Research article

Towards the implications of positive teacher interpersonal behaviors for Spanish learners' academic engagement: Voices from Chinese SFL learners

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of positive psychology in the area of language education, more focus has been placed on the consequences of favorable teacher communication behaviors in language classes. Nonetheless, the function of language instructors' interpersonal behaviors in raising learners' engagement is somehow unknown. Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, no research study has been carried out in Spanish language classes to explore the function of teacher communication behaviors in learners' engagement. To fill this lacuna, the current inquiry looked into the role of teachers' positive interpersonal factors in Chinese SFL learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. For this purpose, a random sample of 32 SFL learners was chosen to participate in our online interview sessions. The answers of SFL learners to the interview questions were thematically analyzed via MAXQDA software. The thematic analysis findings pointed to the value of teacher communication behaviors in improving SFL learners' engagement. The analysis outcomes also demonstrated the potential of 11 positive interpersonal behaviors (rapport, care, clarity, credibility, confirmation, immediacy, closeness, praise, feedback, respect, and stroke) in increasing Spanish language learners' academic engagement. The practical implications that may emerge from the present study's outcomes are finally discussed.

1. Introduction

There is a common belief among researchers and educational practitioners that students' active participation in learning environments dramatically contributes to their academic success [1,2]. Put differently, students' academic success is somehow subject to their ongoing participation in classroom activities [3]. The active and ongoing participation of students in learning environments is technically called "academic engagement" [4,5]. For Christenson, Reschly, and Wylie [6], academic engagement is "students' active participation in academic and co-curricular or school-related activities and commitment to educational goals and learning" [p. 816]. Cai and Liem [7] also described this concept as the degree of effort students exhibit in academic contexts to satisfy the course requirements. Accordingly, engaged students are those who make a great attempt to meet the course objectives set by teachers and educational managers [8]. As put by Kahu and Nelson [9], academic engagement accelerates the growth and advancement of students in learning environments. They submitted that students who value the learning goals and take part in learning tasks with great interest

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and enthusiasm will make rapid progress in acquiring the educational content. Likewise, Olivier, Archambault, De Clercq, and Galand [10] also maintained that academic engagement largely affects students' achievements in educational settings. They believe that engaged students typically attain more desirable outcomes due to the adequate time and energy they allocate to academic activities. In a similar vein, Martínez, Youssef-Morgan, Chambel, and Marques-Pinto [11] noted that students with high level of academic engagement function more effectively in classroom contexts. Thus, to promote students' learning outcomes, improve their classroom performance, and direct them towards academic advancement, the antecedents of student academic engagement need to be detected.

To address this necessity, a myriad of studies have endeavored to locate the internal and external sources of student engagement in educational contexts [12–16]. Nonetheless, research into the predictors of language learners' academic engagement is still in its infancy. Simply said, few investigations [17–19,20,21] have been performed in second or foreign language classes to look into the determinants of learner engagement. To take a step towards bridging this lacuna, this research seeks to uncover the role of positive teacher interpersonal behaviors in "Spanish as a Foreign Language" (SFL) learners' academic engagement. Teacher interpersonal behaviors generally refer to the positive and negative communication behaviors that teachers use while interacting with their pupils [22]. Teachers' positive communication behaviors, which are the main focus of the current inquiry, might be either verbal or nonverbal [23,24]. Rapport, care, clarity, confirmation, closeness, credibility, immediacy, and stroke are some outstanding instances of positive communication behaviors used by teachers both inside and outside the classrooms [22]. As put by Frisby [25], positive interpersonal behaviors help teachers satisfy their students' emotional demands and develop close bonds with them. Similarly, Derakhshan [26] stated that the favorable communication behaviors teachers employ in educational environments result in amicable teacher-student relations.

