EFL LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF INTERLOCUTOR FAMILIARITY ON THEIR ENGAGEMENT IN L2 TASK-BASED INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT

Many EFL educators have reported difficulties in keeping learners engaged in task-based interaction. A factor identified as a challenge for learner engagement is the level of familiarity with the interlocutor. This factor affects language learning and social interaction, whereby a deeper familiarity would typically promote effective communication, which may lead to an improvement in language competence. To determine the extent of familiarity that supports meaningful interaction, this study investigated Chinese EFL learners' perceptions. Specifically, levels of familiarity were examined through cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. The context of this study was an L2 task-based assignment. Data were collected through a questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The findings indicated that interlocutor familiarity level had significant effects on learner engagement, especially in terms of social and cognitive dimensions. The study provided pedagogical implications for teachers to focus on the beneficial impact of interlocutor familiarity level on both social and cognitive dimensions of learner engagement and foster a supportive and conducive classroom environment to enhance peer interaction during interactive tasks.

Keywords: learner engagement; interlocutor familiarity; task-based interaction;

language competence

Introduction

Task-based interaction is widely used in foreign language classrooms (Xu & Zhang, 2019) since it gives learners time to process input and output opportunities to negotiate meaning and possibly resolve communication breakdowns (Loewen & Sato, 2018). Previous research suggests that learners' high engagement in L2 task-based interactions is likely to result in greater learning outcomes (Christenson et al., 2012; Pastushenkov et al., 2021; Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Storch, 2008). In addition, researchers indicate that learner engagement can be enhanced through deliberate interventions and specific teacher behaviours (Shernoff, 2013). In light of these, researchers and L2 educators have endeavoured to promote learner engagement in classroom activities through different pedagogical strategies, including training learners to use different interactional strategies (Fuji et al., 2016; Sato & Lyster, 2012) and manipulating task features (Baralt et al., 2016; Lambert et al., 2017) and task implementation (Dao & McDonough, 2018; Qiu & Lo, 2017). However, learners' relationship has been found to act as a filter for other factors (Sato & Ballinger, 2016), and learners' ability to benefit from peer interaction is greatly affected by the group or pair dynamics (Rouhshad & Storch, 2016). As such, interlocutor familiarity, as one of the decisive factors of learners' relationship, has received increasing attention in second language (L2) research (Dao et al., 2023; Pastushenkov et al., 2021; Sampson & Yoshida, 2021). While these studies have been helpful, they have focused primarily on understanding interlocutor familiarity on learners' interaction or learners' engagement in task-based interaction from the perspective of teachers or researchers. These studies have not considered the notion of familiarity or engagement from students' perspectives.

As Kumaravadivelu (1991) states, "the more we know about the students' personal approaches and personal perceptions, the better and more productive our intervention will be" (p. 107). To expand this area of research, this current study will investigate learners' perceptions of impact of interlocutor familiarity level on their cognitive, social and emotional engagement in task-based interaction. The results of the study would help L2 researchers and educators consider the importance of familiarity level on learners' engagement, which may shape how group tasks can be conducted.

Literature Review

Learner Engagement: Definition and Dimensions

Learners' engagement in task-based interaction attracted teachers' increased attention due to the widely held assumption that learners' high engagement in L2 task-based interactions tended to result in greater learning outcomes (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Task-based language teaching (TBLT) emphasises learning through the completion of meaningful tasks, promoting communication and interaction

among learners (Mulyadi et al., 2021). While early L2 research focused largely on learner engagement from a single dimension, including behavioural or cognitive aspect, subsequent L2 research has shifted to view learner engagement as a multidimensional construct. This was pioneered by Fredricks et al. (2004), who conceptualised engagement as a multifaceted construct, involving behavioural components such as participation, and aspects of emotion and cognition. In L2 task-based interaction, Svalberg (2009) proposed a model of engagement with language (EWL), which is "a cognitive, and/or affective, and/or social state and a process in which the learner is the agent and the language is the object and may be the vehicle (means of communication)" (p. 244). From these studies, cognitive engagement may be defined as learners' focused attention, alertness and mental effort. Affective engagement may be linked to willingness to engage, purposefulness, and autonomy. In contrast, social engagement may be defined in terms of interactiveness, support or scaffolding, and reactiveness or initiation of interaction (see also Baralt et al., 2016; Estaji et al., 2023; Svalberg, 2018).

