



# The Role of Optimism and Pessimism in Influencing Learning Engagement among Saudi EFL University Students

Nada Alqarni

English Department, Faculty of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia



LINK	RECEIVED	ACCEPTED	PUBLISHED ONLINE	ASSIGNED TO AN ISSUE
<a href="https://doi.org/10.37575/h/lng/240061">https://doi.org/10.37575/h/lng/240061</a>	02/12/2024	16/02/2025	16/02/2025	01/03/2025
NO. OF WORDS	NO. OF PAGES	YEAR	VOLUME	ISSUE
6495	7	2025	26	1

## ABSTRACT

The impact of psychological traits on learning engagement (LE) is a crucial area of research, particularly in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL). However, there is a notable lack of studies examining how optimism and pessimism, as two key psychological constructs, influence engagement in foreign language (FL) learning. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between optimism, pessimism and LE levels among EFL students. Specifically, it explored the association between these traits and the overall engagement of 131 Saudi EFL learners, focusing on their behavioural, cognitive, agentic and emotional engagement. A quantitative methodology was adopted for this research. Statistical techniques, including correlational analyses and linear regression, were applied to examine the relationships among these variables. The findings reveal a strong positive correlation between optimism and overall engagement, with the most significant association observed between optimism and behavioural engagement, followed closely by cognitive and emotional engagement. In contrast, pessimism demonstrated only a weak positive correlation with overall engagement. The results of the linear regression analysis confirmed that both optimism and pessimism serve as significant predictors of LE. This study offers valuable insights for educators and researchers interested in understanding the role of psychological traits in shaping LE within FL contexts.

## KEYWORDS

Psychological traits, positive emotions, EFL learners, behavioural engagement, cognitive engagement, emotional engagement

## CITATION

Alqarni, N. (2025). The role of optimism and pessimism in influencing learning engagement among Saudi EFL university students. *Scientific Journal of King Faisal University: Humanities and Management Sciences*, 26(1), 88–94. DOI: 10.37575/h/lng/240061

## 1. Introduction

As interest in exploring the processes of foreign language learning (FLL) and advancement continues to grow within applied linguistics and second language acquisition (SLA), understanding the factors that influence foreign language (FL) learners' engagement in FL learning becomes crucial for educators and researchers. Notably, positive and negative psychological traits, such as optimism and pessimism, may shape students' engagement, attitudes, motivation and overall success throughout their educational journey (Lei and Lei, 2022; Li and Wu, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2019).

Optimism refers to a learner's positive belief in their ability to succeed in educational endeavours, characterised by qualities such as self-efficacy, resilience and a growth mindset (Snyder *et al.*, 2002; Peterson and Chang, 2003). In contrast, pessimism is often associated with a general expectation of negative outcomes and a lack of hope for positive results (Peterson and Chang, 2003). Pessimists tend to focus more on challenges and difficulties rather than opportunities and possibilities.

In general educational settings, optimism plays a vital role in boosting students' motivation to engage with the learning process and in fostering persistence when overcoming challenges (Dawson and Pooley, 2013; Khodarahmi and Zarrinabadi, 2016). Several factors influence the level of optimism, including the quality of teacher support, the classroom environment, peer relationships and individual personality traits (Lei and Lei, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2019). For instance, a supportive learning environment that encourages risk-taking and acknowledges effort can substantially enhance students' confidence and their willingness to navigate the complexities of learning (Bar-On, 2000; Snyder *et al.*, 2002). Within the context of FL education, fostering optimism is a key element in strengthening students' self-efficacy (Lei and Lei, 2022). Conversely, a lack of optimistic perspectives towards learning success can lead to unfavourable outcomes, such as learning difficulties and negative

effects on students' well-being (Rand *et al.*, 2020).

Learning engagement (LE), on the other hand, refers to the extent to which students actively participate in and commit to their language learning activities (Reeve and Tseng, 2011). It is a multifaceted construct that encompasses behavioural, emotional, cognitive and agentic dimensions (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Reeve and Tseng, 2011). Engagement is influenced by various factors, including intrinsic motivation, the relevance of learning materials and the perceived value of language proficiency for personal and professional goals (Ben-Eliyahu *et al.*, 2018; Cong *et al.*, 2024; Guo, 2021; Li *et al.*, 2023; Tsang and Dewaele, 2023; Wang, 2022). Contextual factors, such as the role of educators and the nature of tasks, can also substantially impact student engagement levels (Huang *et al.*, 2022). When students perceive the language as relevant and valuable, they are more likely to invest time and effort in their learning, leading to higher engagement levels (Sabbaghi *et al.*, 2020; Wang and Wang, 2024). Conversely, feelings of anxiety can hinder engagement, resulting in avoidance behaviours and lower participation rates in language learning activities (Li *et al.*, 2024; Shen, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2020; Zheng and Yu, 2018).

