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A Review of Research on English Learning Engagement Among Tibetan Junior High School Students in a Tibetan-Mandarin-English Trilingual Environment

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Abstract: The general index of the quality of foreign-language teaching and learning is learning engagement. Tibetan junior high school students are in a special Tibetan-Mandarin-English trilingual learning environment, and due to the need for language switching, they are less engaged in English learning and show significant academic disparity. Most of the domestic studies have been conducted with samples of students from mainland China, and empirical research on Xizang junior high school students, especially concerning mediating mechanisms and comparisons between high-achieving and low-achieving groups, is still lacking. There is also a trend of focusing more on theoretical analysis rather than applying the results in practice at the local level. Review the main ideas, basic theories and previous research results in this paper; identify deficiencies in the present study; put forward new directions for research; provide a reference for further studies on integrated English education in junior high schools in ethnic minority areas.

Keywords: Trilingual environment; Tibetan junior high school students; Teacher support; English learning engagement; Self-efficacy; Foreign-language anxiety

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1. Introduction

From the perspective of positive psychology, learning engagement is no longer simply equated with the duration of study but is now understood as a composite psychological state that includes behavioral participation, emotional experiences, and cognitive effort; it serves as a key indicator for predicting academic performance [1]. Junior high school students in Xizang must manage the cognitive demands of acquiring three languages: Tibetan (L1), Mandarin (L2), and English (L3). English classes often have practical problems, such as students being reluctant to speak up, feeling anxious about difficulty, and having low participation;

there is a significant gap between high-achieving students and those who struggle with English learning [2].

Although external factors such as family and culture are difficult to change in the short term, teacher support can be adjusted by teachers based on their own circumstances in the classroom microenvironment to motivate students internally and help them learn foreign languages better. Although a large number of empirical studies on learning engagement in China today exist, most of these studies focus on primary and secondary school students in mainland China. Research on Tibetan trilingual learners has been relatively scarce; therefore, little is known about the psychological reasons for and ways to address difficulties in learning. Therefore, this paper will review related studies, summarize the results and deficiencies of previous research, and provide a theoretical basis for future empirical exploration in this area.

Research on the participation in English learning by Tibetan junior high school students can help improve their English grades. Many of these students need good grades in English for their future studies and jobs; now, being able to speak English well is required by universities and employers across China. A trilingual learning environment has been established, but the problems have not been solved by the current teaching methods, as these methods were designed for monolingual or bilingual learners. Students need to learn three different languages at the same time, and each one has a different structure and social function; therefore, the teaching plan should address all the difficulties these students face. Emotions and Motivation are also factors in the sense of engagement. If students encounter many difficulties in English repeatedly, they will feel frustrated with the subject and possibly lose interest in school altogether; thus, this problem may affect their overall academic performance. This paper explores how teacher support affects the motivation for learning English through academic self-efficacy and foreign language anxiety. The aim is to find intervention points that can reduce the difference between high-achieving students and those who struggle, and to promote more equitable educational results in Xizang.

2. Definition of core concepts

Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris [3] proposed the classic three-dimensional structure of learning engagement: Behavioural engagement refers to outward signs such as participation in class and completion of tasks; affective engagement is one's emotional state during learning, such as interest, a sense of achievement and anxiety; and cognitive engagement refers to the mental effort made in applying learning strategies and deep thinking. At the same time, Schaufeli and his colleagues have developed the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for Students (UWES-S). Localisation and revision were carried out by Fang, Shi and Zhang [4], and now it has been used in many studies on foreign language teaching at home and abroad. English learning engagement refers to the application of this idea in the area of foreign language education, which is the extent to which students are engaged in their English learning through behaviour, emotion and cognition.

Teacher support refers to students' own feelings about being cared for by teachers, including how they feel when receiving attention, understanding, respect and encouragement from teachers, which can be divided into emotional empathy, academic feedback and developmental support [5]. English self-efficacy refers to a student's belief in their own ability to learn English [6]; foreign language classroom anxiety specifically refers to communicative apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety in a foreign language environment [7,8]. The two ideas act as cognitive and emotional mediators between teacher support and learning motivation [5].

