Researching language engagement; current trends and future directions

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses how learner engagement in language learning settings has been conceived of and investigated in the past decade. Whilst a cognitive focus used to predominate in research on language learners’ engagement, the importance of affective (and social) factors is increasingly recognized. The paper interrogates ‘engagement’ in the literature in order to better understand its role in Language Awareness and language learning. It situates Engagement With Language (Svalberg, 2009) in relation to other similar notions, including contextual engagement, task engagement and engagement with corrective feedback. An insufficiently understood, yet highly influential factor in engagement research is found to be perceived meaningfulness. What constitutes meaningfulness will partly depend on the age (developmental stage) of the learner. Research findings reviewed indicate that such disparate factors as purposefulness, utility, and enjoyment can confer meaningfulness on tasks or activities, and that meaningfulness can be linguistic, social, or individual in nature. Suggestions are made for further research on conscious learner engagement in instructed language learning settings.

Keywords

Language awareness; engagement with language; affect; meaningfulness; purposefulness; utility; enjoyment.

Introduction

For decades most second language acquisition research focused on the cognitive aspects of language learning, largely to the exclusion of other dimensions (Swain, 2013). In recent scholarship there is, however, a strong tendency to see language learning as emerging from a combination of cognitive, affective and social factors, with a recent emphasis on the affective (e.g. Ellis, 2010; Han & Hyland, 2015; Mercer, 2011; Platt & Brooks, 2002; Sato, 2016; Swain, 2013).

Swain (2013) demonstrates this shift by re-analysing dialogic learner data, originally (in Swain & Lapkin, 1995) approached from a cognitive point of view. For the re-analysis, the author employs various sociocultural lenses (Swain & Deters, 2007), including that of
‘collaborative dialogue’ (Swain 2000), and finishes with a consideration of the emotions displayed in the same dialogue data. The exercise illustrates the value of approaching data from different angles, including the affective, to gain a more in-depth, holistic understanding of the learning process.

The same search for a more holistic approach was the impetus for the Engagement With Language model (EWL; Svalberg 2009) which brought together cognitive, affective and social aspects of the construction of conscious knowledge about language, that is Language Awareness (LA). There was, however, little in-depth discussion at that point of affective or social engagement, or their mutual interaction and relationship to cognitive engagement. In the eight years that have elapsed, the wider recognition of affective factors in language learning, plus an increased acceptance of the complexity of the learning process (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Larsen-Freeman, 1997, 2006) have re-shaped the research landscape. Later on in this paper, two examples of EWL through collaborative dialogue will be discussed.

The purpose of this paper is to interrogate ‘engagement’ in the literature in order to better understand its role in LA and language learning, and to situate the EWL construct in relation to other similar notions. To this end, the paper will endeavour to answer the following four questions: What do Educational and Applied Linguistics researchers mean by ‘engagement’? In language learning contexts, how does EWL relate to other types of engagement? How might affective and cognitive factors interact within an EWL complex dynamic system? And finally: What are the implications for LA research?

A brief description of EWL is first presented. A discussion of research on collaborative dialogue, the most studied form of EWL, follows. Other views of engagement from a range of Educational and Applied Linguistics perspectives are then briefly reviewed and a distinction between task engagement (Platt & Brooks, 2002) and EWL is introduced. To explore the relationship between affective and cognitive EWL, insights are drawn from two task design papers (Guarente & Morley, 2001; Ainley, Pratt & Hansen 2006), and work on learners’ mindsets. These are then applied to a review of engagement research in diverse settings such as online and face-to-face collaborative tasks in university language classes and in the language awareness raising of younger learners. The paper closes with some reflections on what has been learnt from this review and suggestions for future research directions.
Engagement With Language

The process through which Language Awareness (LA) is developed has been called Engagement With Language by Svalberg (2009), who defines it as follows:

- In the context of language learning and use Engagement With Language is a cognitive, and/or affective, and/or social process in which the learner is the agent and language is object (and sometimes vehicle).
- Cognitively, the engaged individual is alert, pays focused attention and constructs their own knowledge.
- Affectively, the engaged individual has a positive, purposeful, willing and autonomous disposition towards the object (language, the language and/or what it represents).
- Socially, the engaged individual is interactive and initiating.

(Adapted from Svalberg, 2009, p. 247; see also Svalberg, 2012)

The importance of implicit, unconscious language learning (Terrell, Gomez and Mariscal, 1980; Frantzen, 1995) is not disputed, but EWL is suggested as a model of, and means of inquiring into, the equally important conscious learning process (Sharwood Smith, 1981, 1993). EWL is thus concerned with how learners construct LA; conscious knowledge about L1, or a second/foreign language, or about language/s in general. The knowledge could relate to the formal properties of language (e.g. grammar, phonology), its pragmatic and social functions, or its literary or political use. In other words, EWL is a theoretical model of the construction of LA in or outside of formal education. People can engage with language in any setting where language is used. Examples of informal EWL are everyday word play, picking up useful phrases in surrounding languages, or noticing and appreciating dialectal or sociolectal variation. This paper will, however, restrict itself to EWL in the language classroom.

