

### Book Review

#### *Engaging Language Learners in Contemporary Classrooms*

Authors:

Sarah Mercer, Zoltán Dörnyei

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press, 2020

ISBN:

9781108445924

Pages:

208

Learner engagement is key to successful learning experiences in general education and language learning is no exception. When students are engaged, they are focusing on the task at hand, paying attention and enjoying their language learning (Aubrey et al., 2020; Ellis, 2018; Mercer, 2019; Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Yet, as Mercer and Dörnyei affirm in their introduction to the book, “discussions of engagement . . . have been largely absent from the literature of L2 [second language] learning and teaching” (p. 4). *Engaging Language Learners in Contemporary Classrooms* addresses this gap directly and in great depth, thus making it a ground-breaking contribution to the growing body of second language (L2) literature on learner engagement.

This book opens with a brief “Foreword,” followed by “Introduction,” in which the authors provide their conceptualization of engagement, the importance of the topic in language learning and teaching, and the structure of the book. The authors perceive the construct of engagement “to be always associated with *action*, ideally combined with internal dimensions of cognitive and affective involvement” (p. 3, [emphasis in original]). The remainder of the book

is then divided into six chapters that are easy to follow. For example, all chapters begin with an introduction followed by a set of theoretical principles and conclude with a concise summary. In addition to the recommended up-to-date reading section, each chapter offers several helpful sections entitled "Reflection Task" that are pertinent and interesting. The reflection tasks introduced in each chapter are excellent in combining theory and pedagogy by asking language teachers to critically reflect on the presented principles in light of their own teaching experiences.

Chapter 1, "The Contexts of Learner Engagement," focuses on contextual principles that affect learner engagement beyond the language classroom at different levels, including the level of language and society, the school, and the learner's family settings. This serves as an excellent opening chapter for two main reasons. Firstly, the discussion of the contextual factors is central to understanding learner engagement. As such, presenting this facet in the first chapter makes it essential reading for language teachers and anyone with an interest in learner engagement. Secondly, the discussion of contextual factors in the opening chapter reminds language practitioners who work in different contexts of the complexity of engagement so that they can address the dynamics of the wider social environments relating to this construct. I find great value in the conclusion of this chapter, in which Mercer and Dörnyei assert that, "our language classrooms are embedded in a wider ecology, and much of what is communicated to learners there about their autonomy, relatedness and competence, as well as the value of languages, will impact on what happened within actual L2 classes" (p. 27).

The next chapters are somewhat different from Chapter 1 in that they discuss more concrete principles that teachers can adapt to positively and actively engage their learners. Chapters 2-4 address three major factors that can enhance learner engaged behaviors, including the learner's psychological state, their relationship to the teacher and their relationship with their peers.

Chapter 2, "The Facilitative Learner Mindset," discusses learners' beliefs and feelings that can impact their engagement. Facilitative mindset is a term used by the authors to refer to learner-internal factors that can facilitate engagement. The assumption behind this chapter is that in order for learners to be willing to engage, it is vitally important for them to possess "an optimal facilitative psychological frame of mind" (p. 49). A wide range of principles are touched upon, including a sense of competence, a growth mindset, a sense of ownership and control over the learning process and confidence. The authors then discuss different action areas that can be pursued by teachers, such as emphasizing a coaching mindset. Adopting a coaching mindset means "thinking of the learner as a person with psychological needs and drives that can be supported through teaching and interaction" (p. 40). Mercer and Dörnyei also explain the importance of discussing learner mindset beliefs explicitly by using, for example,

“texts, quotes, films and literature in which learners can identify role models who exemplify growth mindsets” (p. 45).

In Chapter 3, “Teacher-Student Rapport,” the authors offer a coherent discussion on six main principles underlying quality teacher-student relationships, focusing on the attitudes and behaviors of the teacher. These guiding principles include being approachable, empathetic, and responsive to learner individuality, manifesting belief in learners’ potential to improve, seeking to support learner autonomy, and remaining passionate about teaching. Mercer and Dörnyei then propose concrete actions for teachers to pursue, such as giving students sufficient opportunities to speak about personally meaningful topics and providing learners with thoughtful, clear and purposeful feedback.

Chapter 4, “Positive Classroom Dynamics and Culture,” reviews the role of group dynamics in engaging learners, focusing on peer relationships and culture. In this chapter, the authors argue that it is teachers’ responsibility to create a psychologically safe classroom environment for the learner group to feel a strong sense of belonging characterized by cohesiveness and collaboration. Just like in other chapters, Mercer and Dörnyei suggest specific actions that teachers could adopt in their classrooms to facilitate positive group groundwork for engagement. These include, for example, mixing up learners to ensure that all of them have some kind of relationship with each other, developing a sense of “we” and “us” in the classroom, and preparing learners for groupwork through building relevant linguistic, interpersonal and collaborative skills, setting cooperative norms and assigning appropriate roles within groups.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Mercer and Dörnyei present overarching design principles of initiating and maintaining task engagement from the field of psychology that could guide L2 teachers’ planning of their own classroom tasks (e.g., Antonetti & Garver, 2015; Bjork & Bjork, 2011; Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Chapters 5 and 6 are quite beneficial for teachers and researchers new to the topic of task engagement in language classrooms.