In the context of Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) students, who often regard English as essential for their academic and professional success, it is important to examine how optimism and pessimism influence their LE. These students face unique challenges in their pursuit of EFL learning, including limited opportunities for practice outside the classroom, cultural barriers and varying levels of intrinsic motivation (Alrabai, 2016). Understanding the impact of optimism and pessimism on success in EFL learning is essential for educators aiming to create a more effective and supportive learning environment. Despite the significance of this topic, research on how psychological traits, specifically optimism and pessimism, affect LE in this context remains relatively sparse. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the relationship between optimism, pessimism and LE among Saudi EFL university students. By examining these psychological

dimensions, this research aims to contribute to the existing literature on language acquisition and offer insights into teaching strategies that enhance student involvement while fostering an optimistic learning environment.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Optimism in Educational Settings:

Optimism manifests in two distinct forms and can be evaluated from both a general dispositional perspective, as outlined by expectancy theory, and as an explanatory mechanism, as defined by explanatory style theory (Carver and Scheier, 2014). According to expectancy theory, optimism is regarded as a trait that increases the likelihood of anticipating positive outcomes and fosters a hopeful outlook (Carver and Scheier, 2014). In contrast, explanatory style theory suggests that individuals adopt a consistent approach to explaining their experiences rather than providing isolated explanations for each failure. For example, those who embrace an optimistic explanatory style tend to perceive favourable events as enduring and widespread. Conversely, individuals with the same optimistic outlook are more likely to interpret setbacks as temporary and specific to certain situations (Carver and Scheier, 2014).

Numerous processes link optimism and pessimism to various outcomes, with the specific combination of these processes depending on the particular outcome in question. Additionally, understanding how these effects emerge is further complicated by the fact that a single construct, such as mood, can function as a mechanism in one context while serving as an outcome in another (Peterson and Chang, 2003). More specifically, emotional mechanisms warrant considerable attention, particularly given the extensive research linking pessimism to depression (Peterson and Chang, 2003). Peterson and Chang (2003) argued that expectations and attributions should not be viewed as isolated beliefs; rather, they form essential components of a complex knowledge system that can influence well-being in multiple ways.

Another perspective on the relationship between optimistic thinking and outcomes includes a social dimension (Peterson and Chang, 2003). For example, individuals with pessimistic tendencies often experience social isolation, whereas those with an optimistic perspective may enjoy strong social networks and substantial social support. Therefore, it can be hypothesised that there may be a potential link between optimism and pessimism and engagement as an outcome in the context of EFL learning.

Past and ongoing studies have further elucidated some of the mechanisms underlying optimism. Li and Wu (2011) explored the structural relationships between college students' optimism, creative self-efficacy (CSE) and innovative behaviour among undergraduate students from public and private universities in Taiwan. Their findings indicated that cognitive reappraisal and promotion positively influenced optimism, while prevention had a negative effect. Furthermore, CSE was found to partially and substantially mediate the relationship between optimism and innovative behaviour.

Additionally, previous investigations in educational settings have identified optimism as a key factor influencing both teachers and students. For example, learners exhibit greater resilience when they possess higher levels of optimism (Dawson and Pooley, 2013). More broadly, individuals with elevated optimism tend to be more resilient when facing challenges compared to those who are less enthusiastic and confident (Dawson and Pooley, 2013).

Research further indicates that optimistic individuals are likely to demonstrate resilience in challenging situations, even when their

progress appears gradual (Snyder *et al.*, 2002). Optimists show greater perseverance, maintain positive expectations and employ proactive coping strategies, unlike pessimists, who often deny problems or avoid challenges. For instance, Bar-On (2000) found that optimism could substantially enhance stress management, while other studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between optimism and students' problem-solving abilities and overall academic achievement (Assad *et al.*, 2007; Jenson *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, optimism can serve as a predictor of improved task performance and lower dropout rates (Ruthig *et al.*, 2004).

Khodarahmi and Zarrinabadi (2016) conducted a study examining the relationship between self-regulated learning (SRL) and FL learning optimism among 187 Iranian English language students. Their research highlighted FL learning optimism as a positive psychological construct that substantially predicted the use of SRL strategies during EFL learning. A key finding was that students' EFL learning optimism strongly predicted their SRL strategies, with notable differences observed between low-achieving and high-achieving students.

Recent research has also explored the mechanisms that enable optimistic learners to perform more successfully than others (Lei and Lei, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2019). For example, Zhang *et al.* (2019) investigated how optimism influenced social creativity and the mediating roles of hope and CSE among Chinese college students. The authors found that optimism did not directly predict social creativity, but its effects were mediated by CSE and hope. Rand *et al.* (2020) further argued that optimism can be a critical predictor of both academic success and psychological well-being. Moreover, Lei and Lei (2022) focused on FLL students and examined the relationships between optimism, hope, empathy and CSE, as well as how hope and empathy might mediate the connection between optimism and CSE. Their findings indicated a positive correlation among optimism, hope, empathy and CSE. The authors argued that while optimism did not directly predict CSE, it had a positive indirect effect on CSE through hope and empathy.

