

*Modeling the interaction between teacher credibility,  
teacher confirmation, and English major students'  
academic engagement: A sequential  
mixed-methods approach*

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Abstract

Adopting a sequential mixed-methods approach, the current inquiry examined English major students' perceptions of the role of teacher confirmation and teacher credibility in enhancing their academic engagement in the Chinese context. In doing so, through WeChat messenger, three scales were provided to 1168 English major students chosen from different English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. For the sake of triangulation, 40 participants were invited to take part in interview sessions as well. The inspection of the correlations between the constructs indicated a strong association between student academic engagement and teacher confirmation as well as a close connection between student academic engagement and teacher credibility. This showed that the academic engagement of Chinese EFL students is tied to these teacher interpersonal behaviors. The contribution of teacher confirmation and credibility to Chinese EFL students' academic engagement was also examined using path analysis, which demonstrated that Chinese EFL students' academic engagement was predicted by teacher credibility and confirmation. Additionally, the interview

outcomes proved the integral role of these two communication behaviors in increasing Chinese students' engagement. Findings may have some noteworthy implications for teacher educators and language instructors.

*Keywords:* English as a foreign language (EFL) students; sequential mixed-methods approach; teacher confirmation; teacher credibility

## 1. Introduction

Since students' active participation in the learning process contributes to their higher achievements (Carver et al., 2021), inspiring pupils to engage in classroom activities has been the main concern of teachers in any instructional setting (Carmona-Halty et al., 2021), and the issue is of utmost importance when it comes to second or foreign language (L2) classes, including English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms (Derakhshan, 2022). This is mostly because in countries wherein English is not officially recognized as a second language, students are not always provided with adequate opportunities to use English in society (Pishghadam et al., 2019). Hence, the sole chance for students to master English is active engagement in classroom contexts (Derakhshan, Eslami, et al., 2022). Academic engagement broadly refers to "the time and energy that students devote to educationally sound activities" (Kuh, 2009, p. 6). More specifically, language learners' academic engagement pertains to their physical and emotional investment in learning a new language (Mercer, 2019; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

To elucidate the value of student academic engagement, Reeve and Tseng (2011) stated that those learners who are emotionally and physically committed to participating in classroom activities will be naturally more successful in acquiring the course content. In a similar vein, Shappie and Debb (2019) highlighted the significance of academic engagement by referring to its positive impact on students' academic success. Thus, factors influencing student engagement need to be empirically examined. To respond to this necessity, numerous education researchers (e.g., Kahn et al., 2017) have explored the impact of student-related factors (e.g., self-efficacy, reflexivity, motivation, passion) on academic engagement. Some scholars (e.g., Lauer mann & Berger, 2021; Martin & Collie, 2019; Zhang & Hyland, 2022) have also looked into the function of teachers' personal and interpersonal traits (e.g., autonomy support, creativity, emotional intelligence, feedback, rapport, self-efficacy) in improving students' engagement in general education courses. Yet, as the review of the pertinent literature revealed, when it comes to English language classes, the existing sources related to this topic are few and far between (Khajavy, 2021; Ramshe et al., 2019). Simply

said, the influence of teacher interpersonal characteristics on English language learners' academic engagement has received inadequate attention. Thus, whether teacher interpersonal variables can bring about significant changes in the academic engagement of English learners is open to question. The present investigation strives to address this question by examining how EFL students' academic engagement varies as a function of teachers' positive interpersonal behaviors.

The rationale for studying positive interpersonal behaviors in relation to students' academic engagement can be clearly explained with reference to the emotional response theory (ERT; Mottet et al., 2006) and the broaden-and-build theory (BBT; Fredrickson, 2001). In their ERT, Mottet et al. (2006) argued that the positive interpersonal behaviors that teachers utilize in their classrooms can considerably increase pupils' approach behaviors such as learning engagement. This is because, through positive communication behaviors, teachers can create a desirable learning climate that can affect their students' engagement (Derakhshan, Fathi, et al., 2022). Similarly, in her BBT, Fredrickson (2001) argued that the positive interpersonal behaviors of instructors can inspire positive emotions in the learners. These positive emotions encourage learners to engage with their classmates, instructors, and classroom activities (Fredrickson, 2004; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mercer et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021). With these assumptions in mind, this study seeks to investigate the potential impact of two interpersonal behaviors, namely, confirmation and credibility, on Chinese students' academic engagement.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Teacher confirmation

The construct of teacher confirmation was conceptualized by Ellis (2000) as "the process by which instructors communicate to students that they are valuable, significant individuals" (p. 265). As a multi-faceted construct, teacher confirmation is comprised of three main dimensions: "responding to students' questions, demonstrating interest in the student's learning process, and employing an interactive teaching style" (Buckner & Frisby, 2015, p. 401). The first facet deals with the amount of time that teachers typically allocate to listen and respond to their pupils' remarks and queries. The second is directly related to the teachers' passion and excitement for the student's learning process. The last pertains to the teachers' choice of instructional methods. By adopting a suitable instructional strategy, teachers are able to harmonize the course content with students' needs and preferences (Goldman & Goodboy, 2014). Taken together, one can conclude that the students will feel valued and significant if they receive positive reactions and adequate attention from their instructors.

