

Impact of Motivational Goal Orientations on Behavioral, Cognitive, and Emotional Engagement in Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of Iranian EFL learners' motivational goal orientations on their behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement in the classroom. Utilizing a mixed-methods design, the research involved 200 intermediate EFL learners from language schools in Iran, who completed the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT), a Goal Orientation Survey, and a Student Engagement Questionnaire. The results show that mastery goal orientations, both approach and avoid, positively predict these engagement dimensions, while performance goal orientations do not significantly affect engagement. The findings highlight the importance of fostering mastery goals to enhance student engagement and improve language learning outcomes. The implications of this study suggest that educators should create a supportive learning environment that emphasizes mastery goals, thereby facilitating deeper engagement and better academic performance among EFL learners.

Keywords: Achievement Goal Theory (AGT), Behavioral Engagement, Cognitive Engagement, Emotional Engagement, Mastery Goal Orientation, Performance Goal Orientation

تأثیر جهت گیری های هدف انگیزشی بر تعامل رفتاری، شناختی و عاطفی زبان آموزان ایرانی زبان انگلیسی

این پژوهش به بررسی تأثیر جهت گیری های هدف انگیزشی زبان آموزان ایرانی بر تعامل رفتاری، شناختی و عاطفی آنها در کلاس می پردازد. این تحقیق با استفاده از یک طرح ترکیبی، شامل 200 زبان آموز زبان انگلیسی متوسط از آموزشگاه های زبان در ایران بود که آزمون تعیین سطح سریع آکسفورد (OQPT)، یک نظرسنجی جهت گیری هدف و یک پرسشنامه مشارکت دانش آموزی را تکمیل کردند. نتایج نشان داد که جهت گیری های هدف تسلط، هم رویکرد و هم اجتناب، به طور مثبت این ابعاد تعامل را پیش بینی می کنند، در حالی که جهت گیری های هدف عملکرد به طور قابل توجهی بر تعامل تأثیر نمی گذارند. یافته ها اهمیت پرورش اهداف تسلط را برای افزایش مشارکت دانش آموز و بهبود نتایج یادگیری زبان برجسته

می‌کنند. یافته‌های این پژوهش نشان می‌دهد که مربیان باید یک محیط یادگیری حمایتی ایجاد کنند که بر اهداف تسلط تأکید دارد، در نتیجه مشارکت عمیق‌تر و عملکرد تحصیلی بهتر را در بین زبان‌آموزان زبان انگلیسی تسهیل می‌کند.

واژگان کلیدی: تئوری هدف پیشرفت، تعامل رفتاری، تعامل شناختی، تعامل عاطفی، جهت‌گیری هدف تسلط، جهت‌گیری هدف عملکرد

Introduction

The current research endeavors to evaluate the influence that the motivational goal orientations of Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners have on their behavioral, cognitive, and emotional involvement in the classroom. It is becoming increasingly necessary to gain a grasp of the factors that drive student involvement as the effects of globalization continue to become more prevalent in educational practices. For example, according to Ames (1992) and Dweck (1986), the accomplishment Goal Theory (AGT) proposes that students can choose a variety of goal orientations, which in turn determine their level of engagement and accomplishment in academic settings. Performance-avoidance, performance-approach, mastery-avoidance, and mastery-approach are the four variations of these goal orientations that can be distinguished from one another. Different orientations have different effects on how students approach assignments, how they interact with their classmates, and how they react to problems in the classroom setting.

A number of different aspects of student involvement have been proven to be highly influenced by motivational goal orientations, according to research data. According to Skinner and Belmont (1993), behavioral engagement is defined as the degree to which students participate in classroom activities, ensure that rules are followed, and make an effort to complete assignments. According to Fredericks et al. (2004), cognitive engagement is defined as the process of putting one's mental energy into the process of learning, which includes the utilization of efficient learning strategies and the ability to self-regulate. Students' positive and negative reactions to their learning experiences, including their sentiments toward the subject matter, teachers, and peers, are included in the concept of emotional involvement, according to Skinner et al. (2009).

