

# Theoretical Construction and Research Perspectives of Student Engagement in Foreign Language Education

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**Abstract:** This paper provides a microscopic perspective of student engagement (SE) for foreign language learning (FLL). SE in FLL is defined as the degree and process of foreign language learners' effort or involvement to understand, master and apply the foreign language, culture and other related knowledge. Research on SE in language learning is multidimensional. The SE model of FLL is constructed as dynamic, systematic and mutual interactional, consisting of behavioral, cognitive, emotional, social and cultural engagement. Behavior is the mediator of the other four dimensions which all contribute on the learning process through behavioral engagement. Any change of one dimension will definitely affect the others. Due to the particularity of FLL, this paper probes into the SE of FLL, and its differences to other disciplines, particularly in terms of subject (the learner), the different mediators and the objects of SE in FLL. Since culture is the innate characteristics of language, which also formulates the identity of learners, cultural engagement is a natural dimension of SE in FLL. Language is internalized through language socialization and social interactions, thus social engagement is possible to fit into the dimensions of SE in FLL. All these dimensions are discussed in terms of theoretical and research perspectives to provide insights on SE issues in FLL.

**Keywords:** Cultural engagement, Five-dimensional student engagement in FLL, Social engagement, Student engagement, Student engagement model in FLL

## 1. Introduction

The study of learning engagement originated from the study of Time on Task in the 1930s, and was subsequently popularized by Astin(1984), Pace(1984), Newmann(1989, 1992) and the student engagement measure scale NSSE was developed and promoted throughout the United States and even globally (Kuh, 2001, 2009). Although these scholars use different terms to describe their views on student engagement, all of their views are based on the general premise that academic achievement is related to the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities(Kuh, 2003), which is supported by many studies. As Preliminary studies focus on the behavioral engagement of students in

participating in the course study, holding that the more time students invest into learning, the more they learned. Later scholars have gradually realized that there should be some other deep engagement behind the behavioral engagement, such as emotion, cognition, motivation, agency, sociality and so on. A growing number of researchers then define student engagement as a multidimensional structure, in particular, the three dimensions of student engagement of Fredricks are the most widely accepted (Yonezawa, et. al., 2009), which are considered to be the combination of behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement. Each dimension is different but complementary to each other (Fredricks, 2004). Since the middle and late 1980s, many scholars have conducted in-depth studies on student engagement from multiple perspectives, including the following three aspects: connotation and definition of student engagement (Astin, 1984, 1985; Pace, 1982, 1984; Newmann, 1992), measurement of student engagement and the influencing factors of student engagement (Kuh, 2001). There are also many researchers recognize that the connotation, pattern and influencing factors of student engagement should be differentiated with different disciplines, learning stages, learning groups and learning objects (Guo & Liu, 2016). Therefore, the studies on student engagement of different disciplines gradually emerge into the public view, among which the student engagement of foreign language education also gains a place.

Foreign language courses are compulsory in most countries, among which EFL is most common all over the world. Take China as example, about 300 million people currently study English (majors and non-majors), accounting for about a quarter of the total population of China. Among them, more than 23 million college students in China have become the largest group of learning foreign languages in the world (Xinhua News Agency, 2006), and English as the most common foreign language, has also become a necessary threshold for college admission, employment, further education and promotion. However, as Wu Qidi, Deputy Minister of Education in China said, the problem of “time-consuming but inefficiency” in FLE still exists, and many students’ foreign language ability is still at the middle or even low level (Xinhua News Agency, 2006). After a lot of empirical research, the researchers found that Chinese college students had invested a lot in EFL, but had little effect (Guo, 2016). From this point of view, student engagement of FLL are problematic. However, most research mainly focus on the student engagement measuring of foreign language education (FLE), the defining and the connotation, influencing factors of the student engagement of FLE from the general connotation of student engagement rather than treat foreign language learning as a specific and unique process different from other disciplines. Thus the following aspects are still under research: the differences exist between the FLE and other disciplines education from the student engagement perspective; the subject (student) of the student engagement in FLE is particular, especially when taking into consideration of their self-identity and consciousness as they face their own and target languages and cultures; the mediation of student engagement of foreign language learning (FLL) is different, to be specific, the mediation of FLL encompasses language competence and other FLL activities, meanwhile, the language competence serves as both the mediation and the object of FLL student engagement; the objects of FLL student engagement including language knowledge, cultural knowledge, literature knowledge, social knowledge and other relevant knowledge. Therefore, based on the above consideration, this paper attempts to redefine the connotations and influencing factors of FLL student engagement and construct the FLL student engagement model.