These empirical studies highlight the importance of fostering an optimistic outlook among learners in the learning process, as it may enhance their engagement and promote the creative and innovative behaviours essential for language learning.

### 2.2. Learning Engagement:

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a robust motivational framework that aids researchers and practitioners in understanding and enhancing student motivation and engagement (Ryan and Deci, 2002). SDT differentiates between autonomous regulation, which encompasses engagement and controlled motivation alongside amotivation, the latter indicating a state of withdrawal (Ryan and Deci, 2002). These aspects can be assessed independently, and research suggests that they exhibit distinct correlations with behaviours pertinent to specific tasks (Gagné and Deci, 2005; Reeve, 2012). Studies within SDT have consistently shown that individuals who are actively involved in their activities tend to experience enhanced physical and mental well-being compared to those who feel unmotivated or lack a sense of personal agency (Reeve, 2012; Ryan and Deci, 2000).

In the field of educational psychology, engagement is characterised as 'a state of heightened attention and involvement', manifested across three dimensions: behavioural, emotional and cognitive (Philip and Duchesne, 2016: 3). The behavioural component includes aspects such as on-task attention, effort, persistence and minimal conduct issues. The emotional component is characterised by a sense of interest and enthusiasm, while the absence of negative emotions,

such as anger and boredom, is also crucial. Lastly, the cognitive component involves strategic learning approaches and active self-regulation (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004). This tripartite framework is further supported by studies grounded in SDT, which consistently assess these dimensions of engagement (e.g. Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Reeve, 2012; Reeve and Tseng, 2011; Reeve *et al.*, 2004).

To gain a deeper understanding of how students positively influence their instructional experiences, Reeve and Tseng (2011) introduced the concept of agentic engagement. Agentic engagement refers to students' proactive and thoughtful involvement in shaping their learning experience (Reeve and Tseng, 2011). These dimensions are crucial to the success of FLL. Consequently, this research focuses on these four dimensions and examines their relationship with EFL students' optimistic and pessimistic attitudes toward EFL learning.

Research has highlighted various factors influencing student engagement. For example, Hospel and Galand (2016) found that autonomy support substantially affected emotional engagement, whereas Ben-Eliyahu *et al.* (2018) found that self-efficacy was inversely related to affective engagement, while mastery goals positively correlated with it, suggesting that motivation is influenced by engagement levels. In a broader educational context, Sabbaghi *et al.* (2020) explored the impact of academic engagement on several factors, including academic optimism, perceived competence and excitement among Iranian students. Their quantitative findings revealed a significant positive correlation between academic engagement and the variables of academic optimism, perceived competence and positive achievement emotions. Conversely, a substantial negative correlation was found between negative emotions and academic engagement.

In research conducted by Zhang *et al.* (2020), a path model was employed to analyse the factors affecting de/motivation and the mediating roles of engagement and anxiety in relation to English Language Skills (ELS) attainment and the intention to persist among 591 Chinese EFL college students. The findings indicated that L2 motivation exerted a greater influence than L2 demotivation on both ELS success and learners' willingness to continue their studies. These findings suggest that certain psychological characteristics can impact language learners' success across different linguistic skills. However, research exploring the impact of additional psychological traits, such as optimism and pessimism, on LE in EFL contexts remains relatively scarce.

Furthermore, Huang *et al.* (2022) investigated factors influencing student engagement, focusing on college students' perceptions of cognitive and emotional engagement across task characteristics and educator roles. Their findings revealed substantial differences in cognitive and emotional engagement between teacher-led question-and-answer sessions and online discussions. Additionally, both types of engagement were notably influenced by task characteristics and teacher roles.

In their study, Li *et al.* (2023) examined how optimism influenced teacher engagement, highlighting the importance of reflective teaching and academic optimism as crucial elements affecting work engagement among university educators in Iran. The researchers found that both reflective teaching practices and a sense of academic optimism were substantial predictors of work engagement for English university instructors.

In the context of EFL learning, there is a scarcity of research examining how LE influences student performance. Cong *et al.* (2024) explored the impact of LE and academic self-efficacy on burnout among EFL students in China. Their results revealed a positive correlation between LE and moderate academic self-efficacy, while burnout was inversely related to both factors.

Additionally, Guo (2021) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine the interplay between foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and LE, as well as their impact on EFL success and absenteeism among university students in China. The quantitative data demonstrated a strong positive correlation between FLE and LE, suggesting a mutually reinforcing relationship. However, both FLE and LE exhibited only weak associations with academic achievement, and no substantial connections were identified regarding absenteeism. Nonetheless, it was noted that higher levels of social FLE correlated with reduced absenteeism.