To highlight the value of teacher confirmation, Sidelinger and Booth-Butterfield (2010) noted that confirming students' responses and comments aids teachers in establishing a positive climate in the classroom context. To them, a pleasant learning environment gives students a strong motive for participating in class activities. Hsu (2012) also stipulated that confirming students can dramatically decrease the amount of apprehension and anxiety that they typically experience when receiving and understanding new learning content. To date, several scholars have studied the impact of teacher confirmation on various student-related factors such as learning outcomes (Goldman et al., 2018), willingness to talk (Hsu & Huang, 2017; Wang & Derakhshan, 2023) and motivation (Croucher et al., 2021). For one, Goldman et al. (2018) examined the role of teacher confirmation in students' cognitive learning. Three self-report questionnaires were distributed among 208 students of different ethnicities. Analysis illuminated that they viewed teacher confirmation as a significant facilitator of students' cognitive learning. Likewise, Croucher et al. (2021) examined whether teacher confirmation can predict students' academic motivation. Findings displayed that teacher confirmation can meaningfully predict student motivation.

As mentioned above, several papers have been devoted to the positive effects of teacher confirmation on a range of student-related factors. Nevertheless, the impact of teacher confirmation on student engagement has remained an elusive issue. To our knowledge, only two studies have tried to look into the role of teacher confirmation in predicting student engagement (i.e., Campbell et al., 2009; Goodboy & Myers, 2008). Specifically, Campbell et al. (2009) studied the association between teacher confirmation and student learning engagement. Surveying 672 university students, they found a connection between teacher confirmation and student engagement. The survey findings also indicated that teacher confirmation can drastically influence students' learning engagement positively. More importantly, little research, if any, has been done on teacher confirmation in the domain of language teaching and learning. To bridge this research gap, in the current study, we attempted to extend this research line from general education to the language education environment.

## 2.2. Teacher credibility

In a general sense, the construct of credibility pertains to "the positive attitude toward a source of communication held at a given time by a communicator" (Schrodt & Finn, 2011, p. 241). In the educational domain, credibility has to do with the degree to which learners can rely on their instructors (Gray et al., 2011). Theoretically, this construct goes back to Aristotle's means of persuasion. As

noted by Banfield et al. (2006), Aristotle grouped persuasion mode into three different categories, including (a) *ethos* (i.e., the credibility/believability of a communicator), (b) *logos* (i.e., the reasoning used to prove an assertion), and (c) *pathos* (i.e., the emotional/inspirational appeals). Among them, *ethos* is deemed as the most potent means of persuasion through which an orator can effectively convince his/her audience (Pishghadam et al., 2019). *Ethos*/source credibility as a complex concept comprises three dimensions: *competence*, *trustworthiness*, and *caring* (Teven & Hanson, 2004; Wang et al., 2022). While the first dimension of source credibility has something to do with speakers' knowledge, skills, and abilities, *trustworthiness* and *caring* are related to the personality of speakers. Extending these dimensions to education, *competence* pertains to how positively students perceive their instructors' knowledge and teaching abilities (Teven & Hanson, 2004; Zhi & Wang, 2023). *Trustworthiness* refers to the amount of honesty instructors demonstrate in interactions with their pupils (Teven, 2007). *Caring*, as the last dimension, deals with instructors' continual attention to students' needs, wants, and desires (Zhang, 2009).

To illustrate the importance of teacher credibility, Tibbles et al. (2008) stated that students' motivation to learn considerably varies as a function of teachers' believability and trustworthiness. They explained that a credible teacher can inspire in their pupils a strong desire and motivation to learn. Zepke and Leach (2010) postulated that teacher credibility is tied to students' increased engagement and achievement. To them, when pupils consider their teachers to be adequately knowledgeable, skillful, and attentive, they invest more time and energy in acquiring the course content. This, in turn, culminates in their higher learning achievement. In a similar vein, Zhang (2011) also noted that credible instructors, who are believable in the eyes of their learners, can effectively encourage their pupils to become emotionally engaged with the learning process.

Many studies to date have explored the power of teacher credibility in predicting students' classroom behaviors (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Fernandes, 2019; Lee, 2020). For example, Lee (2020) scrutinized the contribution of teacher credibility to learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). Adopting a random sampling technique, 252 students were chosen from a state college in Korea. They were asked to respond to two reliable inventories previously designed to measure teacher credibility and student WTC. The analysis of students' answers showed that all dimensions of teacher credibility (i.e., *caring*, *competence*, *trustworthiness*) positively predicted students' WTC. Similar to the current study, Derakhshan (2021) examined the pivotal function that teacher credibility may serve in enhancing students' academic engagement. To do so, two valid questionnaires were virtually distributed among 503 Iranian students. Correlation test demonstrated a favorable association between the variables. Additionally, SEM analysis identified

teacher credibility as a significant predictor of student engagement. Taken together, the study outcomes divulged that students' involvement in learning environments strictly depends on their teachers' credibility. Despite such attempts, the examination of teacher credibility in relation to students' academic behaviors is still in its infancy. Moreover, few studies have investigated the implications of teacher credibility in language education contexts. To fill this lacuna, in this research, we explored a group of EFL students' perceptions of their instructors' level of credibility.