## **2. The connotations of the student engagement**

Student engagement has experienced a transition from quantity to quality and from single dimension to multi-dimension. In 1930s, educational psychologist Tyler first noticed the concept of student commitment and defined it as “time on task”, which describes the time students spent on their work and tried to show its effects on learning (Axelson & Flick, 2011). Pace, an American educator,

described the quality of students effort and issued questionnaires in 1979 to measure students “quality of effort”(1984), which were used to identify activities that were helpful to students development and learning. The results show that students learn more when they invest more time and energy in activities such as learning, interacting with classmates and teachers, and using what they have learned in class in their daily lives. Astin in 1984 further improved the “quality of effort”, putting forward the theory of “student involvement”, and defined it as the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience(Astin, 1985), including not only in the amount, more emphasis on the quality in the process of learning and the influence of environment on students’ knowledge. Astin’s research was regarded to deserve credit for originating what would eventually become modern engagement research by many scholars(Axelson & Flick, 2011). Newmann(1992) focused on the psychological investment in learning, and defined student engagement in academic work as the student’s psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote. Combined with Astin, Chickering(1987), Pascarella and Patrick’s research(1991), Kuh G. D.(2003) defined “student engagement” as “the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom, and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities”, and emphasized that “the core factor of the quality of education is the degree of student engagement”. This concept is primarily based on Pascarella’s(2005) view that the impact of the learning process in college on the development of students depends, to a large extent, on the degree to which students exert their personal effort and involvement in learning and non-learning activities during their school years.

Although previous studies have not given a comprehensive definition of student engagement, nor decomposed it into several clear sub-dimensions, they have generally pointed out that student engagement includes two key contents: one is the time and energy that students themselves invest in learning and learning-related activities; the other is the influence of peers, school, community and other environments on students behavior, cognition and emotional engagement. With the deepening of research, the multi-dimensional construct of student engagement has gradually come into being, among which the three-dimensional division of student engagement by Fredricks et al.(2004), is an indispensable part of all current definitions on this topic. They conceptualized student engagement as a meta-construct characterized by its multi-faceted nature, including three dimensions of cognitive engagement, emotional engagement and behavioral engagement. Cognitive engagement focused on inner investment in learning, referring to learners “thoughtfulness and willingness to exert effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills” (Fredricks et al., 2004: 60). Emotional engagement, according to Fredricks et al.(2004:60), encompasses positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and schools and is presumed to create ties to an institution and influence willingness to do the work. This conceptualization highlights the variety of emotional experiences, such as interest, boredom, happiness, sadness and anxiety (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Typically, behavioral engagement has been measured in terms of observable behaviors (Finn & Rock, 1997) including positive student conduct, involvement in learning and schoolwork, and participation in school activities (Fredricks et al., 2004). Although it is generally accepted that student engagement is a multi-dimensional structure with three dimensions, different researchers have different understandings on how to define and measure each dimension till today. In this paper, a premise about student engagement is proposed that student engagement refers to all the involvement from all perspectives including behavioral, cognitive, emotional, social engagement and so on, which is relevant to the goals of attending the university either academically progress or self-development and other outcomes. “Relevance to the educational goal” is the primary premise of student engagement, no matter what aspects involved - behavior, cognition, emotion, sociality or other engagement. In a case of one discipline or curriculum, student engagement should be limited to be relevant to the goal of that discipline or curriculum.

### **3. The Connotation of student engagement of FLL**

Due to the particularities of student engagement of FLL, cultural and social engagement should be integrated into the FLL student engagement dimensions in addition to behavioral, emotional and

cognitive engagement, that is, FLL student engagement is five-dimensional including behavioral, emotional, cognitive, cultural and social engagement, which is a dynamic, interactive and integrated system.

