

Learner engagement in L2 writing

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Abstract

One of the most current themes in second language (L2) learning is learner engagement. This broad construct entails several elements including behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The aim of this study was to investigate learner engagement in a writing course among English L2 university students, and engagement with feedback. The quantitative data showed moderately high levels of learner engagement across all the engagement dimensions. Differences between dimensions of engagement and grades were not found. Qualitative analyses showed a dominance of positive emotions, including interest, curiosity, and optimism. Behavioural engagement was tied to intrinsic and extrinsic reasons, suggesting the importance of motivation for learner engagement. Feedback encouraged students to use meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies, helping them focus on specific language forms.

Key words: L2 learner engagement; L2 writing; feedback.

1. Introduction

Learner engagement has been the focus of attention of much research in educational psychology (Reschly and Christenson, 2012). More recently, second language (L2) researchers have become more interested in this multidimensional construct (Hiver et al., 2021; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Svalberg, 2009). Although engagement appears to be similar to the concept of motivation, there are important differences; namely, motivation is described as intention to do something, while engagement has been defined as action, that is, participation and involvement in an activity (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Most scholars would agree that there are three main dimensions of engagement, including behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Zhou et al., 2021). Actively participating in class and paying attention to language forms in task-based learning can shed light on the extent to which learners are behaviourally and cognitively engaged in language learning (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Moreover, positive emotions (Reeve, 2012), or positive attitudes toward the L2 (Svalberg, 2009) can help signify learners' emotional engagement.

Engagement in L2 learning, including task engagement, can be investigated by focusing on the development of learners' writing skills. Moreover, Ellis (2010) has suggested that written corrective feedback (WCF) can play an important role in learner engagement in writing. Although recently there has been an increase in studies in L2 engagement, there has not been adequate emphasis on learner engagement in L2 writing in various contexts. Accordingly, the aim of this study was to investigate learner engagement in a writing course among Croatian English L2 learners, as well as consider the impact of WCF on task engagement. It should be mentioned that the term L2 learning is used in the general sense and is defined as any language that is learnt after the first language (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017), even though learners in this study are studying English in a foreign language context. The study also aimed to consider differences in engagement among learners, as well as delineate some of the elements of learners' behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement. Firstly, the theoretical background is presented, followed by the aim and method of the study. In the results sections, quantitative analyses are presented and then the results of the qualitative analyses. The results are then discussed, and conclusions are drawn.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. *Learner engagement*

Learner engagement has been extensively researched in educational psychology in the last two decades. According to Reschly and Christenson (2012), early research in engagement in educational psychology focused on academic engaged time to improve student learning (Fisher & Berliner, 1985), as well as on student dropout of school and school completion (Finn, 1989). Current views on engagement see it as a complex phenomenon that entails many factors, including a student's emotions, behaviour, and cognition (Fredricks et al., 2004), which interplay with various contexts including family, school, peers, and society (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). According to Fredricks and McColskey (2012), behavioural engagement involves participation on behalf of the learner whether in academic, social or extracurricular spheres. Emotional engagement entails learners' positive and negative emotions towards teachers, peers or the school, while cognitive engagement encompasses the amount of investment that learners put into their learning, that is, the use of strategies and effort to understand ideas. Fredricks and McColskey (2012) also raise the question of the difference between engagement and motivation. Maehr and Meyer (1997) suggest that motivation can be defined in terms of the effort one applies, including the direction, intensity, quality and persistence of that effort. The focus of many motivational constructs is on individual differences and the psychological processes of

learners. Engagement, on the other hand, is viewed from the perspective of action by which motivation is materialised (Skinner et al., 2009). In addition, engagement involves a learner's interaction with context (Fredricks et al., 2004) such as tasks or activities.

Learner engagement in L2 research has only recently begun to be a focus of interest. Mercer and Dörnyei (2020: 2) define engagement as "...active participation and involvement in certain behaviours—in the case of student engagement, in school-related activities and academic tasks." They suggest that active task engagement is especially important in L2 classrooms because learners need to practice the target language over a long period of time to become proficient in it. Moreover, in order to develop communicative language skills learners need to actively engage in the language which is a key principle of communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language learning. There has been much emphasis on L2 motivation research which has provided important findings regarding L2 learner success; nevertheless, Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) argue that research in engagement offers several benefits which go beyond learner motivation. For example, they suggest that due to the numerous distractions that learners are faced with in today's digital world, motivation to learn is not enough, that is, learners need to be actively engaged so that meaningful learning can occur. In addition, engagement entails some of the fundamental principles of a complex dynamic systems approach to L2 learning, including facets such as cognition, motivation, and affect (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), as well as a focus on behaviour. Finally, another advantage of focusing on L2 learner engagement is that teachers find it an important element in teaching, as well as the fact that it can be applied in the classroom; in other words, it offers teachers strategies that they can use to engage learners. Philp and Duchesne (2016) emphasize that engagement involves the notion of attention to tasks as they are being carried out, which is a key aspect of L2 acquisition. Namely, learners need to pay attention or notice the link between language forms and meaning while using the language (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Ellis (2019) also highlights the fact that L2 research in engagement can help shed light on the connection between implicit and explicit learning whether the focus is on language forms, the task, the content of the lesson, or social interaction.

