



## **The Correlation between Teacher-Student Attachment and Iranian EFL Learners' Engagement**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between behavioral and emotional engagement of Iranian EFL learners and their attachment to their teachers. Both teachers' and students' perceptions of their relationships and students' engagement have been taken into account. Questionnaire data provided by 311 EFL students and 70 EFL teachers was used to investigate the relation between (a) teacher-student attachment and EFL learners' engagement, (b) teacher-student secure attachment and EFL learners' engagement, (c) teacher-student insecure attachment and EFL learners' engagement, (d) teacher-student secure attachment and EFL learners' behavioral engagement, (e) teacher-student insecure attachment and EFL learners' behavioral engagement, (f) teacher-student secure attachment and EFL learners' emotional engagement, and (g) teacher-student insecure attachment and EFL learners' emotional engagement. The analysis of teachers and students' questionnaire data showed that teacher-student attachment was correlated with learners' engagement. The student participants reported that secure attachment positively affected behavioral and emotional engagement while insecure attachment had a negative effect. The teacher participants reported that attachment with students had weak and non-significant relationship with their students' behavioral and emotional engagement. These findings and their major pedagogical implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** Attachment, Teacher-Student Relationship, Learners' Engagement, EFL Learners, Secure Attachment, Insecure Attachment, Emotional Engagement, and Behavioral Engagement

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## **Introduction**

The recent rise of interest in researching adult attachment draws upon Bowlby's theory of attachment (e.g., Bowlby, 1980). The research has had several focuses, according to Crowell and Treboux (1995): examining (1) the relation between childhood attachment experiences and parenting behavior, and intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns, (2) the impact of childhood attachment experiences on adult relationships, and the role of attachment in adult-adult relationships, and (3) the role of working models or representations of attachment in influencing thoughts, feelings, and behavior in different domains of adult functioning like parenting, teaching, and learning.

Teacher-student attachment as one of the most important domains of attachment theory has become a significant topic for educators, researchers, school psychologists, and policy-makers, because this relationship constitutes a powerful element within the learning environment. As a major factor affecting students' development, school engagement, and academic motivation, it forms the basis of the social context in which learning takes place (Roorda et al., 2011). There is ample evidence that strong and supportive relationships between teachers and students are fundamental to the healthy development of students in schools (e.g., see Birch & Ladd, 1998; Pianta, 1999; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Researchers examining the student-teacher relationship have shown that it significantly impacts (positively and negatively) academic engagement (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). Ainsworth (1991) highlights the function of the attachment behavior system in adult life, suggesting that a secure attachment relationship will facilitate functioning and competence outside the relationship. She notes that there is "... a seeking to obtain an experience of security and comfort in the relationship with the partner. If and when such security and comfort are available, the individual is able to move off from the secure base provided by the partner, with the confidence to engage in other activities" (p. 38).

The kind and quality of relationships that form between teachers and students are keys to successful teaching and learning (Aultman, Williams-Johnson, & Schutz, 2009). There is a public belief that positive teacher-student attachment improves student performance, participation, and engagement, behaviorally, affectively and cognitively. "Open communication, as well as emotional and academic support that exists between students and teachers" (Pianta, 1999) is another way to describe a positive relationship between teachers and students. These relationships have also been identified as relationships with "empathy, warmth, and genuineness" (Cornelius-White et al., 2004). Positive student-teacher relationships have also been "characterized by mutual acceptance, understanding, warmth, closeness, trust, respect, care and cooperation" (Leitão & Waugh, 2007). Supportive

and positive relationships between teachers and students ultimately promote a “sense of school belonging” and encourage students to “participate cooperatively in classroom activities” (Hughes, 2011).

Early studies defined student engagement primarily by observable behaviors such as participation and time on task (Natriello 1984; Brophy, 1988). Researchers have also incorporated emotional or affective aspects into their conceptualization of engagement (Finn 1989; Connell 1990). More recently, researchers have studied aspects of cognitive engagement, such as students’ investment in learning, perseverance in the face of challenges, and use of deep rather than superficial strategies (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, 2004). Some have also included self-regulation (the extent to which students demonstrate control over their learning actions) as a component of cognitive engagement (Miller et al. 1996). Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) proposed that engagement is a multifaceted construct consisting of three components: behavioral engagement (i.e., students’ participation or involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities), emotional engagement (i.e., students’ affective reactions in the classroom), and cognitive engagement (i.e., students’ motivation, efforts, and strategy use).