With the significance of positive interpersonal factors in mind [25,26], many researchers [27–29] have investigated the consequences of these behaviors in mainstream educational contexts. Further, with the dawn of positive psychology in the domain of language learning [30], several language researchers [31–33] have also assessed the implications of favorable communication behaviors in language classes. However, as the review of earlier inquiries revealed, few applied linguists and language scholars have looked into the role of teacher communication behaviors in language learners' classroom behaviors. More specifically, little research attention [34,35] has been directed toward the impacts of positive teacher interpersonal factors on language learners' academic engagement. Thus, whether positive teacher communication behaviors can influence language learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement is open to question. In addition, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no investigation has been carried out in SFL classes to discover the influences of positive teacher communication behaviors on Spanish learners' academic engagement. To fill these lacunae, the current inquiry intends to evaluate Chinese SFL learners' perceptions regarding the role of positive teacher communication factors in their academic engagement.

2. Literature review

2.1. Positive teacher interpersonal behaviors

Positive teacher interpersonal variables encompass a wide variety of verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors that teachers employ in educational environments [36]. However, due to space limitations, we will only mention five key instances of positive teacher interpersonal behaviors, offer succinct definitions for them, and shed light on their value in educational environments.

2.1.1. Confirmation

Teacher confirmation has been initially conceptualized by Ellis [37] as "the transactional process by which teachers talk and interact with students that makes them feel they are valuable and significant individuals" [p. 265]. Goldman, Bolkan, and Goodboy [38] further defined this construct as a communication behavior teachers use to instill a sense of value in their students. As Goldman and Goodboy [39] mentioned, teachers often do so by responding to students' questions, offering timely feedback on their actions, and demonstrating enthusiasm for their academic growth. According to Shen and Croucher [40], the sense of significance and value that teacher confirmation behavior cultivates among students drastically promotes their learning motivation. Similarly, Goldman, Claus, and Goodboy [41] noted that confirming students in instructional-learning contexts can establish a close, friendly relationship between teachers and students, which significantly contributes to increased learning achievements.

2.1.2. Credibility

Teacher credibility has to do with the extent to which an instructor is believable and trustworthy in the eyes of his or her students [42]. As pointed out by McCroskey and Teven [43], teacher credibility includes three key dimensions of trustworthiness, goodwill, and competence. Trustworthiness, as the first dimension of this interpersonal behavior, pertains to students' viewpoints towards the teacher's reliability and honesty [44]. As the second dimension, goodwill, refers to the degree to which a teacher values and fulfils his or her students' needs and demands [45]. Finally, competence relates to the extent to which a teacher is proficient in instructing the course content [46]. Fisher and Frey [47] highlighted the value of instructor credibility in instructional environments when they suggested that students who believe their teachers are unreliable are less likely to attend their classes and engage in learning activities. In a similar vein, Pishghadam, Derakhshan, and Zhaleh [48] noted the importance of this communication behavior by referring to its positive influence on students' willingness to communicate. Additionally, Nayernia, Taghizadeh, and Farsani [49] also made the point that this positive communication behavior serves a central role in teachers' professional success.

2.1.3. Care

Teacher care generally refers to the genuine support that teachers offer to students and the enthusiasm they demonstrate in their students' learning [50]. For Laletas and Reupert [51], teacher care pertains to "teachers' behaviors to satisfy students' psychological and emotional needs by providing a respectful, positive, supportive, and nourishing environment" [p. 486]. This is similarly reflected in the words of Derakhshan, Saeidi, and Beheshti [52] who characterized this concept as teachers' verbal and nonverbal reactions to students' emotional and psychological demands. According to Gasser, Grütter, Buholzer, and Wettstein [53], teachers who care about their students and their emotional needs can form close and intimate relationships with them. Such amicable relationships between teacher and students may bring positive changes in students' academic performance [54,55].