Svalberg (2009) argued that EWL is a cyclical process during which learners draw on their existing LA to construct new or enhanced LA, which they then draw on in renewed EWL and so on.
Its ecology includes numerous interacting factors. Tiredness, state of health, emotional state, and task design might affect cognitive EWL. Affective EWL could be influenced by task topic and by cognitive and social factors such as personality type, self-perception, group dynamics, and so on. Social EWL, finally, would be sensitive to affective factors stemming from friendships, power differences in the group, and shared or different values. Among external dimensions likely to have a bearing on EWL are history and culture. These interactions exemplify the complex dynamic nature (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2008; Larsen-Freeman, 2006) of the EWL process.

Cognitive, affective and social factors are thus interdependent and interacting. Affective factors may, for example, influence cognitive and social engagement. An extensively studied affective factor is motivation. Its counterpart at the micro-level is ‘willingness’ (affective EWL). Motivation towards learning the language at the macro-level is likely to affect how or whether the learner invests in peer interaction (social EWL) or pay focused attention to tasks (cognitive EWL). Similarly, social factors can have a bearing on affective and cognitive engagement. Research by Baralt, Gurzynski-Weiss & Kim (2016) indicate that learners who have established a social relationship with their peers are more likely to engage with and deploy attentional resources to a language task than those who have not (see further discussion below). Hence, understanding EWL involves understanding how a great number of factors interrelate and interact at different levels.

An example of a learner/student teacher engaging affectively with the language, but showing only minimal social EWL, was ‘Mia’ in a study by Svalberg and Askham (2015). It was
clear from Mia’s diary entries that she had engaged willingly in language analysis tasks, and found listening to her peers a valuable way of checking her own understanding. This, however, resulted in only minimal social EWL; she took few turns in the group work, and they tended to be brief. One can hypothesize the opposite case, in other words a student who engages socially in a language task with their peers and enjoying this aspect, but who fails to engage affectively with the language, perhaps due to a negative foreign-language self-concept (Mercer, 2011; for example ‘I am no good at languages’).

**Other uses of the term ‘engagement’**

Researchers approach engagement from different angles and with varying degrees of precision. Some are clearly concerned with learner engagement but do not use the term (e.g. Broner & Tarone, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Others such as Skinner, Kinderman & Furrer (2009), and Ellis (2010) use ‘engagement’ with specific, defined meanings which nevertheless differ in important respects.

Drawing on student and teacher interviews and classroom observations, Skinner et al. (2009) investigate general school engagement, operationalized as the behavioural and emotional engagement and disaffection of 1,018 school pupils in the UK. The authors state that:

> at its most general, engagement refers to the quality of a student’s connection or involvement with the endeavour of schooling and hence with the people, activities, goals, values and place that compose it (p.494).

Here engagement is restated as ‘connection and involvement’ with the various actors and elements that make up schooling. The authors clarify that engagement includes both behavioural and emotional participation. The affective aspect is underscored by the contrast made between engagement and disaffection, but “affective engagement” only refers to “energized emotional states, such as enthusiasm, interest, and enjoyment” (p.495), presumably because only ‘energized’ states are easily observable, and only positive affect is seen as desirable.

In second language learning, Ellis (2010) uses the term engagement to describe learner responses to corrective feedback (CF). In that context, engagement is “how learners respond to the feedback they receive” (p.342). A “componential framework” intended to inform future research on CF (p.337) is presented. It bears similarities to the EWL model in that, in addition
to cognitive engagement, it acknowledges behavioural and affective dimensions in the form of uptake/revision of text, and learner attitudes to CF. This is, however, not elaborated on in any depth. The author proposes further research on learners’ engagement with written and oral CF, and on the learning effects of such engagement (see for example Han & Hyland, 2015).

Two examples of engagement constructs have been examined above, to provide at least a partial answer to the first question (What do Educational and Applied Linguistics researchers mean by ‘engagement’?) Engagement with CF can be seen as a sub-type of EWL. A study by Sato (2016), which includes responses to CF as one component of engagement, will be discussed below (see section on Mindset). School engagement, on the other hand, seems to be made up mostly of factors external to EWL but likely to interact with it.

**Collaborative dialogue**

Collaborative dialogue has long been studied in the form of Language Related Episodes (LREs). An LRE is “any part of a dialogue where the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others” (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, p.326). Swain & Lapkin (1998) consider LREs “both a means of communication and a cognitive tool” (p.333). The authors do not explicitly refer to EWL, but that is clearly what LREs are an expression of. Although social and affective dimensions of the collaboration are acknowledged, their study is an example of the - until more recently - cognitive orientation of most LRE research mentioned above (Swain, 2013, discussed above).