### **3.1 The particularity of student engagement of FLL**

The words identity, culture, value have been included in the goals or outcomes of higher education by many scholars (Association of American Colleges and National Leadership Council, 2007; Pascarella et al., 1991). This is more pronounced in language learning, especially in FLL, because language learning and cultural acquisition are synchronized (Su & Yang, 2021). In the process of language learning, learners acquire and internalize the values, behaviors and social customs carried by the language (Poole, 1992; Duff, 2020). College FLE is different from other professional education, thus its connotation of student engagement is correspondingly different. Firstly, the subject of the student engagement in FLE is different, because the students are vacillating and merging between two identities and cultures (constant self-identity construction between the two languages and cultures - mother language and culture versus or blends with target language and culture) as they face their own and target languages and cultures; Secondly, the mediator of student engagement, that is the medium or way of engaging activities, encompassing language competence (students carry out learning activities through language) and learning activities. Language is not only the mediator of students learning, but also the object of learning. All other learning activities are also mediator, bridging the subject and the object in student engagement; Thirdly, the object of engagement, that is, what the engagement activities of students are acting on, and the expected output of their engagement activities, including language knowledge, cultural knowledge, literature knowledge, social knowledge, other relevant knowledge and language competence or skills in speaking, reading, listening, writing and translating.

In the process of FLL, the language students use in activities is foreign language, which sometimes lays a barrier in student engagement. Take FLE in China as an example, according to relevant research (Guo, 2012), when Chinese students use a foreign language in learning activities, they often adopt the strategy of asking for help, avoiding or delaying due to the lack of language competence, target language culture and relevant professional knowledge. They may turn to teachers, students, language tools, or even their mother language for help, or take the strategy of avoidance to give up expressing because of the language and cultural barriers. Students are in frequent bidirectional interacting in the “real I - ego” and “I in the language - compromised ‘I’ when encountering language and cultural barrier”, and then students’ self-consciousness swings between the two “I”, which, to a certain extent, affects students learning enthusiasm and commitment. Therefore, the subjects of student engagement in FLL face more difficulties.

Just as Chinese scholars Wang Shuhua et. al (2018) viewed “If we hold a comprehensive and profound view of FLE, (Chinese) College English teaching should attach great importance to the inner life of English education and the appreciation of English culture”, in FLL in colleges and universities, students mobilize language knowledge, culture knowledge, topic knowledge, cognitive skills, even language competence, through the activities of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation to decode, think and code the language materials to achieve language and culture learning. Listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation are not only the mediator of student engagement, that is, learning activities, but also one of their learning objectives. In the mediation process of learning activities, the knowledge of language, culture, literature, language theory and other relevant knowledge are absorbed and integrated in student engagement, acting on the object of the student engagement - language. In fact, the object is not only a language, but a language that is compatible with culture, literature, language theory and other relevant knowledge through the engagement mediation activities. Culture understanding is always one of the inseparable goals of FLL.

It is empty or even meaningless to talk about language without culture, while culture cannot be inherited without language. Language and culture are penetrated within each other and promote each other's development. Therefore, when studying the student engagement of FLL, culture, as an important engagement mediator and object, has a profound influence on the subjects of student engagement.

### **3.2 Cultural engagement of FLL**

The process of language learning is the development of the ability to meaningfully interpret and use features of a target language (Liddicoat & Scrino, 2013). This interpretation is based on a wide range of assumptions about different cultures. It includes learners development insight in the understanding of socio-cultural contexts and perceptions of cultural activities and identities (Solodka et al., 2021). Learners development insight, due to the influence of cross-cultural context, can be found at such levels that follow each other: the level of cultural sensitivity, the level of cross-cultural competence, the level of subjectivity in the dialogue of cultures (Solodka et al., 2021). The three levels of culture-bounded factors constitute the cultural engagement of FLL.

When it comes to FLL, it is imperative to elaborate the relation between language and culture in depth. Language and culture are mutually penetrating, which is determined by the attributes of language, carrying the cultural spirit, including values, social knowledge, skills, the social and contextual norms, attitude, personal perceptions, and the way of thinking, etc. It is the result of the community collective cognition of this language. Language is also an important cultural form, component and mediator, infiltrating many important spirit in the formation, use and development of a culture. Therefore, it is impossible not affected when we use a language in thinking, writing, and communication, by the implicit cultural norms and images and perceptions implied in it, though they are often vague to be observed. It is self-evident that learning a language necessarily involves the cultural content the language carries. Thus engaging in a language learning inevitably involves engaging in a culture. This acknowledges the value and significant role of culture in student engagement in FLL, and culture is evident to be raised as a necessary dimension to enrich the student engagement of FLL.

