Identifying learner engagement in an early foreign language classroom.

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Learner engagement is a multifaceted construct relating to human behaviour, cognition and affect (Christenson et al., 2012; Finn and Zimmer, 2012). Broadly defined as the extent and manner of involvement manifested by learners in relation to academic tasks, engagement captures such aspects of learner activity as concentration, commitment, interest in and enthusiasm for classroom tasks, as well as learner response to classroom interaction (Fredericks et al., 2004; Janosz, 2012; Schernoff, 2013). In this paper we adopt an on-task, local, short-term, classroom perspective on learner engagement which focuses on the individual “in the moment” experience of the learner (Lawson and Masyn, 2014: 2) that can be explored in the context of a specific lesson/task serving specific pedagogic goals (Anderman and Patrick, 2012). The analysis is based on 45 video recordings of English lessons conducted by trainee teachers in a range of local primary schools. The data include learner verbal and non-verbal contributions to classroom interaction. The goal is to identify what we have labelled 'periods of heightened engagement' (PHEs), that is, those stretches of lesson time where learner engagement is at its highest. Here, the focus is on learners’ behavioural engagement, that is, the external, observable, action-oriented performance and the degree and consistency of actual participation in specific activities. For each of the identified PHEs, a description of learner behaviour is provided along with our interpretation of what kind of engagement it is indicative of. In total, 69 PHEs are identified in our data, with 24 lessons (53%) showing no evidence of PHEs at all, and 21 lessons (47%) featuring multiple instances of heightened engagement. We seek to isolate a common core of potential areas for observing engagement along with a set of actual verbal and non-verbal indicators of engaged classroom behaviour.

Keywords: primary classroom, learner engagement, formal instruction.