To capture the relative quality of engagement, Fortune & Thorp (2001) classify collaborative LREs not only by length but by weight, defined as “the extent to which learners appear to be involved in making linguistic decisions in the process of text construction” (p.153). In ‘weighty’ episodes, the learners demonstrate depth of engagement by displaying previous knowledge and explaining their choices. In other studies, collaborative dialogue is only one element of a more holistic approach to EWL (e.g. Ahn, 2016; Baralt et al., 2016; Kearney & Ahn, 2014; Kearney & Barbour, 2015; Svalberg, 2015). Storch (2004), approaching dyadic collaborative dialogue from an activity theory perspective, finds that the learners’ attitudes and beliefs, and individual goals, have an important bearing on their interaction.

Snyder Ohta (2001) takes a micro-genetic approach to collaborative dialogue, seeing verbalizations as only one aspect of learner engagement (see also Platt & Brooks (2002)
discussed below). Snyder Ohta’s transcripts are extremely detailed, include pausing, intonation, four degrees of volume, speed of delivery, and hesitations. In addition to peer repair, peer recast, and peer co-construction, this more in-depth analysis is able to identify subtle forms of EWL such as private speech, vicarious response, and attentive listening. For example, as proof of “the power of engagement” (p.31) to facilitate language learning, the author cites data showing that the fruits of “linguistic affordances acted on by the learner in private speech are incorporated into the learner’s developing linguistic system” (p.31). Engagement at group level may generate affordances from which private speech and other types of individual engagement emanate. Forms of EWL other than easily observable interaction may thus contribute to restructuring of knowledge.

Task-engagement and language-engagement

Not everything that goes on in a collaborative classroom setting is necessarily EWL. The distinction between language-related and task-related engagement made by Platt & Brooks (2002) seems useful in this regard. Language engagement is explained as learners repeating or responding to questions about linguistic data. This narrow definition does not cover many other forms of EWL but, leaving that aside, Platt & Brooks’ concern is instead with task engagement which they define as:

when learners display through either private or social speech their own structuring of the task, say, to establish goals as they feel necessary to move from mere compliance with the task itself to actual engagement with it (p.373).

Task engagement can be identified by verbal clues (increased fluency, more frequent use of target language, reduced amounts of procedural talk), or paralinguistically (straighter posture, stronger voice quality) or manifest as fewer non-functional behaviours (such as pencil tapping, head scratching). Hence Platt & Brooks’ interaction transcripts are detailed, including for example notes on body language. The authors stress the complexity of the language development process, which includes “developmental processes of cognition and affect” (p.394), and caution against selecting very short extracts of learner interaction for analysis. Instead they trace learners’ development through longer stretches of interaction.
Below is a brief extract with learners of Swahili (p.382), which Platt & Brooks analyse with reference to an earlier, longer extract. The participants are three students, and translations from Swahili are in italics.

**Excerpt 3: Beginning of Task Engagement**

102 C can’t remember the phrase for “do you have”
103 T um, do you have (looks down)
104 E una *(do) you have* (C nods)
105 T una (looks at C)
106 E una
107 T unato – (looks at C)
108 unatoka *(do) you come from* (smiling, head in hand)
109 C uh
110 T unatoka (shifts weight forward, opens out with both arms, smiles)
111 yeah unatoka I think (looks up, smiles, then looks down at map)
112 E un-
113 C unatoka Tanganyika, ziwa Tananganyika? *(do) you come from Tanganyiks?*
   (pointing pencil at T)

There is clearly some EWL going on here. The learners are paying focused attention to language and reflecting on it collaboratively, though in this short extract treating it as lexis without attention to structure. Platt & Brooks, however, analyse the extract in terms of task engagement. The focus is Teresa (T) who has previously displayed a relatively disengaged body language, seemingly unsure of how to tackle the task. In line 110 her body language changes from elbow on back of the chair to leaning forward and signalling her engagement with open arms and a smile. In the authors’ interpretation, drawing on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1986), Teresa has undergone a ‘transformation’ (Bakhtin, 1981, cited p.370) displayed as a change from disengaged to engaged with the task.

Platt & Brooks’ engagement construct appears to include cognitive, affective and behavioural/social elements. They refer, for example, to the “great affective force” of a learner’s utterance (p.390). In the analysis of a particular task engagement episode it is considered that “the higher mental processes have become activated, particularly those of volition (effort) and selective attention” (p.386). This, it is argued, may not lead directly to construction of new knowledge (language development) but can create affordances for it to happen. Hence, task-engagement can be “a portal to the ZPD” (p.391). It can help learners to rehearse and perfect strategies for carrying out the task, thereby freeing up attention for the linguistic focus of the task.
In the extract above, task engagement and EWL occur in parallel. That is not always the case; task engagement can occur on its own, for example at the beginning of a task as the learners are getting organized, interpreting the instructions, setting goals and distributing roles. Nevertheless, the question is how EWL relates to task engagement. Figure 2 below attempts to capture this and thus answer the second question (*In language learning contexts, how does EWL relate to other types of engagement?*).

In the figure, the proportions of the areas relative to each other are not significant and will vary depending on, for example, task requirements and group dynamics. The three types of engagement are interdependent and interacting.

Figure 2. The place of EWL* in relation to other types of engagement, and its mediation.

