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Effects of data driven learning approach on EFL learners' speaking engagement

Efectos del enfoque de aprendizaje basado en datos en la participación oral de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine students' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement in learning to speak through a data-driven learning approach. The participants in this study were 15 undergraduate EFL students at Mekdela Amba University in Ethiopia. In the intervention, which lasted for six weeks, the students were instructed to speak via a data-driven learning approach. The data were collected through self-report surveys and reflective journals. The findings obtained from the self-report survey on the three dimensions of engagement showed that the behavioural engagement score (t (14) = 8.454, p = 0.000, MD = 1.00), the cognitive engagement score (t (14) = 8.508, p = 0.000, MD = 1.296), and the emotional engagement score (t (14) = 13.759, p = 0.000, MD = 1.593) were found to be greater than the hypothesized mean score, and in all cases the difference were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Moreover, the reflective journal findings showed that students engaged positively across the three dimensions of engagement: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. Finally, in light of the results, it was recommended that a data-driven learning approach should be included in EFL speaking instruction to augment learners' speaking engagement.

Keywords: data-driven learning, speaking skills, behavioural engagements, emotional engagements, cognitive engagements

Introduction

Learning demands active involvement from students, and action is the defining characteristic of engagement (Mercer, 2019). Thus, a data-driven learning approach offers learners an opportunity to enhance their engagement in language learning. By providing authentic language data, DDL encourages learners to actively explore language data, making the learning process more engaging. In the context of language instruction, engagement refers to the amount and type of involvement learners have in a language-learning task or activity. Active learners participate more in various tasks, practice learning outside of the classroom, and spend more time on tasks both inside and outside of the classroom. According to Dixson (2015, p. 2), "Students' engagement is the extent to which students are actively engaged by thinking, talking, and interacting with the course's content, the other students in the course, and the instructor".

Dimensions of engagement

Fredricks et al. (2004) proposed a three-dimensional model of engagement: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Engagement involves these dimensions to actively involve students in the teaching and learning process. Behavioural engagement refers to the learners' actual participation and on-task behaviour (Zare et al., 2024). It is also related to the quantity and quality of active participation. Cognitive engagement, on the other hand, refers to the mental activity students engage in while learning (Zare et al., 2024). It involves attention and mental effort in completing a task (Reeve, 2012). Emotional engagement concerns the affective emotions/attitudes towards the task at hand (Zare et al., 2024). Positive emotions (excitement, enjoyment) indicate engagement, while negative emotions (boredom, anxiety, frustration) suggest disengagement (Mercer, 2019).

Data-driven learning (DDL)

Data-driven learning (DDL) is an approach which uses a corpus for classroom practices and language learning. The term 'data-driven learning' (DDL) was first introduced by Johns (1991). According to the author, the DDL approach uses computer-generated concordance outputs to help learners explore the regularities of patterning and develop activities and exercises.

Since its advent, scholars have used different terms to describe it. For example, 'classroom concordancing' (Johns, 1991), and 'corpus-based learning' and 'corpus consultation' (Boulton, 2017). In this study, however, DDL refers to the use of authentic language data from corpora for pedagogical purposes. This pedagogical approach

exposed learners to a wide range of well-organized, targeted written and spoken texts for English language teaching. It has been used as a teaching and learning approach for English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction for learners at different proficiency levels (Mizumoto, 2023; Zare & Delavar, 2022).

Theoretical underpinnings of the DDL approach

The DDL approach has Constructivism, the Noticing Hypothesis, and Usage-Based Theories as its theoretical basis (Flowerdew, 2015). DDL aligns with constructivist principles by promoting active engagement with authentic materials (corpora) and encouraging learners to construct their L2 knowledge through personal exploration of linguistic data (Flowerdew, 2015).

The noticing hypothesis suggests that language learning is improved through noticing and awareness (Schmidt, 2001). DDL supports this by providing learners and teachers with access to a large volume of target language features, which facilitates noticing.

