Transactions on Comparative Education (2024)
Clausius Scientific Press, Canada

DOI: 10.23977/trance.2024.060417
ISSN 2523-5818 Vol. 6 Num. 4

A Comparative Analysis of Empirical Research on Foreign Language Learning Engagement in CSSCI and SSCI Journals (2000-2023)

Yukun Liu

School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

Keywords: Learning Engagement, Empirical Research, Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Abstract: The study critically reviews 142 empirical studies of foreign language learning engagement published by 13 journals in SSCI and 13 CSSCI journals spanning from 2000 to 2023. It was found that: 1) Foreign language learning engagement studies aboard can be traced back to 2000 with a plethora of research in this field; the first learning engagement-related study emerged around 2010 in China with rather limited empirical research to the present. 2) Research both inside and outside China have focused on issues pertinent to engagement with feedback and the interactive mechanism between learning engagement and individual variables such as motivation and emotion. 3) Regarding the research participants, empirical studies abroad focus on students at various educational levels and learning different foreign languages within distinct class environments, while participants in CSSCI journals were mainly EFL learners at tertiary education, with insufficient attention paid to compulsory education, and foreign languages other than English. 4) Mixed-methods were used by studies in CSSCI and SSCI journals, combing questionnaire and interview, and interdisciplinary theories such as positive psychology were chosen as the theoretical background. Based on the above findings, the paper concludes with suggestions into future directions of learning engagement in China concerning the research topics, methods, and theoretical perspectives.

1. Introduction

Learning engagement or learner engagement originated from educational psychology, referring to the degree to which students actively participate in learning interactions[1]. Students actively participate in tasks, constantly think, and enjoy the entire learning process by fully immersing themselves in learning, ultimately achieving learning goals and promoting their academic achievement[2][3]. A large number of empirical studies in the field of educational psychology have shown that learning engagement is of great significance to individual learning[4], attracting scholars' attention in the field of foreign language teaching and learning in recent years. Dörnyei and Kormos (2000) first proposed that "active student engagement is crucial for all language teaching and learning"[5]. Ellis (2019) also pointed out that engagement was the main driving force of learning, and research on engagement should not only focus on explicit and implicit learning mechanisms,

but also explored other elements, including learning tasks, learning content, social interaction, and etc[6].

Few scholars have reviewed the development and overall trend of learning engagement in the field of language teaching. For example, Chinese scholars Li and Li (2021) systematically reviewed 48 English empirical studies from 2010 to 2020, concluding that no consensus has been reached concerning the definition and the construction of learning engagement[7]. Besides, research has focused on the influencing factors, such as teachers, students, curriculum, environment, and peers. And it was mainly measured by traditional methods, such as self-report and online observation. Questionnaires and interviews were utilized for data collection, few empirical research conducted on from the perspective of situational and multimodal analysis.

Hiver et al. (2024) also reviewed the research methods and operational definitions of 112 foreign studies on learning engagement in the past two decades, which confirmed the unclear definition of learning engagement, the relatively single measurement tools[8]. And the research subjects were mainly small groups, without tracking and real-time exploration of the dynamic changes in individual learning engagement status. In addition, there was a lack of intervention research on improving student engagement in language learning environments, such as the impact of factors such as teachers, peers, and learning tasks on learning engagement.

However, studies selected previously are all empirical studies in *Social Science Citation Index* (SSCI) journals, and no scholars have systematically compared the differences in research topics, methods of data analysis, theoretical perspectives and others in the field of learning engagement between *Chinese Social Science Citation Index* (CSSCI) and SSCI journals. Therefore, this article reviews studies published in CSSCI and SSCI journals from 2000 to 2023, revealing research trends and implications for future studies.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research questions

This study aims to answer three questions: (1) What are the overall research trends of learning engagement at home and abroad from 2000 to 2023? (2) What are the current status and differences in research topics, research subjects and environments, research methods, and theoretical perspectives in CSSCI and SSCI journals from 2000 to 2023? (3) What are the future research trends of learning engagement research?