2.1.4. Clarity

Teacher clarity generally pertains to teachers' use of verbal or nonverbal behaviors to make the course content more transparent and understandable [56]. Similarly, Chesebro and McCroskey [57] characterized this concept as a process by which "an instructor is able to effectively stimulate the desired meaning of course content and processes in the minds of students through the use of appropriately-structured verbal and nonverbal messages" [p. 62]. Employing visuals, offering clear instances, revisiting the main points, characterizing difficult concepts, rehearsing the learning tasks, and explaining the main ideas all enable instructors to make the instructional content more comprehensible for their pupils [58]. Teachers' employment of clarity behaviors may significantly contribute to enhanced learning outcomes and increased academic grades [59] as they ease students' recognition and understanding of classroom input. Using clarity behaviors, teachers can also enhance students' academic motivation [60] and prompt them to regularly engage in academic activities [61].

2.1.5. Closeness

Teacher closeness has to do with intimate teacher-student relationships marked by mutual trust, warmth, and low conflict [62]. As Xie and Derakhshan [22] mentioned, like other positive interpersonal behaviors, closeness also helps teachers build quality relationships with their pupils. It is widely believed that the high level of closeness teachers demonstrate in academic settings has a favorable impact on students' classroom emotions, including learning motivation [63], academic interest [64], and classroom enjoyment [65]. Teacher closeness, as noted by Veldman, van Tartwijk, Brekelmans, and Wubbels [66], can cause an upsurge in students' academic outcomes.

2.2. Academic engagement

Students' academic engagement deals with the amount of "time", "energy", and "endeavor" they allocate to academic tasks and activities [67]. This is also mirrored in the words of Wang, Fredricks, Ye, Hofkens, and Linn [68] who described student engagement as "the observable and unobservable qualities of students' interactions with learning activities" [p. 18]. Alrashidi, Phan, and Ngu [69] further defined student engagement in terms of the physical and mental efforts students exert in learning environments. In second or foreign language learning domains, this variable refers to the quality and quantity of endeavors invested by learners in acquiring a new language [70]. In a similar vein, Sang and Hiver [71] characterized language learners' engagement as how deeply they commit themselves to language learning activities. Learners' engagement in language classes might be behavioral, cognitive, or emotional [72]. The first aspect of learner engagement (i.e., behavioral engagement), according to Zhou, Hiver, and Al-Hoorie [73], corresponds with "the amount and quality of learners' in-class participation and time spent on task" [p. 77]. As put by Zhou et al. [73], cognitive engagement, as the second aspect of learner engagement, refers to "mental processes such as the deliberate allocation and maintenance of attention and intellectual effort" [p. 77]. Finally, emotional engagement, as the last aspect of learner engagement, pertains to the positive emotions (e.g., interest, enthusiasm, enjoyment) learners demonstrate during the class time [73]. Learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional participation in language classes are perceived to be tightly connected to their language achievements [74, 75].

2.3. Previous studies on the role of positive teacher interpersonal behaviors in students' engagement

A short glance at the existing literature indicates that several researchers worldwide [28,76–82,83–86] have looked into the role of positive teacher interpersonal behaviors in predicting students' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Imlawi et al. [77], for example, tested the influence of instructor credibility on students' course engagement. In doing this, a group of instructors and undergraduate students were invited to engage in the research process. The outcomes delineated that a high level of instructor credibility significantly contributes to student course engagement. Furthermore, Estepp and Roberts [78] studied teacher immediacy as a possible predictor of student academic engagement. To do so, a sample comprising 306 college students was selected to take part in the inquiry. To elicit the required information, two questionnaires measuring teacher immediacy and student academic engagement were given to respondents. Data analysis showed that verbal and nonverbal immediate cues used by teachers in instructional settings can desirably predict students' academic engagement. Moreover, Lavy and Naama-Ghanayim [28] measured the impact of teacher care on students' school engagement. In doing so, they distributed two valid inventories among 675 students and 33 teachers. The results demonstrated that students will engage more actively in school contexts when they feel that teachers care for them and their academic demands. Subsequently, LaBelle and Johnson [76] examined whether teacher confirmation behavior can influence student engagement. To answer this question, they invited 280 students to respond to two surveys. The outcomes of the surveys indicated that teacher confirmation behavior encourages students to exert more effort in learning contexts. Later, Engels et al. [82] probed the role of

rapport in school students' engagement. To accomplish this, two valid measures of student engagement and teacher-student rapport were administered among a large sample of students. Analyzing the students' answers, the researchers found that intimate and friendly relationships between teachers and students result in enhanced student engagement.