### 2.3. Academic engagement

Academic engagement pertains to "the quality of the effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to the desired outcomes" (Hu & Kuh, 2002, p. 556). Extending this concept to L2 classes, student academic engagement is conceptualized as learners' mental and physical endeavors to acquire a second or foreign language (Hiver et al., 2021). Due to the complexity of this construct, researchers and academics have characterized its dimensions in different ways. Finn (1989), for instance, grouped different aspects of academic engagement into two main categories, namely *participation* and *identification*. The former refers to students' involvement in learning tasks/activities and the latter deals with students' sense of attachment. In another classification, Schaufeli, Salanova, et al. (2002) divided this concept into three major facets, including *vigor*, *absorption*, and *dedication*. The first facet of student engagement (i.e., vigor) generally pertains to the amount of energy that students exert in fulfilling their educational responsibilities (Schaufeli, Martinez, et al., 2002). The second facet (i.e., absorption) refers to students' immersion in learning tasks (Salanova et al., 2010). The third facet (i.e., dedication) alludes to students' passion for acquiring and mastering academic content (Schaufeli, 2013).

Students' engagement, as noted by Finn and Zimmer (2012), can favorably influence their learning outcomes. That is, engaged students are more successful learners as they allocate more energy to receive, understand, and master the course content (Jiang & Zhang, 2021). Due to its importance, student academic engagement has been the focus of several empirical investigations (Dewaele & Li, 2021; Pan et al., 2023; Pawlak, 2014; Tsang & Dewaele, 2023). A review of the previous studies indicates that students' engagement is tied to their motivation (Ghelichli et al., 2020), increased achievement (Khajavy, 2021), higher learning outcomes (Gupta & Pandey, 2018), and academic success (Dogan, 2015). The review of the earlier studies also revealed that a plethora of studies have investigated the determinants and predictors of student engagement in educational contexts (e.g., Lawson & Masyn, 2015). Yet, little research has attempted to

identify the predictors of EFL students' engagement. The present study sought to address this gap by examining the power of teacher confirmation and credibility in predicting EFL students' academic engagement.

#### 2.4. Theoretical models of the interplay between teacher communication behaviors and student academic behaviors

Building upon the emotional response and broaden-and-build theory, we intend to illustrate the potential association between students' academic behaviors and teacher communication behaviors. As a comprehensive framework, emotional response theory encompasses three components of *instructor communication behaviors, student emotional responses, and student approach-avoidance behaviors toward learning* (Mottet et al., 2006). This theory asserts that the positive communication behaviors instructors employ in educational environments induce students' positive responses. Positive emotional responses (e.g., enjoyment, happiness), in turn, enhance pupils' approach behaviors toward learning (e.g., academic engagement). Besides, Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory highlights the importance of positive emotions in learning environments. As noted by Fredrickson (2004), "positive emotions appear to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources" (p. 1369). According to this theory, positive emotions expand the breadth of learners' cognitive actions, encouraging them to follow a wider range of ideas than they are typically used to (Goldman & Goodboy, 2014; Wu et al., 2023; Zhang & Zhang, 2013). This theory also states that, in contrast to adverse emotions which impede students' academic actions, positive feelings drive pupils to become more active in the learning environment (Fredrickson, 2001). As Fredrickson and Branigan (2005) postulated, teachers' communication behaviors (e.g., confirmation and credibility) may play a role in fostering positive feelings in students.

Drawing on these theoretical models, the current study sought to divulge the interplay between teacher confirmation, teacher credibility, and Chinese students' engagement. For this purpose, two research questions (RQs) were put forward:

- RQ1: Is there any significant correlation between teacher confirmation, teacher credibility, and student academic engagement?
- RQ2: To what extent, if any, do teacher credibility and teacher confirmation significantly predict Chinese students' academic engagement?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

A random sampling method was adopted to choose the required participants. As Dörnyei and Csizér (2012) noted, random sampling is “a probability sampling method that provides a truly representative sample” (p. 81). Following this sampling strategy, a sample of 1168 English major students were recruited from different language institutes, colleges, and universities in ten provinces of China (e.g., Anhui, Hebei, Hubei, Hunan, Shanxi, Xinjiang, Zhejiang, Inner Mongolia, Jiangsu, and Henan). The sample comprised 496 males (42%) and 672 females (58%), varying in age from 17 to 23 ( $M = 20$ ,  $SD = 2.69$ ). The majority of the participants were freshmen ( $N = 427$ ), sophomores ( $N = 253$ ), and juniors ( $N = 224$ ), respectively. Most students had been exposed to English for about 11 years and there were only six students who had two-month experiences of studying at some summer training programs offered by the native English-speaking countries. Participants were instructed on how to answer the survey questions and were assured that their answers would be used exclusively for research objectives.

#### 3.2. Instruments

##### 3.2.1. Teacher Confirmation Scale (TCS)

To measure Chinese EFL teachers' confirmation, TCS, designed by Ellis (2000), was utilized (see Appendix A). The scale comprises 27 items. Some of these items are: “My English teacher communicates that he/she is interested in whether students are learning” (item 1), “My English teacher makes an effort to get to know students” (item 3), and “My English teacher listens attentively when students ask questions or make comments during class” (item 11). The reliability index reported for this questionnaire by Ellis (2000) was .95. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha reliability of the questionnaire was .92.

