

Language Learner Engagement During Speaking Tasks: A Longitudinal Study

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Abstract

Learner engagement is crucial for ensuring the quality of learning experiences, and yet the study of ‘task engagement’ has received relatively little empirical attention in the language education domain. This article reports on a study exploring the factors contributing to learners’ engagement and disengagement during task performance in an English as a foreign language classroom. Thirty-seven learners performed 10 different speaking tasks implemented over a 10-week period in a Japanese university task-supported classroom. The participants’ engagement was measured using a post-task questionnaire on perceived levels of anxiety, confidence, focus and desire to speak. Learners’ written self-report reflections revealed complementary in-depth qualitative data about the underlying factors behind their engagement or otherwise during speaking tasks. The results revealed a variety of learner-level, lesson-level, task-level and post-task-level factors contributing to learners’ engagement and disengagement in tasks. Findings indicate that certain task features such as the nature and purpose of the tasks, task repetition, familiar and easier task topics led to successful engagement. On the other hand, lack of social cohesion and motivational baggage were reported as primary factors in determining learners’ silences and disengagement in tasks. The authors offer pedagogical implications for teachers on how speaking tasks can be better implemented to enhance engagement in foreign language classrooms.

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Introduction

Despite being an intriguing and well-studied construct in education and educational psychology (Christenson et al., 2012; Fredricks et al., 2004), learners' engagement during task performance has received scant attention in the second language (L2) learning domain. In general education, there is consistent evidence that learner engagement is strongly related to desirable educational outcomes, such as higher academic achievement (e.g. Finn and Zimmer, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2004). In the language classroom, Ellis (2018: 148) maintains that examining engagement during task performance is crucial for L2 learners in terms of originating and activating learning cognitive processes such as 'noticing and establishing form-meaning connections', that would, in turn, allow learners to absorb the L2 more effectively. Although engagement is important for L2 instruction, 'discussions of engagement. . . have been largely absent from the literature of L2 learning and teaching' (Mercer and Dörnyei, 2020: 4). Recently, however, learners' engagement during tasks has come to the fore in the L2 learning field, benefiting from potential insights in educational psychology.

Previous L2 studies that have examined task engagement (e.g. Aubrey, 2017a, 2017b; Butler, 2017; Lambert et al., 2017; Qiu and Lo, 2017) define it as a state of 'heightened attention and involvement' in a learning task (Philp and Duchesne, 2016: 51). A variety of task factors and conditions have been recognised as being of critical importance to students' task engagement in the language classroom and these studies have yielded valuable insights into L2 learner task engagement. However, scholars have noted that task engagement is often examined without much attention paid to context (e.g. Ellis, 2018; Sato and Storch, 2020). Thus, it remains unclear how task characteristics together with contextual factors related to the learner and classroom environment influence engagement. Furthermore, relatively little research has been carried out on the factors that support or inhibit learners' task engagement experiences (for an exception, see Czimmermann and Piniel, 2016). To address these gaps, the present study was designed to explore the factors contributing to learner engagement and disengagement during 10 different discussion tasks implemented over a 10-week period, thus providing systematic documentation of learners' engagement levels in a task-supported English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom in Japan. We believe that a better understanding of the factors that support or inhibit learner engagement at the task-level might provide teachers and course designers with a more informed basis for designing, selecting and implementing tasks that can enhance engagement and improve learning.

Task Engagement in Language Learning

Within its relatively short history, learner engagement has been recognised as a crucial precursor for a meaningful task experience in the language classroom (Dörnyei, 2019; Ellis, 2018). Although the conceptual definitions of engagement are presently in a state

of flux, particularly in the language education domain, there seems to be a consensus that engagement is closely linked to heightened attention, active participation and meaningful involvement in a learning task (Mercer and Dörnyei, 2020; Philp and Duchesne, 2016). In the task-based language teaching classroom, learner engagement is often portrayed as a multifaceted construct that comprises four core interrelated components: behavioural engagement (time spent on task or participation), affective engagement (feelings), cognitive engagement (attention and thinking) and social engagement (interactions and collaborations) (Philp and Duchesne, 2016). Studies using this model have found that one or more engagement components are enhanced during task performance when tasks are learner-designed (Butler, 2017), when the content is learner-generated (Lambert et al., 2017) and when task topics are learner-preferred or familiar (Phung, 2017; Qiu and Lo, 2017).

