Exploring student engagement as a nexus for integrating theory and practice in language teacher education

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Theory and practice in teacher education

- The relationship between theory and practice, and the need for deeper integration, a long-term challenge in teacher education (TE) worldwide (Kemmis et al., 2014, Klette & Hammerness, 2016)

- the theory-practice dichotomy an integral part of how student teachers (ST) view teacher learning (Bendtsen, 2016; Virta et al., 2001)

Processes of and conditions for integrating theory and practice in teacher learning

application of theory

theory ← → teacher learning → practice

theorizing of practice
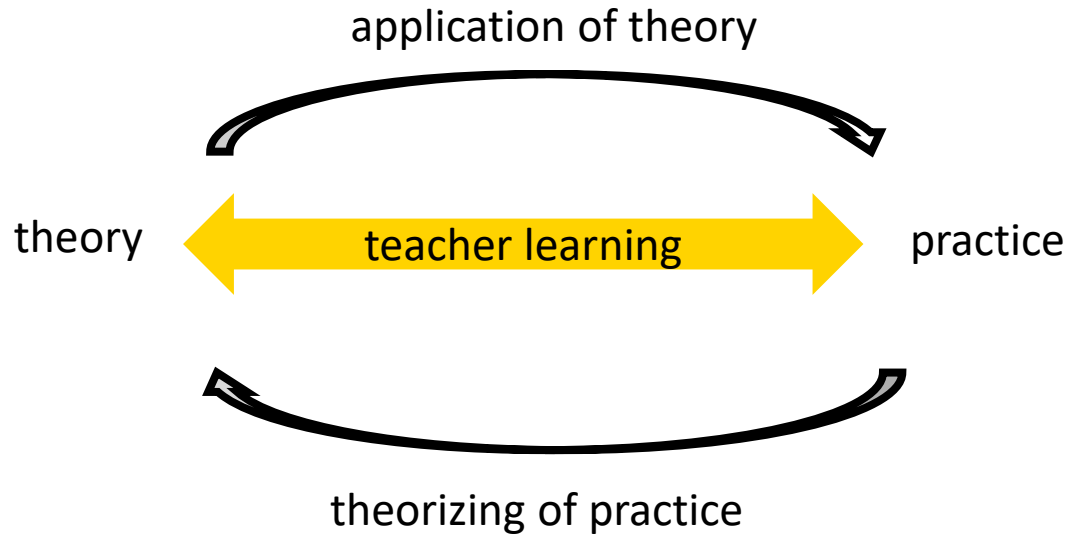
Cf. Bengtsson, 1993; Eraut, 2004; Richards, 2010

Exploring ways of connecting theory and practice in the language teacher education programme at ÅA
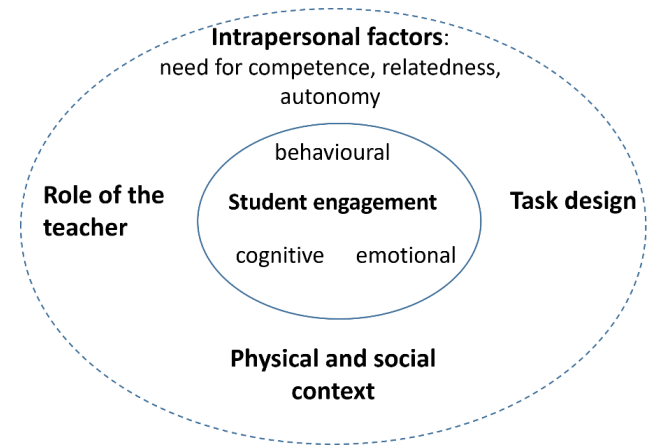
Theory