##### 3.2.2. Source Credibility Scale (SCS)

This scale, developed by McCroskey and Teven (2013), contains 18 items to which participants rate on a linear scale (see Appendix B). Respondents were required to express their viewpoints towards their EFL teachers' “competence” (1, 2, 7, 11, 13, and 16), “trustworthiness” (4, 6, 10, 12, 14, and 17), and “caring”



(3, 5, 8, 9, 15, and 18) by selecting the proper number varying from 1 to 7 between the pairs of adjectives. Some items in the SCS are: “untrained/trained” (item 2), “dishonest/honest” (item 4), “inexpert/expert” (item 7), “immoral/moral” (item 12), and “insensitive/sensitive” (item 15). Previously, McCroskey and Teven (2013) reported a reliability index of .91 for this scale. In this study, a reliability coefficient of .93 was found for this questionnaire.

### 3.2.3. Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for Students (UWES-S)

The 14-item version of UWES-S, developed and validated by Schaufeli, Salanova, et al. (2002), was employed to assess participants’ academic engagement (see Appendix C). The UWES-S is comprised of three subscales, namely “vigor,” “dedication,” and “absorption.” The scale uses a 7-point Likert scale, ranging in answers from 0 “strongly disagree” to 6 “strongly agree.” Examples of the UWES-S’s items are: “When I’m studying, I feel mentally strong” (item 1), “When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to class” (item 5), “I am enthusiastic about my studies” (item 8) and “I feel happy when I am studying intensively” (item 13). While the estimated reliability coefficient for this inventory was .89, the calculated reliability for this study was .95.

### 3.2.4. Semi-structured interviews

In addition to the above-mentioned scales, semi-structured interviews were also utilized to gain a deeper insight into the association between the variables under investigation. To do so, an interview guide with four major questions was prepared (see Appendix D). Then, to find out if there were any flaws in the interview guide, some pilot interview sessions were performed. Following the results of the piloting, the interview guide and its questions were revised. Subsequently, using Skype, Tencent Meeting, Zoom and WeChat, nine online interview sessions were held with a group of 40 participants. Given the participants of the current study were English major students who were proficient English language users, the interviews were conducted in English. Each interview session lasted between 30 and 40 minutes.

## 3.3. Procedure

To adhere to the ethics of research with human subjects (BERA, 2011), using WeChat messenger, a consent letter was distributed to a large sample ( $N= 1300$ )

of Chinese students of English majors recruited from different provinces across the Chinese mainland. Then, the online questionnaires were administered to those students ( $N = 1168$ ) who demonstrated their agreement by signing the consent letter. Since all participants were English major students, the questionnaires were administered in English. The questionnaires were filled out by participants after they had been provided with clear instructions on how to do so. Following that, we recruited some participants who were willing to participate in the interview sessions.

### 3.4. Analysis

The analysis of the quantitative data was carried out through the SPSS (version 28) and Amos (version 24) programs. First, participants' answers to the aforementioned questionnaires were double-checked to exclude the problematic data. Second, to assess the normality of the datasets, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was conducted. Then, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine the composite reliability and discriminant validity of the questionnaires. Subsequently, through the SPSS program, Pearson correlation was run to estimate the connections between the teacher confirmation and credibility subscales and student engagement. Afterward, to determine the function of confirmation and credibility in improving students' engagement, path analysis was performed via the Amos program.

Then, to analyze the qualitative datasets, content analysis (CA) was employed using the MAXQDA (version 2020) program. As a widely used qualitative analysis approach, content analysis involves "coding data in a systematic way in order to discover patterns and develop well-grounded interpretations" (Friedman, 2012, p. 191). CA, as Elo and Kyngäs (2008) noted, may be implemented either inductively or deductively. In the deductive method, researchers analyze qualitative data with respect to a theoretical framework, while in the inductive approach, they do so without any theoretical model (Berg, 2002). In the current research, the inductive method was employed for analyzing the interviewees' responses. Although CA may be typically conducted manually, in this study, MAXQDA, as a qualitative data analysis program, was preferred to do so. It is largely because "employing a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) can remarkably enhance the reliability of the coding process" (Baralt, 2012, p. 223). To ensure the credibility of the analysis (Friedman, 2012), all stages of CA were performed by two persons (i.e., the first author and his colleague) who have already published numerous related studies.

CA comprises three main stages, namely *preparation*, *organization*, and *reporting* (Burnard, 1996). In the first stage, each analyst reviewed the transcripts

of interviewees' answers. This helped them become aware of any important details. Then, at the next stage, they went through the three phases of *open coding*, *creating categories*, and *abstraction* to codify interviewees' responses. In the first phase, the analysts scrutinized the transcripts and offered some tentative codes, accordingly. Then, during the second phase, they linked the initial codes and categorized them into higher-order headings. Finally, at the last phase, each category was named using *content-characteristic words*. Following that, to measure the inter-coder agreement, Krippendorff's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) was utilized. The agreement coefficient was estimated to be .96 in this study. Subsequently, the strategy of participant validation, also known as member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was performed to increase the trustworthiness of the CA's findings. In doing so, the extracted themes were returned to five interviewees to be verified. In addition, in order to promote confirmability (Nassaji, 2020), the dataset as well as the extracted themes were sent to an outside scholar to look over the analysis process.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Data preprocessing

As previously mentioned, to assess the normality of the main variables (i.e., confirmation, credibility, and engagement), the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test was employed. The results showed that the Sig indices of the K-S test for teacher credibility, teacher confirmation, and student engagement were .09, .12, and .06, respectively (Table 1).