Learners who elevate their engagement to a sufficiently high level may achieve a peak engagement state called ‘flow’ – described as a psychological state of intensive involvement and focused attention (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 2009) or a ‘heightened level of motivated task engagement’ (Dörnyei, 2019: 58). In her seminal study, Egbert (2003) examined the occurrence of flow in Spanish classrooms through a questionnaire, structured observations and stimulated recall interviews, and noted that learners were more engaged in tasks that supported the four dimensions of ‘flow’: (a) a perceived balance of task challenge and skills; (b) a perceived sense of control over the tasks; (c) intense concentration and focus; and (d) interest and familiarity with the task topic. Egbert (2003) maintained that the aforementioned conditions can significantly affect learner interest in tasks which would, in turn, impact task engagement experiences. She concluded that her study ‘does not tell us if one dimension is more substantial than others in encouraging flow’ and called for future research into the area of flow to better understand the nature of task engagement in language classrooms (Egbert, 2003: 513). More recently, Aubrey (2017a) examined Japanese EFL learner’s flow-related experiences in intra-cultural (i.e. where learners performed tasks with their Japanese peers) and inter-cultural (i.e. where learners were paired with international students) task-based interactions. The findings of his study revealed that oral tasks performed inter-culturally enhanced students’ experiences of flow. In a follow-up study, Aubrey (2017b) took flow research in L2 a further step by incorporating a qualitative element – namely, learner diaries. A content analysis of 208 diary entries revealed that the learners’ sense of accomplishment of completing the task had a powerful impact on task engagement experiences in the inter-cultural group.

Although the above studies present compelling evidence of the potential influence of task conditions (e.g. a challenge–skill balance, interest, focus and control) on promoting high levels of engagement, they are often cross-sectional in design and not contextualised within the classroom experience (e.g. Lambert et al. (2017), Qiu and Lo (2017) and Phung (2017) are all laboratory studies) and so do not systematically analyse the broader range of variation associated with learners’ engagement levels. Despite the understood notion that the teaching/learning context influences learners’ task engagement (Sato and Storch, 2020), the role of contextual factors relevant to learners and classroom environment on engagement has largely been ignored in research. As Ellis (2018: 152) argues, what is needed is a ‘more dynamic and context-sensitive approach to investigating tasks’, which is necessary to understand the complexity of the notion of task engagement in the

language classroom. The current classroom-based study extends this line of research by exploring how students' *desire to speak*, *anxiety*, *focus* and *confidence* influence engagement over a 10-week period. The choice of these four variables was motivated by the assumption that these factors can be manipulated through teacher behaviours and task design and implementation. From a practitioner's point of view, these variables are vital for language educators when planning and implementing tasks, as they have a potential impact on the quality of learners' task experience in the classroom.

Task-Supported Language Teaching in Asian Contexts

Despite its popularity, the implementation of 'pure' task-based language teaching (TBLT) poses numerous challenges in Asian contexts where language programmes are increasingly emphasising the use of communicative approaches (e.g. TBLT) as alternatives to the traditional teaching methodologies (Butler, 2011). Littlewood (2014), for example, listed several potential problems of adopting a pure TBLT approach in the Chinese context, such as large class sizes, students' excessive use of their first language (L1) during task performance and teachers' traditional belief of viewing language teaching as a transmission of knowledge. Littlewood (2014) maintained that TBLT does not align with the current assessment methods used in such an exam culture where testing influences teaching practices. While recognising that some of these constraints are not just limited to TBLT, Littlewood (2014) dismissed the strong version of TBLT and suggested that a weaker version of TBLT, or what Ellis (2003) called task-supported language teaching (TSLT), should be deemed as a more suitable pedagogical approach in Asian contexts. Although TBLT and TSLT make use of tasks, they draw on different learning theories and the functions of the task vary markedly in these two approaches – that is, TSLT is based on skill learning theory, whereas TBLT draws on 'usage-based theories of implicit/incidental learning' (Ellis, 2019: 458). Unlike TBLT, TSLT views tasks as fundamental parts for practicing specific language structures (Ellis, 2019). As Ellis (2003: 28) succinctly puts it, 'tasks in the weak version are viewed as a way of providing communicative practice for language items that have been introduced in a more traditional way.'