The usage-based theory holds that language is acquired by analyzing real language data in authentic settings to identify recurrent patterns (Tomasello, 2003). DDL supports this by exposing learners to sufficient, authentic use of the target language, and instruction grounded in corpora is based on this documented authentic usage (Dolgova & Tyler, 2019).

DDL and engagement

Research shows that DDL requires learners' cognitive engagement in tasks that demand the activation of higher-order cognitive skills (O'Sullivan, 2007). However, the connection between DDL and cognitive engagement has not been studied (O'Keeffe, 2021). Regarding emotional engagement, previous research shows that incorporating a DDL approach can foster language learners' positive emotions (Zare et al., 2022). Social engagement involves negotiating and collaborating with peers and the teacher. Research indicates that DDL leads learners to higher levels of social engagement during form-focused episodes (O'Keeffe, 2021).

In language instruction, engagement is an important concern because without students' active involvement in the teaching-learning process, educational objectives cannot be achieved (Birhan & Nurie, 2024). Although there seems to be a strong connection between DDL and engagement, empirical studies in this area are scarce. In particular, no empirical study has been conducted on learners' speaking engagement in the data-driven learning approach. Accordingly, this study examined the effects of data-driven learning on EFL learners' engagement in speaking. To attain this objective, the study formulated the following research question:

Does the DDL approach affect undergraduate EFL learners' engagement in academic speaking?

Research methodology

Research setting and participants

The researchers used convenience sampling to recruit participants. Accordingly, fourth-year undergraduate EFL learners of Mekdela Amba University who were registered for the course 'Seminar on Selected Topics' in the academic year 2023 were selected. A total of 15 participants were included in the study. The sample consisted of 11 males and 4 females. The participants were from diverse L1 backgrounds. They had exposure to English only through formal education, and they used English to study undergraduate courses. The intact group was used directly in the research because the study employed a quasi-experimental design that relies on intact-group randomization (Creswell, 2012).

Data collection instruments

Self-report survey

In this study, the level of the participants' engagement during instruction of academic speaking using the DDL approach was measured using a self-report survey. The self-report survey consisted of 27 items: 8 focused on behavioural engagement, 11 on emotional engagement, and 8 on cognitive engagement. These items were prepared using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 5 to 1 (5=always; 4=usually; 3=sometimes; 2=rarely; 1=never). Participants were asked to complete the survey to examine their levels of engagement, and they were directed to select the responses that best described them.

The development of this instrument passed through the following procedures. First, the items were adapted from Fredricks et al. (2004) into three sub-constructs (behavioural engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement). Second, the set of engagement self-report survey items was given to Psychology scholars to indicate which items belonged to the appropriate sub-construct. Finally, based on the scholars' judgments, the self-report survey questionnaire was developed under three sub-constructs. Based on the scholars' judgments, the self-report survey questionnaire was developed under three sub-constructs and checked for reliability. The Cronbach's alpha test of reliability ($\alpha = .819$) indicates that the self-report survey questionnaire was reliable.

Students' reflective journals

The reflective journals were used to collect qualitative data about students' feelings, thoughts, and reflections on DDL instruction. The students' reflective journals were collected throughout the intervention to gain data on students' reactions while working on the corpus-based DDL tasks. Therefore, students were provided with guidance for each engagement dimension to help them write their reflections.

Data analysis methods

One-sample t-tests was used to analyze the self-report survey data. This statistical technique compares the sample's observed mean score to the population mean to analyze data from a single sample group. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used to conduct descriptive and inferential statistical analyses in the study. Furthermore, in this study, thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data gathered from student reflective journals. This analysis involved identifying and reporting significant themes from the qualitative data. The steps followed in the thematic analysis include: repeatedly reading the students' reflective journals to make sense of the data, selecting significant quotes, developing themes, and finally analyzing and narrating the data.

Corpus material design

This study intended to assess the learners' engagement levels in DDL-based instruction. In the intervention, a specific speaking genre had to be selected to limit the study's scope; as a result, the academic oral presentation genre was chosen. Thus, target language patterns frequently used across different sections of an oral presentation were emphasized in the DDL-based intervention.