Table 1 The results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Teacher confirmation	.05	1168	.12
Teacher credibility	.08	1168	.09
Student academic engagement	.07	1168	.06

Drawing on these values, it is possible to conclude that the data distribution was normal. Accordingly, parametric tests can be utilized in the present study. Moreover, there were no outliers or inconsistencies in the gathered data. Besides, it was found that teacher confirmation with a mean score of 105.17 gained the highest average point. In addition, the average scores for teacher credibility and student engagement were found to be 96.13 and 71.99, respectively. Table 2 portrays the results of the Cronbach alpha analyses for all three scales and their underlying components.

Table 2 Cronbach alpha indexes

<i>Scales</i>	<i>Subscales</i>	<i>Cronbach alpha</i>
TCS	-	.92
	Competence factor	.80
	Caring/goodwill factor	.73
SCS	Trustworthiness factor	.77
	Overall scale	.93
UWES-S	Vigor	.80
	Dedication	.71
	Absorption	.70
	Overall scale	.95

As indicated in Table 2, the utilized instruments with values equaled or above 0.7 obtained an acceptable index of Cronbach's alpha (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Subsequently, CFA was also implemented to assess the composite reliability and discriminant validity of the questionnaires. The CFA outcomes are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Reliability and validity of the scales

Questionnaires	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)
TCS	0.889	0.855	0.427	0.968
SCS	0.757	0.753	0.107	0.976
UWES-S	0.969	0.692	0.427	0.975

As shown in Table 3, the composite reliability values of the questionnaires (TCS, SCS, UWES-S) were acceptable. Moreover, all components of the questionnaires demonstrated AVE values higher than 0.50. This further confirms the discriminant validity of the utilized questionnaires.

## 4.2. The quantitative results

### 4.2.1. RQ1: Is there any significant correlation between teacher confirmation, teacher credibility, and student academic engagement?

To address RQ1, Pearson correlation was performed. Table 4 shows the degree of correlation between student academic engagement, teacher credibility, and teacher confirmation

Table 4 evinced that a positive and strong link was found between overall teacher confirmation and credibility ( $r = .72$ ,  $N = 1168$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The results of the correlation test further revealed a direct, close relation between teacher confirmation and student academic engagement ( $r = .38$ ,  $N = 1168$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Similarly, a significant connection was observed between credibility and student engagement ( $r = .33, N = 1168, p < .001$ ). Additionally, the associations between the underlying components of student academic engagement and overall teacher confirmation and credibility are displayed in Table 5.

Table 4 The outcomes of Pearson correlation

	Confirmation	Credibility	Academic engagement
Confirmation	1		
	1168		
Credibility	.72**	1	
	.000	1168	
Academic engagement	.38**	.33**	1
	.000	.000	1168
	1168	1168	1168

Note. \*\*Correlation is significant

Table 5 The results of Pearson correlation

	Vigor	Dedication	Absorption
Confirmation	.37**	.42**	.30**
Credibility	.31**	.37**	.26**

Note. \*\*Correlation is significant.

As shown in Table 5, positive significant relationships were found between all the components of student academic engagement and overall teacher confirmation and credibility. Compared to the other components of student academic engagement, dedication was more significantly correlated with teacher confirmation ( $r = .42, N = 1168, p < .001$ ) and credibility ( $r = .37, N = 1168, p < .001$ ).

#### 4.2.2. RQ2: To what extent, if any, do teacher credibility and teacher confirmation significantly predict Chinese students' academic engagement?

RQ2, which dealt with the function of teacher confirmation and credibility in promoting student engagement, was answered using path analysis. Figure 1 illustrates the findings of path analysis between variables.

As illuminated by the results of path analysis, teacher confirmation ( $\beta = .30, p = .05$ ) and credibility ( $\beta = .18, p = .05$ ) were found to be positive and strong predictors of students' academic engagement. According to Hu and Bentler (1999), a number of criteria (i.e.,  $X^2/df$ , GFI, CFI, NFI, RMSEA) must be met for a model to

exhibit good fit to the collected data. As Table 6 indicates, all the fit indices were highly acceptable, illustrating that the suggested model enjoyed high validity.