As the educational landscape in Iran faces unique problems, such as limited resources, different degrees of student motivation, and diverse classroom dynamics, it is vital to understand how these motivational goal orientations affect engagement in the context of Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Knowing how these motivational goal orientations effect engagement is crucial. Dweck (1986) and Fredricks et al. (2004) found that studies conducted in the past have shown that mastery goal orientations are connected with higher levels of engagement and better academic achievements. According to Elliott and McGregor (2001), performance goal orientations, on the other hand, have the potential to contribute to feelings of anxiety and disengagement, particularly in educational settings that are highly competitive.

This study intends to investigate the ways in which these attitudes influence particular aspects of classroom involvement among Iranian students of English as a foreign language. The purpose of this research is to give insights that may be used to influence teaching practices and enhance learner outcomes in the setting of English language education in Iran. These insights will be provided by examining the links between motivational goal orientations and engagement. It is anticipated that the findings would make a contribution to the current body of literature on motivational dynamics in educational settings and provide educators with practical insights for the purpose of cultivating a learning environment that is more engaging and helpful.

Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to explore how different types of goal orientations (mastery, performance, and avoidance) influence Iranian EFL learners' willingness to engage, persist, and succeed in academic settings. Specifically, it investigated the impact of motivational goal orientations on learners' behavioral, cognitive, emotional, agentic, and social engagement in the classroom.

Novelty of the Study

This study focuses on the interplay between students' motivations and their active participation in learning, which is essential for fostering effective language learning experiences. It examines engagement as a four-dimensional construct, including agentic engagement along with behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement, to determine the distinctive roles of these dimensions in predicting language learning outcomes. It also provides valuable insights into the motivational dynamics within Iranian intermediate EFL classrooms, which can guide educators in enhancing student engagement and improving language learning outcomes. Finally, encourages future research to explore these relationships further, including longitudinal studies and examining the effectiveness of specific pedagogical strategies in engaging diverse learners.

Literature Review

Achievement Goal Theory (AGT)

Achievement Goal Theory (AGT) is a comprehensive framework within educational psychology that examines the underlying motivations driving students' behavior in academic settings. It suggests that students adopt different types of goal orientations, which influence their engagement, learning strategies, and overall academic performance. The two primary goal orientations under AGT are Mastery Goal Orientation and Performance Goal Orientation. Each orientation carries distinct motivational processes and outcomes that impact how students approach learning and challenges.

Mastery Goal Orientation

Students with a Mastery Goal Orientation focus on the intrinsic value of learning. Their primary concern is to develop their competence, gain a deep understanding of the subject matter, and improve their skills over time. According to Ames (1992), these students are driven by an internal desire for self-improvement and knowledge acquisition. They view challenges as opportunities for growth rather than as threats, which leads them to embrace difficult tasks and persist in the face of adversity. Carol Dweck's seminal work in 1986 further emphasized that students with a mastery orientation are more likely to engage in deep learning strategies. They are not solely focused on outcomes like grades but rather on the learning process itself. These students are characterized by a "growth mindset," a term later popularized by Dweck, which denotes the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort and perseverance. Consequently, mastery-oriented students are more resilient, show greater persistence, and tend to achieve higher levels of academic success, especially in challenging subjects.

Recent research has continued to support these findings, highlighting that students with mastery goals are more likely to engage in metacognitive practices, such as self-reflection and self-assessment, which further enhance their learning. They are also more likely to seek help when needed, use feedback constructively, and adapt their strategies based on the requirements of the task at hand.