Most L2 researchers agree with researchers in the field of educational psychology that there are three main dimensions including: behavioural, affective, and cognitive dimensions. Fredricks et al. (2004) define behavioural engagement as the behavioural choices made by learners while learning, affective engagement are the emotions experienced by learners towards their peers and learning tasks, and cognitive engagement is the mental activity that takes place while learners are learning. Sang and Hiver (2021) suggest that early versions of behavioural engagement included either aspects of

'on-task' learning or disengaged 'off-task' learning (Anderson, 1975), while more current views suggest a focus on learners' sustained learning performance by focusing on the degree of effort put into learning tasks, the quality of the participation in tasks, and the extent of active participation in learning (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). In L2 research Philp and Duchesne (2016) view behavioural engagement as the extent to which learners spend time on a task or the amount of active participation in the class. Affective engagement has been described in several ways, including learners' positive motivation to participate in classroom tasks and activities (Skinner et al., 2009), positive emotions which reveal learners' affective engagement or negative emotions that indicate emotional disaffection or disengagement (Reeve, 2012), feelings towards teachers and peers (Mercer, 2015), or positive attitudes toward the L2 language (Svalberg, 2009). L2 research has shown that affective engagement is an important antecedent of cognitive and behavioural dimensions, for example, positive interactions in class with peers increases overall engagement (Baralt et al., 2016; Philp & Duchesen, 2016). Researchers generally agree that cognitive engagement involves the mental work that learners exert while learning. This mental effort includes paying attention to the learning material and involves investment in learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). According to Fredricks et al. (2004) investment in learning includes the use of learning strategies and self-regulation strategies. This definition has been extended in L2 research to include, "focused attention to [language] form, direction of cognitive resources and problem solving" (Baralt et al., 2016: 213 as cited in Sang & Hiver, 2021). It is also important to mention the term disaffection which reflects negative emotions that learners may experience that may result in a lack of motivation and engagement in learning activities. Disaffection may be shown emotionally through feelings of "boredom, anxiety, shame, sadness, or frustration" (Skinner et al. 2012: 25). Skinner et al. (2012) suggest that disaffection is the opposite of engagement by which learners withdraw from tasks such that they show lack of effort, are passive, and simply go through the motions of completing activities. Disaffection can underpin cognitive disengagement leading to a lack of concentration, apathy, or lack of attention and motivation among learners.

2.2. L2 Writing: A focus on feedback

Many L2 learners would agree that acquiring proficient writing skills in the target language is one of the greatest challenges of L2 learning. A focus on L2 writing, in particular WCF, has been the focus of many L2 research studies. Early research focused on the learning strategies learners used in response to WCF (Cohen, 1987; Saito, 1994), how WCF affected the revisions learners made to their writing (Fathman & Whalley, 1990), attitudes and beliefs about teacher feedback (Ferris, 1995), while later studies focused on

the role of student agency (Hyland, 2000), how feedback is processed (Hyland & Hyland, 2001), and how WCF influenced learners use of particular grammatical structures in their writing (Bitchener, 2008). One of the earliest studies to focus on L2 learner engagement with WCF was Hyland's (2003) study which investigated the type of teacher feedback given, including form-focused feedback, and learners' engagement with this feedback. However, Ellis's (2010) paper provided the impetus for further research in this area. Ellis (2010) has suggested a componential framework that includes learner engagement with oral and written corrective feedback. Ellis (2010) argues that individual factors such as age, language aptitude, memory, motivation, and learner beliefs, as well as contextual factors such as the setting where learning takes place (macrosocial factors) and the activity that learners are doing while obtaining feedback (microsocial factors), can act as mediators between the WCF that learners are given and their engagement with WCF which can then affect learning outcomes. Engagement is defined by Ellis (2010: 342) as "...how learners respond to the feedback they receive." He delineates three perspectives of engagement, including a cognitive component which includes how learners deal with WCF, a behavioural component that is concerned with if and how learners modify their written texts (uptake), and an affective component which is directed toward learner attitudes to WCF. In Ellis's framework, cognitive engagement includes ideas that have been the focus of mainstream cognitive approaches to L2 acquisition, including the notion of noticing, that is, the process by which learners pay attention to the WCF, notice gaps in their knowledge, and practice the language in their working memory. Moreover, affective responses to WCF may induce emotions in learners such as anxiety or dislike of the type of feedback they received.

Han and Hyland (2015) have proposed a revised and expanded version of Ellis's (2010) framework which includes the three dimensions of engagement (cognitive, behavioural, and affective), as well as several subconstructs within each dimension. For example, within cognitive engagement they have suggested that the issue of depth of processing of WCF may include learners' awareness of noticing and level of understanding, as well as aspects such as meta-cognitive and cognitive operations that learners use to process WCF. In their framework, behavioural engagement includes not only the revisions learners make in response to WCF, but also the strategies they use to improve their writing. Affective engagement entails emotional reactions to the WCF, along with the attitudes towards WCF. Studies on engagement and written feedback have shown that learners' depth of processing of WCF is not always on the same level among the various dimensions. For example, Han and Hyland (2015) found that although non-language English EFL students used cognitive operations to correct their writing, they did not understand the metalinguistic rules of their errors

which suggests that the feedback was attended to (or noticed) on a surface level. Yu et al. (2018) found that learners were not that cognitively or behaviourally engaged since they were hesitant to revise their writing, even though they showed strong emotions indicating that they were affectively engaged. On the other hand, Han and Xu's (2019) study showed that learners were behaviourally engaged despite the presence of negative emotions.

