

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL ANXIETY, LEARNING ORIENTATION, AND LEARNER AUTONOMY ON SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER ENGAGEMENT AT TERTIARY LEVEL: A SUSTAINABLE APPROACH TO ESL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: The issue of ESL learner engagement at tertiary level in Sri Lanka has been a subject of concern for many years. Factors such as social anxiety, learning orientation, and learner autonomy have been identified as critical components affecting engagement, which, in turn, influence students' learning abilities and academic achievement. While the relationship between social anxiety and academic outcomes has been extensively studied, the specific ways in which social anxiety, learner autonomy, and learning orientation impact learner engagement in the Sri Lankan context remain unclear. Notably, many graduates from state universities in Sri Lanka, particularly those from the Faculties of Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities, face significant challenges due to insufficient proficiency in English. This study seeks to investigate the effects of social anxiety, learner autonomy, and learning orientation on learner engagement at tertiary level. A quantitative research approach was adopted, utilizing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to analyze a sample of 204 participants from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at a Sri Lankan state university. Data collection was carried out through a questionnaire, which incorporated an adapted version of the Social Phobia Inventory to measure social anxiety, while exploratory factor analysis was employed to assess learner engagement. The gathered data were subsequently analyzed using SEM. Contrary to previous studies, the findings of this research reveal that social anxiety does not have a significant impact on ESL learners' engagement in their tertiary-level language classrooms. However, both learning orientation and learner autonomy were found to positively influence learner engagement. Therefore, the study concludes that for a sustainable approach to ESL education, the roles of social anxiety, learner autonomy, and learning orientation are critical, although no direct interrelationship between these factors was identified.

Keywords: English as a Second Language (ESL), learner engagement, System Equation Modeling (SEM), tertiary level, sustainable education

1. INTRODUCTION

The goal of this research is to identify the impact of social anxiety, learning orientation, and learner autonomy on learner engagement in tertiary-level ESL classrooms in Sri Lanka. This study is also significant as the study tries to address a critical gap in the literature on ESL learning in Sri Lanka, focusing on motivational and psychological aspects influencing students' engagement. The acquired knowledge can be used to develop teaching practices and policy decisions that will support the sustainable development of ESL education programs in Sri Lanka at tertiary level.

To evaluate and identify the impact of social anxiety, learner autonomy, and learning orientation on learner engagement of ESL learners at tertiary-level, the study identifies two objectives through the goal of the study.

Objective 01: To identify the learner engagement in tertiary-level classrooms in Sri Lanka.

Objective 02: To identify the individual correlation between social anxiety, learner autonomy, and learning orientation on learner engagement in tertiary-level ESL classrooms.

To fulfill the two objectives, the study designed one research question (RQ);

RQ 01: To what extent do social anxiety, learner autonomy, and learning orientation impact ESL learner's engagement in the target language?

To understand the question, the study designed three hypotheses (H01);

H01: Second language learners' social anxiety negatively affects their learner engagement.

H02: Learner autonomy has a positive impact on learner engagement.

H03: Undergraduate learning orientation has a positive effect on ESL learner engagement.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative research design and analyzed the data using structural equation modeling (SEM). It is based on pre-existing notions regarding second-language learner involvement and was created through a thorough examination of scholarly literature. The study used a primary data collection strategy in which participants' answers to a Google questionnaire were directly retrieved. To obtain the necessary information for statistical data collection, respondents self-enumerated in response to a Google questionnaire used for primary data collection.

First-year undergraduates following the compulsory English courses offered by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences were taken as the sample of this study. The developed Google questionnaires were distributed amongst the undergraduates through their respective English lecturers. The participants were informed and elucidated regarding the nature of the research before completing the Google survey and 204 responses were obtained.

Data were gathered using a questionnaire as the statistical method developed by the researcher, adopting the Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN) (Connor et al., 2000), the Academic Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ) (Miller & Brown, 1991), the Learning Orientation Questionnaire (LCQ) (Biggs et al., 2001), and finally, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) (Fabrigar L.R. & Wegener, D.T., 2012).

The Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) was used as a theory to incorporate and evaluate each variable's interaction more critically. The hypothesis has proven to be useful in the analysis of peer contagion and their learner engagement in the ESL classroom, antisocial development and its influence when it comes to the ESL performance, and the development of ESL related dynamics. Additionally, DST has acted as a guide for the execution of multilevel treatments, including successful school transition support. Thus, the researcher attempts to explore other variable aspects that might affect learner engagement while identifying relationships between social anxiety, learning orientation, and learner autonomy in second language learning engagement by including DST in this study.

Further, multivariate analysis is a statistical technique that allows for the simultaneous observation of two or more variables. There was a clear identification of one variable as the dependent (learner engagement (LE)) and the other as the independent (social anxiety (SA), learning orientation (LO), and learner autonomy (LA)). This analytical technique can be applied to analyze the relationship between the variables and ascertain their interactions and respective impacts using a comprehensive advanced examination. Nemours techniques are used in the multivariate analysis, even though structural equation modeling, or SEM, was the primary analytical method used in this study. SEM is the result of combining factor analysis and multiple regression analysis. Because of this, SPSS and AMOS were both used in the data analysis process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The reliability and validity of the data were examined before conducting the SEM analysis. Thus, Cronbach alpha value was utilized to test the reliability analysis that should be greater than 0.7. Further, the KMO value was used to identify the validity of the data that needs to be higher than 0.6 (Table 01).