In an education setting, engagement with schooling (Skinner et al. 2009) discussed above, is an important example of ‘contextual engagement’. LREs and Engagement with CF are specific types of EWL but other forms will be discussed below. The main mediators for both task engagement and EWL are first of all language but also the para-linguistic features of the face-to-face encounter, as listed on the right in the figure.

Though there are no simple causal links between the different types of engagement, it appears reasonable to assume that they would interact. Hence a general state of disaffection
at school could contribute to reluctance in a foreign language class to engage either with the
tasks or the language. The reverse is also possible; successful fostering of EWL could
contribute positively to overall school engagement. Future research might explore such
interconnections.

The dotted line around EWL indicates that it cannot always be clearly and unambiguously
distinguished from task engagement. The two sometimes bleed into each other. The following
collaborative dialogue extract is provided as an example. It relates to a group task where the
objective is to identify the adjectives and adjective phrases in a text. The task, but not this
specific dialogue, is discussed in more depth in Svalberg (2015). The students have prepared
by underlining the adjectives at home. In the extract, they are half way through the task. The
names are pseudonyms and ‘S’ indicates an unidentified student.

| Isabelle  | Ok – where are we?                        |
| Megan     | Where are we now?                         |
| Isabelle  | Top end                                   |
| Megan     | Top end                                   |
| S         | Top                                       |
| Isabelle  | Smoother - rounder - stronger             |
| Abigail   | Smoother - rounder and stronger           |
| Isabelle  | Yeah                                      |
| Hanna     | Head – smoother – rounder - stronger      |
| Megan     | Dark                                      |
| Isabelle  | Dark                                      |
| S         | Dark                                      |
| Isabelle  | Smaller                                   |
| S         | A bit                                     |
| Megan     | A bit smaller                             |
| Isabelle  | A bit smaller                             |
| S         | Yeah                                      |
| Emily     | Long – dark                               |
| Megan     | Long – dark – yeah                        |
| Emily     | Pink – white                              |
| Megan     | Pink – white – yeah                       |

(Pause for reading/thinking)

‘Where are we?’ at the beginning of the episode, can be classified as task engagement. What
follows is clearly about the language so can be seen as EWL. At the same time, however, the
learners’ engagement is minimal (the pace is quick and uniform) and the main purpose of the
dialogue appears to be checking answers about which they are (rightly or wrongly) confident.
Hence the whole episode seems to be part of their ‘structuring of the task’ (task engagement) as they hurry through a section that does not, in their view, require more intense engagement. Both before and after this episode (not shown here), there are clear instances of more robust EWL.

The list on the right side of Figure 2 names ways in which engagement might be expressed. The example above from Platt & Brook’s (2002) micro-genetic study showed that paralinguistic features of interaction can be as important as language use. In studies on young learners, including a couple to be discussed below (Kearney & Ahn, 2014; Kearney & Barbour, 2015), kinetic involvement, for example jumping up in excitement, moving about while talking, might be a more important and more frequent sign of EWL than languaging.

Language mediates task-related, collaborative dialogue/social speech but also learner’s individual engagement, for example in the form of vicarious response (Snyder Ohta, 2001) where a learner answers, perhaps quietly to themselves, a question put to one of their peers. In some studies, dialogue is triangulated with inner speech. Swain & Lapkin (1995) used a think-aloud format to capture the students’ inner speech during the process of modifying written output. Svalberg (2015) relied partly on dialogue but, in an attempt to tap into inner speech, also on participants’ diary entries plus stimulated reconstruction interviews.

Engagement can also take the form of co-construction, where one learner helps another who is having difficulty completing an utterance, but without completing it for them, or projection, where a learner starts to speak and another learner anticipates and completes the rest of the utterance (Snyder Ohta, 2001).

The list of indicators is not exhaustive but seems potentially useful in helping identify EWL and hence the extent and quality of the conscious aspects of the learning process.

Engagement and authenticity in task design
To begin an exploration of the third question, how affective and cognitive factors might interact within an EWL complex dynamic system, this section looks briefly at the effect of task design on engagement. Two papers will be discussed. The first is concerned with task-design for mathematics education (Ainley, Pratt & Hansen 2006) and reflects on the difficulty of making tasks ‘authentic’, while the second explores the notion of authenticity in EFL tasks (Guarianeto & Morley, 2001).
The most obvious differences between tasks in mathematics and language learning is that the latter may focus entirely on achieving a communicative purpose. The two subjects are, however, rather similar when learners are guided to discover the properties of either mathematics or language as systems.

The focus of Ainley et al.’s (2006) study is learners’ engagement with the subject matter (mathematics). Though engagement is not defined, they are concerned with cognitive and behavioural manifestations, and from this emerges the importance of affective factors.

The problem they address is that “attempts to provide ‘authenticity’ through the contextualization of mathematical tasks in out-of-school settings ... will not ensure engagement with the task or, more importantly, with mathematical ideas” (p.27). The authors argue that attempts to bring the maths of everyday life into the classroom while still making the mathematical focus of the task clear, lack authenticity. A similar argument could be made regarding many communicative EFL tasks which attempt to mimic authentic situations of language use (see below).