Informed by educational psychology, Philp and Duchesne (2016, p. 51) define task engagement as "a state of learners' heightened attention and involvement" which can be manifested in four dimensions: cognitive, social, behavioural and emotional. Cognitive engagement refers to learners' sustained attention and mental effort, whereas emotional engagement refers to learners' feelings toward interaction, including both positive (e.g., enthusiasm, interest, enjoyment, willingness to communicate, feelings of connection) and negative (e.g., anxiety, frustration, boredom). Social engagement concerns learners' interactiveness, mutuality and reciprocity while behavioural engagement is perceived as learners' quantity of on-task talk (see also Dao et al., 2021; Lambert et al., 2017).

Following Philp and Duchesne's (2016) model of task engagement, the current study defines learner engagement across three dimensions, which are cognitive, social and emotional (Dao, 2021; Dao & McDonough, 2018). Cognitive engagement is operationalised as learners' sustained attention to language features and mental effort and is measured through their attention to language and task content. Social engagement is operationalised as the degree of reciprocity and mutuality between learners during task-based interaction. As such, social engagement is measured by learners' mutual help and perceived collaboration. Emotional engagement is operationalised as both positive feelings (e.g., excitement, interest and enjoyment in the topic or the task) and negative feelings (e.g., anxiety, frustration and boredom in the topic or the task) (Dao & McDonough, 2018; Mercer, 2019; Yoshida, 2022).

Learner Engagement With Task

It is widely accepted that when learners are highly engaged in L2 task-based interactions, they are more likely to achieve better learning outcomes (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Studies on learner engagement have primarily focused on language learning tasks, revealing that one or more engagement components tend to increase during task performance when the content was learner-generated (Lambert et al., 2017), when tasks are designed or selected by learners (Dao, 2021; Xu et al., 2019), and when task topics are learner-preferred or familiar (Aubrey, 2022; Phung, 2017;

Qiu & Lo, 2017).

Lambert et al.'s (2017) study with 32 Japanese learners showed that learner-generated content tasks led to more negotiation moves, more backchannels, and more positive affect than teacher-generated tasks. Xu et al. (2019), working with 78 Chinese freshmen, found that a decision-making task elicited more dialogue, stronger interaction, and was perceived as more interesting and enjoyable than a free discussion task. Similarly, Dao's (2021) study with 32 Vietnamese undergraduates reported that a convergent decision-making task prompted more idea units, more LREs, and more responsiveness instances than a divergent opinion-exchange task, indicating higher cognitive and social engagement. Phung (2017) further observed that learners showed higher cognitive engagement, including more negotiation for meaning and form, when performing preferred tasks. Qiu and Lo (2017), in a study with 60 Chinese EFL students, found greater cognitive engagement and more positive affective responses when learners completed tasks on familiar topics rather than unfamiliar ones. In line with this, Aubrey's (2022) longitudinal study of 37 Japanese undergraduates showed that task characteristics such as task nature and purpose, task repetition, and task familiarity were associated with high levels of task engagement.

Although previous studies provided strong evidence for the impact of task conditions on fostering engagement, few of them were conducted in a Chinese classroom context and thus, their findings may not fully account for the variations in learner engagement. Despite the significant role of teaching/learning context in shaping learners' task engagement (Storch & Sato, 2020), the influence of sociocultural contextual factors related to learners must always be considered.