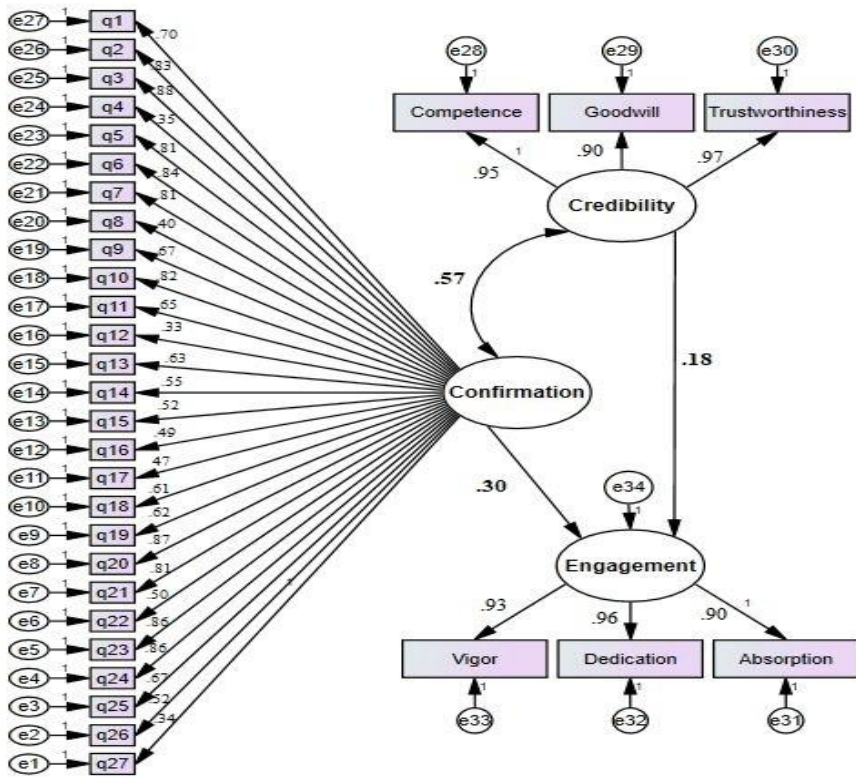


Figure 1 Path analysis between teacher confirmation, credibility, and student academic engagement

Table 6 The goodness of fit indices

	X2/df	GFI	CFI	NFI	RMSEA
Acceptable fit	<3	>.90	>.90	>.90	<.08
Model	2.92	.93	.94	.95	.07

#### 4.2. The qualitative findings

The analysis of the interviewees' viewpoints regarding the antecedents of their academic engagement resulted in five themes and five sub-themes (see Figure 2): *teacher confirmation*, *teacher credibility* (*trustworthiness*, *caring/goodwill*, and *competence*), *rapport*, *teacher care*, and *teacher immediacy* (*verbal and nonverbal immediacy*).

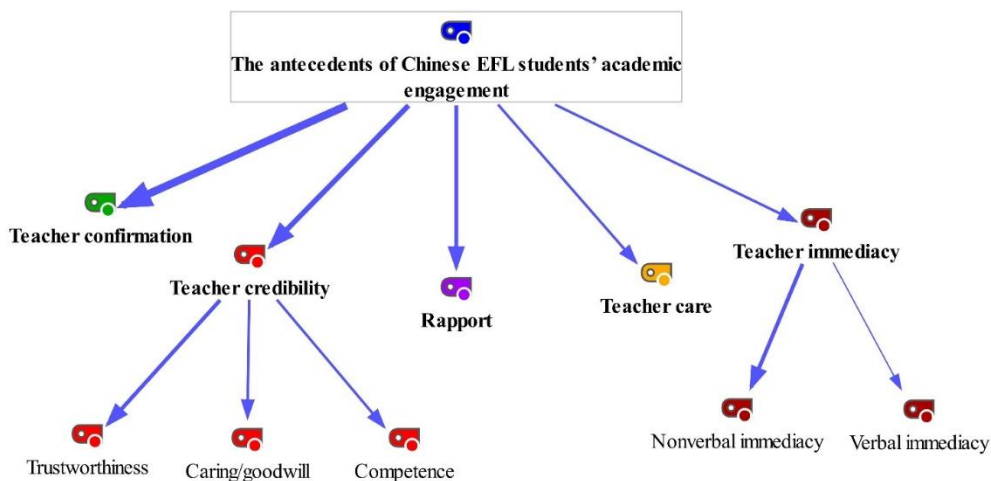


Figure 2 The antecedents of Chinese EFL students' academic engagement

Among the aforementioned themes, teacher confirmation ( $f = 30$ ) was identified as the most recurrent theme (see Table 7). That is, several Chinese EFL students perceived teacher confirmation as a favorable predictor of their academic engagement. Some statements illustrating the pivotal role of teacher confirmation in students' engagement are:

P9: *The confirmations that I typically receive from my English language teacher encourage me to engage in class activities.*

P10: *Providing confirmation to learners can foster their engagement with the language learning environment.*

P14: *Students are more likely to participate in class activities when they feel acknowledged.*

P17: *The teacher's confirmation or approval makes me confident enough to actively participate in learning activities.*

Table 7 The results of content analysis (CA)

Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency	Percentage
Teacher confirmation	-	30	35%
Teacher credibility	Trustworthiness, caring/goodwill, competence	20	23%
Rapport	-	15	17%
Teacher care	-	12	14%
Teacher immediacy	Verbal immediacy, nonverbal immediacy	10	11%
Total		87	100

Note. Some interviewees mentioned more than one factor.

As Table 7 demonstrates, teacher credibility (trustworthiness, caring/goodwill, competence) was another recurrent theme ( $f = 20$ ) mentioned by Chinese

students as a significant antecedent of their academic engagement. The following excerpts illuminate the predictive power of teacher credibility:

*P7: A knowledgeable language teacher can inspire me to become an active learner in classroom environment.*

*P12: I think teachers who are credible in the eyes of their learners can encourage them to regularly participate in the learning process.*

*P16: To me, trustworthy teachers are good at improving their students' academic engagement.*

*P23: I believe that teacher goodwill can cultivate a positive teacher-student relationship and create a good instructional-learning environment in which students' academic engagement can be dramatically increased.*

Besides, some students enumerated rapport, teacher caring, and teacher immediacy (verbal and nonverbal immediacy) as other important predictors of their academic engagement (see Table 7). The following excerpts illustrate these three themes, respectively:

*P8: I think a strong and positive connection between teachers and students can trigger them take part in the language acquisition process.*

*P18: I firmly believe that students' classroom engagement depends on the amount of attention teachers devote to students' feelings, desires, and welfare.*