Reflecting on earlier research on computer based tasks (e.g. Ainley, 2000) the authors suggest that tasks need to be perceived as ‘purposeful’ and having ‘utility’. By purposeful, they mean that the task “has a meaningful outcome for the pupil, in terms of an actual or virtual product, or the solution of an engaging problem” (p.29; italics added). Utility is explained in the following way: “the learning of mathematics encompasses not just the ability to carry out the procedures, but the construction of meaning for the ways in which those mathematical ideas are useful” (p.30; italics added). While purposefulness is internal to the task, utility thus relates to the wider meaningfulness of the task (probably outside the classroom). Utility is perceived rather than objective and the authors stress the importance of building into the task opportunities for learners to appreciate the utility of the mathematical ideas it contains. Although affective engagement is not explicitly discussed by Ainley et al. (2006), it is implied by references to perceived meaningfulness.

Guariento & Morley (2001) reach similar conclusions in their attempt to determine what constitutes authenticity in task-based EFL learning. They identify four criteria (pp.349-351). Tasks which relate to the learners’ needs outside the classroom (“real world targets“), or where they are attempting to achieve a communicative goal (“genuine purpose“), rather than merely carrying out a practice activity, are considered to have authenticity. Drawing on Breen (1985), they point out that the learning situation itself is an authentic environment for tasks.
Learners may, for example, engage in authentic communication by discussing and negotiating their learning preferences with each other and the teacher (“classroom interaction”). Finally, Guariento & Morley (2001) identify “engagement” as in itself a contributor to authenticity. Although the direction of causality appears questionable, their observation that a learner is more likely to engage in tasks if he/she is “genuinely interested” in the topic and purpose of the task “and understands its relevance” (p.350-351) seems uncontroversial. To this they later add “usefulness” (p352).

Although both studies problematize the concept, perceived authenticity is seen as contributing to learner engagement. A task may be seen as authentic if there is a clear link between the task and the world outside the classroom, and/or with the learner’s own needs. Key notions identified in both studies as contributing to learner engagement with tasks (and with the subject matter) are purposefulness and utility/usefulness. It seems likely that both those qualities contribute to meaningfulness which, I will argue below, is an important pre-condition for willingness and hence for affective EWL.

**Mindsets and engagement**

It has been found that learners’ psychological mindsets decisively affect how they approach learning, including interaction with peers (Dweck, 2006; Burnette, O’Boyle, VanEpps, Pollack, & Finkel 2013). Mindset could therefore have a bearing on the quantity and quality of EWL.

Dweck (2006) characterizes mindsets as either fixed or growth. Briefly, learners with the former mindset consider intelligence as fixed while learners with a growth mindset believe intelligence can be developed. The mindset construct has been applied to language learning. Mercer (2012, p.22) defines ‘language learning mindset’ as “the extent to which a person believes that language learning ability is dependent on some immutable, innate talent or is the result of controllable factors such as effort and hard work” (see also Mercer & Ryan 2010; Mercer, 2011). Also in relation to language learning, Sato (2016) identifies what he calls an ‘interaction mindset’ - “a disposition toward the task and/or the interlocutor prior to and/or during the interaction” (p.7). The study suggests that mindsets can be changed, by experience or external factors, for example teachers.

Sato (2016) explored the relationship between interaction mindsets, behaviours in peer interaction, and L2 development. Participants were two focus groups of five students each, in two different English classes in Chile. The A group was a slightly lower proficiency than the B
group. The linguistic focus was past tense, and vocabulary productivity and size. The learners were audio recorded completing communicative, four stage tasks. They sometimes “[shifted] their attention to language forms while maintaining the primary focus on completing the task collaboratively” (p.12). Instances of corrective feedback (CF) and language related collaboration (LRC) were analysed. (Unlike LREs, LRCs exclude self-corrections and include interaction in the L1; p.14). Before the intervention, the learners’ interaction mindsets were established by semi-structured interviews. Questions explored their perceptions of tasks, peer CF (giving and receiving) and classroom peer interaction. L2 development pre/post data were obtained from oral picture descriptions and written fill-in the blank tests.

Interactional mindset and behaviour were markedly different between the two groups but consistent within the groups. Group A displayed a collaborative mindset and behaviour, and produced more CF and LRCs than group B, who displayed a lack of collaborative behaviour and cohesion and expressed general reluctance to participate in class activities, including group work. The B students said they felt socially awkward speaking English to their peers and did not trust each other’s knowledge. Thus the interactional mindsets revealed in the interviews were mirrored by the interactional behaviours in both groups. While both made significant gains on vocabulary size, only Group A significantly improved the use of past tense. Drawing on Johnson & Johnson (2009), Sato comes to the conclusion that “positive interdependence was present” in Group A (p.23) and, in relation to the Group B findings, that lack of trust or fear of negative evaluation are likely to impact negatively on learning.