Alqarni (2023) examined the relationship between LE and language learning strategies (LLSs), as well as their impact on the language learning success of Saudi EFL learners. The study found that participants demonstrated high levels of behavioural engagement, with cognitive, emotional and agentic engagement closely trailing. A significant positive correlation was identified between LLSs and LE. Furthermore, LE was recognised as a critical predictor of language learning achievement.

Although optimism and LE have been extensively examined across various disciplines (e.g. Dawson and Pooley, 2013; Zhang *et al.*, 2019), their roles in SLA studies have received comparatively limited attention. Learning an FL presents significant challenges, requiring students to comprehend the language within contexts that extend beyond its immediate application. Consequently, fostering optimistic attitudes towards FL learning and sustaining high engagement levels are essential for enhancing students' linguistic performance.

This research aims to explore the relationship between optimistic and pessimistic perspectives towards EFL learning and the extent to which these perspectives influence the LE levels exhibited by Saudi EFL students.

### 2.3. Research Questions:

The current study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1. Do optimism and pessimism influence the LE of Saudi EFL learners?

RQ2. What are the relationships between optimism and pessimism and the four aspects of LE (i.e. agentic, behavioural, emotional and cognitive)?

## 3. Methods

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to statistically measure the relationships between optimism, pessimism and LE among EFL students.

### 3.1. Participants:

Participants were 131 Saudi female EFL college-level students from the English Department at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. The mean age was 22.21 years (standard deviation [SD] = 1.544), ranging from 20 to 27 years. They were studying English as an FL at the college level and had completed extensive coursework in the four English language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) alongside specialised courses in linguistics, translation and English literature.

They had been studying for at least five semesters, with a maximum of eight semesters. Their English proficiency was regarded as intermediate ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ), as reflected in their grade point averages (GPA).

### 3.2. Instruments:

Two main measures were included in the online survey and are described below.

The Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R) (Scheier *et al.*, 1994) is a

10-item measure of dispositional optimism and pessimism, with three items measuring optimism and three measuring pessimism. The remaining four items are fillers. Participants rated the strength of each item on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

The LE scale (Reeve and Tseng, 2011) is a 22-item measure assessing four aspects of engagement: agentic (5 statements), behavioural (5 statements), emotional (4 statements) and cognitive (8 statements). Participants rated each item on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). A composite LE score was derived by averaging the standardised scores of all items across the four engagement aspects. A higher score indicated a higher level of engagement.

### 3.3. Data Collection:

The research was conducted during the first term of the 2024 academic year. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method, in which initial participants were invited to share the online survey with fellow EFL students via their university email accounts.

Items were presented in both Arabic and English to validate the questionnaire and enhance participant comprehension. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Clear instructions were provided at the outset, and measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, encouraging honest responses. Participation was entirely voluntary. The author translated the questionnaire into Arabic, and an experienced bilingual translator reviewed it. All scales used in this research have been previously employed in various studies (e.g. Alqarni, 2023; Guo, 2021; Li and Wu, 2011; Peterson and Chang, 2003) and have been recognised as valid and reliable for assessing the relevant constructs.

### 3.4. Data Analysis:

Before performing statistical analyses, the data underwent a reliability assessment. The LE scale exhibited strong reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91), while the LOT-R scale also demonstrated good reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.81). The Shapiro–Wilk test was conducted to evaluate normality due to the small sample size. The results indicated that the data were normally distributed (LE Scale: 0.042; LOT-R Scale: 0.06, both nonsignificant at  $p > 0.01$ ), permitting the use of parametric tests in subsequent analyses. All statistical calculations for this study were performed using version 21 of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

To examine the impact of the independent variables (optimism and pessimism) on the primary dependent variable (LE and its four dimensions: behavioural, cognitive, emotional and agentic), simple linear regression analysis was applied to the quantitative data. Additionally, Pearson correlation tests were conducted to investigate the relationships among the variables.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics for Optimism, Pessimism and Engagement with its Dimensions:

Statistical analyses were conducted to characterise the participants' profiles based on the mean scores (M) and SD for the variables, including optimism, pessimism, engagement and its dimensions: behavioural, cognitive, emotional and agentic. The results, as presented in Table 1, indicate that the mean score for optimism was 3.58 (SD = 0.593), while the mean score for pessimism was 2.77 (SD = 0.98).