2.3. Research in Engagement in L2 Learning

Recently there have been numerous studies and research on L2 learner engagement which have dealt with the topic from various perspectives. Mercer (2015) suggests that learner agency plays a vital role in L2 learner engagement, that is, learners need to feel that they are able to learn the language, be interested in the process of learning, and have the skills and strategies to organize their learning which together with engagement will provide fertile ground for successful L2 learning. Taking a perspective from self-determination theory (SDT), Mercer (2019) follows up on this idea by suggesting that the motivational antecedents for successful engagement include the fulfilment of learners' needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Within the language classroom, researchers have also focused on task engagement, including task-based interaction (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Baralt et al. (2016) analysed task-based peer interaction and found that both social engagement in the form of supportive interaction with peers, and affective engagement, including positive attitudes and willingness to interact, increased cognitive engagement, for instance, noticing and reflection of language forms among learners in face-to-face language learning. Affective engagement has been the focus of several L2 studies. For example, Tsang and Dewaele's (2023) study focused on the relationship between test scores, emotions, including anxiety, enjoyment and boredom, and learner engagement among Chinese EFL learners. They found that all the variables were significantly correlated, with enjoyment being the most significant predictor of engagement, as well as proficiency indicating the importance of this emotion in L2 learning. In another study, Dewaele and Lee (2021) found a relationship between teacher enthusiasm, enjoyment, boredom, and social-behavioural learning engagement among EFL learners. Moreover, Khajavy (2021) investigated the role of L2 grit, L2 emotions (L2 anxiety and L2 enjoyment) in regard to L2 engagement. The results of this study showed that the components of L2 grit, including perseverance and interest, were the strongest predictors of L2 engagement, L2 enjoyment showed a lower predictive level, while L2 anxiety was not a significant factor in L2 engagement.

3. Aim and Method

3.1. *Aim*

As mentioned above, numerous studies have begun to be carried out with respect to L2 engagement. However, more research needs to be conducted in various contexts in order to compare results, particularly with regard to L2 engagement in writing. Moreover, task engagement, in particular, engagement with WCF needs to be further studied among English L2 learners. Generally, the author and fellow colleagues have found that students still lack appropriate academic writing skills when they write their graduate theses, which leads us to wonder about their engagement in their undergraduate writing courses. Accordingly, the major aim of this study was to focus on learner engagement in a writing course among English L2 university students. In addition, task engagement related to WCF was considered. The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- 1a. To what extent were L2 learners engaged in their writing course in general?
- 1b. What was the extent of L2 learners task engagement in their writing class?
2. Were there differences among learners in their level of engagement in the course and in the writing task with regard to grade levels?
3. What emotions did learners experience during the writing course and what were some of the causes of these emotions?
4. Were learners behaviourally engaged or disaffected in learning in the writing course and why?
5. What strategies did learners use to deal with challenges in their writing?

3.2. *Method*

3.2.1. *Sample*

The sample for the first questionnaire consisted of a total of 64 first year English language students at the University of Zadar in Croatia. This included 58 (90.6%) females and 6 (9.4%) males. The mean average age of the sample was 19.27 (SD 1.13), the mean average for length of studying English was 12.50 years (SD 2.10), the average final high school grade was 4.86 (SD .35) on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest grade, and the average grade for their writing assignment was 3.23 (SD 1.34).

The sample for the second questionnaire were the same students. However, not all of them chose to answer the questions. A total of 58 students answered the questions in the second questionnaire, including 52 (89.7%)

females, and 6 (10.3%) males. Students were required to complete a writing assignment (write a paragraph) during one of the classes in the writing course. The average mean grade for students (N= 57) who revealed their grade for this writing assignment was 3.3 (SD 1.24), based on a scale of 1-5. An explanation of the procedures is given below.

3.2.2. Instruments and procedures

In the English major undergraduate study programme at the University of Zadar, students are required to take language exercise courses where they focus on English language skills, including reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, over a period of six semesters. Specific emphasis is placed on the development of academic writing skills in the writing part of the courses. In the first semester of their studies, emphasis is placed on paragraph writing, and in the following semesters on essay writing. This study was based on their experiences in their writing course near the end of the first semester of their first year of studies.

The students were approached during their language exercise class with the consent of their language instructor. The students were informed that their participation was voluntary and that the results would be used for research purposes only. In addition, they were asked to sign a consent form in which they were told the aim and format of the study, as well as the fact that the collected data would be anonymous, and that no personal data would be used. For the first questionnaire, students were given a link on Google Forms which they completed online with the use of their phones. The second questionnaire was a paper copy which students completed immediately after finishing the first questionnaire. The students were informed that they could obtain the results of the study at any time by contacting the researcher by email.

In an effort to investigate the research questions, two questionnaires were used. The first questionnaire included three parts, firstly, background information about the participants including gender, age, years of studying English, their final high school grade in English, the assignment grade received for the writing assignment, and a question asking students if they thought the assignment grade was a success or not. In order to investigate learner engagement in the writing course, the learner engagement questionnaire (Zhou et al. 2021) was used which consisted of 24 items. Zhou et al.'s (2021) questionnaire suggests the following beginning: *In my language class today/this week...* This study adapted this part in order to obtain a general view of learner engagement in the course, and thus began with the statement: *In my English language writing classes this semester...* whereby students gave their answers in reference to the writing course. In order to understand

learner task engagement, the third part of this questionnaire included the same engagement questionnaire (Zhou et al. 2021), but this time the students were asked about their engagement in the class where they received WCF on their writing assignment (writing a paragraph). It began with the statement: *In my language writing class today...* The writing task during this class required students to work on their paragraphs (re-draft them) using the written corrective feedback given by the teacher on their writing assignment and then discuss it with their peers. In short, the first questionnaire aimed to explore student engagement for the course, as well as task engagement in class. The engagement questionnaire was based on a 5 pt. Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It consisted of a total of 24 items based on three factors of learner engagement: behavioural engagement (8 items), emotional engagement (8 items), and cognitive engagement (8 items).