2.2 Data Sources and Analysis

Referring to the selection criteria of Gao, Liao &Li (2014), Lei & Qin (2022), and Xu & Yang (2023)[9][10][11], 13 CSSCI journals and 13 SSCI journals were selected for the bibliometric analysis with the software CiteSpace 6.2R4 as shown in Table 1. These Chinese studies are from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), and others were searched from Web of Science within the time span of 2000-2023, with key words limited to learning engagement/learner engagement/student engagement. 67 studies in CSSCI journals and 470 studies in SSCI journals were found after the preliminary search. After the second examination non-empirical studies, conference abstracts, themes irrelevant to learning engagement, and unavailable studies were manually excluded. Finally 38 studies in CSSCI journals and 104 studies in SSCI journals were selected as input data.

Table 1: CSSCI journals and SSCI journals selected in the study

CSSCI Journals	SSCI Journals
Foreign Language Teaching and Research	The Modern Language Journal
Modern Foreign Languages	Language Learning
Foreign Language World	Language Teaching
Foreign Language Education	Studies in Second Language Acquisition
Foreign Languages in China	System
Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education	Applied Linguistics
Foreign Languages and Their Teaching	TESOL Quarterly
Foreign Language Education in China	Language Teaching Research
Foreign Language Learning Theory and Practice	International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism
Foreign Languages Bimonthly	Foreign Language Annals
Foreign Language Research	ELT Journal
Journal of Foreign Languages	Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching
Foreign Languages Research	Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Overall Research Trend

The overall number of empirical studies on learning engagement varied dynamically from 2000 to 2023. Specifically, 104 studies have been published in SSCI journals. A slow increase from 2000 to 2016 was revealed in Figure 1 with 8 studies identified. From 2017-2020 the number of articles published in SSCI journals has increased year by year, reaching 32 articles. The last 3 years witnessed a rapid growth, with 64 studies in total.

38 studies were identified in CSSCI journals from 2018-2023. Following the slow growth from 2018 to 2020, the number of published studies reached its peak from 2021 to 2023, with 31 studies published.

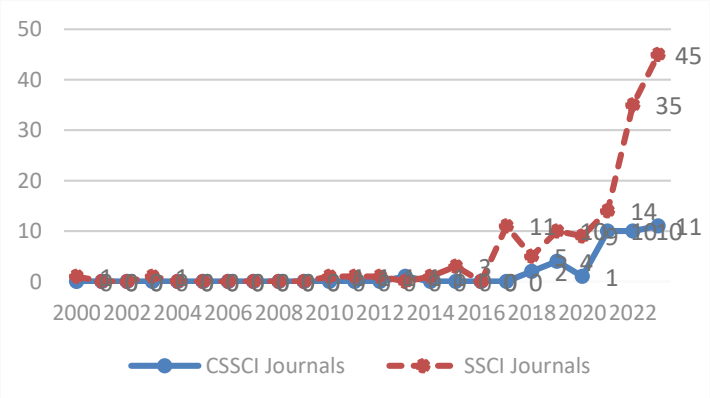

Figure 1: Number of studies published in CSSCI and SSCI journals from 2000 to 2023

3.2 Research Topics

Table 2 presented both commonalities and differences. On the one hand, studies in CSSCI journals and SSCI journals explored engagement with feedback, learning engagement in classroom teaching and writing, and the current status and dimensions of learning engagement. And other research hotspots included interaction mechanism between variables of individual differences, such as motivation, emotion and engagement. On the other hand, Chinese scholars focused more on the development and application of learning engagement scales, learning engagement among various interactive modes. As for SSCI journals, keywords such as complexity/accuracy/fluency, instruction, flipped learning, and task-based learning/language teaching had more frequencies.

