

The Effect of Achievement Goal Orientation on the Online English Learning Engagement of College Students

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Abstract

The key to effective language learning is to improve students' learning engagement. This paper explored the impact of students' achievement goal orientation on online English learning engagement in an online teaching environment through a questionnaire survey of 282 college students. The results showed that college students' online English learning engagement was generally at an above-average level, but their behavioral engagement needed to be improved; achievement goal orientation had a significant impact on online English learning engagement. Among them, mastery-approach goals and performance-approach goals could directly and positively predict college students' online English learning engagement, while mastery-avoidance goals and performance-avoidance goals could directly and negatively predict college students' online English learning engagement. By analyzing the relationship between achievement goal orientation and online English learning engagement, it could not only broaden the theoretical research results on online learning engagement, but also provide a reference for improving the effectiveness of online teaching.

Keywords

College English, Achievement Goal Orientation, Learning Engagement, Online Learning

1. Introduction

The *Guidelines for College English Teaching (2020)* pointed out that "college English teachers should actively promote the comprehensive and in-depth integration of modern information technology into the teaching and learning process, innovate and practice online teaching models, actively adapt to the learning charac-

teristics and learning methods of college students in the new era, and highlight the autonomy, mobility, timeliness, and extensibility of modern learning methods". The increase in online learning will help promote the reorganization and updating of college English teaching content and methods, but students are prone to "six non-engagement behaviors such as 'taking advantage of loopholes', distraction, switching learning goals, deviating from task goals, carelessness, and laziness and cheating" when participating in online learning activities (Gong, Li, & Gong, 2018). How to improve the effect of online learning and improve the quality of online learning has become an important topic in the field of online learning research.

Tseng et al. (2020) pointed out that the key to the effectiveness of online language learning is to improve students' learning engagement. The concept of learning engagement originated from pedagogy and has rich and complex connotations. The literature shows that online language learning engagement has its own particularities. Dymont et al. (2020) pointed out that online language learning engagement is often implicit, and many seemingly busy learning behaviors lack substantial learning engagement. Liu et al. (2016) pointed out that online language learning engagement is dynamic and goes through the stages of "high engagement-low engagement-reengagement". In addition to being affected by objective factors such as technology use and teacher support, online learning engagement is significantly affected by learners' learning motivation and other learning factors, such as interest, self-efficacy, and self-regulation ability (e.g. Liu et al., 2017; Bates & Khasawneh, 2007; Kanuka, 2005). Many other researchers believe that motivation is an integral part of learning engagement (e.g. Cho & Castaneda, 2019; Yang & Dai, 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). As one of the important theories of achievement motivation, achievement goal orientation is a planned cognitive process with cognitive, emotional and behavioral characteristics (Wang et al., 2001a). The theory believes that different achievement goals will produce different behavioral and emotional processes, which in turn affect learners' learning outcomes. It can be seen that achievement goals have an important impact on the level of online learning engagement.

2. Theoretical Background

Learning engagement refers to students' behavioral integration, cognitive willingness and emotional response to the environment during the learning process. It has the complex characteristics of a meta-construct and is an important potential variable for forming classroom motivation and optimizing teaching effects in an overall way (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). The academic community has the highest recognition of the three-part typology of the dimensions of learning engagement, which regards behavior, emotion and cognition as the key dimensions of learning engagement (Lam et al., 2013), emphasizing that students form positive behaviors and attitudes through adaptation to the environment, complete knowledge construction and promote their own development. The three dimensions of learning