The second questionnaire was a paper version which was used to obtain a more in-depth picture of learner engagement in the writing course. The questionnaire consisted of background information (gender, grade received for the paragraph), and the second part contained both multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions. Firstly, in an effort to measure their emotional engagement, the students were asked to tick which emotions they felt during the writing course. Eight emotions were chosen from the Research Assessment Package for Schools – RAPS (1998: II-2). Positive emotions which signified learner engagement included enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, interest, while negative emotions such as boredom, discouragement, anxiety, and anger denoted disaffection from classroom activities. They were also given the opportunity to state other emotions that they felt while taking the writing course. The students were then asked to write what was the cause of these emotions. Behavioural engagement was measured using statements (six in total) from the Engagement vs. Disaffection with Learning (EvsD) survey by Skinner et al. (2008). The students were asked to tick which statements they agreed with and then the reasons for choosing these statements. Finally, the students were asked about the strategies they used to re-draft their writing specifically taking into consideration the corrective feedback they received during the writing class, which was aimed at tapping into their cognitive engagement. The course instructor gave direct corrective feedback in the writing assignment which consisted of corrections regarding structure, grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, etc.

3.2.3. Data analysis

The first questionnaire was quantitative in nature and entailed carrying out descriptive analyses, including frequencies, mean averages and standard deviations using SPSS. In order to compare differences among the students

in engagement in the course and the writing class with respect to grade levels, ANOVA analyses were used. The second questionnaire necessitated the use of qualitative analysis, including frequency analysis. This analysis involved thematic analysis which included usage of the NVivo programme. The answers given by students were coded according to themes. The results were then categorised according to frequency of occurrence within each theme.

4. Results

4.1. *Engagement in the writing course and writing class*

The results of the quantitative analysis for the first questionnaire which measured learner engagement in the writing course and task engagement with WCF in the writing class, showed somewhat similar results. For example, a moderately high mean average ($M=3.90$, $SD=.689$) for behavioural engagement in the writing course among students was found. The students showed that they made a positive effort in the class. Items on this scale included: staying focused even when it was difficult to understand, participating in activities, and continuing to work until their work was completed. The students also showed a moderately high average mean ($M=3.86$, $SD=.669$) with regard to cognitive engagement. Items on this scale included effort to think critically, for example, thinking about different ways to solve problems in their work, connecting new learning things to what they already learned before, and trying to understand their mistakes when they got something wrong. A somewhat lower mean average was shown for emotional engagement in the writing course ($M=3.71$, $SD=.818$). Statements in this factor included issues such as looking forward to the next class, enjoyment of learning new things, as well as negative emotions such as frustration and boredom while attending the class. All the scales showed high reliability with Cronbach alpha values above .70 (EE=.907, BE=.849, CE=.818).

With respect to the writing class where students worked on the feedback for the writing assignment, the result for students' behavioural engagement was high ($M=4.11$, $SD=.646$). The students were also more emotionally engaged in the class ($M=3.81$, $SD=.819$), while their cognitive engagement was somewhat lower ($M=3.78$, $SD=.472$). The reliability results showed relatively high Cronbach alpha values for both the emotional engagement scale (.909) and the behavioural engagement scale (.870). However, the cognitive engagement scale showed a low Cronbach alpha value (.528) which suggests that the findings for this scale need to be taken with precaution. The results of the descriptive analyses are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Descriptive results: Engagement in the writing course - Mean (M), Standard deviation (SD), Cronbach alpha

In my writing classes this semester...

5 pt. Likert scale 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree	Number of items	Sample number	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach alpha
Emotional engagement	8	64	3.71	.818	.907
Behavioural engagement	8	64	3.90	.689	.849
Cognitive engagement	8	64	3.86	.669	.818

Table 2: Descriptive results: Engagement in the writing class - Mean (M), Standard deviation (SD), Cronbach alpha

In my writing class today...

5 pt. Likert scale 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree	Number of items	Sample number	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach alpha
Emotional engagement	8	64	3.81	.819	.909
Behavioural engagement	8	64	4.11	.646	.870
Cognitive engagement	8	64	3.78	.472	.528

4.2. Differences in levels of engagement among learners

A comparison was made in an attempt to investigate whether there were differences in learners' engagement in the course and in the writing class with respect to grade levels. The grade used was based on the writing assignment that they completed in class. It was assumed that if students had

received a lower grade level, there would be lower levels of engagement. However, the results show no significant differences in levels of engagement (both for the course and task engagement) and grades among students. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Results of one-way ANOVA: Comparison of scales – Behavioural engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement for writing course, writing class and assignment grade

Scale	df	F	p
Behavioural engagement (semester)	F(4, 59)	.710	.589
Emotional engagement (semester)	F(4, 59)	.279	.890
Cognitive engagement (semester)	F(4, 59)	.597	.666
Behavioural engagement (writing class)	F(4, 59)	.723	.580
Emotional engagement (writing class)	F(4, 59)	.317	.865
Cognitive engagement (writing class)	F(4, 59)	1.52	.209

4.3. Emotions

In order to obtain a more comprehensive view of students' engagement in the writing course, qualitative analysis was carried out using multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The students were asked which emotions they generally experienced in their writing classes. The results indicated that the participants in general experienced more positive emotions (66.7%) compared to negative emotions (30%). The top positive emotions included interest (22.8%), curiosity (20%), optimism (15.6%), and enthusiasm (8.3%). On the other hand, the most frequent negative emotions included anxiety (15%), discouragement (8.9%), and boredom (6.1%). None of the students said they experienced anger during their writing classes. The results are given in Table 4.