Despite topics such as engagement with feedback, motivation, and emotions were hotspots in CSSCI and SSCI journals, Chinese studies demonstrated a multidimensional and in-depth trend, while foreign studies covered more diverse topics and involved a wider range of participants.

Table 2: Keywords in empirical studies in CSSCI and SSCI journals from 2000 to 2023

	CSSCI Journals		SSCI Journals	
	key word	frequency	key word	frequency
1	Mobile environment /online teaching /situational learning	10	Feedback	24
2	Emotions/Behavior/ Cognitive/engagement with feedback	8	Emotion	23
3	Feedback characteristics/ Peer feedback/mixed feedback	7	Motivation	22
4	Learning motivation/ Motivational Strategy/External Motivation/ Motivational regulation	4	Classroom(s)/foreign language classroom	22
5	Peer interaction /interaction mode /multiple Interactions	4	Complexity/accuracy/fluency	14
6	Scale development /reliability and validity	4	Writing	12
7	Writing	3	Instruction	6
8	Emotional experience /enjoyment/anxiety	3	Affective/cognitive/ behavioral/emotional engagement	5
9	Impact path/mechanism	3	Collaborative writing/dialogue	4
10	Classroom teaching /second language classroom	3	Flipped/task-based language learning/teaching	4

Firstly, the past three years witnessed a joint attention from Chinese and international researchers on engagement with written feedback, such as engagement in automated writing evaluation (AWE), mixed feedback environment, peer feedback, and etc. Apart from the common research subjects

mentioned above, written corrective feedback/corrective feedback, teacher feedback, and other topics were more explored in SSCI journals.

Secondly, motivation and engagement were considered as determining factors in foreign language learning[12][13]. CSSCI journals focused more on the predictive effect of motivation or motivational regulation on learning engagement within different teaching environments, while foreign studies mainly focused on the impact of different teaching tasks, teaching methods, and interactive modes on learning engagement and motivation. Besides, scholars also investigated the moderating role of different individual difference variables on motivation and learning engagement, such as emotions, academic performance, gender differences, age, and etc.

Last, CSSCI studies explored the relationship between learning engagement, enjoyment and anxiety. Only one study simultaneously focused on the mediating role of both positive and negative emotions between teacher support and foreign language learning engagement. With the development of positive psychology in foreign language teaching and learning, studies in SSCI journals investigated how both negative and positive emotions influenced learning engagement.

In order to identify hot topics on learning engagement in CSSCI and SSCI journals, keywords with the strongest citation burst were conducted as shown in Figure 2.

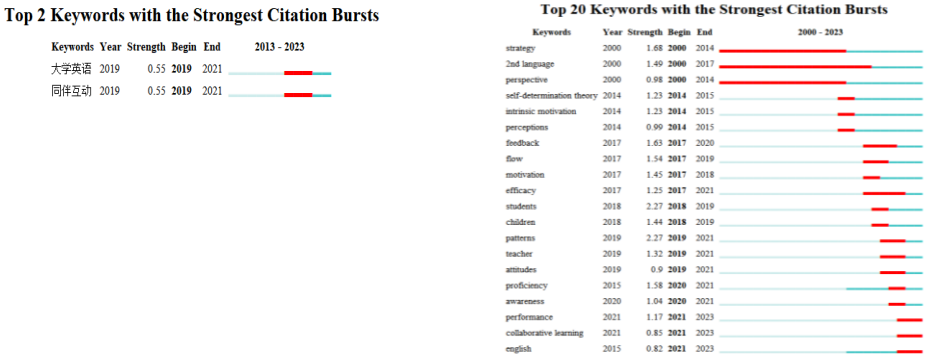

Figure 2: Keywords with the strongest citation bursts in CSSCI and SSCI journals from 2000 to 2023

College English and peer interaction were identified as hostspots in CSSCI journals, revealing the increasing attention on the impact of task types from 2019 to 2021. After manual retrieval, research on peer interaction has continued until 2023, with numerous Chinese scholars delving into its mechanism. However, studies in SSCI journals focused on collaborative learning, exploring the overall level of learning engagement within specific situations or tasks, such as writing or vocabulary learning.