It is not part of our purpose to cast doubt on the effectiveness of the aforementioned approaches. Nor do we wish to question the value of the large volume of published studies describing the role of TBLT in Asian classrooms. What needs to be emphasised here is that TSLT is used in the current investigation as a more promising framework to positively engage students in EFL Japanese classrooms, and tasks are implemented as units to analyse different factors, conditions and constraints that would determine learners' engagement or disengagement in L2 learning (Dörnyei and Kormos, 2000). As suggested by Dörnyei and Kormos (2000: 276), tasks can be very useful in examining the various aspects of L2 processing, including 'cognitive, affective and socio-dynamic' dimensions.

Silence in Japanese EFL Classrooms

Engaging learners in simple oral tasks is a challenging undertaking for many educators. This is particularly true for Japanese university students where silence tends to be the norm in EFL classrooms rather than the exception (King, 2013; King and

Harumi, 2020; King and Smith, 2017; King et al., 2020). King's (2013) research, based on 48 hours of minute-by-minute classroom observations, offers probably the most comprehensive analysis of Japanese student silence in EFL classrooms. Adopting a complex dynamic systems theory perspective, King (2013) suggests that student silence in this setting should be viewed as emerging from a complex combination of learner-internal factors (such as hypersensitivity to others) and contextual factors (such as teacher-centred methods).

More recently, King et al. (2020) conducted a longitudinal mixed-methods study within three Japanese English as a medium of instruction classrooms. Their research provided further evidence of the continued existence of silence within Japanese EFL classrooms and acted as a stimulus to the current project. Anxiety about using English and social inhibition were reported as key factors for student avoidance of talk among the various factors involved in student silent behaviours in language classrooms. Through an intervention using out-of-class initiatives to encourage better group dynamics and in-class learning activities providing awareness and strategies for tackling negative affect and inhibition, students in the study reported being better able to deal with feelings of anxiety and to actively engage in their English classes.

Building upon the findings of King et al. (2020) and in light of the research gaps identified above, the present study examines the factors contributing to engagement and disengagement among 37 learners of English while performing discussion tasks over the course of 10 weekly lessons. We explore how students' *desire to speak*, *anxiety*, *focus* and *confidence* influence engagement over a 10-week period in a task-supported EFL classroom. Although the factors theorised to influence task engagement experiences were identified in advance, further factors affecting students' positive and negative disposition toward tasks are identified based on the students' written self-report reflections. These reports, along with questionnaires administered immediately post-task, enabled us to answer the research questions highlighted below.

Research Questions

1. What causes Japanese EFL learners to be engaged and disengaged during the performance of classroom tasks throughout a university semester?
2. What are the characteristics of tasks and associated contextual factors that lead to high and low engagement?

Methods

Participants

One intact EFL class of 37 (17 males, 20 females) second-year sociology majors at a large university in Japan participated in the study. Of the student participants, two were from China, one was from Malaysia and one student was from Saudi Arabia. The remaining 33 students were Japanese. Although the course was classified as an 'upper intermediate' listening and speaking course, the proficiency of students varied, with most falling into B1–B2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scale (i.e. intermediate-level proficiency).

Table 1. Task topics and procedures.