Besides, some language studies [18,87–92] have also been conducted on positive teacher communication behaviors to measure the impact that they may have on language learners' academic engagement. Derakhshan [87], for instance, inspected the function of instructor credibility and immediacy in Turkman students' engagement. To this aim, three pre-designed questionnaires, namely the "Nonverbal Immediacy Scale (NIS)", "Source Credibility Scale (SCS)", and "Utrecht Work Engagement", were sent to 503 students. The analysis of the aforementioned questionnaires uncovered the capacity of teacher credibility and immediacy in improving student' classroom involvement. Likewise, Zheng [89] explored the function of teacher credibility and clarity in improving Chinese students' engagement. To do this, the e-version of three valid scales was prepared and then administered to participants. The study results exhibited that the credibility and clarity of teachers in instructional contexts promote students' engagement. In another study, Shakki [18] examined the outcomes of teacher-student rapport and teacher support for English learners' engagement. To accomplish this, 216 Iranian English learners were asked to engage in this research process by responding to three valid scales. Both teacher-student rapport and teacher support were noticed to be of high importance for student academic engagement. Despite these scholarly endeavors [e.g., 80, 81, 82, 83], research into the consequences of language teachers' interpersonal behaviors is still in its early stages, which necessitates further research in this area. To answer this necessity, the current study attempts to figure out the role of teachers' positive communication behaviors in SFL learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement.

2.4. Theoretical model of the role of teacher interpersonal behaviors in learners' academic engagement

The role of teacher interpersonal behaviors in learners' academic engagement can be explained with reference to the "*rhetorical/relational goal theory*" [93]. This theory suggests that teachers, in any instructional-learning context, possess a set of pedagogical purposes that direct their instructional practices. To meet these purposes, they typically employ various rhetorical and relational behaviors when communicating with their learners [93]. The rhetorical and relational behaviors, also called interpersonal behaviors, comprise a range of positive (e.g., humor, empathy, immediacy, care, support) and negative actions (e.g., inattention, apathy, aggression) that may facilitate or impede the learning process [94]. Central to the rhetorical/relational goal theory is the idea that learners' impressions of their teachers' interpersonal behaviors can largely influence their academic behaviors such as engagement [95].

Referring to the rhetorical-relational goal theory, we formulated the following research questions:

RQ1. To what extent are positive teacher interpersonal behaviors effective in fostering Chinese SFL learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement?

RQ2. Which positive teacher interpersonal behaviors (e.g., confirmation, rapport, credibility, closeness, care, clarity, immediacy, stroke, etc.) mostly contribute to Chinese SFL learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement?

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Adopting a random sampling strategy, a small sample of Chinese SFL learners, consisting of 24 females and 8 males, was chosen to engage in the research process. Random sampling is a subset of the "probability sampling approach" that decreases the selection bias and offers a truly representative sample [96]. Participants were all undergraduate students studying Spanish language and literature at two different universities in China. They ranged in age from 19 to 23 years old [*Mean* = 21.32]. The participants were all informed of the main intentions of the inquiry and assured of the privacy and confidentiality of their information.

3.2. Instrument

A deep, semi-structured interview was developed to examine participants' attitudes towards the role of positive teacher interpersonal behaviors in students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. The rationale of using structured and semi-structured interviews lies in the fact that they allow researchers to obtain in-depth information and evidence from respondents [96]. Prior to running the interview sessions, the interview guide, which comprises two major parts [see Appendix], was sent to three experts for review and approval. After three days, they returned the interview guide with some minor revisions. Then, in order to promote the reliability and trustworthiness of the instrument [97], some trial interview sessions were performed with some non-participants.