Student engagement is conceptualized as a mediator between contextual factors and learning outcomes (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner et al., 1990) and is maximized when students perceive that important contexts meet their basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2020; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Culture is the connotation of language and the core context of language occurrence. In FLL, culture is a meta-knowledge and the cultural awareness is meta-cognition, which serve as effective and supportive conditions in guiding the language to stimulate and explore the meta-experience of the language through stimulating the cultural nature of language, so as to understand the connotation of the language, stimulate the sensible and creative use of language as well. From the perspective of the deconstructionism of learning that the learning process is not just a simple information input, processing, storage and extraction, but the unification of assimilation and adaptation through the two-way interaction of old and new experiences, so as to complete the regeneration and creation of knowledge (Project Team from Institute of Higher Education of Shanghai Normal University, 2015, pp. 73-75). Hence, in the process of language construction, the engagement subject constantly carries out cultural construction to endue the constructed language with meaning. Cultural engagement of FLL is conceptualized as the process of applying culture to endue the language with meaning, making the language learning actually happen (deep in its underline meaning), and make the self-consciousness clearer. In other words, cultural engagement in FLL refers to the knowledge, understanding and empathy of target language and culture, dialectical thinking of the mother language and culture and target language and culture, and the effort and process of integrating these knowledge and thinking into language learning. The deeper the cultural involvement is, the clearer the self-identity and cultural awareness will be, the more involved the language learning, the better the

language learning effect. On the other hand, the insufficient cultural involvement and the superficial language learning will hinder the meaning construction. In avoidant communication strategies, self-consciousness swings between language expression and self-identification, even self-culture ecology, and learning interest and student engagement decrease. Students learning is interacting with the cultural ecology in class. In FLL, cultural acquisition will definitely enhance the contextual support and psychological needs, and the students with stronger prior academic performances, helping to channel the need for competence, are often more engaged (Chase et al., 2014).

Cultural engagement involves a sense of cultural-related ego, identity belonging and cultural-difference awareness between the native and target culture, and the application of this belonging and awareness to the actual practices of FLL. The students are exposed to new environments with two languages and cultures, even identities intertextured together to enhance their personal and academic development in FLL.

If the students lack the cultural awareness of the language, they will isolate themselves from the language, and find it difficult to get involved in language learning. In the interactions of language and culture, students and language, students and culture, the self identity between the native and target language and culture, the language competence is cultivated, the meaning of language and culture interpreted, the language and culture awareness reflected.

Language is cultural, and learning language is to perceive culture and build identity. Particular linguistic forms and the sequential organizations within which they occur are seen to bear “sociocultural information on acts and activities, identities and relationships, feelings and beliefs and other domains (which) must be inferred by children and other novices” (Ochs, 1987, p.10). In line with Ochs, Scollon and Scollon (1981) argue that the discourse system is closely tied to an individuals concept of identity, and any change in the discourse system is likely to be felt as a change in personality and culture. If we suggest change we have to be very aware that we are not only suggesting change in discourse patterns. We are suggesting change in a person’s identity.

It is cultural identity that enables us learning a language. Granted, engaging in culture, that is cultural engagement in FLL is an innate dimension of student engagement in FLL as well.

### **3.3 Social engagement in FLL**

The social engagement of FLL includes two aspects. One is the degree of language socialization in the FLL process, involving what underlying language, such as the perception and interpretation of identity, position, consciousness, culture, concept, power, relationship, and etc., which relates to the psychological engagement process; the other is the social interaction in the process of FLL, involving psychological and behavioral interactive activities.

Language socialization emphasizes that language is both the intermediary of socialization and the result of socialization (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). When learners enter from one community to another community, the differences between the contact area and the original community in society, culture, language and consciousness become an important intermediary for learners to construct new knowledge and ability, and also an important driving force for their socialization (Su & Yang, 2021). Language socialization provides a theoretical basis for the social engagement of learners in FLL. Foreign language classroom has a culture and knowledge system different from the native language classroom. The cross-language and cross-cultural nature of foreign language help construct the learner with two virtual communities internally without obvious boundaries between the two communities. One is the learners internal community constitute of native identity, language and culture; the other is the community of native-target blended identity, language and culture. Indexicality of language resources enables it to reflect and construct social context, such as identity, position, social behavior, social activities, and other culturally meaningful realities (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992). Students should jointly build new knowledge, new positions, new ideas and new abilities between these two internal communities. Quite similar and overlapping to the cultural engagement, the social engagement emphasize more on the socialization of language, which is an dimension not easy to be detected and noticed in FLL student engagement research, but it sheds a critical light on student engagement in FLL.