Task	Topic	Process
1	Textbook preview	Shared information on and decided as a group which three textbook units to study for the semester.
2	Working abroad	Shared information on and decided as a group which country would be the best to work in.
3	Out-of-class activity	Shared information on and decided as a group which out-of-class activity would be best for the class.
4	Overcoming anxiety	Shared information on and decided as a group which classroom situations are most stressful and how to overcome anxiety in those situations.
5	Family immigration	Shared information on and decided as a group which students' family members had the most interesting immigration experiences.
6	Travel	Shared information on and decided as a group the best travel destination.
7	World Heritage Sites	Shared information on and decided as a group which sites in Japan should have World Heritage designation.
8	Historical person	Shared information on fascinating people in history and decided as a group who would be the most interesting person to meet.
9	Creation myth	Created a 'myth' to describe the creation of Mount Fuji as group.
10	Vacation	Shared information on and decided as a group where to travel to during summer vacation.

Classroom Practice

The study took place during the first 10 weeks of the first semester of a one-year course, with classes occurring once per week for a duration of 90 minutes. The teacher structured classes based on the units of the listening and speaking English textbook used. The themes of the textbook units covered topics related to sociology (e.g. human migration), geography (e.g. describing geological landscapes) and business (e.g. cooperative farming). For each unit, vocabulary and grammar were explicitly introduced and listening and speaking activities were conducted. Each class consisted of a teacher-fronted lecture, mechanical language practice (e.g. grammar exercises, reading aloud example dialogues) and a final 10–15-minute discussion task. The focus of this study was on how students engaged in the end-of-class speaking task. However, as with any real classroom environment, absenteeism and tardiness affected the actual number of students in the classroom activities, with participation in the final speaking tasks ranging from 17 to 25 students during the study period.

A description of task topics and procedures for the 10 tasks is shown in Table 1. All tasks were implemented in groups of four or five students. Nine out of the 10 tasks consisted of an information-sharing component followed by a decision-making component, with the teacher eliciting the decision from each group in plenary-mode. The procedures for Task 9 differed from other tasks in that, students were instructed to collaboratively create a narrative rather than express opinions. In line with the practice of TSLT, most

tasks were based on topics from the lesson and thus served to provide a meaningful context for using taught language. The exceptions to this were Tasks 1, 3 and 4, which were unrelated to the preceding lesson.

Data Sources

To measure the extent to which learners engaged in each task, a questionnaire was administered immediately after each task and before the end of the lesson. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of four 10-point Likert scale items, which targeted students' *desire to speak* (To what extent did you have a desire to speak in today's task?), *anxiety* (How nervous were you during today's task?), *focus* (How much did you concentrate during today's speaking task?) and *confidence* (Did you have confidence in your English-speaking ability during today's task?). The second part of the questionnaire asked students to write down (in Japanese) their reasons for participating (or not) in the speaking tasks. The questionnaire items and instructions were presented to participants in Japanese.

Analysis

To answer Research Question 1, students' written responses were translated from Japanese into English by a bilingual research assistant and a content analysis (Cohen et al., 2007) was conducted. This involved an initial review of the data, coding of data and categorisation of codes into themes. The initial review revealed some responses that were incomprehensible or ambiguous, which were eliminated from the analysis. The coding required segmenting responses into T-units (following Hunt's (1970) definition of a T-unit as a clause with its subordinate elements). In total, we identified 203 T-units. We next categorised these into causes of engagement and causes of disengagement before coding the data. Once the data were coded, we combined similar codes into more general themes. Each thematic category is shown in Table 2.

The first and second author used a coding scheme to independently code all the data. The obtained simple intercoder agreement was 89%. Coding that resulted in disagreement was subject to further discussion until full agreement was reached.

To answer Research Question 2, we first ranked tasks based on the mean scores of all questionnaire items. Tasks with the two highest and the two lowest means were subject to further qualitative analysis, with the goal of uncovering the characteristics that lead learners to positively or negatively engage with each task.

Results and Discussion

What Causes Japanese EFL Learners to Be Engaged and Disengaged During the Performance of Classroom Tasks Throughout a University Semester?

As shown in Table 3, learners reported on a variety of learner-level, lesson-level, task-level and post-task-level factors that led them to engage or disengage with the task. The

Table 2. Categories for content analysis of causes of engagement and disengagement.