Supportive relationships help maintain students’ interests in academic and social pursuits, which in turn lead to better grades and more positive peer relationships. Teacher and student attachment has been identified as a significant influence on students’ overall school and behavioral adjustment (Baker et al. 1997). According to Fisher and Cresswell (1999), interaction with other people (students, other teachers, and staff) is actually a major part of most teachers’ school days. Therefore, it is important to study the naturalness and quality of teacher-student relationships, as it influences the quality of their relationships (Sava, 2001). Students have positive perceptions of the teacher when teachers are more involved with students within the social environment (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). A reciprocal association is found between teacher and student behavior: teacher involvement fosters students’ classroom engagement, and that engagement, in turn, leads teachers to become more involved. Some longitudinal studies attribute the effect of a supportive teacher–student relationship on achievement to the direct effect of the quality of the relationship on students’ engagement in the classroom (e.g., O’Connor & McCartney, 2007; Hughes, Luo, Kwok & Loyd, 2008).

Moreover, there are some scholars who believe that the negative attachment between teacher and student is an obstacle to students’ engagement. They believe that the negatively-attached students to teachers would see their teachers unsupportive and feel a lack of care, so they come to class under some pressure, not with enthusiasm and motivation. Decker (2007) stated that having a negative relationship with one’s teacher may promote negative outcomes and engagement for

students. Sava (2001) reported that high incidences of educational, psychological, and somatic complaints are seen in students whose teachers they characterize as hostile in their attitude towards them. Bru, Boyesen, Munthe, and Roland (1998) stressed that lack of teacher support would hinder students from developing a positive self-concept.

Some of the key terms in the current study are presented here. In secure attachment, the care-seeker uses caregiver as a secure base for exploration and the caregiver responds to needs. In insecure attachment, the care-seeker is clingy, unable to cope with absences of the caregiver. He/she seeks constant reassurances. Behaviorally-engaged learners would typically comply with behavioral norms, such as attendance and involvement, and would avoid disruptive or negative behavior. Emotionally-engaged Students would show affective reactions such as interest, enjoyment, or a sense of belonging.

### **The Study**

The majority of the research has focused on investigating student–teacher relationships with elementary-aged populations, which may be most appropriate given that research indicates students and teachers tend to have closer relationships when students are younger. However, exploring the relationship between teachers and adult students and ways of turning that relationship to attachment, and increasing the engagement of students in class due to that created attachment also seem worth the attempt. The results of such studies can largely assist the teachers, students, researchers, school managers, institutes, and policy-makers to find better ways to improve the attachment between teachers and students and, in turn, help the improvement in engagement and success of learners. This study aims to investigate whether there is any correlation between the attachment (secure or insecure) in class and engagement of students. The following hypotheses were formulated as a working platform to explore the different dimensions of this issue:

1. There is no correlation between teacher-student attachment and EFL learners' engagement.
2. There is no correlation between teacher-student secure attachment and EFL learners' engagement.
3. There is no correlation between teacher-student insecure attachment and EFL learners' engagement.
4. There is no correlation between teacher-student secure attachment and EFL learners' behavioral engagement.
5. There is no correlation between teacher-student insecure attachment and EFL learners' behavioral engagement.
6. There is no correlation between teacher-student secure attachment and EFL learners' emotional engagement.

7. There is no correlation between teacher-student insecure attachment and EFL learners' emotional engagement.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Three-hundred and eleven English learners and 70 EFL teachers responded to a questionnaire covering the research hypotheses. Of the 311 learners, 137 students studied in English institutes, 70 students studied basic English at secondary and high schools, and 104 students studied as English majors in universities. These students were in the age range of 14-32 and consisted of an almost equal number of males and females (48.8 % male and 51.2 % female). Of the 70 teachers, 30 teachers taught in English institutes, 20 teachers taught English at high schools, and 20 teachers taught English to English majors in universities.

### **Materials**

This study used four questionnaires to gather data from students and teachers about student-teacher relationship and student engagement. To avoid the misunderstanding, the student questionnaires were translated into Persian by an experienced translator.