Another perspective of social engagement is the social interaction in the process of FLL, which emphasizes the social interaction activities physically and psychologically. Student engagement is an overarching “meta-construct” which entails an interactive ecosystem made up of enriching experiences and interactions of the students, teachers, support staff and the institutional environment (Malik et al., 2021). Language knowledge is constructed in the experiences and interactions between the engagement subject and the learning context, that is, the intermediary. The context or the intermediary includes the interaction ecology between the learner’s native language culture and the target language culture, the level of peer interaction and cooperation, the support and feedback from teachers, the interaction between the subject and the object, and so on. In conclusion, the context or the inter mediation created for student engagement is the social representation of student engagement. Vygotsky argued that it is by mastering semiotically mediated processes and categories in social interaction that human consciousness is formed in the individual (Stone & Wertsch, 1984, p.166). He also holds that any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First, it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. Additionally, the constructivism of learning holds that learning is both individual and social, and is a process of continuous enrichment, improvement and accumulation in the interaction of individuals, groups and society (Project Team from Institute of Higher Education of Shanghai Normal University, 2015, p. 68). Knowledge resides within individuals and is embedded in teams or communities. Constructivism of social orientation emphasizes the social nature of knowledge. Vygotsky saw social interaction as playing an essential role in the development of word meaning. The primary reason for adults and children to participate in social interaction is not, however, to produce mastery of word meanings. Rather, it is to engage in communication and mutual regulation. It is in connection with speech functions such as these that Vygotsky proposed his account of egocentric and inner speech (Stone & Wertsch, 1984, p.171). Language is not only the basis of knowledge, but also a kind of social construction. Its meaning is directly related to the context and is formed by human or nature through social interaction. The meaning and identity of knowledge are constructed in the interaction.

It is proved by many researchers that the typical decline in student engagement over time is lessened when students perceive better support for autonomy by teachers and more social support from teachers and peers (Moreira et al., 2020). Considering this characteristic, it follows that student engagement is malleable and can be shaped by contextual influences (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Consequently, it is becoming increasingly popular for measures of student engagement to incorporate students perceptions of support from teachers, peers, and family alongside emotional, behavioral, and cognitive indicators to capture the fit between students and their environments (Appleton et al., 2006; Moreira et al., 2020). Therefore, the social engagement of FLL means that the engagement subject interacts with the learning context and the engagement object through language socialization and social activities with the purpose of constructing the learners development and acquiring foreign language knowledge. In such language socialization and social activities as the mutual integration between language and culture, interaction between self-identification(from the ego) and the other-identification(influence from the outside), peers interaction and cooperation, teachers support and feedback, the engagement subject interacts with the object to construct language knowledge and ability, turning outside knowledge inside. In FLL, the higher the social engagement of the engagement subject is, the more fully the engagement subject acts on the engagement object, and the better the learning effect is.

### **3.4 Integration of student engagement of FLL**

Some critics of the student engagement concept have sometimes suggested that we do damage to the messy reality of student learning if we disaggregate the various forms of engagement from each other, or valorize one of its forms above the other. Some say that student engagement is best understood as a “multidimensional construct” or “metaconstruct”(Axelson & Flick, 2011). Compared with other subjects, FLL has both uniqueness and generalities. Therefore, on the basis of its particularity of cultural and social engagement, student engagement of FLL also embraces behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement. Behavioral engagement in FLL refers to the actual effort of the engagement subject on the foreign language course and the intensity of the actual contact with the foreign language. Emotional

engagement of foreign language refers to the attitude towards foreign language courses, foreign language and culture, as well as the confidence, value and emotional experience in learning and using foreign languages. Cognitive engagement refers to the ability of self-monitoring and regulation, motivation, self-efficacy and strategies in FLL.

As an important psychological phenomenon, emotion always happens simultaneously with cognition and determines behavior together. Students emotional engagement determines the starting point of their cognitive engagement and maintains their cognitive engagement. After the interaction of the two, it is manifested as students behavioral engagement. Some scholars propose that behavioral engagement comes before and provides the necessary energy for cognitive engagement (Manwaring et al., 2017). How motivated students are, is directly contingent upon their level of cognitive engagement (Malik et al., 2021). In this context, self-motivation, self-regulation and self-determination are key to the future aspirations of students (Lee, 2014).