	Engagement/disengagement factor	Example
Learner-level factors	Perceptions about language skills	<i>Lack of vocabulary</i>
	Attitudes/beliefs about learning English	<i>I don't like English much recently</i>
	Affective/cognitive/physical state	<i>I felt depressed today</i>
Lesson-level factors	Preparation for the lesson	<i>I did my homework</i>
	Understanding of the lesson	<i>I couldn't understand the teacher's instruction</i>
Task-level factors	Task design	<i>The topic was a little difficult</i>
	Opportunity to speak	<i>I had plenty of opportunity to speak</i>
	Focus on performance	<i>I spoke without thinking about grammar</i>
	Confidence/anxiety	<i>I get tensed to speak up in class</i>
	Social collective factors	<i>Group atmosphere where you can speak up</i>
	Commitment to the task	<i>It was necessary to exchange opinions</i>
	Desire to speak	<i>I wanted to have a good conversation</i>
Post-task-level factors	Enjoyment	<i>Because I enjoyed it</i>
	Evaluation of performance	<i>I couldn't say what I want to say quickly in English</i>
	Reflection on performance	<i>If we try harder actively, I think people will speak up a bit more</i>

main factor that led to task engagement related to the task experience itself (73.87%), with the most frequent comments relating to social collective factors. In contrast, task experience was a lesser contributor to disengagement (34.78%), with learner-level factors, such as perceptions of language skills, negative attitudes towards English and the students' affective and cognitive states, accounting for almost as much (31.52%). In other words, the learner-internal factors seemed to be a more important determiner of disengagement than for engagement.

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for each questionnaire item: desire to speak, anxiety, focus and confidence. Based on this data, participants reported consistently higher scores for ability to *focus* and *desire to speak* than for *confidence* in speaking English, with the latter never reaching a mean of 6 on the 10-point scale. High scores on focus are perhaps related to the task design, where tasks required all students to participate and use higher-order reasoning skills (i.e. to make a decision). The relatively low confidence ratings are reflected in the high proportion of negative *evaluation of performance* comments that contributed to disengagement (29.34%) compared to the proportion of positive *evaluation of performance* comments (16.21%).

Figure 1 shows the trajectory of each engagement component across the 10 tasks. There are three identifiable trends. First, confidence gradually increases – albeit in an uneven fashion – from a low point at Task 1 to a peak at Task 10. Self-confidence reflects learners' beliefs that they are able to perform tasks in the L2 competently, which is, in part, related to the quantity (and quality) of L2 use experience. Such an upward trend is thus expected as learners become accustomed to the task procedures and their classmates. The second is a downward trend in anxiety, with the highest mean anxiety score

Table 3. Factors contributing to engagement.

	Engagement factors (positive)	Proportion (frequency)	Engagement factors (negative)	Proportion (frequency)
Learner-level factors	Perceptions about language skills Attitudes/beliefs about learning English Affective/cognitive/physical state	2.70% (3) 0.90 (1) 2.70% (3) 6.31% (7)	Perceptions about language skills Attitudes/beliefs about learning English Affective/cognitive/physical state	21.74% (20) 1.09% (1) 8.70% (8) 31.52% (29)
Lesson-level factors	Preparation for the lesson Understanding of the lesson	2.70% (3) 0 (0) 2.70% (3)	Preparation for the lesson Understanding of the lesson	2.17% (2) 2.17% (2) 4.35% (4)
Task-level factors	Task design Opportunity to speak Focus on performance Confidence Social collective factors Commitment to the task Desire to speak Enjoyment	6.31% (7) 5.41% (6) 2.70% (3) 4.50% (5) 29.73% (33) 8.11% (9) 7.21% (8) 9.01% (10) 73.87% (81)	Task design Opportunity to speak Focus on performance Anxiety Social collective factors Commitment to the task Desire to speak Enjoyment	14.13% (13) 1.09 (1) 2.17% (2) 9.78% (9) 7.61% (7) 0 (0) 0 (0) 0 (0) 34.78% (32)
Post-task-level factors	Evaluation of performance Reflection on performance	16.21% (18) 1.80% (2) 18.01% (20) 100% (111)	Evaluation of performance Reflection on performance	29.34% (27) 0 (0) 29.34% (27) 100% (92)

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for engagement scales.