Given that collaborative group work is a cornerstone in most LA pedagogy (learners investigating, talking about, and discovering language; Borg, 1994; Wright & Bolitho, 1993) Sato’s study is particularly relevant to LA practitioners and researchers. Collaborative interaction mindset emerges as a predictor of collaborative interaction, which is likely to lead to higher learning gains.

As in the previous studies discussed, affect – here in the form of attitude emanating from mindset – is crucial because it determines the noticing (or not) and acceptance (or not) of peer CF. This process in turn is mediated by social relationships within the group. In summary, collaborative or non-collaborative interaction mindset leads to corresponding interactional behaviour which promotes or does not promote L2 processing, thus having an effect on learning outcome (Sato 2016, p.25, citing Johnson & Johnson’s, 2009, affective-social-cognitive model of learning).
Online and face-to-face EWL

Another research context where task properties and their effect on engagement is attracting attention is online as compared to face-to-face (FTF) collaboration. A recent example is Baralt, Gurzynski-Weiss & Kim (2016) who applied the EWL framework in order to understand why students in the two environments did not respond in the same way to the same tasks.

The study involved 40 English speaking intermediate learners of Spanish carrying out cognitively simple and complex collaborative dyadic tasks. For the online group, the tasks took the form of synchronous computer mediated chat in a laboratory environment while another group carried out the tasks FTF. An important contextual feature was that the students in the online group did not all know each other prior to carrying out the tasks. Interaction data and questionnaires from the two groups were coded for the three types of EWL (cognitive, affective, social).

Both the interaction data and post-task questionnaires showed that “all three types of engagement were diminished or were entirely absent in the online interactions” (p.200) while the FTF learners were highly engaged and collaborative on the same tasks.

The attitudes of the two groups to the language, the task, and working with peers, were markedly different. While the FTF group described their experience as fun, interesting and a great experience the online group were overall negative in their assessment. Many had not enjoyed the experience and did not feel that working with peers was useful.

The positive traits of successful peer interaction for learning indicated by Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012; discussed in Philp, 2016, p.386), such as supporting peers’ engagement, respecting others and working cohesively appear to have been absent from the online group data. For example, the online students largely ignored their peer’s contributions when they posted their own. The FTF context, in contrast, seemed to foster communication and collaboration around the task (social engagement). In the FTF group, more complex tasks also led to greater cognitive engagement with the target language feature while no such effect was found in the online group.

The difference in affective engagement of the two groups was notable. The FTF students displayed a positive attitude to collaboration with their peers while in the online group, attitudes to peers and the task were strongly negative. The authors conclude from this that “learners’ affective engagement, e.g. their attitudes towards task performance as well as
towards their partner, affected their cognitive engagement with form” (p.233). Social engagement also mediated the learners’ cognitive EWL. “Those who reported feeling happy, having fun, and who saw their partners as friends engaged in more social scaffolding that led to greater instances of cognitive engagement” (p.233). While this is of immediate relevance to online task designers, it may also have wider implications as it suggests the dependence of cognitive engagement on volition (willingness), which in turn may emerge (or not) in social interaction and that affective and social engagement are therefore primary.

Further studies along similar lines could benefit from addressing the absence of data on the participants’ beliefs and attitudes prior to the peer interaction in Baralt et al.’s (2016) study. In particular, it would be important to know to what extent the learners’ attitudes and willingness to engage emerged from the learning experience (online or FTF) or were due to prior factors external to the task, for example mindset.

**The EWL of younger learners**

In the discussion above, meaningfulness has emerged as an influential factor for the EWL of adults. To determine whether this applies more generally, it is useful to consider the EWL of children. Manifestations of EWL other than collaborative dialogue may be more frequent in child data, as suggested in research by Ahn (2016), Kearney & Ahn (2014) and Kearney & Barbour (2015).

**Language Play:** A study by Ahn (2016) of 11-15 year old beginner and intermediate level students on an English Language immersion programme in Korea highlights the role of affect in younger learners’ EWL. Classes were video recorded and field notes taken. To identify EWL, teacher-student and student-student interactions, in class and during breaks, were analysed using the question framework from Svalberg (2012, p.378).

The data revealed episodes of Language Play (LP). Ahn (2016) distinguishes Ludic LP (LLP; Cook, 2000) from LP for Rehearsal (LPR; Lantolf, 1997). The former is for amusement while the latter is a learning strategy. The paper focuses on EWL in the form of LLP. LLP episodes are identified using Broner & Tarone’s (2001, p.376) five channel cues: Presence/absence of laughter; shifts in voice quality and pitch, loudness/whispering; use of well-known/new language forms; presence/absence of a fictional world of reference; presence/absence of audience other than self.
The prime importance of affect for the children’s EWL is very evident in the data. LLPs signal willingness (motivation) to amuse oneself and others (sometimes causing laughter). Examples analysed in the paper include an episode involving LLP with linguistic form where the children play with the phonological similarity between the word ‘digital’ and a Korean word meaning ‘pig’s hair’. Also illustrated is LLP with meaning; the children link ‘good thinking’ to ‘Einstein’ and ‘genius’, creating a world of ‘fiction’ and contributing to a ‘carnival’ atmosphere (p.42, citing Cook 1997).