Table 4: Emotions experienced during writing classes

Emotion	Number	Percent
Interest	41	22.8%
Curiosity	36	20 %
Optimism	28	15.6%
Enthusiasm	15	8.3%
Total	120	66.7%

Anxiety	27	15%
Discouragement	16	8.9%
Boredom	11	6.1%
Anger	0	0
Total	54	30%
Other	6	3.3%

The students were also asked for the source of their positive emotions while taking the writing course. Thirty-one answers were given for the causes of interest in the writing course, including interest in learning how to write (10), learning from mistakes (7), the writing course (5), feedback given from teachers and peers (4), learning new things (4), the professor (4), comparing writing ability with colleagues, and grades (2). The students who were interested in learning how to write stated the following: “I was very interested in learning new expressions to improve my paragraph...” (A4), “the cause of these emotions was the want to learn something more about writing paragraphs” (B19), while others wanted to learn from their mistakes: “but also I was interested in my mistakes and wanted to improve them so I can get a good grade on the exam” (A6), “The cause was that I wanted to see my mistakes in the assignments so that I can learn from them and improve my writing skills.” (A5).

Several reasons were given for the cause of feeling of optimism in the course, including grades (7), wanting to improve (5), feedback given in the course (5), improving writing ability (4), learning for the exam (3), the lectures and course design (3), learning how to write (2), learning from mistakes (1), the joy of learning something new (1), comparing their writing ability to others (1), the professor (1). With regard to the category of grades the students stated that “The paragraph received a better grade than I expected and there were few...correctable mistakes” (B15), “I was feeling optimistic because I got a good grade which gave me more confidence for the upcoming exam” (C4). A student who noted feedback as a source said that “I felt good because I received feedback that helped me improve my skills” (B28), while another student stated they felt optimism because they were sure they would improve, “I am very optimistic about my future improvement” (B35).

Curiosity was another common emotion experienced by students who stated that this emotion was based on the desire to learn from mistakes and improve writing skills (11), wanting to better oneself (3), wanting to compare their writing ability with others (2), enjoyment in writing in order to

improve (1), feedback (1), the grade they received (1), and pride (1). Most students who noted this emotion stated that the source was from the desire to learn from mistakes and improve their writing skills: “The cause was that I wanted to see my mistakes in the assignments so that I can learn from them and improve my writing skills” (A5), “the cause of these emotions was knowing the mistakes I made and the desire to fix them in order to get a better grade on my exam” (B22). Enthusiasm experienced during the course was the result of grades (4), the desire to learn new things (3), the professor (2), writing ability (1), and the desire to improve their writing (1).

Other emotions experienced by students were encouragement whereby the professor was the source of this feeling (2), while feelings of pride were the result of self-confidence (1). The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Causes of positive emotions

Emotion	Number	Causes/Reasons given for attributed emotion
Interest	31	Learning how to write (10), Learning from mistakes (7), Course (5), Feedback from teachers and peers (4), Learning new things (4), Professor (4), Comparing writing ability with colleagues (3), Grade (2)
Optimism	25	Grade (7), Wanting to improve (5), Feedback (5), Improving writing ability (4), Exam (3), Lectures/Course (3), Learning how to write (2), Learning from mistakes (1), Learning something new (1), Comparing their writing ability to others (1), Professor (1)
Curiosity	23	To learn from mistakes and improve writing skills (11), Wanting to better myself (3), Wanting to compare their writing ability with others (2), Enjoyment in writing to improve (1), Feedback (1), the grade they received (1), Pride (1)
Enthusiasm	9	Grade (4), Learning new things (3), Professor (2), Writing ability (1), Desire to improve writing (1)
Encouragement (other)	2	Professor (2)
Pride (other)	1	Self-confidence

With regard to negative emotions, anxiety was the most frequently ticked emotion (28) with students citing inappropriate level of writing ability (14),

lack of self-confidence (7), speaking anxiety (4), trait anxiety (2), and mental health problems (2) as causes for this feeling. Examples given by students with regard to feeling anxious because they felt their language ability was not adequate were mainly focused on the skill of writing: “I was scared to go have writing classes because academic writing was never my strong suit” (A3), “I had a lot of mistakes and it’s hard for me to write academic writing” (C50). As for feelings of discouragement (14), students suggested lack of knowledge (6), learning something new (3), lack of self-confidence (2), lack of preparation (1), and opposition (1) as causes for this feeling. For instance, one student stated that “Having the feeling of not knowing too much or not knowing enough to be here” (B39) as a reason for feeling discouragement. Boredom was also another negative emotion experienced by students (8). Students stated that the causes of this emotion stemmed from personal health and mental state (3), lack of motivation (2), lack of sleep (2), lack of writing ability (1), and course content (1). One student said: “My general mental state paired with my lack of focus” (C54) as reasons for experiencing boredom.

Other emotions that students added to the list included frustration (1), whereby lack of writing ability (1) was cited as a reason for this feeling, stress (1) which was caused by a failing grade, as well as lack of confidence (1) which was related to a sense of lack of language ability (1). The results of the causes of negative emotions are summarised in Table 6.