	Desire to speak	Anxiety	Focus	Confidence
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Task 1 (n = 27)	6.62 (1.75)	4.25 (2.50)	7.03 (2.08)	4.48 (2.25)
Task 2 (n = 27)	7.14 (1.58)	3.85 (2.58)	7.44 (1.62)	5.22 (1.78)
Task 3 (n = 25)	7.00 (1.19)	4.12 (2.61)	6.92 (1.28)	5.76 (1.56)
Task 4 (n = 24)	6.75 (1.22)	2.25 (2.28)	7.12 (1.39)	5.21 (1.98)
Task 5 (n = 23)	6.74 (1.95)	4.00 (2.31)	6.82 (2.32)	5.30 (2.01)
Task 6 (n = 27)	7.11 (1.52)	4.00 (2.80)	7.19 (1.50)	5.44 (1.69)
Task 7 (n = 25)	6.36 (2.00)	3.40 (2.29)	6.96 (1.76)	5.32 (2.23)
Task 8 (n = 23)	6.43 (1.56)	3.26 (2.02)	6.09 (1.59)	5.39 (1.69)
Task 9 (n = 17)	6.72 (1.64)	3.67 (2.54)	5.56 (2.68)	5.22 (1.70)
Task 10 (n = 25)	7.08 (1.63)	3.20 (2.38)	6.80 (1.55)	5.88 (1.86)

M: mean; SD: standard deviation.

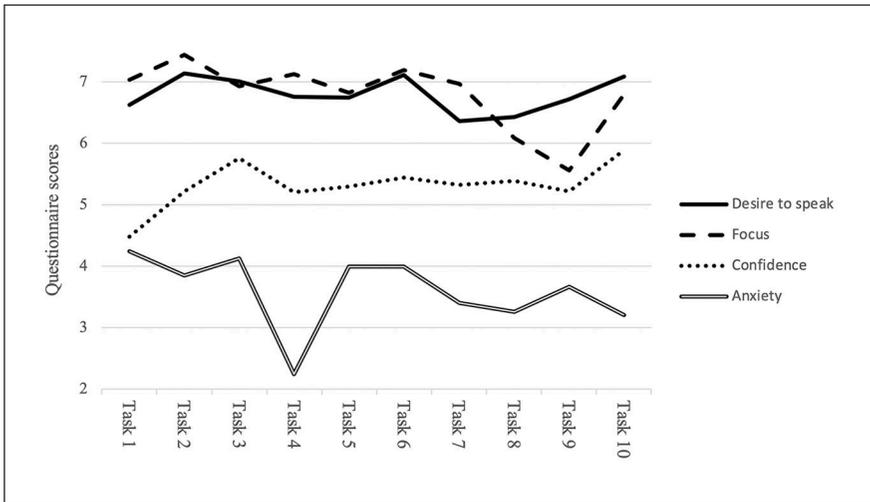


Figure 1. Trajectory of engagement scales across tasks.

reported for Task 1 and the second lowest score reported for Task 10. Anxiety is partly related to social dynamics, with heightened anxiety leading to feelings of inhibition in speaking with and in front of peers (King, 2014; King and Smith, 2017). The trend may indicate that learners had become more comfortable with their learning situation over time. Finally, as reported by others (e.g. Yashima et al., 2016), students at Japanese universities often show signs of fatigue after starting the semester with high motivation, which can be seen in the downward trend for desire to speak.

Table 5. Means of all tasks from the questionnaire.

	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4	Task 5	Task 6	Task 7	Task 8	Task 9	Task 10
Average	5.97*	6.49	6.39	6.71**	6.22	6.44	6.31	6.16	5.96*	6.64**

Note: means include reverse scoring for anxiety item.

*Least engaging tasks.

**Most engaging tasks.

What Are the Characteristics of Tasks and Associated Contextual Factors That Lead to High and Low Engagement?