*P34: The use of facial expressions, gestures, and body language not only enables language teachers to create a lively learning environment but also helps them to involve students in the learning process.*

## 5. Discussion

This study was endeavored to identify the relations between Chinese EFL teachers' confirmation, credibility, and students' academic engagement (RQ1). Using correlation tests, a positive and strong association was discovered, first, between teacher confirmation and student academic engagement, and second, between teacher credibility and student academic engagement. When it comes to the strong connection between teacher confirmation and student academic engagement, it is possible to say that this result is aligned with those of Campbell et al. (2009), who reported a positive link between these two variables. This finding is also consistent with the Goodboy and Myers (2008) outcomes, which illuminated that being confirmed by instructors is intertwined with students' active participation. Concerning the direct association between teacher credibility and student academic engagement, it can be noted that this finding lends support to earlier investigations' results



that demonstrated the value of teacher credibility for students' learning motivation (Fernandes, 2019), WTC (Lee, 2020), and willingness to attend classes (Hu & Wang, 2023; Pishghadam et al., 2019; Pishghadam et al., 2023). All these previous studies identified the extent to which students' classroom behaviors, including their academic engagement, can be influenced by their viewpoints and attitudes towards their teachers' competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness.

Besides its primary objective, the current study also sought to uncover the role of teacher confirmation and credibility in predicting academic engagement (RQ2). As illuminated in the path analysis model, teacher confirmation and credibility were identified to be the positive predictors of Chinese students' engagement. This finding is in tune with the outcomes of several related studies (e.g., Derakhshan, 2021; Imlawi et al., 2015) highlighting the positive impacts of teacher confirmation and credibility on students' engagement. The predictability of the Chinese students' academic engagement through teacher confirmation is consonant with the core assumptions of ERT (Mottet et al., 2006). According to this theory, teachers' positive communication behaviors, including confirmation, contribute to a range of positive responses such as happiness and learning enjoyment (Dewaele et al., 2019). Such positive responses can result in increased student engagement (Mottet et al., 2006).

As mentioned above, teacher credibility was also found as a valuable determinant of student academic engagement. This finding implies that skilled, competent, and trustworthy teachers can effectively involve their pupils in classroom activities. A possible explanation for this might be that "teaching and teachers are at the heart of student academic engagement" (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 40). That is, the behaviors that teachers employ in classrooms while teaching are extremely important for pupils' learning engagement. This result can also be justified by the fact that "if the teacher is perceived to be trustworthy, well prepared, and sensitive to student feelings, students are committed to work harder, get more out of the session and are more willing to express their own opinion" (Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 170). This finding is in congruence with Fredrickson' (2001) theoretical model (BBT) in which she suggested that, through positive communication behaviors (e.g., credibility), teachers can cultivate positive emotions that stimulate students to become more active in classroom contexts. The present findings support Derakhshan's (2021) research outcomes, which illuminated that teacher credibility is an external source of student classroom engagement. The findings also lend support to those of Imlawi et al. (2015), who reported that students tend to engage passionately in the process of learning when they receive instructions from a qualified and knowledgeable teacher. Additionally, it seems reasonable to compare this finding with that found by Pishghadam et al. (2023), who uncovered that students' tendency to attend classes highly depends on their instructors' interpersonal behaviors, including credibility and stroke.

To fully describe the Chinese EFL students' perceptions regarding the interpersonal factors contributing to their academic engagement, some qualitative information was also obtained through interviews. As the findings of CA indicated, among different interpersonal factors mentioned by interviewees as the antecedents of students' engagement, teacher confirmation and credibility were found to be the most frequent and repetitive themes. This illustrates that, in congruence with the quantitative outcomes, the qualitative findings demonstrated that these two interpersonal factors were the highly influential elements in predicting Chinese EFL students' academic engagement. In addition to teacher confirmation and credibility, some other interpersonal factors, including caring, rapport, and immediacy, were also perceived to be the other determinants of student academic engagement. All these three variables highlight the value of students' positive emotions or feelings in the EFL learning contexts. This implies that, in line with what Mottet et al. (2006) and Fredrickson (2001) mentioned in their theories, teachers who intend to promote their students' engagement should inspire desirable feelings in them.

## 6. Conclusions, implications, limitations, and directions for future research

Guided by the two important theoretical frameworks of ERT and BBT, the role of Chinese EFL teachers' confirmation and credibility in predicting their students' academic engagement was investigated. The results of the correlational and path analyses revealed that teacher confirmation and credibility can meaningfully predict Chinese students' engagement in EFL classrooms. Based on these results, it is fair to conclude that those EFL teachers who are adequately knowledgeable and trustworthy, and those who provide confirmation to pupils are more capable of involving their students in the language learning process. This was also corroborated by the CA's findings. The findings of the present research may have some significant implications for teacher trainers, pre- and in-service language teachers, and all who aspire to become more effective language instructors. Given the centrality of teacher interpersonal factors, notably teacher confirmation and credibility, in students' increased engagement, teachers need to know how to become a credible instructor and how to confirm their learners. Teachers are also expected to improve their competence and instructional skills to be deemed as credible instructors. Furthermore, they should constantly update their knowledge about confirmation skills and strategies to keep up with any innovations or advancements in this area.