Philip & Duchesne (2016) argued that the sub-dimensions of learning engagement included not only cognitive, behavioral, and emotional dimensions, but social factors[14]. Therefore, scholars have delved into the learning engagement within different contexts, concluding that learning engagement would affect the outcomes of interactive learning, which coincides with socio-cultural theory and ecological perspective emphasizing the interaction between individuals and the environment can trigger effective learning[15].

3.3 Research Subjects and Environments

As shown in Tables 3, most studies in SSCI journals mainly chose students/learners as participants, while few scholars also concentrated on the role of teachers in regulating learning engagement. However, only 2 studies in CSSCI journals investigated the relationship between teacher support and learning engagement.

English as foreign language occupies a dominant position in studies published in CSSCI and SSCI journals. One studies in CSSCI journals explored the internal mechanism of online learning engagement in French as a second foreign language, while studies in SSCI journals involved more languages, including French, Spanish, Chinese, German, and Japanese.

In addition, studies in CSSCI and SSCI journals both focused on foreign language teaching and learning at tertiary education. Besides, studies in SSCI journals covered foreign language learners at different ages, including middle school, primary school, and preschool children.

Additionally, the emergence of keywords such as “online environment” and “online learning” reflected the application of technology-powered education. Topics such as “flipped classroom”, “study abroad”, and “immersive” in Table 3 also received more attention from scholars in SSCI journals, while it remained under-explored in CSSCI journals.

Table 3: Key words of research subjects and environments in empirical studies in CSSCI and SSCI journals from 2000 to 2023

		CSSCI Journals		SSCI Journals	
		key word	frequency	key word	frequency
Research Subjects	Subjects	Students/learner	38	Student/learner	99
				Teacher	10
	Languages involved	English	37	English	87
		French	1	French	10
				Spanish	10
				Chinese	5
				German	5
				Japanese	2
Research Environments	Education levels	University	38	Higher education/ university/college	80
				Secondary/ high school	19
				Primary/ elementary school	11
				Children	3
	Environments	Network /Online environment	10	Online	9
				Flipped	3
				Study abroad	1
				Immersion	1

3.4 Research Methods

Key Words Cluster revealed that most studies in CSSCI and SSCI journals adopted descriptive analysis and correlational analysis as shown in Table 4. The research paradigms gradually diversified: the increasing number of qualitative studies, the decreasing amount of quantitative research, and more mixed-research design. The most commonly used data collection tools in CSSCI

and SSCI journals were questionnaires and interviews. Moreover, other data collection methods concluded different types of writing or speaking tasks, classroom observations, and reflective log. However, the data collection methods used in SSCI journals were more diverse, including stimulus recall, auditory thinking, and even electrocardiography to record learners' heart rate.

Besides, descriptive analysis was commonly used as the basic data analysis, followed by correlational analysis, structural equation modeling, analysis of variance, factor analysis, t-test, and regression analysis. However, structural equation modeling was used more frequently in CSSCI journals and analysis of variance (ANOVA/MANOVA) was used more frequently in SSCI journals. Other data analysis tools in SSCI journals, such as path analysis, latent profile analysis, and Q-method analysis did not receive equal attention in CSSCI journals.