The materials preparation followed the following procedure. The first step was selecting the corpus. To select the corpus, the researcher considered the target learners' problem areas and the specific features that the researcher wanted to teach (academic oral presentation). As a result, the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) was selected for the study. This corpus contains 152 speech events, including examples of virtually every kind that occur on a university campus. The speakers include instructors and students of every level, both native and non-native speakers. The corpus consists of 88% native speakers and 12% non-native speakers. This wide variety of speeches was recorded and transcribed. It is a corpus composed entirely of academic spoken English and therefore provides the best possible snapshot of the language being used in a university context.

Once the corpus was selected, the next step was to analyze it to identify frequent target-language features, focusing on those specific to the learning goals. As a result, formulaic sequences used across different rhetorical moves in academic oral presentations were identified. Accordingly, formulaic expressions for greeting audiences, introducing oneself, introducing the topic, illustrating points, sequencing ideas, expressing opinions, signalling conclusions, summarizing, and thanking, which are commonly used in different sections of an academic oral presentation, were selected. The formulaic expressions were taken from the MICASE based on the lower cut-off limit for an expression to be considered frequent, which is 10 occurrences/ million words, according to the guidelines proposed by Bardovi-Harlig et al. (2015) and Biber et al. (1999).

The selection of formulaic sequences involved the following procedures. First, the MICASE corpus is loaded into the AntConc software. Next, common expressions are generated and identified based on the lower cut-off limit mentioned above. Then, the formulaic sequences are extracted and analyzed in their contexts using concordance lines. Finally, the sequences are categorized based on their pragmatic functions (greeting, introducing, sequencing ideas, etc), and authentic examples that were illustrative and engaging for learners were taken. These language patterns and authentic examples were presented as concordance lines and excerpts.

Based on the language patterns and authentic examples identified from the corpus, activities and tasks were developed. Lessons that provided learners with input and production activities were designed. Therefore, lessons that included consciousness-raising or focused-noticing activities, as well as production activities, were designed. The consciousness-raising activities were designed to help learners notice and understand target language features and to develop explicit knowledge of these features. Consciousness-raising activities are means of making features of language salient, facilitating learners' noticing of the target language model. The production activities, on the other hand, were designed to help learners practice and use target-language features in actual communication.

Intervention

The DDL intervention consisted of two main types of activities: Consciousness-Raising (CR) activities and Production activities, designed to enhance speaking skills using corpus data, specifically focusing on formulaic expressions in oral presentations.

Consciousness-raising activities were based on corpus input, using concordance evidence and model oral presentation extracts (e.g., from MICASE). These activities help learners become aware of target formulaic expressions in authentic language use. This provided learners with explicit knowledge of language features. Learners worked in groups to identify and analyze target sequences and notice language features (e.g., how speakers use expressions at different stages of a presentation). Focused activities

involved analyzing excerpts with highlighted and bolded target expressions. Frequent exposure to authentic structures, as noted by Gabrielatos (2005), led to awareness of language patterns.

Production activities focused on repeated practice to help learners transform their new explicit (declarative) knowledge into usable (procedural) knowledge. In this section, speaking activities were designed to help learners use the target formulaic expressions identified from the corpus (e.g., greeting the audience and announcing topics). This stage took longer. Learners first consciously retrieved the speech production sequences (a rehearsal stage). Through repeated practice and exposure, they gradually developed the ability to retrieve and produce them automatically, moving toward procedural knowledge and possibly implicit knowledge. Learners prepared their final oral presentations using the newly discovered formulaic sequences. This act of being "pushed" to use the language aligns with Swain's (1995) Output Hypothesis, which posits that productive use facilitates deeper language processing.

Results and discussions

Students' engagement level in learning academic speaking via the DDL approach

Table 1. One-samplet-test results of behavioural engagement

	Test Value = 3	Test Value = 3	Test Value = 3	Test Value = 3		
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Behavioural engagement	8.454	14	.000	1.00	.747	1.252

A one-sample t-test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in participants' level of behavioural engagement. As indicated in Table 1 (M= 4.00; S.D =.473), the mean score after the intervention was above the expected mean value (M=3.00). The test result (t (14) =8.454, $p < 0.05$), shows that the participants' level of behavioural engagement was significantly higher than the expected level or the population mean score (3.00). Thus, it can be concluded that the participants' behavioural engagement in the DDL instruction was significantly higher.