The overall mean score for engagement was 3.76 (SD = 0.66). Among the four dimensions of engagement, behavioural engagement had

the highest mean score (M = 4.34, SD = 0.78), followed by cognitive engagement (M = 4.18, SD = 0.66), emotional engagement (M = 3.93, SD = 0.95) and agentic engagement, which had the lowest mean score (M = 2.37, SD = 1.04).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for optimism, pessimism and learning engagement with its dimensions (N= 131)

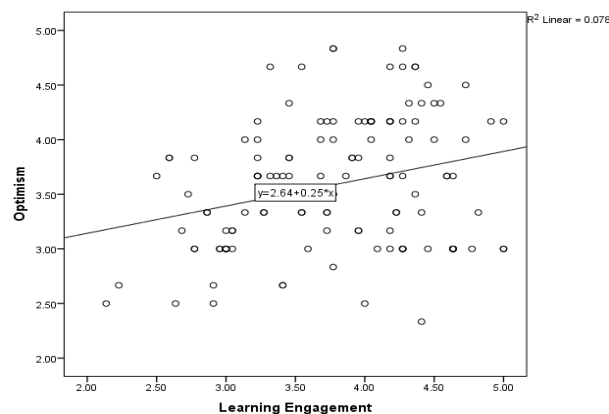
Variables	Mean	SD	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Optimism	3.584	0.593	0.051	3.481	3.686
Pessimism	2.773	0.980	0.085	2.604	2.943
Learning engagement	3.766	0.663	0.057	3.652	3.881
Cognitive engagement	4.188	0.717	0.062	4.064	4.312
Behavioural engagement	4.348	0.788	0.068	4.211	4.484
Emotional engagement	3.931	0.958	0.083	3.765	4.096
Agentic engagement	2.378	1.043	0.091	2.198	2.559

Note:SD = Standard Deviation

### 4.2. Statistical Correlations between Optimism and Learning Engagement:

Pearson correlation analyses demonstrated a significant positive relationship between optimism and engagement, with a correlation coefficient of  $r = 0.280$  ( $p < 0.001$ ) (see Figure 1). This finding suggests that participants with higher levels of optimism were more likely to exhibit increased engagement in EFL learning. As shown in Table 2, optimism was positively and significantly correlated with three dimensions of engagement: behavioural ( $r = 0.439$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), emotional ( $r = 0.243$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and cognitive ( $r = 0.337$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Figure 1: Correlation between optimism and engagement among the participants (N= 131)



In contrast, pessimism exhibited a moderate positive association with engagement ( $r = 0.194$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). While agentic engagement did not show a significant correlation with optimism, it was significantly correlated with pessimism ( $r = 0.318$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Additionally, pessimism demonstrated significant positive correlations with both emotional engagement ( $r = 0.243$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and cognitive engagement ( $r = 0.337$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlations between optimism, pessimism and learning engagement (N= 131)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Optimism	1						
Pessimism	-0.766**	1					
Learning engagement	0.280**	0.194*	1				
Agentic engagement	-0.098	0.318**	0.615**	1			
Behavioural engagement	0.439**	-0.028	0.834**	0.271**	1		
Emotional engagement	0.243**	0.173*	0.870**	0.420**	0.706**	1	
Cognitive engagement	0.337**	0.107	0.832**	0.188*	0.716**	0.679**	1

Note: Statistical significance: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$

The significant correlations observed between optimism and engagement led to further statistical analyses to assess how both optimism and pessimism influence engagement in EFL learning and its four dimensions.

### 4.3. The Impact of Optimism and Pessimism as Predictor Variables on Engagement and its Aspects as Dependent Variables:

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the impact of optimism and pessimism on engagement levels among EFL learners. The model explained approximately 48% of the variance ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.472$ ), with the results indicating  $F(2,128) = 59.149, p < 0.001$  in relation to engagement in EFL learning. As detailed in Table 3, both predictors made significant contributions to the model ( $ps < 0.001$ ).

Table 3: Simple linear regression model for predicting engagement levels in EFL learners ( $N = 131$ )

	$R^2$	Adj $R^2$	$\beta$	$t$	$p$ -value
Model	0.480	0.472			
Optimism			1.035	10.443	0.000
Pessimism			0.986	9.952	0.000

Note: Dependent variable: Engagement

A series of simple linear regression analyses were conducted to evaluate the impact of optimism and pessimism on various forms of engagement. The results revealed that both optimism and pessimism were significant predictors of cognitive ( $F(2,128) = 49.340, p < 0.001$ ), behavioural ( $F(2,128) = 46.668, p < 0.001$ ), emotional ( $F(2,128) = 37.759, p < 0.001$ ) and agentic engagement ( $F(2,128) = 11.545, p < 0.001$ ). These findings indicate that optimism and pessimism play a crucial role in each type of engagement, explaining 43% ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.427$ ), 42% ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.413$ ), 37% ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.361$ ) and 15% ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.140$ ) of the variance in cognitive, behavioural, emotional and agentic engagement, respectively. Overall, cognitive engagement demonstrated the strongest effect, followed by behavioural, emotional and, lastly, agentic engagement.

## 5. Discussion and Implications

The results of this study provide compelling evidence for the role of optimism in enhancing engagement in EFL learning contexts. The significant positive correlation between optimism and overall engagement suggests that individuals with a more optimistic view towards EFL are likely to engage more deeply in their learning process. This finding aligns with existing literature that highlights the importance of positive psychological traits in educational settings (e.g. Ben-Eliyahu *et al.*, 2018; Cong *et al.*, 2024; Guo, 2021; Li *et al.*, 2023; Tsang and Dewaele, 2023; Wang, 2022), indicating that fostering optimism could be a valuable strategy for educators seeking to enhance student engagement.