Impact of Interlocutor Familiarity on Learner Engagement

Learners' motivation and collaboration in conversational interactions can differ in various ways depending on their interlocutors (Lee & Young-A, 2019; McDonough et al., 2022). In a theoretical review of small group work settings, Dörnyei (1997) justified the importance of creating a team among language learners to promote interlocutor familiarity to help students build relations based on trust and assistance. When working with a familiar interlocutor, learners may feel more comfortable, which, in turn, generates less anxiety, leading to more enhanced performances (Cao & Philp, 2006; O'Sullivan, 2002). Findings of Dao et al.'s (2021) research suggested familiar dyads had significantly higher scores on all types of engagement (e.g., cognitive, social, and emotional), showing the benefits of pairing learners who were familiar with each other for facilitating learner engagement.

Fan and Xu's (2021) study on 60 Chinese undergraduate students also indicated that familiar dyads showed higher engagement in cognitive, social and emotional dimensions, compared to unfamiliar dyads. In addition, interlocutor familiarity could provide learners with a sense of security as familiar interlocutors were more willing to signal non-understanding and negotiate through discourse features, such as confirmation checks and clarification requests (Lee, 2004). Pastushenkov (2021) reported that familiar dyads (group of two learners) tended to engage more in language discussion and produced more language related episodes (LREs). Furthermore, interlocutor familiarity had been linked to the way feedback was

provided. Mackey (2012) proposed that familiarity between interlocutors might have an influence on how learners provide feedback and indicate non-understanding.

Nonetheless, familiar peer pairing did not necessarily bring positive results since there may have been considerable amount of off-task behaviour among students working together (Mozaffari, 2016). Ockey et al. (2013) found no significant differences between scores in familiar and unfamiliar groups in terms of pronunciation, fluency, lexis and grammar, and communication skills. Similarly, Lee and Young-A (2019) reported no significant influence of familiarity on the numbers of LREs produced. Furthermore, Philp et al. (2010) observed that unfamiliarity could also help some student focus on form, despite feelings of discomfort. These contradictory findings highlighted the complexity of the influence of interlocutor familiarity level on learner engagement, which highlighted the need for further investigation.

Based on Pastushenkov et al. (2021), familiarity was operationalised as whether learners in each dyad (a) were friends and classmates, or (b) had previously interacted with each other. In contrast, unfamiliarity was defined as learners in each dyad (a) knew this person but had never worked together before, or (b) did not know this person and had never worked together before. In the current study, "familiarity" refers to the extent to which learners have previously interacted and established a rapport with their interlocutor, fostering a sense of comfort and mutual understanding. "Unfamiliarity", on the other hand, denotes a lack of prior interaction or limited acquaintance, which may introduce a degree of uncertainty and formality in the interaction.

Method of Study

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine how learners perceived the impact of interlocutor familiarity level on their cognitive, social and emotional engagement in task-based interaction. As the focus of this study was on learner engagement at the level of task, employed Philp and Duchesne's (2016) framework of task engagement was employed. Learner engagement was operationalised as learners' involvement and participation in peer interaction as seen through cognitive, social and emotional dimensions. The mixed-methods approach comprised a questionnaire that collected students' perceptions on peer familiarity with learning engagement across three dimensions (cognitive, social, and emotional). Subsequently, a semi-structured interview was conducted to allow participants to elaborate on their perceptions regarding the impact of interlocutor familiarity level on their engagement in completing the assigned task.

Participants

The participants of this study were 45 first-year Chinese EFL undergraduates, with an average age of 19 years old, majoring in different disciplines (e.g., international trade, E-commerce, marketing). While the participants took other courses, they were enrolled in the same English class taught by the teacher who is the first researcher. Based on the participants' English scores from the College Entrance Examination, they were at a similar English language proficiency level. To determine an appropriate

sample size, G*Power (Ryan, 2013) software was utilised to conduct a power analysis for a one-way ANOVA, assuming a medium effect size (Cohen's f=0.25), an alpha level of 0.05, and two groups (familiar and unfamiliar dyads). The calculated power was 0.83, indicating that a sample size of 45 participants (see Dao & McDonough, 2018) is sufficient for detecting significant differences. Demographic information for all participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information on the Participants

