, enabling learners to perceive the relevance of knowledge and skills. Interactive activities, such as collaborative problem-solving, group discussions, and reflective exercises, help stimulate intrinsic motivation and maintain sustained engagement. By incorporating these methods, teachers can foster students' active participation, critical thinking, and deeper comprehension of learning content.

Teachers should also strengthen theoretical research on learning engagement and develop localized assessment tools that reflect students' actual experiences and cultural contexts. Culturally grounded assessments, combined with empirical investigation, allow educators to identify key factors influencing engagement, providing schools with precise and actionable strategies for improvement. Such an approach contributes to the targeted enhancement of educational quality, enabling teachers to better understand and address the complex, dynamic nature of students' learning processes.

The effective use of expectancy effects represents another important strategy to promote engagement. By collaboratively setting achievable short-term goals with students and organizing teacher-student support groups, educators gain deeper insight into learners' academic conditions and internal needs. Teachers' positive expectations, timely feedback, and consistent emotional support not only improve learning performance but also foster trust, psychological resilience, and a sense of competence. These processes collectively strengthen students' self-efficacy and enhance their sustained engagement in English learning activities.

Equally important is the establishment of a collaborative mechanism between families and schools to construct an emotional and educational support ecosystem. Teachers should actively communicate with parents regarding students' learning progress, challenges, and emotional development, fostering mutual trust and cooperation through class communication platforms, home visits, and parent-child engagement activities. Parents, as significant participants in students' development, should maintain regular contact with English teachers, providing timely information about students' learning conditions, emotional changes, and daily life experiences. In turn, teachers should recognize and value parental involvement by inviting parents to participate in classroom observations, homework guidance, and joint meetings, thereby promoting a unified approach to student support.

Guided by the philosophy of holistic student development, families and schools should pursue shared goals, integrate resources, and establish emotional connections that nurture an inclusive, caring, and understanding educational environment. Such collaboration not only provides essential support for students' academic progress in English but also promotes their social, emotional, and psychological well-being. By coordinating efforts across home and school settings, educators and parents together can cultivate a supportive network that enhances students' motivation, engagement, and confidence, laying the foundation for both short-term academic achievement and long-term personal growth.

4. Conclusion

Learning engagement represents a critical factor influencing junior high school students' English learning outcomes, their sustained academic development, and the cultivation of long-term learning habits. Within the current educational context, which emphasizes reduced excessive academic pressure and a core competency-oriented approach, effectively promoting students' engagement in English learning has emerged as a pressing issue in classroom practice. High levels of engagement not only enhance

immediate academic performance but also support the development of students' motivation, resilience, and lifelong learning skills.

This study indicates that teachers' active emotional support, respect, and encouragement play a central role in fostering a positive learning environment. Through consistent attention to students' psychological states, individualized guidance, and the creation of a safe and supportive classroom climate, teachers can stimulate both emotional and cognitive involvement in English learning. Setting achievable learning goals, providing opportunities for success, and offering constructive and affirming feedback further enhance students' self-efficacy, thereby promoting their behavioral persistence, deep cognitive processing, and active participation in learning tasks. In this way, students develop not only greater confidence in their language abilities but also stronger intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement over time.

Equally important is the role of home-school collaboration in supporting learning engagement. When families and schools maintain consistent educational philosophies and coordinated support mechanisms, students receive stable external reinforcement that complements classroom instruction. Regular communication between teachers and parents regarding students' academic progress, emotional experiences, and daily learning challenges ensures a shared understanding of student needs and facilitates targeted interventions. Joint initiatives, such as parent involvement in classroom activities, collaborative goal-setting, and emotional support programs, strengthen students' sense of security, motivation, and commitment to English learning, thus supporting the sustainable development of engagement.

Enhancing English learning engagement in junior secondary schools, therefore, requires coordinated efforts among teachers, schools, and families, with comprehensive strategies implemented across emotional, cognitive, and environmental dimensions. Emotional support nurtures motivation and psychological safety, instructional design and feedback foster cognitive engagement and skill development, and home-school collaboration provides continuous external support. Only through the integration of these elements can students' learning engagement be effectively cultivated, ensuring both immediate academic success and long-term personal growth.

This study offers valuable implications for English teachers, highlighting the importance of optimizing classroom interactions, attending to students' psychological and emotional needs, and establishing effective home-school collaboration mechanisms. Future research may adopt empirical and longitudinal methods to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies, providing further evidence to support instructional improvement and policy implementation in junior secondary English education. Such studies can contribute to the development of evidence-based practices that enhance student engagement, promote holistic educational outcomes, and support the continuous improvement of teaching quality within the English learning context.

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