Table 2. One-sample t-test results of cognitive engagement

	Test Value = 3	Test Value = 3	Test Value = 3	Test Value = 3	Test Value = 3	Test Value = 3
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Cognitive engagement	8.508	14	.000	1.296	.971	1.621

As shown in Table 2, the cognitive engagement score (t(14) = 8.508, p = 0.000, MD = 1.296) was greater than the hypothesized mean, and the difference was statistically significant (p < 0.05). Thus, it can be concluded that the participants' cognitive engagement level in learning academic speaking through the DDL approach was higher.

Table 3. One-sample t-test results of emotional engagement

	Test Value = 3	Test Value = 3	Test Value = 3	Test Value = 3	Test Value = 3	Test Value = 3
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Emotional engagement	13.759	14	.000	1.593	1.347	1.84

A one-sample t-test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in participants' emotional engagement. As indicated in Table 3 (M = 4.593; S.D. = .463), the participants' mean score was above the expected mean (M = 3.00). The test result (t(14) = 13.759, p < 0.05) indicates that the participants' level of emotional engagement was significantly higher than the expected level or the population mean. Thus, it can be concluded that the participants' emotional engagement in the DDL-based instruction was significantly greater than the expected mean score.

To triangulate the results from a self-report survey, data were collected through reflective journals. The participants were given guided items focused on behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Thus, participants wrote their reflections about learning speaking skills, particularly academic oral presentation skills, through the DDL approach. Accordingly, the data obtained from the students' reflective journals were analyzed under the three dimensions of engagement.

The first section of the reflective journal focused on students' behavioural engagement in learning academic speaking through the DDL intervention. Participants in their reflective journals stated that they were interested and excited to learn to speak through the DDL intervention. For example, Participant 11 stated his behavioural engagement in learning to speak through the DDL intervention as follows:

"I am interested in the new method of teaching. I found it beneficial for my academic speaking. Thus, I attend classes properly during the speaking instruction which is given via DDL. Moreover, I actively engaged in pair and group discussions to complete classroom tasks. When the teacher gave us home assignments and class work, I tried to complete and submit them properly. The concordance-based activities made me practice the target language features so that I could use them for later oral production. I was actively involved in asking and answering questions for a better understanding of the DDL lesson."

The second group of items in the reflective journal concerns the students' emotional engagement in learning to speak through the DDL intervention. Based on the reflective journal, participants stated that they enjoyed the corpus-based DDL instruction and were happy to learn to speak using corpus tools such as concordance lines. The following students' reflective journals show how their emotions were fully engaged in developing their speaking skills during DDL-based instruction. Student 3 reflected his feelings about the DDL instruction as follows:

"I'm very happy to study English with the corpus-based DDL approach because with this approach, I can learn linguistic features important for my academic oral presentations. So, I enjoyed learning formulaic sequences for oral presentations through concordance-based activities. I'm very interested in learning the target language features through DDL material because the intervention material makes me identify important formulaic sequences for my academic oral presentations."

Furthermore, student 7, on his part, reflected the following idea:-

"I'm so happy to learn academic oral presentation skills via concordance-based activities and authentic language features. This new method of teaching provided me with important language features for my academic oral presentations, so I found the intervention attractive.

In addition, learning academic speaking skills becomes more fun. However, I faced difficulties during the DDL intervention. The cut-off sentences in the concordance

lines were difficult to understand, but later the teacher-led instruction helped my understanding, and I felt happy to get a new experience in developing academic speaking skills."

The remaining items in the reflective journals focus on students' cognitive engagement in learning academic speaking through the DDL intervention. The results show that the participants were cognitively engaged in the DDL-based intervention. The participants demonstrated their willingness to learn the material by noticing and identifying target formulaic sequences presented in the concordance lines and example extracts. Based on the reflective journal, most students noted that their knowledge of formulaic sequences increased after the DDL intervention. Through data-driven learning, they studied a considerable number of formulaic sequences, which helped their academic speaking skills.