Measures	Items	Demographic information	Percentage
Age		Mean=19	
Gender	Male	20	44%
	Female	25	56%
English Proficiency level	English scores of College Entrance Examination (150 points in total)	Mean=107.13 (equivalent to an IELTS Band 4.5)	
Discipline	Electronic Commerce	20	44%
	International Trade	14	31%
	Marketing	11	25%

Study Design and Data Collection

Out of 45 participants, 15 were selected to be core learners (see Pastushenkov et al., 2021). These core learners were selected by the first author based on their active participation in class. Each core learner chose a peer he or she perceived as either familiar or unfamiliar. Based on this setup, 30 dyads were formed (see Dao & McDonough, 2018, for the same pairing method).

The task chosen for this study was a picture-sequencing task, a task commonly used in second language research due to its effectiveness in eliciting rich interaction among learners (Dao et al., 2021). The task consisted of six different pictures depicting a series of activities (see Appendix 1). Task pictures were controlled for the potential impact of the topic and content. All the versions of the task pictures featured similar topics and depicted similar activities in a sequence. The task was implemented in a controlled classroom setting during the middle of the second semester (week 8). At this point, the participants already interacted with their classmates, allowing for a clear distinction between familiar and unfamiliar peers. Participants in each dyad were instructed to interact with each other to describe and sequence the six pictures. Each core learner first completed the first task with a familiar interlocutor, followed by a second task with an unfamiliar interlocutor. Both tasks were audio recorded by the participants themselves using their own mobile phones.

After completing the picture-sequencing task, all participants were asked to complete a five-point Likert scale self-report engagement questionnaire from Dao et al. (2021) through Wenjuanxing (a professional online questionnaire survey platform). The questionnaire consisted of three sections (cognitive, social and emotional

engagement), with each section containing eight items. Participants were required to choose a response ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree". Items related to cognitive engagement focused on learners' self-reported attention to each other's language issues, attention to each other's opinions and contribution to task completion, justification of opinions, provision of ideas, and elaboration of ideas. Social engagement items addressed learners' involvement, collaboration, and responsiveness to each other's opinions and language problems. As for emotional engagement, items addressed learners' perceived interest, excitement, contentment, satisfaction, boredom, annoyance, discouragement and frustration during interaction. The questionnaire items were simplified and translated into Chinese to ensure comprehensibility for participants with developing English proficiency.

The adapted survey was validated through a pilot study involving 15 Chinese EFL undergraduates, aged between 18 and 20. The participants for the pilot study were selected through convenience sampling, as the researcher was also their instructor. This approach enabled quick feedback on the questionnaire and helped to refine ambiguous items and ensured clarity. As a result of the pilot test, several revisions were made to the questionnaire. For instance, the item "I attended to my own language issues during the interaction" was modified to "I paid attention to my own grammar and vocabulary during the interaction" to better align with the focus of the study on language learning. "I elaborated my ideas/opinions during the interaction" was changed to "I provided detailed explanations of my ideas/opinions during the interaction" based on participants' feedback.

A follow-up semi-structured interview with core learners was conducted after the task (Dao et al., 2021; Fan & Xu, 2021). This provided additional data to enrich the questionnaire findings and offered deeper insight into how interlocutor familiarity influenced learner engagement (Ruslin et al., 2022). The interview comprised five open-ended questions on learners' perceptions of their engagement with both a familiar and an unfamiliar interlocutor during the task (see Appendix 2). The research team reviewed the questions to ensure alignment with the study objectives and piloted them with five of the 15 core learners to check clarity (see Whitehead, 2016). Each 10-minute interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. To support comprehension, the questions were translated from English into Mandarin by a qualified translator, and participants could respond in English, Mandarin, or a combination of both. Mandarin responses were translated into English and then back-translated into Mandarin by two translators, one a native English speaker fluent in Mandarin and the other a native Mandarin speaker fluent in English. The research team compared the original Mandarin, the English translation, and the back-translated Mandarin, resolving any discrepancies to ensure equivalence of the English and Chinese versions.