3.3. Data-gathering procedure

Having been assured of the quality of the instrument, we held some interview sessions with participants on a video conferencing platform called Tencent Meeting. All participants were interviewed individually, and each interview session took no more than 20 min of participants' time. Given that all interviewees had a good command of English, the interview sessions were entirely performed in English. The responses of participants to the interview questions were recorded and transcribed in detail. The data-gathering process

took about one month, from January 20, 2023 to February 18, 2023. The ethical approval of this article is waived, on the condition that all the interviewees have been informed clearly about the nature and purpose of the study and completed a written consent form before they voluntarily participated in it.

3.4. Data analysis

The transcriptions of respondents' answers were systematically analyzed through the latest version of "MAXQDA software" [Version 2023]. MAXQDA, as Baralt [98] mentioned, is a "computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software" (CAQDAS) that considerably improves the trustworthiness of the coding process. The thematic analysis was implemented in light of Gao and Zhang's [99] data analysis technique, which consists of five distinct phases. During the first phase, the *"cleaning phase"*, the analysts scrutinized the transcriptions to identify typos and inconsistencies. Then, throughout the *"coding phase"*, they tentatively offered some initial codes by re-examining the datasets. Following that, in the phase of *"generating themes"*, the analysts sorted the preliminary codes into some relevant themes. Further, in the *"categorization phase"*, the analysts classified the derived themes using higher-order concepts. In the final phase, *"producing the report"*, they provided a concise report of the whole process. All these five phases were carried out by two analysts with a view to enhancing the credibility of the analysis [96]. Thus, the statistical approach of Krippendorff's coefficient was used to measure the inter-coder agreement. The results indicated a high degree of agreement [$\alpha = 0.97$] between the analysts.

4. Findings

The thematic analysis of interviewees' responses to the first question yielded two major themes, which are listed in the following table [Table 1].

As demonstrated in the above table, the majority of respondents [78 %] perceived that positive teacher interpersonal behaviors have a great impact on SFL students' academic engagement. To illustrate:

Participant 2: *I think teacher interpersonal behaviors dramatically affect students' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement.*

Participant 9: *In my opinion, the interpersonal behaviors of teachers largely influence SFL learners' engagement in classrooms.*

Participant 13: *In my opinion, teachers' interpersonal behaviors have a great impact on the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement of Spanish learners.*

Other respondents [22 %] maintained that positive teacher communication behaviors are somehow influential in students' academic engagement. For instance, some of the respondents maintained that,

Participant 14: *In my opinion, teachers' interpersonal behaviors have little effect on SFL learners' engagement.*

Participant 16: *I think teacher interpersonal behaviors have some influence on SFL learners' engagement.*

The examination of respondents' answers to the second question resulted in 11 themes, which are presented in the table below [Table 2]. The analysis outcomes indicated that SFL learners viewed 11 positive interpersonal behaviors as important predictors of student engagement: *rapport, care, clarity, credibility, confirmation, immediacy, closeness, praise, feedback, respect,* and *stroke*.

As shown in Table 2, six positive communication behaviors, namely *rapport, care, clarity, credibility, confirmation,* and *immediacy,* were perceived to serve a more important role in promoting Spanish learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. The following extracts illuminate respondents' viewpoints in this regard:

Participant 11: *The close bonds that teachers build with their students stimulate students to passionately engage in classroom activities.*

Participant 14: *Teachers who care about their learners can remarkably increase their academic engagement.*

Participant 17: *Clear instruction of course content can ease students' comprehension, which culminates in increased learning engagement.*

Participant 23: *The credibility that teachers convey to students through words, expressions and actions can make a significant difference in students' academic engagement.*

Participant 24: *Students who are acknowledged by their professors are more motivated to participate in learning tasks.*