Table 4: Keywords of research methods in empirical studies in CSSCI and SSCI journals from 2000 to 2023

	CSSCI Journals		SSCI Journals	
	key word	frequency	key word	frequency
Data collection	Questionnaire	26	Questionnaire(s)	52
	Interview	17	Interview(s)	47
	Learning tasks	10	Task(s)	38
	Classroom observation	2	Classroom observation	7
	Reflection log	1	Stimulated recalls	4
			Reflection	3
			Think-aloud protocol(s)	3
			Heart rate	1
Data analysis	Descriptive data analysis	16	Descriptive statistics	22
	Structure equation modeling	16	Correlational analysis	19
	Relevance test	14	ANOVA MANOVA	16
	Factor analysis	9	Factor analysis	9
	Regression analysis	5	Structural equation modeling	8
	Variance analysis	3	T-test	7
	T-test	2	Regression analysis	3
			Path analysis	3
			Latent profile analysis	1
			Q-methodology analysis	1

3.5 Theoretical Perspectives

As shown in Table 5, the theoretical perspectives shared in CSSCI and SSCI journals included positive psychology, self-determination theory, ecological perspective/ecological feeding theory,

complex dynamic systems theory, social cognitive theory, socio-cultural theory, and etc, which varied with different frequencies.

Positive psychology and its theories received widespread attention in CSSCI and SSCI journals, verifying the positive and emotional turns in the study of individual differences in second language learning. Broaden-and-build theory and control-value theory have boosted the understanding of the complex relationship between academic emotions and their "causes and consequences". Studies in SSCI journals have explored the relationship between emotion and learning engagement, while the impact of emotional experiences and interactive patterns on student emotional engagement in cooperative learning are often explored in studies in CSSCI journals, confirming the mediating and promoting effect of positive emotions on emotional engagement.

In addition, an ecological perspective was also adopted in CSSCI and SSCI journals. van Lier (2004) introduced the concept of "affordance" into the field of second language acquisition, underlining the relationship between learners and the environment[16]. Affordance arises from the process of learners' active participation. Therefore, studies in CSSCI and SSCI journals probed into the relationship between perceived affordance and learning engagement within diverse environments.

Besides, the complex dynamic systems theory was adopted by scholars in CSSCI and SSCI journals, which holds that second language acquisition is dynamic and sensitive to initial conditions, emphasizing the dynamic interaction between variables of individual differences.

As research in language teaching and learning proceed, more scholars have gradually realized the influences of social factors and cognitive factors[17]. Therefore, cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives are integrated to probe into the mechanism of learning engagement from a social cognitive perspective. Studies in SSCI journals adopted the social cognitive perspective to analyze impacts of teacher feedback on learner behavioral engagement, while these in CSSCI journals explored variation in engagement with peer feedback. Results showed that cognitive engagement with feedback was influenced by external and internal factors, including collaborative cooperation, learning goals, feedback quality, cognitive adaptation, psychological adaptation, and etc.

Table 5: Key words of the theoretical perspectives in empirical studies in CSSCI and SSCI journals from 2000 to 2023

CSSCI Journals		SSCI Journals	
key word	frequency	key word	frequency
Sociocultural theory	2	Self-determination theory	7
Self-determination theory	2	Positive psychology	2
Complex dynamic systems theory	1	An ecological approach	2
An ecological approach	1	Control-value theory	2
Affordance perception	1	Complex dynamic systems theory	1
Control-value Theory	1	Sociocultural theory	1
Broaden-and-build Theory	1	Social cognitive perspectives	1
Social cognitive Theory	1	Broaden-and-build theory	1
Positive psychology perspective	1	Flow theory	1

4. Future Research Prospects

Based on the above analysis of research topics, research subjects and environments, research methods, theoretical perspectives, and analysis of research hotspots, future empirical research on learning engagement in China could be improved from three aspects.

Focus on more diverse research subjects and environments. The interaction between individual

and the environment can trigger effective learning, more studies of learning engagement could be conducted at different education levels and in more classroom environments, such as the mechanism among teacher beliefs, teacher classroom emotions, teacher self-efficacy, and learning engagement, and the interaction between teacher feedback literacy and students' learning engagement with feedback. Studies could also be conducted within flipped classrooms, tracking the overall level of learning engagement in technology empowered foreign language teaching contexts, and how artificial intelligence boost learning engagement.