Chapter 5, “Initiating Engagement with Learning Tasks,” focuses on creating learner initial task engagement by providing several task design principles. These include, for example, understanding learners’ needs and abilities, the need to get all learners emotionally invested during tasks, and creating curiosity. The authors also explain that the start-up of a task in which the teacher clarifies what is expected from learners is vitally important in capturing and sustaining engagement. Mercer and Dörnyei remind the reader that keeping learners active by, for example, asking them to move things around or physically engaging with something is vital for initiating task engagement. Their discussion of task design is followed by suggestions of a number of useful teacher actions, such as grabbing the learners’ attention and triggering their curiosity through tasks that

are novel in some way (e.g., using a colored paper for a reading task and cutting it into paragraphs that students have to then reconstruct). In addition, the authors suggest a second way of promoting curiosity by adopting strategies that provoke puzzlement, uncertainty, mystery or confusion. For example, puzzlement can be promoted by employing traditional puzzle formats such as jigsaws. This well-constructed chapter provides a thorough overview of task engagement as an important and yet an underexplored area of research.

Chapter 6, "Sustaining Engagement on Learning Tasks," is a natural follow-up to Chapter 5, and a fitting finale to the book. Mercer and Dörnyei propose interesting, engaging principles that go beyond keeping students merely active. For example, providing learners with an appropriate level of task challenge compatible with their level of L2 attainment, ensuring positive emotions in the task, attention, and interest are crucial factors in sustaining task engagement. The authors move on to suggest that reducing levels of predictability and ensuring a sense of progress or accomplishment among learners are crucial principles for maintaining learner engagement during tasks. The chapter closes with relevant practical points that teachers could implement in combination with the action points proposed in previous chapters. Among different action points, Mercer and Dörnyei introduce what they called "CLARA" principles which are central to task engagement. CLARA approaches include fostering challenge, learner-centeredness, active learning, real-world relevance and autonomy-richness.

The last component of this book, "Conclusion," offers an informative summary of the chapters in a table format, recapitulating the main principles and actions points proposed in the book. The authors then identify three recurrent themes central to learner engagement, including the power of positive emotions, empowering learners as partners in their education and active participation. In their final words, Mercer and Dörnyei leave readers with a very thoughtful reminder that, "the learners themselves do not like to be bored or passive; they would usually prefer to be engaged. So, our job is to engage learners in their learning by designing language learning experiences that provide learners with the opportunity and encouragement to engage" (p. 162).

Among the many positive aspects of this book, I applaud the publication of Mercer and Dörnyei's book for the following reasons. First of all, the publication is a teacher-friendly resource that offers a theoretically grounded and empirically rich window into learner engagement within language classrooms. It provides readers with practical approaches and guiding principles to involve today's generation of learners. The authors offer a set of comprehensive principles that are eminently feasible and require no special equipment in the classroom. Most importantly, the proposed action points can be adopted in different teaching contexts and for learners of all levels. Many of these principles can also be

easily integrated into what teachers currently do with no special expertise. On the other hand, novice teachers might feel overwhelmed by the number of principles needed to engage their students. I also have to admit that, at times, I found myself thinking that implementing some of the engagement principles proposed in the book might seem overly ambitious, but, on each occasion, Mercer and Dörnyei managed to skillfully relate idealism to practical realities that can be simply achieved through small adjustments to teachers' current practices. It is, indeed, the flexibility and accessibility that make this book a welcome addition to the L2 literature.

Overall, maintaining harmony between theory and practice, Mercer and Dörnyei's publication is a valuable contribution to the L2 literature, especially at a time where teachers must work with increasingly distracted students. It weaves together fields such as psychology, language education and motivation studies in order to make engagement a useful construct for a variety of audiences. This is a very thought-provoking read for language teachers, postgraduates in language education, L2 researchers and for anyone with an interest in engagement in L2 teaching and learning. Language teachers can use this book as a practical guide to design engaging classroom learning lessons and tasks by, for example, falling back upon some of the task design principles introduced in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6. It is a horizon-broadening read not only for novice teachers but also for more experienced practitioners. As for postgraduates and L2 researchers, the book can be an informative guide for designing empirical studies. Importantly, this work should be seen as a clarion call for further L2 research in the area of engagement.

Reviewed by  
Haydab Almukhaild  
University of Leicester, UK  
[haaa6@leicester.ac.uk](mailto:haaa6@leicester.ac.uk)

## References

- Antonetti, J. V, & Garver, J. R. (2015). *17,000 classroom visits can't be wrong: Strategies that engage students, promote active learning, and boost achievement*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Aubrey, S., King, J., & Almukhaild, H. (2020). Language learner engagement during speaking tasks: A longitudinal study. *RELC Journal*. <http://doi.org/10.1177%2F0033688220945418>

- Bjork, E. L., & Bjork, R. A. (2011). Making things hard on yourself, but in a good way: Creating desirable difficulties to enhance learning. In M. A. Gernsbacher, R. W. Pew, L. M. Hough, & J. R. Pomerantz (Eds.), *Psychology and the real world: Essays illustrating fundamental contributions to society* (pp. 59-64). New York: Worth Publishers.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2002). *Flow: The classic work on how to achieve happiness*. London: Rider.
- Ellis, R. (2018). *Reflections on task-based language teaching*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Mercer, S. (2019). Language learner engagement: Setting the scene. In X. Gao (Ed.), *Second handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 1-19). Cham: Springer.
- Oga-Baldwin, W. L. Q. (2019). Acting, thinking, feeling, making, collaborating: The engagement process in foreign language learning. *System*, 86, 102-128.