engagement jointly reflect students' behavioral, emotional and cognitive states in the learning process, and reflect the operation of students' mental vitality (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). The cognitive dimension refers to the cognitive resources and willingness invested in understanding subject knowledge and mastering skills; behavioral engagement refers to explicit participation and learning behavior; emotional engagement refers to emotions towards teachers, peers, and institutions. In recent years, in view of the recognition of learners' agency status (e.g. Bandura, 2006; Xu & Long, 2020) and the in-depth research on learning engagement, researchers have proposed that agency engagement be the fourth dimension of learner engagement. Agency engagement refers to students' constructive contribution to the teaching process they receive, which is a supplement and improvement to learning behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement and emotional engagement (Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) divided achievement goal orientation into mastery goal orientation, performance approach goal and performance avoidance goal based on the traditional dichotomy. Among them, mastery goal orientation aims at learning and mastering, focusing on the mastery and understanding of learning tasks and the development of personal abilities; performance approach goal focuses on performing better than others, pointing to a positive judgment of ability acquisition; and performance avoidance goal focuses on not being worse than others, pointing to a one-sided negative judgment of ability. Elliot and McGregor (2001) proposed a 2×2 achievement goal framework based on the three-part method, namely mastery approach goal, performance approach goal, mastery avoidance goal and performance avoidance goal. Since the achievement goal orientation theory has attracted widespread attention from scholars, related research on its impact on learning engagement has also achieved certain results. Foreign scholars have conducted multi-dimensional research on the impact of achievement goal orientation on learning engagement and found that students' mastery goal orientation significantly predicts cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement, and performance approach goal has a significant correlation with cognitive and emotional engagement. (e.g. McWhaw & Abrami, 2001; Ferrell, 2012; Tas, 2016). In recent years, Chinese scholars have also begun to pay attention to the impact of achievement goal orientation on learning engagement. For example, Huang et al. (2017) found that college students' mastery goal orientation and performance approach goal orientation were significantly positively correlated with learning engagement, while performance avoidance goal orientation was significantly negatively correlated with learning engagement. Huang et al. (2019) also found that mastery goal orientation and performance approach goal orientation can directly and positively predict online learning engagement and its three components (cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement); but performance avoidance goals can only directly and negatively predict online learning cognitive engagement, and the relationship between behavioral engagement and emotional engagement is not significant.

Previous studies have shown that achievement goal orientation can effectively predict students' learning engagement level in learning-related activities. Achievement goal orientation is a planned cognitive process with cognitive, emotional and behavioral characteristics. As an individual's stable internal trait, it reflects the individual's perception of the purpose or meaning of engaging in achievement activities (Wang et al., 2001b). Therefore, students with different goal orientation traits have different behaviors in the learning process, and the time and energy invested in learning activities are also different, and gradually form a relatively stable behavioral response pattern (Mega, Ronconi, & Beni, 2014). However, the learning engagement that existing studies focus on mostly occurs in offline environments, and the research on college students' online English learning engagement is obviously lagging and insufficient. In view of this, this study combines the characteristics of the online learning environment and proposes research hypotheses. Research Hypothesis 1): Both mastery approach goals and performance approach goals can directly and positively predict college students' online English learning engagement; Research Hypothesis 2): Mastery avoidance goals and performance avoidance goals can directly and negatively predict college students' online English learning engagement.

3. Research Method

3.1. Subjects

The subjects of this study are sophomores from three colleges in a certain province who are not majoring in English. These students all took the extension course "General Academic English".

The participants in the survey completed the designated English learning tasks on online learning platforms (such as digital learning platforms that match the textbooks; online training platforms for English writing and oral skills such as Pigai.com or FiF), maintained a balance between online and offline learning time, and frequently interacted with teachers and classmates through social media platforms (such as WeChat, QQ, etc.). Data were obtained by distributing questionnaires to students in class by relevant teachers. A total of 302 questionnaires were distributed, and 282 valid questionnaires were collected. Among the 282 respondents, there were 123 males and 159 females, with majors including preschool education, financial accounting, software engineering, electrical engineering, business administration, international trade, and artificial intelligence.