In addition, as the carrier of emotional and cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement is easy to observe and understand. However, behavior is deceptive. In order to understand students learning situation, it is far from enough to only rely on observation. We also need to “see the essence through the phenomenon”, and further investigate its psychological process, namely, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement. Studies (Ren et al., 2017) have shown that the most important factors of student engagement is the cognitive engagement, and the second is the emotional engagement, and at last the behavior. The results agree with Newmann(1992), namely, compared with students activities, their psychological process is more important. It also shows that the importance of the cultural and social engagement in the process of FLL, because cultural engagement and social engagement also include cognitive thinking, emotional experience, and behavioral activities, etc. Obviously, although each of the five dimensions of student engagement, namely cultural engagement, social engagement, cognitive engagement, emotional engagement and behavioral engagement has its independent interpretation system and sub-dimensions, student engagement is actually an integrity with mutual contact and influence of the five dimensions, which are inseparable. The five dimensions of student engagement act on the learning object as a whole to achieve the language and culture learning.

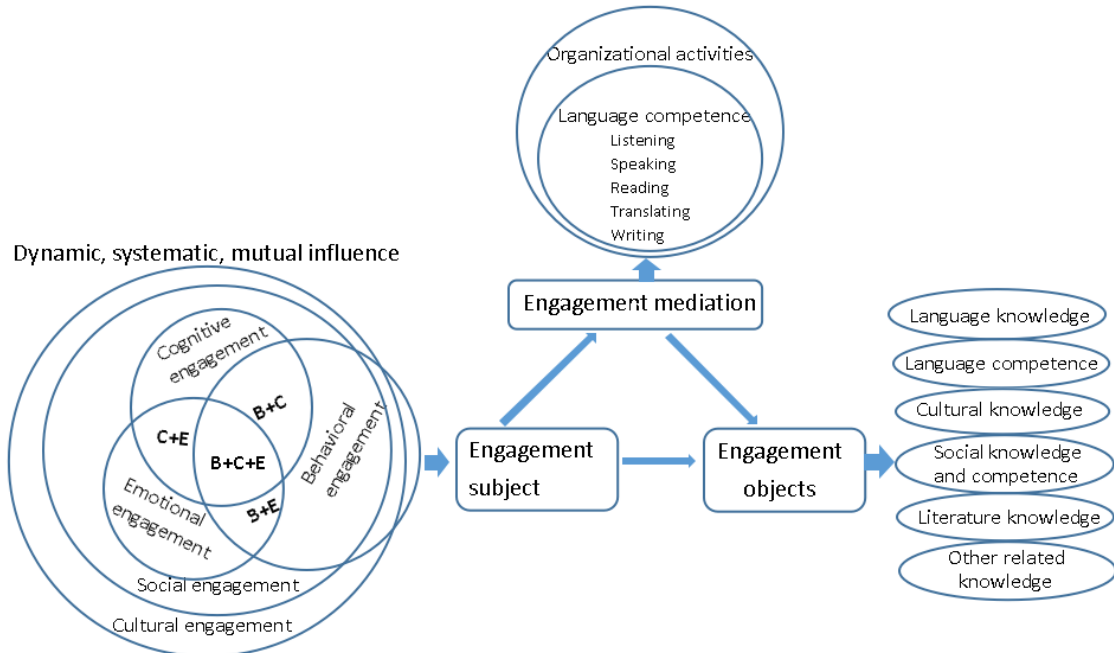
Based on the above research, this research holds that the student engagement of FLL refers to the degree and process of foreign language learners’ effort or involvement to understand, master and apply the foreign language, culture and other related knowledge in FLL. It is a multi-dimensional construct includes behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, cultural engagement and social engagement. Hence, understanding student engagement of FLL involves understanding how a great number of factors, the above dimensions interrelate and interact at different levels.