Data Analysis

To investigate the perceived impact of interlocutor familiarity level on learners' engagement in task-based interaction, normalised quantitative scores for each dimension of learner engagement produced from the self-report questionnaire were compared using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data from the semi-structured

interviews was analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The entire dataset was first reviewed independently by the first and the third authors to identify and highlight segments that contain participants' comments about the impact of interlocutor familiarity level on their engagement. These highlighted segments were re-examined and initial codes were created based on key words and concepts. Subsequently, the codes were compared between the two independent coders (the two authors) to reach an agreement and ensure coding consistency. Next, similar codes were organised into potential themes. Coding examples of learner engagement are as follows:

Table 2

Coding Scheme of Learner Engagement

Dimension	Evidence	Example
Cognitive	Attention to language features	This progress could improve our spoken English.
	Mental effort (Task-related discussion)	We will discuss more to reach an agreement.
Social	Instances of mutual help	There was more mutual help during the communication process.
	Instances of collaborative interaction	The communication was more smooth.
Emotional	Positive emotions (comfort, interest, ease)	I felt more comfortable when interacting with a familiar partner.
	Negative emotions (anxiety, worry, restraint)	I was worried about making grammatical mistakes.

Findings

Learner Engagement in Task-based Interaction by Familiarity Level

To investigate how interlocutor familiarity affected learner engagement in task-based interaction, self-reported scores for the dimensions of engagement for both dyads were calculated. Descriptive statistics of raw and normalised scores of learner engagement per dyad in each dimension are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3

Participants' Perceptions on Engagement by Familiarity Level

Dimensions	Indicators	Familiar		Unfamiliar	
	Positive Emotion	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
Emotional engagement	1. I felt interested while I was doing the task.	3.65	1.18	3.30	1.17
	2. I felt excited while I was doing the task.	3.70	1.08	3.40	1.05
	3. I felt contented while I was doing the task.	3.90	0.97	3.50	1.15
	4. I felt satisfied with how well I completed the task.	3.90	1.02	3.55	1.15
	Negative Emotion				
	5. I felt bored while I was doing the task.	2.20	0.95	2.15	0.81
	6. I felt annoyed while I was doing the task.	2.15	0.99	2.45	0.76
	7. I felt discouraged while I was doing the task.	2.15	0.99	2.10	0.72
	8. I felt frustrated while I was doing the task.	2.05	0.94	2.15	0.67
Social Engagement	***Perceived Collaboration***				
	9. I involved my partner during the interaction.	4.30	0.98	3.65	1.27
	10. I felt my partner involved me during the interaction.	4.10	1.07	3.80	1.11
	11. I collaborated with my partner during the interaction.	4.30	0.98	3.90	1.12
	12. I felt my partner collaborated with me during the interaction.	4.35	0.88	3.85	0.88
	Mutual Help				
	13. I responded to my partners' opinions during the interaction.	4.35	0.81	3.80	1.06
	14. I felt my partner responded to my opinions during the interaction.	4.40	0.60	3.85	1.09
	15. I helped my partner with language problems during the interaction.	4.25	0.64	3.60	1.19
	16. My partner helped me with language problems.	4.10	0.85	3.80	1.06
Cognitive Engagement	***Attention to Language***				
	17.I paid attention to my own grammar and vocabulary during the interaction.	4.05	0.89	3.60	1.10
	18.I paid attention to my partner's grammar and vocabulary during the interaction.	4.05	0.69	3.45	1.05

19. I provided feedback on my partner's language issues during the interaction.	4.05	0.89	3.65	0.88
20. My partner provided feedback on my language issues.	4.1	0.85	3.45	0.89
Attention to Task Content				
21. I thought hard about my partner's contributing opinions during the interaction.	4.20	0.62	3.75	0.91
22. I always justified my opinions during the interaction.	3.90	0.85	3.50	0.95
23. I provided a lot of ideas to contribute to the task.	4.05	0.60	3.40	0.88
24. I provided detailed explanations of my ideas/ opinions during the interaction.	4.00	0.79	3.55	0.89

Note: M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

A one-tailed ANOVA analysis was also conducted and results showed that the level of learner engagement in the familiar dyads was significantly higher than that in unfamiliar dyads (p = .03), with a medium effect size (d = .56).