Table 6: Causes of negative emotions

Emotion	Number	Causes/Reasons given for attributed emotion
Anxiety	28	Inappropriate writing ability (14), Lack of self-confidence (7), Speaking anxiety (4), Trait anxiety (2), Mental health problems (2)
Discouragement	14	Lack of knowledge (6), Learning something new (3), Lack of self-confidence (2), Lack of preparation (1), Opposition (1)
Boredom	8	Personal health and mental state (3), Lack of motivation (2), Lack of sleep (2), Lack of writing ability (1), Course content (1)
Disappointment (other)	2	Grade (2)
Frustration (other)	1	Lack of writing ability (1)
Stress (other)	1	Failing grade (1)
Lack of confidence (other)	1	Lack of language ability (1)

4.4. Behavioural engagement and disaffection

In order to identify the extent to which students were behaviourally engaged or disaffected in their writing class, they were asked to tick which statements applied to them whereby multiple answers were allowed. The majority (83.2%) stated that they were behaviourally engaged in their writing class, compared to a minority (17.5%) who were disaffected. A large percentage of students paid attention in class (33.9%), tried hard to do well in class (29.7%), and participated in class discussions (19.6%). On the other hand, a small number of students thought about other things while in class (10.8%), did just enough to get by (4.7%), and acted like they were working (2%). The results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Behavioural engagement vs. disaffection

Behavioural Engagement	Number	Percent
I pay attention in my writing class.	49	33.9%
I try hard to do well in my writing class.	44	29.7%
When I'm in class, I participate in class discussions.	29	19.6%
Total	122	83.2%
Disaffection		
When I'm in class, I think about other things.	16	10.8%
In my writing class, I do just enough to get by.	7	4.7%
When I'm in class, I just act like I'm working.	3	2%
Total	26	17.5%

The students were asked the reasons for choosing the statements that they did. The students noted 53 reasons for being engaged in the classroom, including the desire to improve their work and progress in their writing (16), trying their best and wanting to succeed (14), to get better grades (7), feeling that it would help them in their future (7), being interested in learning new things (4), finding the class useful and interesting (5), and the professor (3). The following statements were given by the students: "but the most important for me is to find new ways in which my paragraphs can be improved" (A5), "if I'm not paying attention or working I won't progress" (A4), "I always try my best to succeed" (A3), "paying attention is important for a very high grades" (C49), "I try hard to do well in my writing class be-

cause it is important for further education” (B21), “I pay attention in my writing class in order to learn something new” (B24), “I try hard to do well in my writing class and pay attention in my writing class because I know that can be useful for me” (B19), “I appreciate the work my teacher puts in her classes” (A11).

With regard to the reasons for their disaffection, the students noted that they lost their focus (6), were overwhelmed and frustrated (4), did not find the course interesting (4), were tired (4), found the course too demanding (2), did not like putting in the work (2), and problems in their personal life (1). Examples of statements given by students include: “Simply put, a divided attention due to other subjects that need working and studying for” (A10), “The reason is that sometimes I feel overwhelmed and frustrated so I like to think about something else” (A1), “Sometimes I would just think about something else and not pay attention and act as if I’m doing assignments although I was not because I was tired or bored because it wasn’t interesting for me” (B16), “...but sometimes I get easily bored if I’m exhausted and I do just enough to get by” (A6), “...but I think the writing classes are a bit annoying because a lot is asked from us when we’re just getting started with ac. writing” (C43), “...although my motivation is quite low leading to me taking the lazy way out” (C54), “but recent happening in my personal life have started to cloud my mind and it’s hard to focus on the task” (A3). A summary of the results of the reasons for their engagement and disaffection are given in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8: Reasons for behavioural engagement

Reasons	Number
To improve work and progress	16
Trying their best and wanting to succeed	14
To get better grades	7
Will help them in the future	7
Interested in learning new things	4
Useful and interesting class	5
Professor	3

Table 9: Reasons for disaffection

Reasons	Number
Loss of focus	6
Overwhelmed and frustrated	4
Course was not interesting to them	4
Were tired	4
Found the course too demanding	2
Did not like putting in the work	2

Problems in their personal life	1
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4.5. Cognitive engagement: Strategy use

In the last open-ended question, which aimed to investigate students' cognitive engagement in the course, the students were asked to think about the feedback they received for their writing in the course, both from their peers and the teacher, and to write the strategies they used to solve problems in their writing. A large majority of students (42) stated that they focused on specific language issues, some students (31) explicitly stated that they worked on the feedback from peers and the professor, while some students noted that they worked from the feedback (14). With regard to feedback, one student stated that "Following the feedback I tried to do one by one thing. I believe I corrected everything that I got as feedback. I firstly focused on more general things about my paragraph and then I started on the details" (A4). This example shows that the student used the metacognitive strategy of planning and organizing their learning (Oxford, 1990). Another student stated that "I wrote down what my peers and teacher said to me and I will try to correct that before exam" (A13) suggesting that they used the cognitive strategy of taking notes (Oxford, 1990). Other strategies included re-writing (4), studying more (3), using previous knowledge (1), re-reading the paragraph (1), using the coursebook (1), and comparison with others. The results are shown in Table 10.