3.2. Research Tools

The achievement goal orientation scale compiled by Elliot and McGregor (2001) was used. The scale has 12 items, divided into four dimensions: mastery approach goals, performance approach goals, mastery avoidance goals, and performance avoidance goals. The Cronbach's α of the original scale was 0.87, 0.92, 0.89, and 0.83, respectively. The confirmatory factor analysis model of this study had a good overall fit ($\chi^2/df = 3.26 (<5)$, NFI = 0.85, TLI = 0.89, CFI = 0.85, RMSEA = 0.07

(<0.08)), indicating that the questionnaire has good structural validity. In addition, the Cronbach's α of the four dimensions of mastery-approach goals, performance-approach goals, mastery-avoidance goals, and performance-avoidance goals were 0.79, 0.88, 0.85, and 0.92, respectively, all greater than 0.7, indicating that the scale has good reliability.

This study combined the online learning environment and the characteristics of the research subjects and selected the online learning engagement scale compiled by Sun and Rueda (2012). The scale has 15 items, including three dimensions: cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and behavioral engagement. The Cronbach's α of the original scale was 0.88, 0.751, and 0.629, respectively. The confirmatory factor analysis model of this study had a good overall fit ($\chi^2/df = 3.47$ (<5), NFI = 0.83, TLI = 0.86, CFI = 0.88, RMSEA = 0.06 (<0.08)), indicating that the questionnaire has good structural validity. In addition, the Cronbach's α of the three dimensions of cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and behavioral engagement were 0.82, 0.78, and 0.83, respectively, all greater than 0.7, indicating that the scale has good reliability.

4. Results and Discussion

This study conducted descriptive statistics and correlation analysis on achievement goal orientation and online English learning engagement. The results showed that achievement approach orientation and mastery approach orientation had higher scores ($M = 3.42, 3.37$), while achievement avoidance orientation and mastery avoidance orientation had lower scores ($M = 2.87, 2.92$). At the same time, the results also showed that achievement approach orientation and mastery approach orientation were positively correlated with cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement, and emotional engagement, respectively. However, achievement avoidance orientation and mastery avoidance orientation were significantly negatively correlated with cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and behavioral engagement. See Table 1 for details.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of achievement goal orientation and online English learning engagement.

Dimensions	Performance Approach	Performance Avoidance	Mastery Approach	Mastery Avoidance	Cognitive Engagement	Emotional Engagement	Behavioral Engagement
Performance Approach	1						
Performance Avoidance	-0.61***	1					
Mastery Approach	0.70***	-0.38***	1				
Mastery Avoidance	-0.59***	0.63***	-0.62***	1			
Cognitive Engagement	0.55***	-0.28***	0.77***	-0.53***	1		

Continued

Emotional Engagement	0.54***	−0.24***	0.76***	−0.50***	0.72***	1	
Behavioral Engagement	0.60***	−0.31***	0.81***	−0.51***	0.75***	0.85***	1
M	3.42	2.87	3.37	2.92	3.59	3.58	3.42
SD	0.98	1.12	0.89	1.25	0.93	0.87	0.97

Note: N = 282. ***Significant correlation at 0.001 level (two-sided).

4.1. The Degree of College Students’ Achievement Goal Orientation and Online English Learning Engagement Is at a Medium Level

The descriptive analysis results show that the average scores of achievement approach orientation and mastery approach orientation are high, while the average scores of achievement avoidance orientation and mastery avoidance orientation are low and the standard deviation is large. This reflects that in the process of participating in online learning activities, most college students hope to improve their knowledge and skills through online learning, develop their personal abilities, and gain positive evaluations from others. In terms of online learning engagement, college students’ online learning engagement is at a medium level overall, but their behavioral engagement needs to be improved. This shows that college students still have relatively negative and passive behaviors in participating in online discussions and answering questions, which is different from the research conclusion of Liu et al. (2017) that online learners’ behavioral engagement is higher than cognitive engagement and emotional engagement. The reason for this result may be that online courses have a wide coverage and a long duration under the epidemic background, and some learners are prone to learning behavior deviations due to their lack of autonomous learning ability (Li & Zhang, 2020). Therefore, under the epidemic background, teachers should optimize online teaching design, innovate course content design according to learners’ learning needs, and provide challenging teaching activities. For example, create language practice tasks based on real situations around relevant topics (such as video production, poster design, etc.).