Innovate research topics and broaden research scopes. Compared with SSCI journals, fewer studies were published in CSSCI journals and research topics required further exploration, such as the variation of learning engagement in different feedback environments and the underlying reasons, and the dynamic changes of learning engagement in different learning tasks. In addition, how variables such as emotions, motivation, and self-regulation strategies affect learner engagement requires further exploration.

Adopt appropriate theoretical perspectives and research methods. The previous analysis manifested the value of socio-cultural theory, complex dynamic systems theory, an ecological theory/perspective, broaden-and-build theory, and control-value theory that originated from educational psychology for future research. In addition, more interdisciplinary theories could be introduced for a deeper understanding of learning engagement, such as social cognitive perspective, well-being theory, emotion regulation theory, and etc.

5. Conclusions

The study reviews empirical studies of learning engagement published in 13 SSCI journals and 13 CCSCI journals from 2000 to 2023 by the bibliometric analysis tool Citespace. After giving an overview of the annual publication status, the study examines research topics, subjects and environments, methods, and theoretical perspectives, the study deduces future research trends to promote the development of learning engagement in China.

References

[1] Reeve, J. (2012) A self-determination theory perspective on student engagement. In S. Christenson, A. Reschly & C. Wylie (eds.), Handbook of Research on Student Engagement. New York: Springer. 149-172.

[2] Furrer, C. and Skinner, E. (2003) Sense of relatedness as a factor in children's academic engagement and performance. Journal of educational psychology, 95, 148.

[3] Li, J., King, R. B. and Wang, C. (2022). Profiles of motivation and engagement in foreign language learning: associations with emotional factors, academic achievement, and demographic features. System, 108, 102820.

[4] Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C. and Paris, A. H. (2004) School engagement: potential of the concept, state of the evidence. Review of Educational Research, 74, 59-109.

[5] Dörnyei, Z., & Kormos, J. (2000) The role of individual and social variables in oral task performance. Language teaching research, 4, 275-300.

[6] Ellis, N. C. (2019) Essentials of a theory of language cognition. The Modern Language Journal, 103, 39-60.

[7] Li X. and Li Y. (2021) Empirical Study and Analysis of Foreign Learning Engagement Based on Systematic Literature Review. Modern Distance Education Research, 02, 73-83.

[8] Hiver, P., Al-Hoorie, A. H., Vitta, J. P. and Wu, J. (2024) Engagement in language learning: A systematic review of 20 years of research methods and definitions. Language Teaching Research, 28, 201-230.

[9] Gao, X. (Andy), Liao, Y. and Li, Y. (2013) Empirical studies on foreign language learning and teaching in China (2008-2011): a review of selected research. Language Teaching, 47, 56-79.

[10] Lei, L. and Qin, J. (2022) Research in foreign language teaching and learning in China (2012-2021). Language Teaching, 55, 506-532.

[11] Xu J. and Yang J. (2023) Comparative Analysis of Empirical Research on Foreign Language Education at Home and Abroad. Contemporary Foreign Language Studies, 02, 113-123.

[12] Hiver, P., Al-Hoorie, A. H., and Evans, R. (2021) Complex dynamic systems theory in language learning: a scoping review of 25 years of research. Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 44, 1-29.

[13] Reeve, J. and Lee, W. 2014. Students' classroom engagement produces longitudinal changes in classroom motivation. Journal of Educational Psychology, 106, 527-540.
[14] Philp, J. and Duchesne, S. (2016) Exploring engagement in tasks in the language classroom. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 36, 50-72.
[15] Lantolf, J. P. and Poehner, M. E. (2014) Sociocultural theory and the pedagogical imperative in L2 education: Vygotskian praxis and the research/practice divide. New York: Routledge.
[16] van Lier, L. (2004) The Ecology and Semiotics of Language Learning: A Sociocultural Perspective.New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
[17] Li, Z. and Liu, Y. (2023) Theorising language learning experience in LOTE motivation with PERMA: a positive psychology perspective. System, 112, 102975.