Table 4

Univariate Tests Results: Interlocutor Familiarity and Indictors of Learner Engagement

Dimensions	Indicators	Group	M	SD	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Emotional	Positive Emotion	Familiar	3.79	1.05	0.657	.421	.011
		Unfamiliar	3.44	1.11			
	Negative Emotion	Familiar	2.14	0.95	0.084	.773	.001
		Unfamiliar	2.21	0.74			
Social	Perceived Collaboration	Familiar	4.26	0.96	5.126	.027	.081
		Unfamiliar	3.80	1.08			
	Mutual Help	Familiar	4.28	0.73	6.463	.014	.100
		Unfamiliar	3.76	1.08			
Cognitive	Attention to Language	Familiar	4.06	0.82	5.541	.022	.087
		Unfamiliar	3.54	0.97			
	Attention to Content	Familiar	4.04	0.72	4.661	.035	.074
		Unfamiliar	3.55	0.90			

By comparing the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) values of each

indicator for the familiar and unfamiliar dyads in Table 4, it can be seen that familiarity has an impact on six indicators of learner engagement: attention to language, attention to task content, perceived collaboration, mutual help, positive emotion and negative emotion. From the perspective of the three dimensions of engagement, in both familiar and unfamiliar groups (see Table 4), among the total scores of the three dimensions of learner engagement, the top two are social engagement and cognitive engagement. The scores for emotional engagement in both groups are significantly lower than the other two dimensions. More specifically, follow-up univariate analyses to examine the effect of familiarity with partners on learner engagement showed significant differences on four measures of learner engagement: perceived collaboration, mutual help, attention to language and attention to content (see Table 4).

Student Engagement Experiences of Interlocutor Familiarity

The qualitative findings indicated that interlocutor familiarity had a complex impact, where different engagement dimensions were at play. For instance, when asked whether they preferred working with a familiar or an unfamiliar partner, most participants claimed that it was more efficient to work with a familiar partner. Excerpt 1 from a core learner's semi-structured interview responses illustrated the perceived benefits of working with a familiar interlocutor in the L2 task-based interaction. The complexity of dimensions may be referred to in the excerpts below, where the codes are indicated. Of the 15 interviews analysed, approximately 60% of the responses were given in Mandarin. All the illustrative excerpts selected for this paper were translated from Mandarin.

> **Excerpt 1**
> I don't mind interacting with an unfamiliar partner. But if I have a choice, I'd rather work with a familiar partner. When working with a familiar partner, there was more mutual help [social engagement] during the communication process, and the communication was more smooth [social engagement]. That is, I needn't worry about making language and vocabulary mistakes and can speak more freely [positive emotional engagement]. Meanwhile, we were comfortable [positive emotional engagement] and had a better understanding of each other [social engagement] when interacting with a familiar partner, which made it easier to complete the task [cognitive engagement]. However, I felt restrained [negative emotional engagement] when talking with an unfamiliar partner because I was anxious about making language mistakes or having a different opinion [negative emotional engagement], which prevented me from focusing on the task [cognitive engagement]. But I provided more help [social engagement] to unfamiliar partner because I was more familiar with the task after completing the similar task with a familiar partner.