Performance Goal Orientation

Students with a Performance Goal Orientation are primarily motivated by the desire to demonstrate their competence relative to others. Their focus is on achieving high grades and outperforming peers, often at the expense of deep learning. According to Dweck (1986), these students are more concerned with how they are perceived by others and tend to avoid situations where they might fail or be judged negatively. Performance-oriented students often engage in surface-level learning strategies, such as rote memorization, which may yield short-term success but do not promote long-term retention or understanding of the material. Elliott and McGregor (2001) expanded on Dweck's work by introducing the concepts of performance-approach and performance-avoidance orientations. Performance-approach oriented students strive to outperform their peers and seek positive recognition, whereas performance-avoidance oriented students are more concerned with avoiding failure and negative judgments. Both orientations, however, are associated with higher levels of anxiety and stress, which can hinder academic performance and overall well-being. Research indicates that performance-oriented students are more likely to engage in maladaptive behaviors, such as cheating or avoiding help-seeking, to maintain their self-image. Additionally, these students may experience a decline in motivation over time, especially when faced with challenges or when their performance does not meet their expectations.

Student Engagement: A Multidimensional Concept

Student engagement is a multifaceted construct that encompasses various dimensions of students' involvement in learning activities. Fredericks et al. (2004) proposed a model that identifies three primary dimensions of student engagement: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Each dimension plays a critical role in shaping students' overall academic experience and success.

1. Behavioral Engagement

Behavioral engagement refers to students' participation in academic activities, including their adherence to classroom norms, effort, and persistence. According to Skinner and Belmont (1993), students who are behaviorally engaged are actively involved in their learning process, attend classes regularly, complete assignments, and contribute to classroom discussions. This type of engagement is often linked to positive academic outcomes, as it reflects a student's commitment to their educational responsibilities.

Recent studies have shown that behavioral engagement is influenced by both individual factors, such as self-discipline and motivation, and environmental factors, such as teacher support and classroom management. Students who perceive their learning environment as supportive and

structured are more likely to exhibit high levels of behavioral engagement, which in turn leads to better academic performance and lower dropout rates.

2. Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement involves the investment of mental effort in learning, the use of effective learning strategies, and the ability to self-regulate one's learning process. Fredericks et al. (2004) emphasized that cognitively engaged students are those who not only attend to the material being taught but also employ deep learning strategies such as critical thinking, elaboration, and organization of information.

Cognitive engagement is closely linked to mastery goal orientation, as students who are intrinsically motivated to learn are more likely to engage in activities that promote understanding and skill development. These students are proactive in their learning, setting goals, monitoring their progress, and adjusting their strategies as needed. Research has shown that cognitive engagement is a strong predictor of academic achievement, as it leads to deeper comprehension and better retention of knowledge.

3. Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement refers to the affective aspect of student engagement, including students' emotional reactions to their teachers, peers, and the learning environment. Skinner and Belmont (1993) noted that students' positive or negative emotions towards their academic experience can significantly impact their motivation and engagement levels. For instance, students who feel connected to their teachers and peers are more likely to experience positive emotions such as enthusiasm and interest, which enhance their overall engagement.

Emotional engagement is also related to students' sense of belonging and self-efficacy. When students feel that they are valued members of the classroom community and believe in their ability to succeed, they are more likely to be emotionally invested in their learning. Conversely, negative emotions such as anxiety, boredom, or frustration can lead to disengagement and lower academic performance. Teachers play a crucial role in fostering emotional engagement by creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

In general, achievement goal theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the different motivations that drive students' engagement in academic activities. Mastery and performance goal orientations each have distinct effects on how students approach learning, with mastery-oriented students generally displaying deeper engagement and better long-term outcomes. Student engagement itself is a complex, multidimensional construct that encompasses behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects, all of which are critical to fostering a successful educational experience.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The current study addresses the following research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: Do motivational goal orientations (performance-avoid, performance-approach, mastery-avoid, and mastery-approach) of Iranian intermediate EFL learners affect their behavioral engagement in the classroom?

H1: Iranian EFL learners' motivational goal orientations significantly predict their behavioral engagement in the classroom.

RQ2: Do motivational goal orientations (performance-avoid, performance-approach, mastery-avoid, and mastery-approach) of Iranian intermediate EFL learners affect their cognitive engagement in the classroom?