A Tibetan-Mandarin-English trilingual environment refers to a learning situation where Tibetan students

use Tibetan as their first language, Mandarin as their second, and English as their third foreign language. Multiple language transfer will increase the cognitive load on students, and those who struggle academically may be more prone to developing psychological problems such as a lack of self-efficacy and high anxiety [9].

First, we need to know how self-efficacy and foreign-language anxiety affect the trilingual learning environment before designing effective interventions. Interventions for monolingual and bilingual environments cannot be directly applied to trilingual classes. At the same time, when assessing teacher support, self-efficacy and learning engagement in these contexts, one should pay attention to cultural and linguistic factors that influence how Tibetan students understand and respond to the questionnaire items. Teacher support may have different connotations in Tibetan culture; traditionally, there has been a sense of respect and some distance between teachers and students, whereas in mainstream Chinese classrooms, it tends to be more egalitarian and interactive. Foreign language anxiety may also manifest differently among Tibetan students because English is a third language they learn primarily through formal education and have little opportunity for real-life application. Under these circumstances, the resulting anxiety patterns would be different from those of monolingual Chinese students learning English as a second language. If the above problems of concepts and measurements are not solved first, the empirical study will lack validity and culturally responsive interventions for Tibetan students will be unavailable.

3. Relevant theoretical foundations

The theoretical underpinnings of this review draw on four perspectives that, taken together, clarify how teacher support may shape English learning engagement among Tibetan students. Finn's Participation-Identification Model [10] describes a self-reinforcing cycle: Participation leads to success, success makes one feel part of the school, and this sense of belonging encourages further participation. When this cycle is broken, disengagement and alienation will occur simultaneously; this phenomenon aligns with the classroom withdrawal experienced by Tibetan students who struggle with English. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory adds a cognitive path. Behaviour is not directly caused by the environment; rather, it is regulated by self-efficacy beliefs. Support from teachers can help students gain confidence in their English study, thereby motivating them to learn more actively. Thus, self-efficacy functions as a cognitive link between teachers' behaviour and students' motivation.

The emotional dimension is captured by Pekrun's Control-Value Theory [11]. Achievement emotions depend on how much control students feel over a task and how much they value it. Supportive teaching can enhance both appraisals: Structure and Feedback enhance the sense of control; linking English to real-life goals increases its appeal. A negative classroom atmosphere will cause more anxiety and lower participation. Therefore, foreign language anxiety acts as an affective mediator. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory [12], teacher-student interaction takes place in the microsystem and is closely related to one's life at that time. The wider system of Tibetan students' families also includes language use in daily life, attitudes towards English among communities, and national policies affecting classrooms. However, the classroom is still the actual site for implementation. Together, the above theories propose a two-pathway model: teacher support affects engagement via both cognitive (self-efficacy) and emotional (foreign language anxiety) pathways.

4. Current situation of domestic and foreign studies

Factors influencing learning engagement are primarily categorized into three types: individual, family and

school. At the individual level, self-efficacy positively correlates with learning motivation [13]; however, negative emotions such as anxiety reduce the willingness to learn. At the family level, parenting style and parental expectations also affect students indirectly; however, they are difficult to change in practice. Teacher support at the school level is a relatively easy-to-manage factor that can be changed. Many studies have shown that when students feel supported by teachers, they are more motivated to study [14]. Longitudinal research has found that emotional support from teachers is positively associated with both behavioural and cognitive engagement among students, especially those with a low sense of academic self-worth [15].

Research abroad has shown that perceived teacher support positively correlates with students' participation in foreign language classes, and both self-efficacy and foreign language anxiety are related to this effect [12]. A sample of junior high school students from mainland China also verified this result. However, most of the previous research has only examined one mediating path and has not considered self-efficacy and foreign language anxiety as parallel dual mediators. A single mediator model may fail to capture the complexity of cognitive-emotional processes in foreign language learning and thus overlook the interaction among self-efficacy and anxiety that affects motivation. In addition, there are relatively few empirical studies on various groups of Tibetan junior high school students, such as high-achievers and low-achievers. Most previous research does not divide students into different ability groups for comparison and thus cannot provide specific countermeasures.