Table 1. Reliability and Validity

Variable	No. of Items	Reliability	Validity
LA	7	0.725	0.685
LO	7	0.871	0.872
SA	6	0.873	0.865
LE	7	0.747	0.827

After successfully passing the reliability and validity test, the correlation of the measurement model was tested, and the results indicated a weak (Negligible) positive correlation between LA and LO. The P values between the LA, SA and LA and LO are significantly higher than the intended 0.05 P value making the variables statistically significant, the remaining two correlations between LA, SA, and SA, & LO indicated a weak negative correlation. Hence, it can be concluded that the correlations among the independent variables are not strong (Table 02).

Table 2. Discriminant Validity of the Measurement Model

Interrelated Variables			Correlation	P
LA	<- ->	SA	-0.107	0.174
LA	<- ->	LO	0.052	0.521
SA	<- ->	LO	-0.265	0.002

To acknowledge the direct impact of learner autonomy, learner orientation, and social anxiety on the general degree of language learner engagement, a structural model was created. Learner autonomy, social anxiety, and learner orientation were the three endogenous primary latent components that made up the Suggested structural model. The exogenous construct was language learner engagement. Table 3 indicates the direct effects of each variable on the dependent variable which is learner engagement.

Table 3. Direct Effects of Independent Variables

Path	Path Coefficients	Standardized Path Coefficients	Standard Error	CR	P - Value	Decision
LA->LE	-0.007	-0.006	0.073	-0.092	0.927	Not Supportive
LO-> LE	0.775	0.623	0.111	6.981	0.000	Supportive
SA-> LE	0.054	0.074	0.052	1.034	0.301	Not Supportive

As per the results (Table 3), the path from LA to LE indicates a negligible negative relationship as evidenced by the very low path coefficient. The P value of 0.927 far exceeds the significance threshold of 0.05, indicating the relationship is not statistically significant. Contradictory, the path between LO and LE is robust with a positive significance of 0.775. The Standard path coefficient of 0.623 further underscores the strength of this as the P value of 0.000 is well below the threshold point of intended 0.05, which makes it statistically significant. The path of SA to LE reveals a positive (minor) coefficient of 0.054, which is small yet statistically insignificant as shown by the P value of 0.301.

The link between learner autonomy and engagement, in contrast to earlier research, is based on the fact that motivated students are more likely to assume accountability for their own education, which in turn promotes autonomy (Reeve, 2013). In contrast to most prior research, the current study indicates that the relationship between involvement and autonomy might be context-dependent and that cultural attitudes regarding the subject can play a significant mediating role (Dörnyei, 2001). The findings of Fredrics, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) that behavioral involvement may not always result in increased autonomy are further supported by these findings.

Furthermore, the significant positive relation between Learning orientation and learner engagement proves that learners with high learning orientation are driven by an internal desire to master skills and understand concepts, rather than simply achieving grades or rewards (Dwecks, 1986) encouraging students to invest time and effort, despite obstacles. When students see the relevance of their studies to real-world applications, their intrinsic motivation and engagement often increase (Reeve, 2006) by the mastery goals, emotional, and cognitive resilience- positively influence students' engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Dweck, 1986).

Interestingly, the results indicate no significant impact of social anxiety on L2 learner engagement. This contradicts most previous literature, which has consistently highlighted the negative consequences of learner engagement (Hwang et al., 2020). While earlier research, such as Young (1991), often emphasized the adverse effects of social anxiety on second language acquisition, the current study found no substantial evidence to support this claim. Respondents generally disagreed with the notion that they were fearful of making mistakes in their L2 when interacting with fluent speakers, further countering the claims of the previous findings.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study emphasizes the critical role learning orientation has established as a predictor of engagement across learner engagement domains. Learning-oriented students who prioritize mastery over performance, display higher engagement in academic tasks. Fostering a learning orientation can create a positive cycle of engagement and achievement by promoting self-regulation, mastery-oriented tasks, and autonomy-supportive teaching strategies, educators can enhance engagement levels and encourage students to take ownership of their learning (Reeve, 2006). The literature aligns closely with the results of the study showcasing that learning-oriented students are consistently more engaged and resilient.

Moreover, the less impactful findings between learner autonomy and learner engagement suggest the need for more targeted, autonomy-supportive instructional strategies that may go beyond merely promoting engagement. The need to emphasize reflective practices, goal setting, and offering students opportunities to make decisions could be more effective as stated by Littlewood in 1999. Notably, the results challenge the prevailing assumption that social anxiety negatively affects L2 learner engagement. Contrary to previous research, such as Hwang et al. (2020), which highlights the detrimental impact of social anxiety on learner participation, the current study found no significant evidence to support this. Respondents largely refuted the idea that they were apprehensive about making mistakes in their L2 interactions with fluent speakers, further reinforcing these findings. Social anxiety can significantly hinder learner engagement, especially in language learning contexts where communication and interaction are key. By addressing social anxiety, educators can create more inclusive environments, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to succeed while helping educators to build resilient learning communities where students feel supported and are more likely to engage with their peers, fostering a collaborative and sustainable learning environment.

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