H2: Iranian EFL learners' motivational goal orientations significantly predict their cognitive engagement in the classroom.

RQ3: Do motivational goal orientations (performance-avoid, performance-approach, mastery-avoid, and mastery-approach) of Iranian intermediate EFL learners affect their emotional engagement in the classroom?

H3: Iranian EFL learners' motivational goal orientations significantly predict their emotional engagement in the classroom.

Significance of the Study

The Iranian intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners are the subject of this study, which aims to provide insights into the distinctive motivational dynamics and engagement patterns that exist within this setting. It is essential to have a solid understanding of these aspects in order to improve the outcomes of language learning in Iran.

Behavioral, cognitive, emotional, agentic, and social engagement are the five aspects of classroom involvement that are investigated in this study. Through the utilization of an all-encompassing strategy, it is possible to get a more profound comprehension of the manner in which various components of engagement are influenced by motivational goal orientations. In addition to this, the study investigates the influence that mastery and performance goal orientations have on the level of student involvement. It has been demonstrated that mastery goals, which center on the development of skills and the enhancement of one's own personal qualities, have a beneficial influence on engagement. On the other hand, performance goals, which place an emphasis on displaying one's degree of expertise in comparison to others, may result in disengagement. Exploring these conflicting perspectives offers educators the opportunity to gain vital insights.

The results of this research shed light on the significance of cultivating mastery goal orientations in Iranian English as a Foreign Language classes in order to create increased student involvement. Educators have the ability to foster better levels of engagement and, eventually, enhance the results of language acquisition by establishing a learning environment that is supportive and places an emphasis on the development of skills, personal progress, and the value of effort. In addition, the research makes a contribution to the existing body of information about accomplishment goal theory and student engagement, particularly with regard to the field of language education. We gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that affect learners' involvement in the classroom as a result of this research since it investigates the linkages between motivational goal orientations and multiple characteristics of engagement.

In Iranian English as a Foreign Language classrooms, the insights acquired from this study can be used to inform teaching approaches. It is possible for educators to modify their instructional practices in order to better support and engage students, which ultimately results in more successful language learning experiences. This is made possible by an awareness of the motivational dynamics that drive engagement.

In a nutshell, the significance of this study lies in the fact that it is relevant to the Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, that it investigates multidimensional engagement, that it investigates mastery and performance goal orientations, that it has implications for fostering engagement, that it contributes to the existing body of literature, and that it has the potential to inform teaching practices. In addition to providing instructors who are working with Iranian students of English as a foreign language with helpful recommendations, the findings have the potential to improve language learning outcomes.

Method

Design of the Study

This study used a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design with 141 intermediate male and female EFL learners aged 18-35 studying at language institutes in Isfahan and Gachsaran, Iran. The participants were placed at the intermediate level based on the language school criteria.

Participants

The participants in this study were 200 Iranian EFL learners enrolled in language schools in Iran. They were placed at the intermediate level based on the language school criteria for placement. The participants included both male and female learners, aged between 15 and 25 years.

Instruments

The following instruments were exploited in the present study:

Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT): This test was used to ensure the homogeneity of learners' English proficiency levels.

Goal Orientation Survey: Adapted from Miller (2019), this survey measures learners' performance-avoid, performance-approach, mastery-avoid, and mastery-approach goal orientations.

Student Engagement Questionnaire: Adapted from Reeve and Tseng (2011), this questionnaire assesses learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement.

Procedure

The research procedure was meticulously designed to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. The study followed a structured approach, which included several key steps as follows:

The OQPT was administered first to ensure the homogeneity of learners' English proficiency levels. This standardized test assesses the language proficiency of learners and categorizes them into appropriate levels. By using the OQPT, the researchers ensured that all participants were at the intermediate level, which is crucial for maintaining consistency in the study. The test results were analyzed to confirm that participants fell within the predetermined proficiency range, thus eliminating any potential confounding variables related to language ability.