To establish which tasks engendered the highest and lowest engagement across participants, we selected tasks with the two highest and two lowest means for further discussion. As can be seen in Table 5, these are Tasks 4 and 10 and Tasks 1 and 9, respectively.

Engagement: Diminished Anxiety and Enjoyment (Tasks 4 and 10). Task 4 facilitated the highest engagement of all tasks. This can be primarily attributed to a significant drop in anxiety levels (see Table 4) amongst learners, from 4.12 (Task 3) to 2.25 (Task 4). The low anxiety levels can be explained by the purpose of Task 4, which was to raise students' awareness of how anxiety can negatively impact classroom behaviours. The input prior to Task 4 was a reading of a fictional case study of a highly anxious language learner used to reflect on their own experiences of learning English. Students then shared situations or classroom activities that were most likely to provoke anxiety, particularly when speaking English, and then decided on the most anxiety-inducing classroom situation (e.g. speaking in front of the class) before discussing potential strategies that they could use to overcome anxiety when learning English. The effectiveness of Task 4 in lowering anxiety, and thus increasing engagement, is supported by the qualitative data. Students reported lowered inhibitions (e.g. *I wasn't tense at all*, T4), which may have led to improved social engagement (e.g. *I spoke well as there was a lot of discussion*, T4).

Task 10 had the second highest mean. The task required learners to share information on summer vacation destinations they would like to travel to and decide as a group the best one. A distinctive feature of Task 10 was that it was a repetition of Task 6 in terms of (similar) topic and procedures. Students may thus have benefited from recycling content from Task 6, freeing up their attention (Skehan, 1998) for more playful interaction. Perhaps as a result, enjoyment was the most significant contributor of engagement, accounting for 50% of all engagement-related comments (e.g. *our discussion became exciting*, T10) – far exceeding the average of all tasks (9.01%). This is congruent with previous findings that suggest repeating tasks under similar, but not identical, conditions can lead to higher engagement (e.g. Aubrey, 2017a; Kim, 2013) and that enjoyment is an important characteristic of engagement (Aubrey, 2017b; Egbert, 2003). Students participating in Task 10 may have also benefited from spending the previous nine weeks together, where they familiarised themselves with task procedures and 'ironed out' many interpersonal issues that may have disrupted group cohesion previously. Overall, the data on Task 10 implies that 'experience', both with the task and between students, seems to explain the high level of engagement with the task.

Disengagement: Lack of Social Cohesion and Motivational ‘Baggage’ (Tasks 1 and 9). Despite being highly consequential to students (choosing textbook units to study), questionnaire results revealed that Task 1 was the second least engaging task, engendering low *confidence* and high *anxiety* (see Table 4). This is corroborated by students’ written evaluations, in which there were more negative evaluations of task performances than any other task (e.g. *my English didn’t come out very well*, T1). The comments below further illustrate the anxious states of students:

I couldn’t discuss very well as I *worried* too much about making grammatical errors.

I didn’t try to speak to others because I’m *shy*.

I *wasn’t confident* with my English much.

The engagement potential of Task 1 was hindered by the fact that it took place during the first class, which, for many Japanese students, means they had not spoken English for an extended period of time. Many students were no doubt unpractised and, thus, felt that their perceived English skills were not sufficient to participate in task discussions. Most students in the class were meeting for the first time and, thus, social cohesion was low (e.g. *It was difficult to speak to the students who were from abroad*, T1).

Task 9 had the lowest questionnaire mean overall, including the lowest scores for *confidence* and ability to *focus*. The distinctive feature of Task 9 was that, instead of sharing information and making a decision, the goal of the task was to produce a myth that explains the creation of Mount Fuji. Students may have been unfamiliar with the task procedures or had difficulty with the high level of cognitive skill required (e.g. *the topic was hard*, T9). Qualitative data also revealed that, unlike other tasks, disengagement was primarily due to learner-level factors, such as negative attitudes towards learning English (e.g. *I don’t like English much recently*, T9), negative perception of language skills (e.g. *I didn’t know how to express myself*, T9) and suboptimal physical/cognitive states (e.g. *I’m fasting, so I’m hungry and can’t focus*, T9). This may indicate that, for this time in the semester, learners’ motivational ‘lethargy’ likely overshadowed the more engaging properties of the task. Unsurprisingly, Task 9 coincided with the highest number of absences of the semester, which may have further eroded participants’ opportunity for social engagement.