Research on English in Xizang regions is divided into theoretical and empirical studies. Theoretical literature accounts for a key proportion, highlighting practical issues such as negative transfer among the three languages, weak motivation, and pronounced English anxiety [16,17]; but, much of this consists of summaries of frontline teaching experiences and lacks empirical data to support these claims. The limited existing empirical studies mostly provide descriptive analyses of the overall sample, exhibiting key shortcomings: Most fall under the category of foreign language teaching research; there is a lack of quantitative studies focused on students who struggle with English in an inclusive education context; and most only explore the relationship among variables without developing tiered support plans for trilingual classrooms based on empirical evidence, thus failing to apply theoretical results to teaching practice.

Another deficiency in the current research on English learning in Xizang is a focus solely on problem description, such as low motivation, high anxiety and negative transfer, without providing solutions or conducting tests in actual classroom settings. Descriptive studies can show us why Tibetan students have been performing poorly. However, the area now requires intervention-oriented research to systematically investigate how various teaching methods and teacher-support measures actually work. For instance, one can determine whether explicit teaching of the similarities and differences among the three languages reduces negative transfer and increases interest. Determine whether the teacher training course has added new material on emotional support and positive reinforcement for students, and thus improved their sense of self-efficacy and willingness to participate in class. The voices of Tibetan students themselves are also largely absent from this body of research. Most of the previous studies have used only quantitative surveys and have neglected to conduct interviews or focus groups to learn about students' actual lives and feelings in a trilingual environment. Involve the students themselves in the study to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind changes in their behaviour and help plan future educational activities based on this knowledge [18].

5. Gaps, future directions, and conclusion

The literature reviewed above has established a solid theoretical framework for learning engagement and

confirmed the roles of teacher support, self-efficacy, and anxiety in shaping academic outcomes. Yet when it comes to Tibetan junior high school students in a trilingual environment, several gaps stand out. One is the limited generalizability of existing samples: Most of the results are based on data from mainland China, and whether the same model applies to trilingual cultural environments has not been verified. Another problem is that most research uses only one mediator; therefore, we do not know whether self-efficacy and anxiety work together, or if the paths are different for high-achievers and low-achievers. A third deficiency is disciplinary: underperforming ethnic minority students have received little attention in terms of special or inclusive education, and thus no individual-level, needs-based analysis has been conducted to guide differentiated teaching. Finally, there is a long-standing gap between theory and practice. Many theories have been proposed, but few practical applications or localised teaching materials have been developed.

Several directions for future study arise from the above deficiencies. First, expand the sample to include more trilingual ethnic minority students and validate the existing theories and measures specifically for Tibetan junior high school students, paying attention to differences among high-achieving and low-achieving students. A third is to explore the mediating path further; a multi-group structural equation model can be employed to determine if there are different paths at various levels of proficiency. Methodologically, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design will be used to conduct quantitative surveys first and then follow up with qualitative interviews to explore both general trends and their reasons in the local area. Finally, the application of theory should also be strengthened. Based on empirical evidence and tested through focus group discussions or pilot studies, stratified teacher support programmes have been developed to provide practical tools for frontline teachers and promote educational equity for ethnic minority students facing difficulties in learning English in Xizang's inclusive education system.

In short, this paper reviews the current state of knowledge on English learning engagement among Tibetan junior high school students and points out deficiencies in research that need to be addressed. Addressing the above deficiencies will expand the theoretical foundation for trilingual language education and offer practical references for enhancing English teaching and learning in ethnic minority areas across China [19].

Finally, research on the engagement of English learning among Tibetan junior high school students should aim to provide evidence-based, culturally sensitive teaching practices that front-line teachers can apply in various classrooms. To achieve this goal, researchers, teacher educators, school administrators and local communities need to cooperate continuously to ensure that the intervention is both theoretically sound and practically feasible. Strengthen the capacity of the education system in Xizang and organise professional training for teachers to meet students' emotional needs better during English classes. China's educational environment is changing rapidly; therefore, the national curriculum standards have been revised, and new technologies have begun to be applied in schools. In light of the above changes, future studies will also examine how they affect the English learning of Tibetan students. Only when considering all the factors at play in individuals, teaching and society can researchers help create an all-encompassing inclusive educational environment for Tibetan students to learn English effectively.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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