Discussion

The research question was intended to assess learners' engagement during instruction in speaking using the DDL approach. A 27-item self-report questionnaire was administered to respondents to assess their level of language learning engagement. Accordingly, the questionnaire data were analyzed using a one-sample t-test. The findings of the analysis showed that the behavioural engagement score ($t(14) = 8.454$, $p = 0.000$, MD = 1.00), the cognitive engagement score ($t(14) = 8.508$, $p = 0.000$, MD = 1.296), and the emotional engagement score ($t(14) = 13.759$, $p = 0.000$, MD = 1.593) were found to be greater than the hypothesized mean score, and in all cases, the difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Thus, it can be concluded that the participants' engagement level in the three dimensions of learning academic speaking through the DDL approach was highly favourable.

Furthermore, the participants' reflective journals showed they were interested in learning to speak through the DDL intervention. They enjoyed the corpus-based DDL intervention, as this new approach provided them with wider exposure to important language features, such as formulaic sequences, which were vital to the development of their speaking skills. Besides, the participants noted that they remained engaged throughout the DDL intervention by noticing target-language features in the corpus data, completing concordance-based activities, and delivering academic presentations. As a result, the participants perceived that their academic speaking skills had improved. In sum, the present study revealed that using the DDL approach in English language classes has the potential to increase EFL learners' engagement.

In sum, the present study showed that incorporating DDL tasks into English language classes has the potential to increase EFL learners' speaking engagement.

Experiencing such an inductive, discovery-oriented approach to doing tasks would help EFL learners remain motivated and engaged (Gilquin & Granger, 2010). This aligns with Daskalovska's (2015) study, which argues that corpus-based language tasks are sufficiently motivating and engaging, and that L2 learners discover the information autonomously. In other words, DDL requires that EFL learners become engaged in their learning by using various cognitive skills, such as comparing, classifying, reasoning, analyzing, inferring, and interpreting (Boulton & Cobb, 2017). The findings from the self-report survey and reflective journals regarding participants' engagement level were also consistent with those of Zare et al. (2022), who found that using a DDL approach promotes language learners' emotional engagement. A study by Zare et al. (2024) also confirmed that integrating DDL tasks into EFL classes boosted learners' task engagement. In the same vein, Brihan and Nurie (2024) found that corpus-based instruction improved students' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagements, and students liked the activities and actively participated in the corpus-based tasks. The students' perspective also noted a series of distinguishing DDL task features – that is, motivating, authentic, autonomy-raising, curiosity, concentration, and interesting, albeit challenging – required for task engagement.

Conclusions

In this study, an attempt was made to examine the effect of the DDL intervention on learners' speaking engagement. DDL encourages learners to actively explore authentic language data (corpora) to discover usage patterns. This inductive approach shifts the focus from teacher-centred instruction to student-centred discovery, which can significantly boost engagement as learners take ownership of their learning. Moreover, when learners actively engage with real language, they often find the learning process more meaningful and motivating. This can lead to a more positive attitude towards learning and using English for speaking.DDL helps learners move beyond declarative knowledge (knowing about the language) to procedural knowledge (knowing how to use the language). By actively analyzing and applying linguistic patterns, learners become better equipped to produce accurate and fluent spoken English. As a result, learners' speaking engagement is enhanced. In this study, participants completed a self-report questionnaire after the DDL intervention to determine whether the intervention affected learners' engagement level in speaking. It was found that learners' behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement levels were encouraging. In most EFL contexts, learners fail to actively engage in speaking, and a lack of engagement has been one of the most serious problems hindering learners' development of speaking skills. As indicated in the present study, learners' engagement in speaking was good when they were involved in corpus-based activities and tasks. As corpus materials provide learners with authentic examples of language use, they make learning more relevant and meaningful, and this, in turn, can boost learners' engagement.

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