In Excerpt 1, the core learner pointed out the level of familiarity with a partner affected how she expressed herself and whether she was able to stay focused on the task. When paired with a familiar partner, she felt relaxed and completed the task efficiently, whereas she felt anxious and was hesitant to express herself, which

hindered her performance when paired with an unfamiliar partner. Another learner's response in Excerpt 2 also indicated the impact of familiarity level on learner engagement, suggesting that the process of interacting with a familiar interlocutor could enhance their friendship as well as improve her spoken English. These results supported the findings of the quantitative analyses reported above, indicating that interlocutor familiarity significantly affected learners' cognitive and social engagement.

Excerpt 2

I felt more comfortable positive emotional engagement, spoke more freely, and performed better cognitive engagement when interacting with a familiar partner. I had to watch my words cognitive engagement when interacting with an unfamiliar partner because I was worried about negative emotional engagement making grammatical mistakes. On the other hand, I was trying not to embarrass the other person by pointing out their mistakes. It is interesting positive emotional engagement to work with a familiar partner during the task. At the same time, this process can enhance the friendship social engagement between us and improve our spoken English cognitive engagement.

In contrast, two other learners reported the opposite experiences, which were reflected in the semi-structured interview responses in Excerpt 3 and 4.

Excerpt 3

In comparison to a familiar partner, I prefer to work with an unfamiliar partner positive emotional engagement. When paired with an unfamiliar partner, I can get more new ideas and hear different voices cognitive engagement from the partner because we are strangers and have little common experiences. And we will have more communication social engagement and discuss more cognitive engagement together to reach an agreement. It is helpful to finish the task cognitive engagement. However, when I work with a familiar partner, we may wander off to chat or do things that aren't related to the task since we are good friends and there is always something to talk about.

Excerpt 3 indicated that working with an unfamiliar partner facilitated learner's social and cognitive engagement (e.g., "get more new ideas", "discuss them together"). In contrast, interaction with a familiar partner resulted in interruptions through casual conversation between friends. Moreover, as shown in Excerpt 4, the learner did not feel embarrassed to speak English or express herself when working with an unfamiliar partner.

Excerpt 4

Familiarity level with partners had little influence on my engagement with task. No matter who I am paired with, I'll try my best to get the job done. cognitive engagement I prefer to work with an unfamiliar partner. positive emotional engagement I feel less embarrassed positive emotional engagement to speak English or show myself with an unfamiliar partner than with a familiar one. Besides, I'd like to

communicate with different people, [social engagement] and I don't want to establish a fixed collaborative relationship with the same person.

The findings from the semi-structured interviews highlighted the impact of interlocutor familiarity level on learner engagement. While many participants expressed a preference for working with familiar partners due to increased comfort, reduced anxiety, and enhanced mutual understanding, others found greater cognitive, social and positive emotional engagement when paired with unfamiliar partners, benefiting from diverse perspectives and structured discussions. Additionally, some learners reported that interlocutor familiarity level had little influence on their engagement, emphasizing personal adaptability and task commitment, which was consistent with the quantitative findings that showed only a slight difference in emotional engagement between familiar and unfamiliar dyads. These varying responses suggested that familiarity level influenced engagement in multiple dimensions, shaped by individual differences and the specific learning context.

Discussion

This study investigated EFL learners' perceptions about the impact of interlocutor familiarity level on their cognitive, social and emotional engagement in L2 task-based interaction. The quantitative data results revealed that familiar dyads scored significantly higher on social engagement (e.g., perceived collaboration and mutual help) and cognitive engagement (e.g., attention to language and task content), and slightly higher on emotional engagement (e.g., positive emotion). The findings suggest that familiar dyads foster better communication and deeper mutual understanding. As anticipated, learners felt more comfortable communicating with familiar classmates rather than unfamiliar ones (Cao & Philp, 2006), provided and received more support during the L2 task-based interaction (Dao, 2021) and were better able to focus on their performance and task completion without being distracted by concerns about their partner's perceptions (Poteau, 2017).