The present investigation is subject to a set of shortcomings and limitations. First of all, the current study was carried out in an English as a foreign

language context. Thus, the findings of this study may not be generalized to other English education contexts. To identify any discrepancies in the findings, future investigations should replicate this topic in other educational settings. Second, the effects of situational factors, including gender, age, and major, were not measured nor controlled. To attain more accurate findings, further inquiries are firmly advised to do so. Third, only students were surveyed and interviewed in this study. To offer a more comprehensive picture of the issue, future studies are required to interview some teachers as well. Besides, with regard to the shortcomings of the existing literature, some other critical recommendations need to be mentioned as well. To start with, there is a dearth of empirical research on how teachers' positive interpersonal factors, notably confirmation and credibility, may result in student engagement. As such, much more academic attention should be devoted to these interpersonal variables and their potential educational consequences. Next, even though cultural background may shape the perceptions of participants (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021), only a few studies on teacher confirmation and credibility have taken cultural differences into account (e.g., Pishghadam et al., 2023). To find out to what extent cultural differences may affect students' attitudes toward these positive interpersonal variables, more cross-cultural studies need to be undertaken in this regard. Another lacuna that needs to be addressed is that while positive communication behaviors, notably credibility, have received adequate attention in mainstream education, they have been somehow overlooked in the language instructional context. Future studies in this area are therefore required to be conducted in EFL and ESL contexts.

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APPENDIX A

Teacher Confirmation Scale (TCS)

Instruction: Please respond to each of the statements in terms of the way you perceive your current teacher communicating towards you or others in your class. Please use the following scale to respond to each of the statements: Never = 0, Rarely = 1, Sometimes = 2, Often = 3, Almost always = 4.

My English teacher...

1. Communicates that he/she is interested in whether students are learning.
2. Indicates that he/she appreciates students' questions or comments.
3. Makes an effort to get to know students.
4. Belittles or puts students down when they participate in class.
5. Checks on students' understanding before going on to the next point.
6. Gives oral or written feedback on students' work.
7. Establishes eye contact during class lectures.
8. Talks down to students.
9. Is rude in responding to some students' comments or questions during class.
10. Uses an interactive teaching style.
11. Listens attentively when students ask questions or make comments during class.
12. Displays arrogant behavior.
13. Takes time to answer students' questions fully.
14. Embarrasses students in front of the class.
15. Communicates that he/she doesn't have time to meet with students.
16. Intimidates students.
17. Shows favoritism to certain students.
18. Puts students down when they go to the teacher for help outside of class.
19. Smiles at the class.
20. Communicates that he/she believes that students can do well in the class.
21. Is available for questions before and after class.
22. Is unwilling to listen to students who disagree.
23. Uses a variety of teaching techniques to help students understand course material.
24. Asks students how they think the class is going and/or how assignments are coming along.
25. Incorporates exercises into lectures when appropriate.
26. Is willing to deviate slightly from the lecture when students ask questions.
27. Focuses on only a few students during classes while ignoring others.

APPENDIX B

Source Credibility Scale (SCS)

Instruction: On the scales below, indicate your feelings about your current language teacher.

- |     |                           |               |                                    |
|-----|---------------------------|---------------|------------------------------------|
| 1)  | Intelligent               | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Unintelligent                      |
| 2)  | Untrained                 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Trained                            |
| 3)  | Cares about me            | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Doesn't care about me              |
| 4)  | Honest                    | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Dishonest                          |
| 5)  | Has my interests at heart | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Doesn't have my interests at heart |
| 6)  | Untrustworthy             | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Trustworthy                        |
| 7)  | Inexpert                  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Expert                             |
| 8)  | Self-centered             | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Not self-centered                  |
| 9)  | Concerned with me         | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Not concerned with me              |
| 10) | Honorable                 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Dishonorable                       |
| 11) | Informed                  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Uninformed                         |
| 12) | Moral                     | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Immoral                            |
| 13) | Incompetent               | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Competent                          |
| 14) | Unethical                 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Ethical                            |
| 15) | Insensitive               | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Sensitive                          |
| 16) | Bright                    | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Stupid                             |
| 17) | Phony                     | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Genuine                            |
| 18) | Not understanding         | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Understanding                      |

APPENDIX C

Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for Students (UWES-S)

Instruction: The following items attempt to measure your level of academic engagement. Please use the following scale to respond to each of the statements (Never = 0, Almost never = 1, Rarely = 2, Sometimes = 3, Often = 4, Very often = 5, Always = 6).

Vigor

- 1) When I'm studying, I feel mentally strong.
- 2) I can continue for a very long time when I am studying.
- 3) When I study, I feel like I am bursting with energy.
- 4) When studying I feel strong and vigorous.
- 5) When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to class.

Dedication

- 1) I find my studies to be full of meaning and purpose.
- 2) My studies inspire me.
- 3) I am enthusiastic about my studies.
- 4) I am proud of my studies.
- 5) I find my studies challenging.

Absorption

- 1) Time flies when I am studying.
- 2) When I am studying, I forget everything else around me.
- 3) I feel happy when I am studying intensely.
- 4) I get carried away when I am studying.

APPENDIX D

Interview questions

- 1) What teacher international behaviors do you feel most impact your engagement in classroom context? (Please explain)
- 2) To what extent can your English teacher's competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness encourage you to take part in classroom activities? (Please explain)
- 3) Do you think being confirmed by teachers is important for your academic engagement? Why? or Why not? (Please explain)
- 4) Do you have any further comments on the positive effects of teacher credibility and confirmation on your academic engagement?