Delving deeper into the dimensions of engagement, the statistical results indicated that the strongest correlation was observed between optimism and behavioural engagement. This suggests that optimistic learners are not only more likely to participate in classroom activities but may also demonstrate persistence and effort in their studies. The positive relationship between optimism and cognitive engagement further implies that these learners may be more inclined to invest mental resources into their learning, potentially leading to better academic outcomes.

Emotional engagement, while showing a positive correlation with optimism, was the weakest among the three dimensions. This suggests that while optimism contributes to positive feelings about learning, it may not be as strong a predictor of emotional involvement as it is for behavioural and cognitive aspects. These findings align with past studies that have elucidated the mechanisms underlying optimism and its impact on various educational outcomes (e.g. Khodarahmi and Zarrinabadi, 2016; Li and Wu, 2011).

The absence of a significant correlation between agentic engagement and optimism is particularly intriguing. Agentic engagement refers to the proactive and self-directed aspects of learning, suggesting that optimistic individuals may not necessarily take the initiative in their learning processes. This finding invites further investigation into the

complex interplay between optimism, engagement and learner agency.

Conversely, the findings regarding pessimism present a more nuanced picture. While pessimism exhibited a weak positive association with overall engagement, this relationship does not necessarily indicate a beneficial impact. Instead, the significant correlations between pessimism, agentic engagement and emotional engagement suggest that a pessimistic view towards EFL learning may be linked to less constructive forms of engagement. This implies that while pessimism may drive some level of engagement, it does not do so in a way that fosters positive learning experiences or outcomes.

The results of the linear regression analyses provide a deeper understanding of the roles of optimism and pessimism in influencing engagement among EFL learners. The findings indicate a strong relationship between these psychological traits and LE, affirming the importance of both optimism and pessimism in educational contexts (e.g. Khodarahmi and Zarrinabadi, 2016). Both predictors made substantial contributions to the model, suggesting that they operate independently in shaping engagement levels. This finding is consistent with previous research that emphasises the impact of optimism on learning outcomes (e.g. Lei and Lei, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2019).

Additionally, this finding supports SDT, which posits that engagement is associated with favourable outcomes across different domains. Specifically, the positive relationship between optimism and LE suggests that fostering an optimistic mindset may enhance individuals' sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness, which are key components of SDT, ultimately leading to greater engagement in the learning process.

When examining the impact of optimism and pessimism on specific forms of engagement, the results reveal that both constructs substantially predict cognitive, behavioural, emotional and agentic engagement. The strongest variance was observed in cognitive engagement, suggesting that optimistic learners are more likely to engage in deep processing of information, which is crucial for language acquisition. This aligns with the notion that optimism fosters a growth mindset (e.g. Snyder *et al.*, 2002; Khodarahmi and Zarrinabadi, 2016), encouraging students to view challenges as opportunities for learning rather than obstacles (Bar-On, 2000; Dawson and Pooley, 2013; Lei and Lei, 2022).

Behavioural engagement, which encompasses participation and effort in learning activities, also showed a strong relationship with both optimism and pessimism. This finding underscores the importance of fostering an optimistic learning environment, as students who feel positive about their abilities are more likely to participate in classroom activities and persist in their efforts (Reeve and Tseng, 2011). This connection highlights the potential for optimism to serve as a predictor of improved task performance and reduced dropout rates, as evidenced in Ruthig *et al.* (2004).

Emotional engagement, while still significant, explained a lower percentage of variance. This suggests that while optimistic learners may experience positive emotions related to their learning, the emotional aspect of engagement may also be influenced by other factors, such as classroom dynamics or teacher-student relationships. Interestingly, agentic engagement had the lowest variance explained, indicating that while both optimism and pessimism play a role in agentic engagement, other variables may be more influential in determining a learner's initiative and autonomy. This finding prompts further investigation into what additional factors might contribute to agentic engagement, such as individual learner characteristics or external support systems.

Overall, the results of this study highlight the nuanced roles that

optimism and pessimism play in shaping various dimensions of engagement in EFL learning. The implications of these findings are substantial, suggesting that fostering optimism can lead to improved student engagement and, consequently, better language learning outcomes. As students engage more deeply in their EFL learning journey, they are likely to develop greater self-regulation and persistence in the face of challenges.

Moreover, the findings suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing optimism among learners could lead to improvements in cognitive and behavioural engagement, ultimately enhancing language learning outcomes. Conversely, understanding the impact of pessimism on engagement can help educators identify at-risk students who may require additional support to foster a more positive learning experience.