Prior research suggested that face-losing issue hindered learners' communication with their partners in peer interaction (Xu & Cao, 2012). As shown in Excerpt 1, the core learner explained she was hesitant to express herself because she was anxious about making mistakes or embarrassing the partner by pointing out her mistakes. This was inconsistent with the questionnaire responses which showed that there was little difference in emotional engagement between the two groups. The unfamiliar group scored slightly higher on negative emotions, suggesting that negative emotions may not be a major factor in learner engagement. Instead, positive emotional experiences and social interactions played a more critical role in promoting learner engagement.

However, the interviews showed that not all learners preferred interacting with familiar partners. For some working with an unfamiliar peer was more conducive to social and cognitive engagement since. Working with unfamiliar peers could offer more new ideas (cognitive engagement), encourage open communication and deeper discussion (social engagement) to fulfil the task. This finding aligns with Fan and Xu's (2021) finding that unfamiliar groups provided more feedback than familiar ones, and

unfamiliarity can also help some students to focus on form, despite feelings of discomfort (Philp et al., 2010). In contrast, close friends are likely to have small talk during the interaction, which can distract from the task. In addition, Mozaffari (2016) research found that familiarity can affect learner engagement negatively, such as leading to more digressions.

The results highlighted the significance of the social dimension in learner engagement, a finding that is particularly important in the Chinese educational context. Chinese educational practices have traditionally emphasised the cognitive dimension in second language teaching and learning (Sun & Zhang, 2021). The cultural values emphasised in China are collectivism and harmony (Rublik, 2018). Within this cultural context, social interactions and relationships play a crucial role in shaping individual identity and learning experiences. Learners at this proficiency level are often more aware of their language limitations and may be especially sensitive to feedback and interactional dynamics. However, the findings of the present study suggest that students themselves may value different elements. As young adults, their engagement levels may be influenced by a developmental stage characterised by a strong need for social interaction and a desire to form meaningful connections. This highlights the importance of foregrounding the social dimension in language learning, particularly in an educational environment such as China's, where it may be undervalued.

Conclusion

This study examined how interlocutor familiarity shapes learners' cognitive, social and emotional engagement in L2 task-based interactions. Using a mixed-methods design, 45 Chinese EFL learners completed a self-report engagement questionnaire and took part in semi-structured interviews. Findings indicate that familiar partners tend to lower anxiety and increase comfort, which can support collaboration and promote higher engagement. At the same time, working with unfamiliar interlocutors appeared to prompt more feedback and idea generation, suggesting benefits for cognitive flexibility and exposure to new perspectives. Pedagogically, teachers may wish to balance stable, familiar pairings with periodic partner rotation, supported by activities that build rapport and encourage active collaboration and feedback. As the participants shared similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds in an EFL context, the generalisability of the findings is limited. Future research should recruit more diverse samples and employ longitudinal designs to trace how evolving familiarity shapes learner engagement over time.

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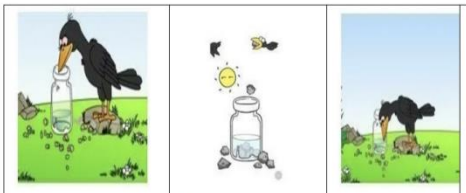
Appendix 1

Picture Sequencing Tasks

Set 1



Set 2

Appendix 2

Interview Questions

1. Does working with a familiar partner affect your level of engagement in the task? (与熟悉的同伴搭档会影响你在任务中的参与度吗？)

2. Does working with an unfamiliar partner affect your level of engagement in the task? (与不熟悉的同伴搭档会影响你在任务中的参与度吗？)

3. If you had to choose, would you prefer to work with a familiar or an unfamiliar partner? Why? (如果只能二选一，你更愿意与熟悉的同伴还是不熟悉的同伴搭档？为什么？)

4. In future group work, would you like to work with this familiar partner again? Give your reasons. (下一次小组活动时，你还愿意继续与这位熟悉的同伴搭档吗？请给出肯定或否定的理由。)

5. In future group work, would you like to work with this unfamiliar partner again? Give your reasons. (下一次小组活动时，你还愿意继续与这位不熟悉的同伴搭档吗？请给出肯定或否定的理由。)