Practice

Action research*

Student engagement
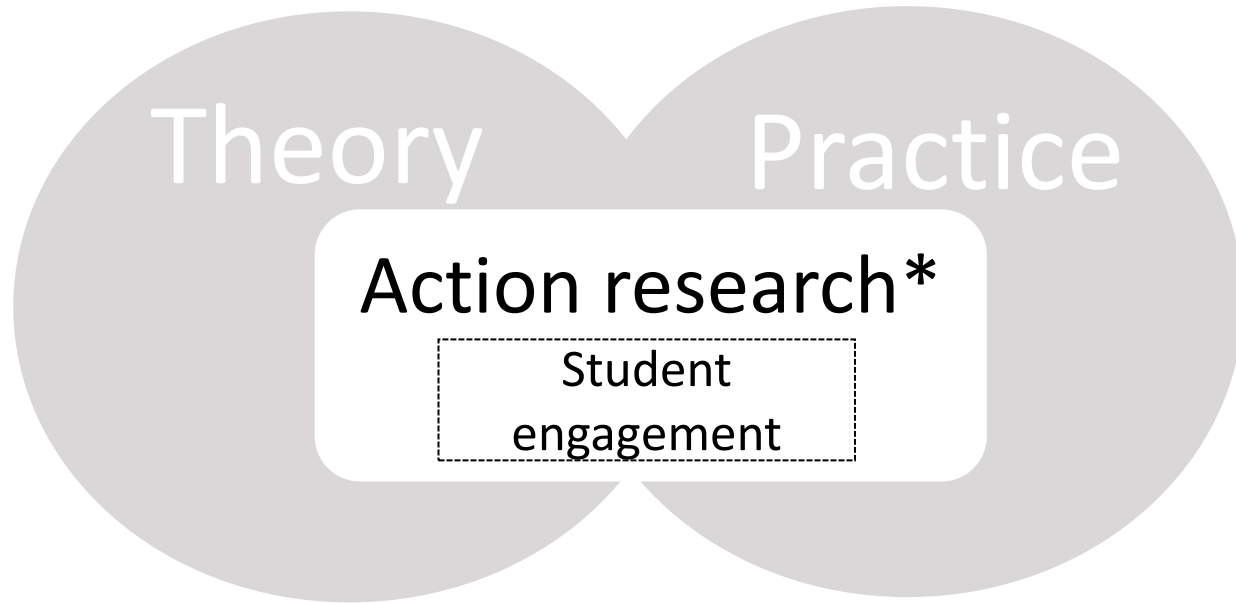
*See previous study by Bendtsen, Eklund, Forsman & Pörn, 2019

Student engagement as a theoretical framework

- Engagement provides a key framework for conceptualizing L2 learners' **meaningful involvement in learning opportunities**…" (Hiver et al., 2021)

- Action is central (Hiver et al., 2024; Mercer, 2019)
- Three core dimensions/components of engagement: *behavioral, cognitive* and *emotional engagement*

- Engagement is dynamic (Hiver et al., 2024) and functions as an ecological system where contextual, inter – and intra personal factors interact (Reschly, & Christenson, 2022)

Intrapersonal factors: need for competence, relatedness, autonomy

behavioural

Role of the teacher　　**Student engagement**　　**Task design**

cognitive　　emotional

Physical and social context

Bendtsen & Forsman, 2025

The language TE programme at ÅA

- Studies in the teaching subject(s)+ *basic studies in education* in Turku

- Three-week field practice period

- *Subject studies in education* in Vaasa during a spring semester (20 weeks): Comprising courses in pedagogy, general didactics and subject didactics alongside teaching practice at the university practice school

The study

Aim: to explore how the concept of student engagement integrated into small-scale AR-based projects can be used to strengthen the nexus between theory and practice within language TE

RQ1: How is student engagement understood by the student teachers?

RQ2: How can the use of student engagement as a theoretical framework strengthen the nexus of theory and practice?