After establishing homogeneity in language proficiency, participants were asked to complete the Goal Orientation Survey. This survey was adapted from Miller (2019) and aimed to measure learners' motivational goal orientations, specifically focusing on performance-avoid, performance-approach, mastery-avoid, and mastery-approach orientations. The survey consisted of 20 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, allowing participants to express their level of agreement with various statements related to their goals in the learning environment. This survey provided quantitative data on the motivational orientations of the learners.

Following the Goal Orientation Survey, participants completed the Student Engagement Questionnaire, which was adapted from Reeve and Tseng (2011). This questionnaire assessed learners' engagement across three dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. The questionnaire included 30 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, enabling the researchers to evaluate how engaged the learners felt in their classroom activities. This step was essential for gathering data on the various dimensions of engagement that were hypothesized to be influenced by motivational goal orientations.

All surveys were administered in a controlled classroom environment to minimize distractions and ensure that participants could focus on the tasks. The researchers provided clear instructions and assistance as needed to ensure that all participants understood the purpose of the surveys and how to complete them.

After all participants completed the surveys, the collected data were analyzed using statistical software (e.g., SPSS). The analysis included descriptive statistics to summarize the participants' goal orientation scores and engagement levels. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to investigate the relationships between motivational goal orientations and the different dimensions of engagement. This analysis aimed to determine the predictive power of each goal orientation on behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement.

Finally, ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and their consent was obtained before participation. Confidentiality was maintained, and participants were assured that their responses would be used solely for research purposes.

By following this structured procedure, the study aimed to provide a complete understanding of how motivational goal orientations influence various dimensions of classroom engagement among Iranian EFL learners. The systematic approach to data collection and analysis ensured the reliability and validity of the findings, contributing to the overall significance of the research.

Results

To test the hypotheses, multiple regression analysis was conducted with goal orientations as predictors and behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement as outcome variables. The results are summarized in Tables 1-3.

Table 1

Multiple Regression Analysis of Goal Orientations Predicting Behavioral Engagement

Variable	β	p-value
Performance-Avoid	0.05	0.45
Performance-Approach	0.10	0.18
Mastery-Avoid	0.32	0.001
Mastery-Approach	0.45	0.000

The results in Table 1 indicate that mastery-approach goal orientation has a strong positive effect on behavioral engagement ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that learners who focus on mastering the material are more likely to participate actively in classroom activities. In contrast, performance-avoid and performance-approach orientations do not significantly predict behavioral engagement, indicating that these orientations may not foster active participation.

Table 2

Multiple Regression Analysis of Goal Orientations Predicting Cognitive Engagement

Variable	β	p-value
Performance-Avoid	0.04	0.52
Performance-Approach	0.08	0.25
Mastery-Avoid	0.30	0.002
Mastery-Approach	0.42	0.000

According to the results in Table 2, Mastery-approach goal orientation again shows a significant positive relationship with cognitive engagement ($\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001$), suggesting that learners who are motivated to understand and master the content are more likely to invest in learning strategies and self-regulation. Mastery-avoid also positively predicts cognitive engagement, indicating that learners who aim to avoid misunderstanding are still engaged cognitively. Performance orientations do not significantly contribute to cognitive engagement.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analysis of Goal Orientations Predicting Emotional Engagement

Variable	β	p-value
Performance-Avoid	0.03	0.65
Performance-Approach	0.06	0.38
Mastery-Avoid	0.28	0.005
Mastery-Approach	0.40	0.000

The results indicate that mastery-approach goal orientation significantly predicts emotional engagement ($\beta = 0.40, p < 0.001$), suggesting that learners who adopt this orientation are likely to have positive emotional reactions to their learning environment. Mastery-avoid orientation also positively influences emotional engagement, indicating that learners who aim to avoid mistakes can still experience positive emotions in the classroom. Performance orientations do not significantly affect emotional engagement.