Additionally, educators should consider implementing strategies that cultivate optimism among students, as this may lead to enhanced engagement across various dimensions. This study also identifies a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific influence of optimism in SLA contexts, indicating the need for further research to explore this psychological construct's mechanisms and its potential for enhancing educational practices in FL classroom settings. By addressing these areas, educators and researchers can work together to create more effective language learning environments that support student success and well-being.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study highlights the critical role of optimism in enhancing LE among EFL learners. The findings underscore the importance of optimism as a facilitator of LE in EFL contexts and corroborate existing literature that emphasises the positive impact of optimism on various educational outcomes, including resilience, stress management and problem-solving abilities. By demonstrating significant correlations between optimism and multiple dimensions of engagement (cognitive, behavioural, emotional and agentic), this study reinforces the necessity for educators to cultivate an optimistic learning environment.

Future research could expand on these findings by exploring the mechanisms through which optimism and pessimism influence engagement and by investigating potential interventions aimed at increasing optimism and their subsequent effects on engagement and learning outcomes in EFL learners. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide insights into how these relationships evolve over time, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between psychological traits and engagement in language learning contexts.

Furthermore, future research could explore the role of pessimism in educational contexts. Understanding these dynamics could provide valuable insights into optimising EFL instruction and improving student success.

## Biography

### Nada Alqarni

English Department, Faculty of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia, ndaa@kku.edu.sa

She is an associate professor of applied linguistics. She holds a PhD degree from Birkbeck College, University of London. Her research interests encompass the psychology of language learners and instructors, bilingualism, second and foreign language learning, and psycholinguistics. She is particularly focusing on how psychological factors influence foreign language learning outcomes and how educators can better support students in foreign language learning

contexts. She has published a number of scholarly articles, including work featured in a prestigious journal, System.

(ORCID): <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9238-2258>

## References

- Alqarni, N. (2023). Language learning strategies and learning engagement as predictors of language learning achievement: an investigation of Saudi EFL learners. *Saudi Journal of Language Studies*, 3(3), 129–43.
- Alrabai, F. (2016). Factors underlying low achievement of Saudi EFL learners. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 6(3), 21–37. DOI:10.5539/ijel.v6n3p21
- Assad, K.K., Donnellan, M.B. and Conger, R.D. (2007). Optimism: An enduring resource for romantic relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93(2), 285–97. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.93.2.285
- Bar-On, R. (2000). Emotional and social intelligence: Insights from the emotional quotient inventory. In: R. Bar-On and J.D.A. Parker (eds.) *The Handbook of Emotional Intelligence*. San Francisco, United States: Jossey-Bass.
- Ben-Eliyahu, A., Moore, D., Dorph, R. and Schunn, C.D. (2018). Investigating the multidimensionality of engagement: affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement across science activities and contexts. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 53(n/a), 87–105.
- Carver, C.S., and Scheier, M.F. (2014). Dispositional optimism. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 18(6), 293-9. Doi: 10.1016/j.tics.2014.02.003
- Cong, Y., Yang, L. and Ergün, A.L.P. (2024). Exploring the relationship between burnout, learning engagement and academic self-efficacy among EFL learners: a structural equation modeling analysis. *Acta Psychologica*, 248(n/a), n/a. DOI:10.1016/j.actpsy.2024.104394
- Dawson, M.L. and Pooley, J. (2013). Resilience: the role of optimism, perceived parental autonomy support and perceived social support in first year university students. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 1(2), 38–49. DOI: 10.11114/jets.v1i2.137
- Fredricks, J.A., Blumenfeld, P.C. and Paris, A.H. (2004). School engagement: potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), 59–109. DOI:10.3102/00346543074001059
- Gagne', M. and Deci, E.L. (2005). Self-determination theory and work motivation. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26(n/a), 331–62. DOI: 10.1002/job.322
- Guo, Y. (2021). Exploring the dynamic interplay between foreign language enjoyment and learner engagement with regard to EFL achievement and absenteeism: a sequential mixed methods study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12(n/a), n/a. DOI:10.3389/fpsyg.2021.766058
- Hospel, V. and Galand, B. (2016). Are both classroom autonomy support and structure equally important for students' engagement? A multilevel analysis. *Learning and Instruction*, 41(n/a), 1–10. DOI: 10.1016/j.learninstruc.2015.09.001
- Huang, M., Kuang, F. and Ling, Y. (2022). EFL learners' engagement in different activities of blended learning environment. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 7(9), 1–15. DOI: 10.1186/s40862-022-00136-7
- Jenson, W., Olympia, D., Farley, M. and Clark, E. (2004). Positive psychology and externalizing students in a sea of negativity. *Psychology in the School*, 41(1), 67–79. DOI: 10.1002/pits.10139
- Khodarahmi, E. and Zarrinabadi, N. (2016). Self-regulation and academic optimism in a sample of Iranian language learners: variations across achievement group and gender. *Current Psychology*, 35(n/a), 700-710. DOI: 10.1007/s12144-015-9340-z
- Lei, F. and Lei, L. (2022). How does the optimism of students learning a foreign language affect their creative self-efficacy? The mediating effects of hope and empathy. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13(n/a), n/a. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.831593
- Li, C.H. and Wu, J.J. (2011). The structural relationships between optimism and innovative behavior: understanding potential antecedents and mediating effects. *Creativity Research Journal*, 23(2), 119–28. DOI: 10.1080/10400419.2011.571184
- Li, F., Mohammaddokht, F., Hosseini, H.M. and Fathi, J. (2023). Reflective teaching and academic optimism as correlates of work engagement among university instructors. *Heliyon*, 9(2), n/a. DOI: 10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e13735
- Li, X., Zhang, F., Duan, P. and Yu, Z. (2024). Teacher support, academic engagement and learning anxiety in online foreign language learning. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 55(5), 2151–72. DOI: 10.1111/bjet.13430
- Peterson, C. and Chang, E.C. (2003). Optimism and flourishing. In: C. L. M.