The author concludes that, through LLPs one ‘further identifies and reflects oneself as a user of multiple languages.’ (p.44)

**World Language Learning (WLL):** The EWL framework was also applied by Kearney & Ahn (2014) and Kearney & Barbour (2015) in their studies of pre-school children (3-5 years of age) in World Language Learning (WLL) classes in the US. The researchers drew on video recordings and field notes covering over two years.

Kearney & Ahn (2014) identify 53 EWL episode. They explore what form EWL might take in this context, and whether it might contribute to enhanced LA. Engagement was evident in the children’s gestures and their movement around the classroom. In one episode, the children are taking part in a game by pointing upwards, and showing that they are keen to translate and participate. At other times, a child’s silence could indicate reflection on the language. The authors recommend that the EWL framework should make more explicit reference to non-verbal displays of LA.

An important observation made by the authors is the importance of meaningfulness to the children. The meaningfulness pertains to the language and/or to the interaction surrounding the language. It would not be surprising if the absence or presence of perceived meaningfulness were an especially important factor in the LA development of young learners, whose cognitive engagement is likely to be less deep and extended. Above, meaningfulness was linked to perceptions of the purposefulness and utility of the task. More widely, one might say that activities/tasks which are perceived to be of some value to the learner are meaningful. In a language learning context the value might be linguistic, that is pertaining to the language as language (e.g. useful new vocabulary or grammar), or social; pertaining to the language as social activity (e.g. enabling desired social interaction).

In a continuation of their study, Kearney & Barbour (2015) look at the young learners’ EWL from a language socialization perspective. In the WLL classes, there is a ‘language partner’ (a
student teacher) who teaches for example songs, vocabulary, or the script of the target language. Examples are shown of the children being affectively willing to engage with the language partner and the language but also occasionally contesting the validity of target language use. In one excerpt a child initiates by taking the language partner by the hand and leading her to a table. She wants to write the partner’s name in Korean. An extended talk about language ensues in which the learner is cognitively, affectively and socially engaged. “A shared orientation to the acceptability of multiple writing systems is achieved through complex stance-taking over the course of the interaction” (p.170), and the child reaches an awareness of Korean script as a workable way of writing. The authors observe that acceptance or rejection (of the target language) are not parts of a linear, cumulative learning process but are both signs of noticing and first steps in understanding and accepting language diversity. Rejection is not necessarily negative, but has more potential to facilitate socialization/learning than passive acceptance; it signals engagement which can lead to discussion and negotiation.

For these learners, meaningfulness appears to be as much social as linguistic; engagement with language is not easily separated from engagement with people. This might well apply more widely to young learners’ engagement in language learning contexts, but further research is needed.

Conclusions and future directions
A brief exploration of what researchers mean by ‘engagement’ has shown considerable differences in how it is construed but has also helped situate EWL. School engagement (Skinner et al., 2009) is posited as forming part of ‘contextual engagement’, while engagement with CF (Ellis, 2010) is a sub-type of EWL. A distinction has also been made between task engagement and EWL. While the difficulty of separating the two is acknowledged - they may blend or occur in parallel – task engagement can clearly play an important role in facilitating EWL.

Some affective factors were explored and their possible interaction with cognitive EWL discussed. It was suggested that learners’ willingness to engage could be affected by task design. How the learner perceives the purposefulness and utility of what is learnt could render the task meaningful and enhance their willingness to expend attention and effort on it. Such an assessment might require a fairly mature learner. For younger learners meaningfulness
might relate more closely to immediate enjoyment and/or social interaction. What makes language worth engaging with, in the eyes of the learner, would thus be influenced by stage of maturity.

The impact of social factors on learners’ willingness to engage was also highlighted by the contrast between FTF and online interactions. The latter group’s negative views and failure to collaborate, contrasted with the FTF learners’ positive perceptions and willing collaboration. A promising area of further research is the impact opportunities to establish social relationships prior to on-line task work could have on subsequent EWL.

Attitudes in the form of mindsets also have a bearing on willingness to engage. Two very useful constructs were discussed: language learning mindset and interaction mindset. Learners who believe that they can learn the language by their own effort and hard work, and that working collaboratively can be helpful to them are more likely to engage, cognitively, affectively and socially than those who do not. This raises the question how mindsets not conducive to high quality EWL can be influenced, and could lead to a very interesting line of research.

Both mindset and meaningfulness thus appear to have a significant impact on learners’ EWL and, one would assume, on the LA they construct. Svalberg (2007, p.292) states that “in LA work, stimulating affective engagement tends to rely on communicative purpose and meaningfulness of tasks”. I would now suggest that meaningfulness includes perceived purposefulness and utility of tasks, and that meaningfulness can also be social. The importance of social relationships between the interlocutors, or the opportunity to establish/enact such relationships was evident in the online context discussed, and also in the younger learner settings. The desire for, or enjoyment of social interaction can render tasks meaningful, thereby attracting task-engagement which attracts language-engagement. Figure 3 attempts to unpack meaningfulness in an EWL context.