### **The Student-Instructor Relationship Scale**

The Student-Instructor Relationship Scale is a 36-item inventory developed to tap secure and insecure student-instructor relationships on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). Pintrich et al. (1991) reported satisfactory internal consistency for this scale ( $\alpha = .80$ ) and the internal consistency of the translated version of the instrument was .64. In this questionnaire, higher scores denoted stronger feelings of connectedness, i.e. secure attachment to the teacher; and low scores communicated avoidance or a tendency to shun a close relationship, i.e. insecure attachment to the teacher.

### **Student Engagement Self-Report**

The researchers administered the self-report questionnaires developed by Skinner et al. (2009) to students. This 27-item questionnaire evaluates behavioral and emotional engagement of the learners in class setting on a 4-point Likert scale from Not at all true (1), to Very true (4). Ten items tap behavioral engagement, i.e., effort, attention, and persistence while initiating and participating in learning activities or lack of effort and withdrawal from learning activities; and 17 items tap emotional engagement, i.e., motivated involvement during learning activities or withdrawal or alienation during learning activities.

Skinner et al. (2009) reported the internal consistency reliabilities of .61 and .85 for the behavioral and emotional engagement subscales. The reported test-retest reliability was also good ( $r = .68$ ). This questionnaire also enjoys good construct and criterion-related validity (Skinner et al, 2009). Using Cronbach's Alpha Method, the internal consistency of the translated version was .81 and .88 for the behavioral and emotional subscales, respectively.

### **Student-Teacher Relationship Scale**

Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (Pianta, 2001) is a 23-item questionnaire on a 5 point Likert scale. Higher scores suggest more positively perceived relationships. In contrast, lower scores reflect less well-developed relationships. According to Pianta (2001), test-retest reliability was solid for this scale ( $r = .92$ ). Internal consistency, using Cronbach's Alpha Method, was also high ( $r = .86$ ). Strong evidence for concurrent and predictive validity has also been found concerning behavioral and academic outcomes (Pianta, 2001). The internal consistency for the questionnaire in the current study seemed acceptable ( $r = .66$ ).

### **Student Engagement Teacher-Report**

The researchers administered the teacher-report questionnaire developed by Skinner et al. (2009) to teachers to report on their students' engagement in class. This 25-item questionnaire elicits teachers' cognition of behavioral and emotional engagement of the learners in class settings on a 4-point Likert scale from Not at all true (1) to Very true (4).

Each teacher reported (a) students' behavioral engagement using 10 items tapping their effort, attention, and persistence while initiating and participating in learning activities and their lack of effort and withdrawal from learning activities; and (b) emotional engagement using 15 items about students' involvement during learning activities and their emotions indicating motivated withdrawal or alienation during learning activities.

Skinner et al. (2009) reported the internal consistency reliabilities of .81 and .87 for the two subscales in teachers' reports. The reported test-retest reliability was also high ( $r = .82$ ). This questionnaire has proved to have good construct and criterion-related validity (Skinner et al., 2009). In the current study, the internal consistency of the questionnaire was .92 and .94 for behavioral and emotional engagement, respectively.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

One of the researchers met the students and most of the teachers in their classes and gave them the necessary instructions in Persian on how to complete the questionnaires. It was emphasized to them that there were no right or wrong answers and that the information they provided on questionnaires would be anonymous. Students' data and teachers' data were collected separately and the learners were assured that their teachers would not be informed about the information they provided in the questionnaires. The students and the teachers filled the attachment questionnaires before the engagement questionnaire. The majority of the teachers received their forms in class although some teachers received them via email.

### **Data Analysis**

To determine the security or insecurity of teacher-student attachment, each student's and teacher's scores on attachment questionnaires were summed up and divided by the number of questions in order to determine the mean. Scores higher than the mean denoted a secure teacher-student attachment and scores lower than the mean denoted an insecure teacher-student attachment. To determine the engagement level of the students, at first the students' reports about their engagement were analyzed. The mean of the engagement questionnaire was calculated by summing each student's scores and dividing them by the number of questions. Scores higher than the mean meant higher student engagement and the lower ones meant lower engagement. The same procedure was used for teachers' reports about student engagement. SPSS statistical package version 20.0 was employed to find the relationship between attachment and engagement according to the data provided by the teachers and students.

### **Results and Discussion**

This study sought to examine the correlation between teacher-student attachment and engagement of EFL learners from the students and teachers' point of view. In this section, the results of the analysis of the data which the two groups of participants provided are briefly presented (Table 1) and discussed.