- Keyes and J. Haidt (eds.) *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived*. United States: American Psychological Association.
- Philp, J. and Duchesne, S. (2016). Exploring engagement in tasks in the language classroom. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *36*(n/a), 50–72. DOI: 10.1017/S0267190515000094
- Rand, K.L., Shanahan, M.L., Fischer, I.C. and Fortney, S.K. (2020). Hope and optimism as predictors of academic performance and subjective well-being in college students. *Learning and Individual Differences*, *81*(n/a), n/a. DOI: 10.1016/j.lindif.2020.101906
- Reeve, J. (2012). A self-determination theory perspective on student engagement. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly and C. Wylie (eds.) *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement*. Boston, United States: Springer.
- Reeve, J. and Tseng, C.M. (2011). Agency as a fourth aspect of students' engagement during learning activities. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *36*(4), 257–67. DOI: 10.1016/j.cedpsych.2011.05.002
- Reeve, J., Jang, H., Carrell, D., Jeon, S. and Barch, J. (2004). Enhancing students' engagement by increasing teachers' autonomy support. *Motivation and Emotion*, *28*(n/a), 147–69.
- Ruthig, J.C., Perry, R.P., Hall, N.C. and Hladkyj, S. (2004). Optimism and attributional retraining: longitudinal effects on academic achievement, test anxiety, and voluntary course withdrawal in college students. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *34*(4), 709–30. DOI: 10.1111/j.1559-1816.2004.tb02566.x
- Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 68–78. DOI:10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68
- Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. (2002). An overview of self-determination theory: Perspectives on student engagement. In E. L. Deci and R. M. Ryan (eds.) *Handbook of Self-Determination Research*. New York, United States: Springer.
- Sabbaghi, F., Karimi, K., Akbari, M. and Yarahmadi, Y. (2020). Predicting academic engagement based on academic optimism, competency perception and academic excitement in students. *Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology*, *3*(3), 50–61. DOI: 10.52547/ijes.3.3.50
- Scheier, M.F., Carver, C.S. and Bridges, M.W. (1994). Distinguishing optimism from neuroticism (and trait anxiety, self-mastery, and self-esteem): a reevaluation of the Life Orientation Test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *67*(6), n/a. DOI:10.1037/0022-3514.67.6.1063
- Shen, J. (2021). A review of the effectiveness of foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety on learners' engagement and attainment. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*(n/a), n/a. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.749284
- Snyder, C.R., Rand, K.L. and Sigmon, D.R. (2002). Hope theory. In: C.R. Snyder and S. J. Loper (eds.) *Handbook of Positive Psychology*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Tsang, A. and Dewaele, J.M. (2023). The relationships between young Chinese EFL learners' classroom emotions, engagement and EFL proficiency. *Applied Linguistics Review*, *15*(5), n/a. DOI: 10.1515/applirev-2022-0077
- Wang, X. (2022). Enhancing Chinese EFL students' academic engagement: The impact of L2 enjoyment and academic motivation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*(n/a), n/a. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.914682
- Wang, X. and Wang, S. (2024). Exploring Chinese EFL learners' engagement with large language models: a self-determination theory perspective. *Learning and Motivation*, *87*(n/a), n/a. DOI: 10.1016/j.lmot.2024.102014
- Zhang, X., Dai, S. and Ardasheva, Y. (2020). Contributions of (de) motivation, engagement, and anxiety to English listening and speaking. *Learning and Individual Differences*, *79*(n/a), n/a. DOI: 10.1016/j.lindif.2020.101856
- Zhang, Y., Liu, W., Liu, Y., Huang, Z. and Liu, Q. (2019). Chinese college students' optimism and social creativity mediated by creative self-efficacy and hope. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, *47*(7), 1–9. DOI: 10.2224/sbp.8268
- Zheng, Y. and Yu, S. (2018). Student engagement with teacher written corrective feedback in EFL writing: a case study of Chinese lower-proficiency students. *Assessing Writing*, *37*(n/a), 13–24. DOI: 10.1016/j.asw.2018.03.001