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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Relationship between Teachers' Interpersonal Behavior, Motivation, and Student Engagement in English Language Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the correlational model between teachers' interpersonal behavior styles (need-supportive and need-thwarting) and academic engagement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of autonomous and controlled motivation. This study is a descriptive-correlational study and is a part of applied research in terms of purpose . A total of 305 male and female students from the second level of secondary education were selected using a cluster random sampling method. Participants completed validated questionnaires assessing need-supportive and need-thwarting teacher behaviors, autonomous and controlled motivation, and academic engagement. Data were analyzed using path analysis within the structural equation modeling framework. The results indicated that need-supportive and need-thwarting teacher behaviors significantly predicted students' academic engagement in English language classrooms, in positive and negative directions, respectively. Moreover, autonomous motivation mediated the relationships between teachers' interpersonal behavior and academic engagement. So, creating psychologically need-supportive learning environments can enhance students' engagement in English language classrooms by promoting autonomous motivation.

KEYWORDS

Self-determination Theory, Teacher Behavior, Motivationa, Engagement.

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Introduction

Student engagement is a dynamic, context-dependent construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). In language classrooms, engagement is influenced by the learning environment and students' interactions with significant social agents, particularly teachers (Mercer, 2019). Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) emphasizes the quality of motivation and proposes that social-contextual factors influence students' motivation and educational outcomes. Autonomous motivation reflects self-endorsed reasons for learning, whereas controlled motivation is based primarily on internal or external pressure (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

From an SDT perspective, teachers may support or thwart students' psychological needs through their interpersonal behaviors. Need-supportive behaviors include providing meaningful choices, acknowledging students' perspectives, offering constructive feedback, and developing respectful relationships, whereas need-thwarting behaviors involve controlling language, ignoring students' preferences, undermining competence, and emphasizing failure (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Previous research has generally shown positive relationships between need-supportive teaching, autonomous motivation, and engagement, while need-thwarting behaviors are associated with less adaptive outcomes (McEown et al., 2014; Jang et al., 2016; Dincer & Yesilyurt, 2017). However, limited research has examined these relationships simultaneously in Iranian EFL classrooms. Therefore, the present study investigated the relationships among teachers' need-supportive and need-thwarting interpersonal behaviors, students' autonomous and controlled motivation, and academic engagement, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of motivation.

Method

This applied study employed a descriptive-correlational, cross-sectional design using structural equation modeling. The participants were 305 male and female second-level secondary school students (155 girls and 150 boys), aged 16–18 years, in Urmia. They were selected through multistage cluster random sampling from eight schools and 12 classes. Data were collected using the 24-item Interpersonal Behaviors Questionnaire (Rocchi et al., 2017), the 12-item Self-Regulation Questionnaire (Ryan & Connell, 1989), and Reeve's (2013) 19-item Academic Engagement Questionnaire. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, confirmatory factor analysis, and path analysis in Mplus 8. Robust maximum likelihood estimation and bootstrapping were used because the data were not multivariably normal.

Results

The descriptive results showed that students perceived teachers' need-supportive behaviors above the scale midpoint and need-thwarting behaviors below it. Autonomous motivation ($M = 4.41$) and academic engagement ($M = 4.01$) also had relatively high mean scores. Academic engagement was positively correlated with need-supportive behavior ($r = .47$, $p < .01$) and autonomous motivation ($r = .54$, $p < .01$) and negatively correlated with need-thwarting behavior ($r = -.30$, $p < .01$). The hypothesized model showed good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 1.51$, $p = .21$; RMSEA = .04; CFI = .99; TLI = .97; SRMR = .02).

Need-supportive behavior positively predicted academic engagement ($\beta = .27$, $p = .001$) and autonomous motivation ($\beta = .42$, $p = .001$), whereas need-thwarting behavior negatively predicted academic engagement ($\beta = -.20$, $p = .001$) and autonomous motivation ($\beta = -.13$, $p = .008$). Autonomous motivation positively predicted academic engagement ($\beta = .36$, $p = .001$),

while controlled motivation did not significantly predict engagement (β = .05, p = .302). Need-thwarting behavior positively predicted controlled motivation (β = .18, p = .001), whereas need-supportive behavior did not (β = -.08, p = .16). The model explained 39% of the variance in academic engagement, 22% in autonomous motivation, and 5% in controlled motivation. The mediation analysis showed that autonomous motivation significantly mediated the positive relationship between need-supportive behavior and academic engagement and the negative relationship between need-thwarting behavior and academic engagement. The indirect effects through controlled motivation were not significant.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings generally supported the SDT-based model. Teachers' need-supportive behaviors were associated with greater autonomous motivation and academic engagement, whereas need-thwarting behaviors were associated with lower autonomous motivation and engagement. Autonomous motivation was a significant predictor and mediator of academic engagement, while controlled motivation did not significantly predict engagement or mediate the relationships between teacher interpersonal behaviors and engagement. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of autonomy-supportive learning environments and autonomous motivation in language learning (McEown et al., 2014; Jang et al., 2016; Dincer & Yesilyurt, 2017).

The findings suggest that English teachers can promote student engagement by supporting students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness through meaningful choices, constructive feedback, and respectful interpersonal relationships, while minimizing controlling and need-thwarting behaviors. The results should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously because of the cross-sectional design, the restriction of the sample to secondary-school EFL students in one geographical context, and the use of self-report measures. Longitudinal, experimental, and multi-source studies are recommended for future research.

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Ethical Considerations

All relevant national regulations and professional ethical principles were observed during the implementation of the study and preparation of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared that there was no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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