Pedagogical Implications

This study elucidates factors that contributed to engagement and disengagement during discussion tasks implemented each week over 10 weeks of a semester. Previous research on task engagement has tended to focus on the motivational properties of a limited selection of tasks (e.g. Aubrey, 2017a, 2017b), and, as a result, they have ignored the contextual factors related to the learner, the classroom environment and the temporal ebbs and flows of engagement over time. Embracing these issues, this research is grounded in the reality of learners attempting to perform amid typical classroom uncertainties. Based on the results of this study, several suggestions can be made to teachers who are considering implementing oral tasks in an otherwise teacher-centred classroom.

Firstly, this research highlights certain task features that led to successful engagement. There is evidence to suggest that students responded better to easier, more familiar tasks (e.g. Task 10) than tasks with more abstract, unfamiliar topics and procedures (e.g. Task 9). If teachers are implementing tasks at the end of a lesson when students may be starting to tire, lessening the cognitive burden by repeating procedures, repeating topics and aiming to induce playful experiences rather than rigorous cognitive stimulation may give rise to more positive student engagement.

Secondly, this study revealed that learners tend to describe engagement in terms of task-level factors, of which the most important is social collective factors. Not only do teachers need to design interest-provoking tasks that are at an appropriate difficulty level, they also need to create optimal conditions where students can concentrate on the task and express themselves without feeling undue anxiety. As findings suggest, engagement is enhanced when learners become familiar with each other. This takes time but can be accelerated by activities such as group planning for tasks, cooperative learning, clear task roles and group post-task debriefings. Initial attempts to implement tasks may be thwarted by a lack of group cohesion, so teachers are advised to devote attention to cultivate peer relationships early in the semester.

Finally, it was found that disengagement tended to come from learner internal factors to a much greater degree than engagement. The implication of this is that learners may respond negatively to a task not because of poor design or implementation choices by the teacher, but simply because learners bring their motivational ‘baggage’ into the classroom, which then overrides any motivational function of the task. Teachers may thus want to devote some attention to promoting students’ positive attitudes towards English and their own language skills, and provide strategies for improving physical and emotional health. Task 4 in this study provides an example of how this could be done, where learners discussed strategies for alleviating emotional stress. As we have seen in this study, learners’ physical and emotional well-being may need greater attention during the second half of the course as motivation begins to wane.

Conclusion

The present study was exploratory in nature, and so there are limitations that need to be kept in mind when interpreting findings. First, all but one task was of the same design (i.e. information sharing and decision-making) and all were implemented in the same manner (i.e. oral, group). A wider range of task types or implementation methods (e.g. individual, written) would be worthwhile investigating. As previous research suggests, having students design their own tasks or generate their own content (e.g. Lambert et al., 2017) could be especially motivating for students. Under such optimal conditions, it would be interesting to investigate if and how learners choose not to engage. Second, Task 4 (strategies for overcoming L2 speaking anxiety) seemed to be effective in treating one aspect of disengagement. This task was unique in this study and so it is difficult to generalise about how effective this kind of task is. Future studies may want to examine the efficacy of other tasks that attempt to explore learners’ emotional states. Such an investigation may lend itself well to ‘exploratory practice’ in which the teacher and students work together to mutually understand a classroom problem (Allwright, 2005).

Finally, this study used questionnaires and written reflections to measure engagement during tasks. If students' performances had been recorded, we could have provided further evidence for task engagement by, for example, identifying instances of linguistic problem-solving during task discussions (i.e. cognitive engagement) or measuring the language output for each student (i.e. behavioural engagement). Nevertheless, we believe this study provides useful insights into why learners engage or disengage during classroom tasks.

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