Participant 29: *Immediate and timely reactions to students' classroom behaviors motivate them to invest more time, energy, and effort in academic contexts.*

Beside the aforementioned communication behaviors, closeness, praise, feedback, respect, and stroke were also considered to play some role in increasing SFL learners' academic engagement [Fig. 1]. The following excerpts demonstrate the predicting role of these positive communication behaviors, respectively:

Participant 9: *The closeness of teacher-student relationships can contribute to enhanced student engagement.*

Participant 16: *Teacher praise can encourage students to make more efforts in classrooms.*

Participant 22: *Teachers' timely feedback on students' academic activities can lead students to higher levels of academic engagement.*

Participant 27: *Students who feel respected are more inclined to take part in the learning process.*

Participant 32: *One of the positive communication behaviors that may be beneficial for SFL students' academic engagement is teacher*

Table 1
The thematic analysis outcomes for the first interview question.

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
To a great extent	25	78 %
To some extent	7	22 %
Total	32	100 %

Table 2
The thematic analysis outcomes for the second interview question.

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Rapport	21	17 %
Care	19	15 %
Clarity	18	15 %
Credibility	17	14 %
Confirmation	15	12 %
Immediacy	15	12 %
Closeness	6	5 %
Praise	4	3 %
Feedback	4	3 %
Respect	2	2 %
Stroke	2	2 %
Total	123	100 %

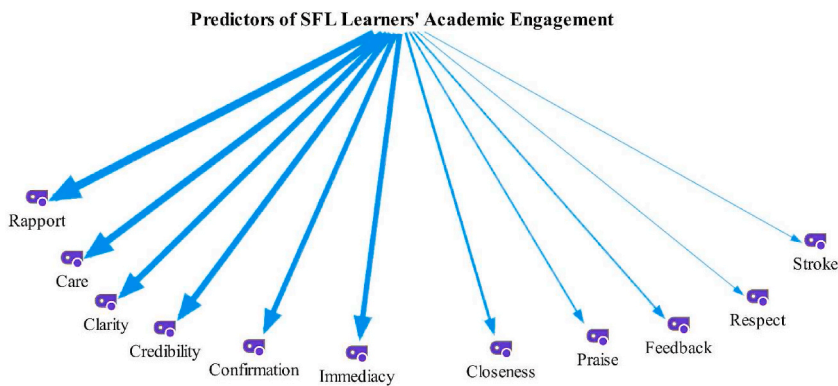**Note:** Some respondents mentioned several positive interpersonal behaviors.

Fig. 1. Positive teacher interpersonal behaviors contributing to SFL learners' academic engagement.

stroke.

5. Discussion

This qualitative study was conducted with a view to exploring the function of favorable teacher interpersonal factors in Chinese SFL learners' academic engagement. Put another way, it sought to find out whether Chinese SFL learners' academic engagement depends on their teachers' communication behaviors. To accomplish this, a group of Chinese SFL learners were invited to take part in an interview session. Of the 32 SFL students who participated in the interview session, just over half considered positive teacher interpersonal behaviors to be highly beneficial for their own academic engagement. This finding lends support to Zhou's [91] outcomes, which delineated that favorable communication behaviors used by instructors in educational contexts can greatly contribute to improved student engagement. This outcome also mirrors Peng's [92] results, which indicated that positive teacher communication behavior can dramatically influence student academic engagement. Besides, most of those interviewed mentioned rapport, care, clarity, credibility, confirmation, and immediacy as the most powerful predictors of learner engagement. To them, these six interpersonal behaviors can greatly contribute to Spanish learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. The study's finding regarding the important role of rapport in fostering learner engagement accords with those of Shakki [18] and Thornberg et al. [81], who found that teacher-student rapport can drastically increase student classroom engagement. Moreover, the outcome of this inquiry concerning the positive role of teacher care in Spanish learners' engagement corroborates the results of Lavy and Naama-Ghanayim [28], who reported that teacher care can stimulate students to passionately engage in classroom contexts. Furthermore, the result of this investigation regarding the undeniable role of teacher clarity in promoting learner engagement is consistent with that of Zheng [89], who discovered that the amount of effort learners invest in classroom settings largely depends on their instructors' clarity. In addition, the study outcome on the high capability of teacher credibility in increasing learner engagement supports the findings of Imlawi et al. [77] and Zheng [89], who noticed that a high level of teacher credibility results in enhanced learner engagement. Another important finding of this research, which points to the key role of teacher confirmation in raising students' academic engagement, confirms LaBelle and Johnson's [76] outcomes, which revealed that confirming learners in academic contexts brings some favorable changes in their behavioral and emotional engagement. Finally, there are also some commonalities between the present study's results about the predicting function of teacher immediacy and those discovered by Estepp and Roberts [78] and Derakhshan [87]. They found that verbal and nonverbal immediate cues teachers utilize in instructional environments can significantly affect students'