Table 10: Strategies used to solve problems in writing

Strategies	Number
Focused on specific language issues	42
Used feedback from peers and professor	31
Worked from feedback	14
Re-writing	4
Studied more	3
Used previous knowledge	1
Re-reading paragraph	1
Used coursebook	1
Comparison with others	1

An analysis was further carried out to decipher the types of language issues that students focused on in their writing. The most frequent language issues addressed by learners included the use of more formal language (10), vocabulary (7), and sentence structure (6). One student stated that "I tried to improve my paragraph by using more formal phrases" (B21), another said that "I tried to think of a more complex vocabulary" (B31), while another

student said that “I learned that I have to work on sentence structures” (A1). Students also noted they needed to focus on using more complex sentences (5), use synonyms (4), better supporting sentences (4), a better concluding sentence (4), and a better topic sentence (4). For example, participant B35 stated that among the language issues they needed to focus on was “the use of more complex sentences,” participant B31 said that “I tried to use as many synonyms as I could,” while other participants focused on paragraph structure, “...and I added sentences that supported my main ideas” (A9), “I improved my concluding sentence” (B29), and “I fixed my topic sentence” (C47). Other language issues that students noted were using less pronouns (3), using linking words (2), omitting irrelevant sentences (1), and working on cohesion (1). The results are shown in Table 11.

Table 11: Strategy focus: Language issues

Language issues	Number
Use more formal language	10
Vocabulary	7
Sentence structure	6
More complex sentences	5
Use of synonyms	4
Better supporting sentences/ideas	4
Better concluding sentence	4
Better topic sentence	4
Less pronouns	3
Linking words	2
Omitting irrelevant sentences/ideas	1
Cohesion	1

5. Discussion

The first research question investigated the extent to which students were engaged in the writing course and the writing class where they received feedback for their writing. The results of the quantitative analysis for the writing course indicated moderately high levels of behavioural engagement and cognitive engagement, followed by emotional engagement. Mercer et al. (2021) have suggested that learners can be behaviourally engaged, but they might be ‘going through the motions’ whereby they lack cognitive and emotional involvement. However, it appears that students in this study, who were English language majors, were both behaviourally and cognitively engaged in the language course. The somewhat lower emotional engagement levels (although still moderately high) showed that the majority of students felt positive attitudes toward the course and had positive emotions

such as enjoyment of the class, as opposed to negative emotions, for instance, feelings of boredom, frustration, or apathy. With regard to the engagement levels for the writing class where students had to work on the feedback given for their paragraph, the results showed much higher levels on all three dimensions, with high levels of behavioural engagement, followed by emotional and then cognitive engagement. There might be several reasons for this. Namely, the type of task that students were asked to do (revise their writing in class), and peer feedback which 'pushed' students to engage in the activities.

The second research question focused on the differences in engagement in both the writing course and writing class with regard to the grade they received for their writing assignment. The results indicated no significant differences between the three dimensions of engagement and grade levels. This is in contrast to other studies, for example, Tsang and Dewaele's (2023) research found a relationship between enjoyment, learner engagement, and test scores, among primary school Chinese EFL learners. Other studies corroborate the close relationship between L2 enjoyment and language achievement among high school students (Jin & Zhang, 2021). Garcia-Ponce and Tavakoli's (2022) study also found a relationship between learner cognitive engagement and language proficiency. It should be noted that the students in this study, who were first year university students, had very high final grades in English at the end of their last high school year ($M=4.86$, on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the highest grade). The average grade on the writing assignment was much lower ($M=3.23$, with 5 being the highest grade). It is possible that the lower grade did not de-motivate or lead them to disengage from the course and class because they had positive past English L2 learning experiences. Moreover, they could have been more encouraged to learn from their mistakes in an effort to improve their writing. This is confirmed in the qualitative analysis as will be seen below.

Interest, curiosity and optimism were the most common positive emotions experienced by learners and they were tied to the desire to learn how to write and to learn from mistakes. This result is confirmed by Hidi & Harackiewicz (2000) who have suggested that interested learners will put in more effort, become more involved, and will be inclined to want to learn more. The result of this qualitative analysis also offers an answer to why there were no differences in levels of engagement despite receiving low grades for their writing assignment. Namely, even though students received lower grades for their assignment, they were still engaged in the writing class because they were interested in improving their writing skills. Similarly, in a study among English L2 undergraduate students in Iran, Khajavy's (2021) found that two components of L2 grit, perseverance and interest, were significant predictors of L2 engagement. Sang and Hiver (2021) have ob-

served that interest has played a role in numerous L2 motivation frameworks (Dörnyei, 1994; Williams & Burden, 1997). Moreover, they suggest that interest may be seen as “an antecedent of motivation and engagement” (Sang & Hiver, 2021: 26). In other words, interest can be seen to play an important role in learner L2 engagement.

In this study, positive emotions far outweigh negative emotions among students; nevertheless, some of the negative emotions should be mentioned, including the two most dominant ones, such as L2 anxiety and discouragement. L2 research has shown that L2 anxiety is an important factor that can affect L2 motivation (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre, 1999; Oxford, 1999). However, recent studies indicate that anxiety does not seem to be a factor that affects learner engagement (Khajavy, 2021; Tsang & Dewaele, 2023). A small minority of students in this study experienced L2 anxiety and discouragement which were tied to students’ fear about their ability to do well in English writing. This appears to indicate that these negative emotions are associated with self-confidence in keeping with Mercer’s (2015, 2019) assertion regarding the importance of learner agency in learner engagement. Nonetheless, a cause-and-effect relationship between these emotions and disaffection is not clear from the obtained data.