**Table 1:** Pearson Correlations in pairs of variables in each of the seven research hypotheses

Pairs of variables	Correlation according to students' responses	Correlation according to teachers' responses
1.teacher-student attachment and EFL learners' engagement	.337 (sig. 000; N = 311)	.043 (sig. 781; N = 70)
2.teacher-student secure attachment and EFL learners' engagement	.315 (sig. .001; N = 112)	.178 (sig. 404; N = 24)
3.teacher-student insecure attachment and EFL learners' engagement	.121 (sig. .204; N = 112)	.045 (sig. .847; N = 21)
4.teacher-student secure attachment and EFL learners' behavioral engagement	.288 (sig. .002; N = 112)	.320 (sig. 128; N = 24)
5.teacher-student insecure attachment and EFL learners' behavioral engagement	.176 (sig. .064, N = 112)	.089 (sig. .079; N = 24)
6.teacher-student secure attachment and EFL learners' emotional engagement	.290 (sig. 002; N = 112)	.138 (sig. .519; N = 24)
7.teacher-student insecure attachment and EFL learners' emotional engagement	.073 (sig. 447; N = 112)	.046 (sig. 844; N = 21)

**Hypothesis 1: Teacher-student attachment and EFL learners' engagement**

This relationship enjoyed support from learners, but not from teachers. Learners' support is in line with the findings of Berndt & Miller (1990), Furrer & Skinner (2003), Pintrich (2003), Wigfield et al. (2006), and many other scholars. All of them have come to the conclusion that teacher-student attachment has positive effects on students' engagement. Pintrich (2003) in his study concluded that Students who reported connected, non-threatening associations with instructors reported more engagement than their counterparts who felt less connected, or more anxious, in these affiliations. Students who have positive attachments to their teacher are more



likely to experience a sense of belonging and academic competence. In turn, these perceptions may motivate students to work hard to meet classroom (behavioral and emotional) expectations (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). In a study conducted by Pianata (2006), the student-teacher relationship had the most significant direct effect on the engagement of students. Lack of teachers' support for this relation may be due to the lack of positive attachment between these teachers and their students and/or lack of perceived engagement among these students, although such hypotheses should be empirically confirmed.

### **Hypothesis 2: Secure teacher-student attachment and EFL learners' engagement**

The null-hypothesis that there is not any significant relationship between teacher-student secure attachment and engagement was rejected by learners but not by teachers. The support of the relationship by learners reconfirms the conclusion of the studies that teacher-student secure attachment leads to the success of students and more engagement of them in class. Past research consistently demonstrates that teacher's good relationship with students positively impacts student satisfaction with the teacher and the course and leads to more engagement of the students (Frymier & Houser, 2000; Dobransky & Frymier, 2004). However, the teachers' views about the relationship between their attachment to students and students' engagement are not supportive of this connection, nor are they in line with the findings of the studies referred to here or in the literature review.

### **Hypothesis 3: Insecure teacher-student attachment and EFL learners' engagement**

The third null-hypothesis stating that there is not any significant relationship between insecure teacher-student attachment and engagement was supported both by learners and teachers. The studies by Stronge (2002), Blankstein (2004), and some other scholars confirm the fact that students who are insecurely attached to their teachers do not tend to engage in class and because of that they do not show any motivation to engage positively in class.

### **Hypothesis 4: Secure teacher-student attachment and EFL learners' behavioral engagement**

The fourth null-hypothesis stating that there is not any significant relationship between secure teacher-student attachment and behavioral engagement was rejected by students. Past research supports the idea that teacher-student attachment positively impacts student behavioral engagement (Kerssen-Griep, Hess, & Trees, 2003). Students' support of this relationship confirms the impact of students'

attachment to their teachers on their own behavioral engagement such as volunteering to do task and answer questions, being active and participating in class discussions. Teacher participants of this study agreed that the secure attachment they had with their students had a moderate effect on their students' engagement, but their agreement was not significant.

#### **Hypothesis 5: Insecure teacher-student attachment and EFL learners' behavioral engagement**

Both learners' and teachers' responses verified the fifth null-hypothesis that there is not any significant relationship between insecure teacher-student attachment and behavioral engagement. This is, arguably, because if students think that their attachment to their teachers is negative, they will not feel well about their relationship and will not be behaviorally engaged. A few studies had results similar to this study. Pais (2009) argues that "children with conflicted teacher-student relationships feel stress, which interferes with learning" (p. 1). This stress does not let them feel free in class; therefore, they would not be inclined to participate well in class activities.