classroom participation.

6. Conclusion

In this inquiry, the purpose was to delineate the function of desirable communication behaviors in Chinese SFL learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Simply said, the present research was an attempt to find out whether positive communication behaviors can promote Chinese SFL learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. The outcomes of the thematic analysis pinpointed that favorable teacher communication behaviors are critical for promoting learners' engagement in Spanish language classes. The analysis results also suggested that, among various positive interpersonal behaviors, rapport, care, clarity, credibility, confirmation, and immediacy play a more important role in raising learners' academic engagement.

7. Pedagogical implications

The most obvious implication to emerge from the study outcomes is that language teachers, notably those instructing Spanish as a foreign language, need to employ effective interpersonal behaviors to enhance their learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. As the present study's outcomes revealed, rapport, care, clarity, credibility, confirmation, and immediacy are effective communication behaviors, which result in increased learner engagement. Teachers are thus expected to establish intimate relationships with their learners, care for their academic desires, make them feel valuable, and use different verbal and nonverbal behaviors in interacting with them. Another practical implication that emerges from the present investigation's findings is that teacher trainers need to instruct their student teachers how to interact with learners in order to lead them towards higher levels of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. With the value of positive teacher interpersonal behaviors in mind, teacher trainers should raise both pre- and in-service teachers' awareness of positive communication behaviors that are essential in instructional contexts.

8. Limitations and suggestions for further research

Notwithstanding their invaluable implications, the findings of this investigation are restricted by three major limitations, which warrant further investigation on this topic. The first important limitation is that the present research was qualitative in nature and used only semi-structured interviews to obtain the datasets. To find any variation in the outcomes, future research studies are advised to adopt a mixed-method approach to evaluate respondents' perspectives through various data-gathering instruments such as observations and surveys. The second limitation is about the sample size that was relatively small. Given that, with a small sample size, the findings might not be transferable to other relevant contexts, future researchers are recommended to invite more participants to their studies. The last limitation of this research lies in the fact that the research questions were solely answered in light of learners' viewpoints. That is, teachers' perspectives about the consequences of positive interpersonal factors for learners' academic engagement were disregarded. To address this restriction, future investigations need to look into teachers' viewpoints as well.

Ethical approval

The ethical approval of this study is waived, on the condition that all the interview participants have been informed clearly about the nature and purpose of the research. They have completed a written consent form before they voluntarily participated in it, which is stated clearly in data collection procedures in methods section.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Nan Ding: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Yongxiang Wang:** Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix

Semi-structured Interview.

1. Demographic Information

    Name:
    Gender:
    Age:
    Nationality:
    Level of Education:

2. Interview Protocol
1. How do you define behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement of students in classroom contexts?
2. What factors contribute to SFL (Spanish as Foreign Language) learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement in classroom contexts?
3. To what extent do teacher interpersonal behaviors (e.g., care, clarity, confirmation, credibility, closeness, immediacy, stroke, rapport, etc.) affect SFL learners' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement in classroom contexts?

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