#### **4. Model construction of student engagement of FLL**

Previous studies on student engagement mainly focused on learners as learning subjects without giving much consideration to learning objects such as specific courses or learning contents. From the perspective of constructivism learning theory, in Piagets term, “construction” refers to the process of the occurrence of individual psychology from a relatively primary structure to a more complex structure, starting from the contact point between inner-self and external things and following the two complementary directions provided by external things and internal self(Gu, 1998, p.681). It includes several aspects: the occurrence of psychology is realized through the interaction between subject and object; the interaction between subject and object is the process of double construction between internal subject and external things, and so on. FLL involves not only vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, literature, language, pragmatic theory, translation theory, the content of the professional foreign language knowledge and so on, which belong to the language knowledge and culture knowledge level, but also cultivation of language skills as listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation. They are the objectives of FLL, some are also the mediator as well. From the perspective of the objects of FLL, or the object of student engagement, the student engagement in FLL includes engagement in foreign language, culture and related knowledge, as well as foreign language skills. As one of the goals of FLL, foreign language skills are also the intermediary activities. Any learning involves the learner, the learning object and the learning process, in which the process is the mediator. The learner is the subject of student engagement, while the learning object is the object of student



engagement. Listening, speaking, reading, writing, translating and other social interaction and cooperation are the mediator, that is, the process of learning. The essence of learning is a process in which subject constructs psychological structure internally through a series of mediation activities on the basis of the interaction between subject and object (Bi, 2010). In FLL, learners, as the subject, interact with foreign language, culture, other relevant knowledge and foreign language skills through behavior, cognition, emotion, culture and social interaction, forming their engagement on these specific contents(See Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1** The subject-mediator-object structure of SE in FLL and its constituent elements (by Wu Yanbo).

As is shown in Fig. 1, cognitive, emotional, social and cultural engagement all contribute on the learning process through behavior, or behavioral engagement. Both cognitive thinking and action are behavior. Without behavioral engagement, cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural engagement cannot work on learning. In other words, behavior is also the mediator of the other four dimensions. The engagement of FLL is dynamic, systematic and mutual interactional. Any change of one dimension will definitely affect the other dimensions. For instance, the change of emotional engagement will change the behavioral engagement to some extent, either the academic time or the engagement quality. The social engagement will influence at least one dimension like cognitive, or behavioral engagement, or all the dimensions. Similarly, the degree of cultural engagement can explain the change of other dimensions. The dynamic, systematic and mutual interactional student engagement of learners act on the objects of FLL through the engagement mediators. It has a two-way influence respectively on the objects and mediation.

## 5. Present situation and research perspectives of college student engagement of FLL, taking China as an example

Through random interviews with some college students and foreign language teachers, classroom observations and literature analysis, we have investigated the current situation of college students engagement in FLL. The results show that, on the whole, Chinese college students engage in FLL a lot, but not efficient, and the proportion of the different dimensions of student engagement is not coordinated. Many freshmen and sophomores spend most of their time on FLL, but there are still quite a few students who can't pass CET-4 and CET-6 (The national test in China during the schooling years of college students), and even for the students who have passed the test, the English level can even hardly meet the requirements of the syllabus of the language teaching in China(Shu, 2014).

In terms of student engagement of FLL, students engage more behaviorally, but comparatively, less in emotional, cognitive, cultural and social engagement. That is to say, although students engage in FLL behaviorally, especially on the degree of effort and perseverance, the motivation of behavioral engagement is external motivation, or more accurately, it is kind of passive learning in order to pass certain exams or obtain the corresponding certificate. The learning is a mechanical work through repeated exercises on the workbook to master the skills of passing the exams, which makes the students lack of interest and internal driving force for learning, not to mention the social and cultural engagement. Actually, according to Newmann(1989) standardized tests and the practice exercises used to prepare for students can be expected to undermine the engagement of many students. Once the examination is passed or a certificate is obtained, the students motivation disappears and the learning behavior is suspended. Based on such motivation of learning, its cognitive engagement is relatively insufficient and unstable, and the emotional engagement even more insufficient. In addition, many students are used to doing exercises and reading materials alone, so they are not active in cooperative learning and active participation, and their social engagement is relatively deficient. A large number of studies have also shown that Chinese students have relatively insufficient knowledge of both Chinese and foreign cultures, especially the foreign language cultures, so their cultural engagement in FLL is insufficient.