![Figure 3. Meaningfulness in Engagement With Language](image)

Meaningfulness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Utility</th>
<th>Joy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Meaningfulness in Engagement With Language
The usefulness of this scheme, based on insights from the review, needs to be tested in research. It suggests that meaningfulness emerges from the perceived value of the task, for example the purposefulness, utility, and/or enjoyment of the language involved, as language and/or as social activity. It also posits that a range of factors (linguistic, social, individual) may influence these perceptions. The lines indicate mutual interaction. For example, in the LLP context (Ahn, 2016) enjoyment seemed to derive from linguistic meaning and social interaction and individual identity construction (as competent multilingual) which, it is suggested, together rendered the activity meaningful. Meaningfulness is likely to affect the strength of learners’ willingness to engage, and therefore the depth and extent of their EWL.

In conclusion, willingness affects decision making thus determining whether the learner exercises agency and how. This implies a close relationship between affective and cognitive EWL, which needs to be investigated further.

The ultimate purpose of this paper has been to gain further insights into EWL, the process through which LA is created and enhanced, and to map out possibilities for further research. Some fairly specific suggestions have already been made. The review has shown how engagement research can expand ‘inwards’, in a micro-genetic approach, capturing in as much detail as possible what happens during episodes of EWL, or it can expand ‘outwards’, by tapping into not only learners’ interaction but also external factors (e.g. task design) and learner mindsets, perceptions, and reflections. The complexity of EWL has become clear; the sheer number of factors touched on in the paper might seem daunting, and the reader can probably add others which have not been discussed here. As Mercer (2011) points out, researchers need to impose artificial boundaries on the complex dynamic systems (CDSs) they investigate. In my view, that need not be a problem as long as it is explicitly stated what factors have or have not been considered in their research and why. My hope is that the above focus on the nature of EWL has paved the way for researchers who would concentrate on what can stimulate or inhibit it. I do not wish to promote a particular way of doing that (e.g. a particular research design) but I will offer some general thoughts on possible approaches.

The holistic nature of the EWL construct, which can easily accommodate a social power perspective and historical factors, is compatible with Critical Pedagogy (Norton & Toohey, 2004) or Ecological (Van Lier, 2004) approaches to research. Such research might take the form of case studies, life histories (e.g. Duff & Uchida, 1997) or other types of ethnography.
A more conventional SLA format is the quasi-experimental intervention study, where for example the effect of a particular task type on learners’ EWL is studied in some detail (see also suggestions in Svalberg, 2012), compared to a control group, and combined with pre and post-testing of the target feature. In such a study, it is possible to combine detailed case studies of a very small number of learners with test and questionnaire data from intact classes.

Teachers might be interested in carrying out practitioner research on the EWL of their own learners in order to find a pedagogy that facilitates it. A possible approach is Lesson Study (Dudley, 2008; Tan-Chia, Fang, & Ang, 2013), where teachers first plan a lesson together, identifying specific learning challenges they wish to address. One of the group then teaches the lesson while the others observe targeted learners. The focus of such observations could be the learners EWL (or some aspect of it). Following the lesson, the teachers convene to discuss what they observed, evaluating how and how successfully the lesson promoted EWL. The lesson plan or materials would then be revised, and taught to another class.

Language learning environments are currently being transformed by the use of technology (Walker & White, 2013). Research is needed to help us understand how different kinds of online delivery and participation affect learners’ EWL, and why. Baralt et al.’s (2016) study, discussed above, raises the possibility that aspects of the in-the-flesh, face-to-face encounter allow social relationships to be created fairly instantly, and that their absence in an online environment can inhibit EWL. Research could usefully explore to what extent this is the case, and if so how it might be overcome in technology enhanced language learning.

In any EWL research, it needs to be kept in mind that engagement is not necessarily observable and that apparent signs of engagement (e.g. body language) can be misinterpreted. Nor are the reasons for engagement or lack of engagement usually obvious; hence the importance of data triangulation and including the participants’ subjective interpretations. Equally valid but different insights are likely to emerge from learner interaction, journal entries, stimulated recall, direct observation, focus groups, questionnaires, tests or other data types. Combining three or more can help guard against over-interpretation, and allow the voices of different types of learners to come through. A better understanding of how cognitive, affective and social aspects of EWL interact mutually and with other learner internal and external factors could benefit LA practice in a range of settings, including L1 literacy classes and L2 learning by school pupils or adults.
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Notes

1. Although the EWL process is conscious, its ultimate aim in language learning is that it should eventually contribute to knowledge that is automatically available. A discussion of that is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.
2. In Systemic Functional Appraisal Theory, ‘engagement’ refers to how language users express commitment to what they are saying (e.g. Tan, 2010). As it focuses on realizations (output) rather than process it will not be discussed here.

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