#### **Hypothesis 6: Secure teacher-student attachment and EFL learners' emotional engagement**

The data obtained from learners participants in this study indicate that a rise in secure attachment relationships between students and teachers would also mean a rise in the emotional engagement of learners. If students could have secure attachment with their teacher, it would give them enough motivation for learning English which takes much practice and engagement, both behaviorally and emotionally. When students develop interpersonal relationship with their teachers, they are more engaged in the activities and do not disappoint the teachers. It is likely that students want their teachers to be proud of them and engagement is perceived as a way to achieve this. However, teachers did not believe the attachment they formed with their students was related to the emotional engagement of their students. The sixth null-hypothesis that there is not any significant relationship between secure teacher-student attachment and emotional engagement is supported. The teachers thought that in spite of positive attachment, students' engagement could be low. The reason for this weak relationship could be the fact that the secure relationship between teachers and students in most classes is taken for granted and already expected. In fact, teachers may be in need of some awareness-raising and tangible evidence before they realize that such relationship exists.

### **Hypothesis 7: Insecure teacher-student attachment and EFL learners' emotional engagement**

Neither group of participants rejected the seventh null hypothesis which said that there was no relationship between teacher-student insecure attachment and EFL learners' emotional engagement. This is both counter-intuitive and against the findings of past research as reported in the Review of Literature. According to previous research, a negative teacher-student relationship means lack of basic components such as comfort, communication, respect, and trust and existence of a feeling of inapproachability, an imaginary wall between the teacher and student. If teachers are not perceived as approachable, students might not feel comfortable asking questions, which can affect their progress or performance in that class. It is not hard to see that students' insecure attachment to their teachers does hinder them to have a good relationship with teachers, which will lead to lack of motivation and, consequently, lack of emotional engagement. Such students will not invest much physical and emotional energy in English classes they have with teachers they insecurely attach to.

### **Conclusion**

This study attempted to explore the relationship between teacher-student attachment and engagement of Iranian EFL learners from students and teachers' points of view. The results seem to indicate that teacher-student attachment has some positive relationship with learners' engagement. From students' viewpoint, their secure attachment with their teachers had positive relationship with their engagement and improved their participation in the process of learning English both behaviorally and emotionally. The data they provided affirmed that if they were insecurely attached to their teachers, the amount of their academic engagement would reduce and they would not be inclined to participate in class both behaviorally and emotionally. The results from this study are consistent with past research suggesting that the quality of the relationship between teacher and students influences students' engagement. The findings from this study provide further support for Pianta's teacher-student relationship theory, suggesting that when teachers feel close to their students, they may be more motivated to help the students academically succeed (Pianta et al., 1995; Hamre, & Pianta, 2001) and, as a result, the students will be more engaged in class because they love their teacher and can feel the effort their teacher invests. This study also found evidence of other student-level characteristics influencing how students engage behaviorally and emotionally. As expected, students with insecure attachment to teacher are likely to engage poorly, both behaviorally and emotionally. Students with secure attachment in class engage better in the process of learning English.

The data provided by the teacher participants of this study did not show significant relationships between the two variables of attachment and engagement. These findings are not in line with the conclusions of some studies mentioned in the literature review, which emphasize the positive effect of secure attachment on students' engagement. It is surprising that the teacher participants of this study did not give much importance to their relationship with their students and ignored this important element in learning and teaching. One reason for this finding can be teachers' expectation of a negative interaction and relationship with students due to their bad experiences. Another reason might be the fear teachers have about students misusing a close relationship. They, presumably, think that if they establish good relationships with their students, students may misuse it creating discipline issues and interrupt the learning process.

In addition to using a small sample, this study suffered from being cross-sectional. Relationships usually develop over time, and student-teacher links are often limited in duration. Data collection at several points in time may allow for a more accurate understanding of how the teacher-student attachment relate to EFL students' engagement.

Of course, more fine-tuned studies, which employ various measures and methodologies, can be designed to investigate the moderating effect of factors such as age, proficiency, gender, background, and ethnicity of both learners and teachers in the interplay of engagement and attachment.

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