Foreign language knowledge, cultures, skills and the related knowledge are important content of FLL, which are the main objects of student engagement. However, the engagement of college students on the objects are not coordinated. The engagement on foreign language knowledge accounts for the largest proportion, while the engagement on culture and other related knowledge accounts for the minimum or even no special engagement, and the engagement between the two are on language skills. The study found that 70% of college students learn English by reciting words and texts and practicing CET-4 and CET-6 exam papers in China(Wang, 2002). On the whole, FLL methods of college students have not changed greatly. Specifically, in terms of language knowledge learning, college students engage more in vocabulary and grammar knowledge, especially in vocabulary learning, and pay little attention to pragmatics and other knowledge. In terms of language skills, students invest more in reading and listening training, especially reading training(Guo & Liu, 2016). However, most of the students engagement on foreign language reading is oriented towards the training of reading skills, and the ultimate goal is to pass all kinds of exams required. Therefore, their reading materials are mainly based on reading test questions. In writing, translation and oral learning, most of the students are passive. More than half of the students will not make great engagement in these aspects if not forced by the requirements of the teacher or the needs of examination, so their written and oral output is deficient. Chinese scholar Guo Jidong conducted an empirical study on the relationship between communicative difficulties and communicative strategies of Chinese college students and found that the three biggest communicative difficulties encountered by Chinese college students are the lack of target language culture, relevant professional knowledge and communicative skills(Guo, 2012). Guo Jidong's findings largely reflect the lack of engagement in foreign language cultural knowledge, relevant professional knowledge and strategies among Chinese college students.

Though some culture-related courses are offered by some colleges and universities in recent years in China to improve students foreign language cultural knowledge structure and their cross-cultural communication consciousness and the ability to some extent, the knowledge students mastered is fragmented due to reasons such as teaching hours, class size, and learning purpose. In addition, many students failed to consolidate and expand their learning in time, and their foreign language knowledge and accomplishment did not show significant changes(Guo & Liu, 2016).

The total investment and engagement of Chinese college students in foreign language teaching and learning is large, but the problem of "time-consuming but inefficient" which is criticized by academic circles for years has not been well solved. One of the reasons is the inefficient and unbalanced engagement in FLL. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct extensive and in-depth research on foreign FLL and its influencing factors from different perspectives.

Firstly, given that the relevant research results are mainly focused on the general and universal learning of student engagement, there are few studies on specific majors or courses, especially FLL student engagement. Relevant research results are not systematic, and some need further demonstration. Therefore, this paper makes a comprehensive and in-depth analysis on student engagement of FLL and its connotation based on the current literature.

Secondly, most of the current measures of student engagement use scales prepared by educational psychology experts in the United States and other western countries. Though with high validity and reliability after testing and of important reference value, the scales are not designed for specific courses such as FLL. Due to the particularities elaborated in this paper, it is of significance to design and compile a scale specially for measuring student engagement of FLL.

Thirdly, student engagement is an integrate concept, a unity of various elements which interact and influence each other. Some perspectives on student engagement prospects are further suggested according to different disciplines, different learners, different learning stages, even different learning patterns. It is more convincing to describe and analyze the student engagement by combining various factors together than as a single composition. Relevant researches can take different learning objectives, learning contents, learning stages, major types and school types as parameters to conduct an overall analysis of various dimensions, subjects, mediators and objects of student engagement in FLL.

## 6. Conclusion

Student engagement in FLL refers to the process and the degree of effort or commitment of foreign language learners in FLL, which is a multidimensional construct. It can be divided into behavioral, cognitive, emotional, cultural and social engagement from the perspective of learning subject. The objects of student engagement of FLL consist of knowledge of language, culture and the foreign language skills. The mediating activity of student engagement is to make the subject of student engagement act on the objects through listening, speaking, reading, writing, translating and other social interaction activities. The research on student engagement of FLL has both theoretical value and practical significance. In terms of theoretical value, the study of different dimensions of student engagement in specific courses plays a positive role in enriching the study of student engagement in various disciplines and promoting the development of student engagement theory. A comprehensive description and analysis of the elements and manifestations of student engagement of FLL and the mechanism of the sub-dimensions' interaction can not only reveal the nature of student engagement of FLL, but also improve the understanding of the whole process of FLL. Exploring the theoretical basis of student engagement of FLL and constructing a comprehensive model of student engagement of FLL have certain value for broadening the research perspective of FLL and enriching the research of foreign language teaching and learning theory as well.

## 7. Co-Author Contributions

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Datin Dr. Nazeera Ahmed Bazari and Dr. Roslaili Anuar all contributed to the research's design, analysis and writing. The published version of the manuscript was read and approved by all authors.

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