4.2. The Correlation between Achievement Goal Orientation and Online English Learning Engagement is Significant

This study shows that mastery approach goals, performance approach goals, mastery avoidance goals and performance avoidance goals can directly affect college students’ online English learning engagement. Among them, mastery approach goals and performance approach goals have a positive impact on online learning engagement, while mastery avoidance orientation and performance avoidance goals have a negative impact on online learning engagement. This is consistent with previous research results (McWhaw & Abrami, 2001; Ferrell, 2012; Tas, 2016; Huang et al., 2017, 2019). The above research results further prove that achievement

goal orientation can effectively predict the level of learning engagement shown by students in learning activities. Online learners with mastery approach goals will take positive measures to self-regulate in order to improve their abilities during the learning process, thus showing a higher level of learning engagement; learners with performance approach goals aim to pursue excellent academic performance and expect to be recognized by others. Therefore, they also show more active efforts in online learning activities and have a higher degree of learning engagement. According to the achievement goal theory proposed by Elliott and Dweck (1988), those who hold the ability growth view and mastery goal orientation believe that ability is controllable and unstable, and that their ability can be changed and continuously increased through hard work. For this reason, they will regard the efforts made in learning-related activities and tasks as a way or means to increase their own ability, and thus will be more active and hardworking in the corresponding learning activities, so their learning investment level is high. On the other hand, those who hold the ability entity view and performance goal orientation believe that ability is stable and uncontrollable, but there are differences between those who have performance approach goal orientation and those who have performance avoidance goal orientation, which is mainly reflected in the pursuit of goals, so the performance of the two in learning activities is also different. The former, in order to gain recognition of their abilities from others, often pursue excellent academic performance in their learning activities, and thus study actively and hard, and their learning input level is also high; while the latter, in order to avoid others' unfavorable evaluation of their abilities, are often not so proactive in their learning activities, and even try to avoid challenging tasks as much as possible, so their learning input level is relatively low.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzes the relationship between achievement goal orientation and online learning engagement, broadens the scope of online learning engagement research in theory, and enriches the theoretical results of online learning engagement research. At the same time, it also provides a reference for improving learners' online learning effects and enhancing learners' online learning engagement level. Learners with different achievement goal orientations have different achievement goals to achieve during online learning, which leads to differences in their learning status, learning needs, and learning process. Given that mastery approach goals and performance approach goals can directly and positively predict college students' learning engagement, teachers should continuously stimulate students' learning potential through scientific and reasonable positive evaluation and goal setting, and minimize students' learning anxiety and negative reactions. For students in the mastery avoidance and performance avoidance target groups, teachers should promptly identify and focus on their psychological construction to prevent various psychological problems and bad learning behaviors that may arise from their high anxiety. In addition, in order to improve the quality of learners' online learning, schools and teachers should optimize course resources and improve

the construction of teaching platforms to meet learners' learning needs, monitor learners' learning process in real time, and keep learners in a positive learning state.

This study still has some shortcomings. On the one hand, this study only selected college students who participated in the designated online course platform as the research subjects, the research scope is small, and the research results may be biased. In future research, it is hoped that the research sample can be expanded to further analyze the causal relationship and interaction mechanism between the variables. On the other hand, this study mainly uses the questionnaire survey method to obtain relevant data. In the future, it is hoped that the results will be more scientific and rigorous through technical methods. With the high degree of mediatization of English learning, future research can build a more comprehensive learning engagement influencing mechanism model. By combining brain science, artificial intelligence and other technologies, more accurate measurement and research of learning engagement can be achieved.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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