Generally-speaking, the above results show that, 1) Mastery-approach goal orientation positively predicted behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement ($p < 0.001$), 2) Mastery-avoid goal orientation also positively predicted these engagement dimensions ($p < 0.01$), 3) Performance-approach and performance-avoid goal orientations did not significantly predict behavioral, cognitive, or emotional engagement. These findings support the hypotheses, indicating that Iranian EFL learners' mastery goal orientations, both approach and avoid, positively influence their behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement in the classroom.

Discussion

The results suggest that fostering mastery goal orientations, particularly mastery-approach, can enhance Iranian EFL learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement in the classroom. Educators should create a supportive learning environment that emphasizes skill development,

personal improvement, and the value of effort. By promoting mastery goals, teachers can improve language learning outcomes. One possible explanation for the positive impact of mastery-avoid goal orientation on engagement is that these learners may still be motivated to learn and improve their skills, even if their primary goal is to avoid misunderstanding or making mistakes. By engaging in classroom activities, they can reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes and enhance their learning.

The current findings corroborate those of Dweck (1986) and Ames (1992), who emphasized the positive impact of mastery goal orientations on student engagement. For instance, Dweck (1986) found that students with a mastery goal orientation are more likely to engage deeply with learning material, demonstrating persistence and resilience in the face of challenges. Similarly, Ames (1992) noted that mastery-oriented students are intrinsically motivated and view learning as a process of self-improvement, leading to higher levels of engagement.

The lack of significant effects of performance goal orientations on engagement in this study is consistent with findings from Elliot and McGregor (2001), who suggested that performance-oriented students may experience anxiety and fear of failure, which can hinder their engagement in classroom activities. This aligns with the notion that performance-avoidance goals can lead to disengagement, as students may avoid challenging tasks to protect their self-esteem (Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

The findings also support the findings of Fredricks et al. (2004), who identified cognitive engagement as being closely tied to mastery goal orientations. In their research, they found that students who adopt mastery goals are more likely to employ deep learning strategies and show higher levels of emotional engagement. The current study reinforces this relationship, demonstrating that mastery-oriented learners not only engage cognitively but also experience positive emotional responses in the classroom.

Although this study focused on behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement, it is worth noting that previous research, such as that by Reeve and Tseng (2011), has highlighted the importance of agentic engagement, which involves students actively participating in their learning process. Future studies could expand on this research by exploring how motivational goal orientations influence agentic engagement in Iranian EFL learners.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence for the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' motivational goal orientations and their behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement in the classroom. The findings highlight the importance of fostering mastery goal orientations to enhance student engagement and improve language learning outcomes. Future research should explore these relationships further, including longitudinal studies and investigating the role of contextual factors in shaping goal orientations and engagement. Additionally, examining the effectiveness of specific pedagogical strategies in promoting mastery goals and engagement would be a valuable avenue for future research.

Implications

The findings of this study underscore the importance of fostering mastery goal orientations among EFL learners to enhance their engagement in the classroom. Educators should create a supportive learning environment that emphasizes skill development, personal improvement, and the value of effort. By promoting mastery goals, teachers can encourage students to take risks, engage deeply with the material, and persist through challenges.

Moreover, professional development programs for teachers can focus on understanding motivational dynamics and how to cultivate a mastery-oriented classroom environment. This could involve training teachers to provide constructive feedback, set challenging yet achievable goals, and create a classroom culture that values learning and growth over competition.

Limitations

While the findings of this study are significant, there are several limitations to consider. The cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationships between goal orientations and engagement dimensions. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess how these relationships evolve over time. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported measures may introduce bias, as participants might respond in socially desirable ways. Future studies could incorporate observational methods to triangulate findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

In conclusion, this study contributes valuable insights into the motivational dynamics within Iranian EFL classrooms. By focusing on fostering mastery goal orientations and creating a supportive learning environment, educators can enhance student engagement and, ultimately, improve language learning outcomes. Future research is encouraged to explore these relationships further, including longitudinal studies that track changes in motivation and engagement over time, and to examine the effectiveness of specific pedagogical strategies in engaging learners from diverse backgrounds.

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