The majority of students stated that they were behaviourally engaged in their writing class. They listed several reasons for their engagement, including wanting to improve their work and progress, and wanting to try their best and succeed. These reasons are intrinsic in nature and may be said to refer to their motivation to learn English which includes a positive Ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, 2005, Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) which looks to their future self as a proficient L2 learner. Moreover, their strong self-efficacy and self-confidence confirm Mercer’s (2019) assertion that learners’ feelings of competence are important elements of learner engagement. In addition, it appears that behavioural engagement is closely tied to emotional engagement since similar reasons were given for their engagement. Students also stated that the course will help them in the future and that grades were important for them, suggesting that extrinsic reasons also play a role in behavioural engagement similar to L2 motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Dörnyei and Kormos (2000) have found that student attitudes toward the course play a role in task engagement indicating that motivation is an important factor in learner engagement. A very small number of students were disaffected in learning in the writing course, noting reasons such as losing focus, feeling overwhelmed and frustrated, not finding the course interesting or finding it too demanding, and tiredness. As Sang and Hiver (2021) state, students might develop a resistance to further learn if they are disengaged; as a result, there should be targeted interventions to assist learners who are disengaged.

With regard to the last research question, the results suggest that students used several strategies to deal with the feedback they received for their writing. For example, they stated that they worked from the feedback and focused on specific language issues (errors) and used the feedback from peers and the professor. From the statements given by students, we can generally confirm that they used numerous learning strategies to improve their writing, including metacognitive and cognitive strategies such as planning and organizing their work, and taking notes (Oxford, 1990). The fact that they used metacognitive and cognitive strategies indicates that they 'noticed' their errors (Ellis, 2010) and were cognitively engaged with the WCF (Han & Hyland, 2015). Moreover, the interaction between the feedback given by the teacher and peers implies the importance of the social dimension in language learning (Philp & Duchesne, 2008). Storch (2008) suggests that listening to one's peers and paying attention to teacher talk is another important dimension of L2 engagement which is confirmed in this study. Moreover, other L2 research studies have also shown the link between learning effectiveness and being socially engaged (Moranski & Toth, 2016; Sato & Ballinger, 2012; Toth et al., 2013). Han and Hyland (2019: 249) have suggested that learner engagement with WCF can be viewed as a sociocognitive phenomenon which entails "both cognitive and social aspects that cannot be easily separated."

The students in this study have shown that they were cognitively engaged in the course through the strategies that they used regarding the feedback, but they also focused on specific language issues which points to a specific aspect of L2 engagement. Namely, as Baralt et al. (2016) have confirmed, L2 cognitive engagement involves learners' focus on language forms and solving language problems. By focusing on language issues through the medium of corrective feedback, students in this study were cognitively engaged in their writing. In compliance with other studies (Bitchener, 2019; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Bitchener & Storch, 2016), this study affirms that WCF helps learners become aware of gaps in their L2 knowledge and facilitates L2 proficiency. WCF can also be said to encourage learners to engage with the language (EWL) to use Svalberg's (2009) term. Svalberg (2021: 39) states that EWL refers to "learners thinking and talking about language, its forms, functions and how it works." The type of WCF given to students helped them focus on key issues in L2 academic writing, including using more formal language, more complex sentence structure, better supporting sentences, topic sentences, concluding sentences, and so on. Another issue that arises from these results is the importance of the type of feedback given. For example, Moser (2020) found that the manner in which teachers provide feedback can either enhance or impede learner engagement with writing. It is evident from the results of this study that the type of feedback (direct corrective feedback) was specific enough for learners to be able to notice their

errors, but also focus on specific language issues that needed to be improved.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study show that students were relatively well engaged in the writing course and writing class regarding all three dimensions, including emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement. No differences were found among the three dimensions and grade levels suggesting that the students were not disheartened by the assignment grade they received for their writing. While attending the writing course, the students experienced mostly positive emotions, including interest, curiosity and optimism. When asked to explain the causes of these emotions, the students mentioned wanting to learn how to write and learn from their mistakes as major reasons indicating a positive attitude toward the writing course, but also somewhat explaining the lack of demotivation because of the grades they received for their writing assignment. The qualitative analyses revealed that behavioural engagement was tied to emotional engagement as students stated similar reasons for being behaviourally engaged, including wanting to improve their work, as well as wanting to try their best. This also shows that intrinsic reasons play an important role in L2 learner engagement. Other reasons given for behavioural engagement involved extrinsic reasons such as the desire to attain good grades. These elements of behavioural engagement point to the importance of learner motivation in this construct. Moreover, in response to feedback, the students used both cognitive and metacognitive strategies implying that they were cognitively engaged in the writing course and paid attention to language forms. Feedback from the teacher and peers was also tied to this cognitive engagement, indicating that the social dimension is an important aspect of L2 learning. In addition, feedback helped learners focus on their writing errors, showing them how to improve their writing skills with regard to specific language issues, which in turn encouraged their overall engagement. The results also imply that the type of written feedback may play a role in improving learner engagement.

Similar to many L2 studies, this study verifies that L2 learner engagement is a multidimensional construct with overlapping dimensions. Students in this study were genuinely engaged in the writing course, despite having difficulties in their writing skills, and used feedback to improve their writing. As these participants were English language majors, suggesting they were highly motivated to improve their English language proficiency, future studies should perhaps include English learners who are not language majors to compare levels of engagement. In addition, following stu-

dents over a longer period of time, for example, throughout their university programme, might give richer results with regard to L2 learner engagement.

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