Implementation

Participants: a cohort of five language STs participating in the programme in spring 2025: Adam, Jenny, Sarah, Tim and Vera

Data sources and timeline for collection

| Data sources	Description	Timeline
Initial drawing (ID)	drawing+ verbal explanation	week 1
Initial profile (IP)	reflective self-assessment	week 3
* Written reflection 1 (R1)	reflection on teaching practice	week 8
* Written reflection 2 (R2)	reflection on teaching practice	week 11
* Written reflection 3 (R3)	reflection on teaching practice	week 19
* AR project (AR)	project plan/poster	week 12/20
* Final group discussion (FD)	discussion + intro of Figure 1	week 20
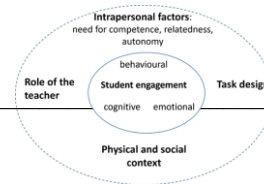
* Tasks specifically involving Student engagement

RQ1: STs' understanding of student engagement

- The concept has an intuitive appeal and STs readily recognize it in their practice
- Tendency to connect engagement with active and emotional displays of engagement rather than aspects connected with cognitive engagement
- as STs' understanding of practice evolves, a more complex and dynamic view of engagement develops
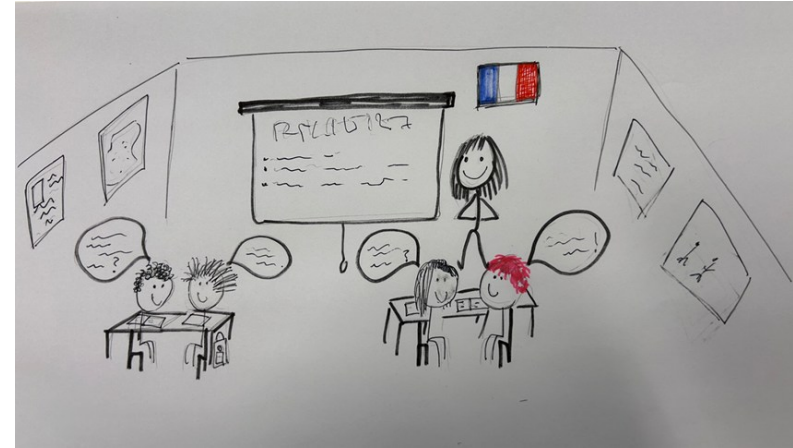
Vera (ID, week 1) wants everyone in the classroom to be "engaged and eager"

RQ2 How can the use of student engagement as a theortical framework strenghten the nexus of theory and practice?

In their reflections, the STs alternated between processes of *application of theory* and *theorizing of practice*
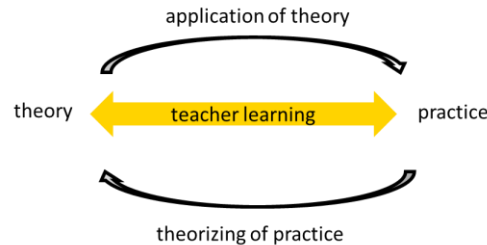
In *Reflection 1*, Adam is concerned with maintaining students' engagement. He finds it challenging and states that "it is impossible to please everyone" (Adam, R1). He then identifies factors that he believes can influence engagement, such as variation to redirect students' focus, and choice of content affecting instruction and task design.

In *Reflection 2*, he experiences an improvement in engagement and pinpoints contributing factors such as his relationship with students and clearer task design.

In *Reflection 3*, he expresses that he has been struggling with teacher–student interactions. He reflects that when teacher–student interaction is low, or follows a set, predictable pattern, it affects student engagement negatively.

[Adam, R1-3)

RQ2 How can the use of student engagement as a theortical framework strengthen the nexus of theory and practice?

- Teacher learning is a complex endeavour (see e.g., Bendtsen, 2016); as Sarah points out, the process requires time to reflect on the situation before steps can be taken towards transferring one's understanding into practical action (cf. Eraut, 2004).

Sarah, in Reflection 2, applies the theory as she connects students' behaviours with both engagement and non-engagement. She recognizes the dynamic nature of engagement as she concludes that the level of engagement may vary from time to time, and that there may be individual differences regarding what students find engaging. She deduces that tasks involving gamification, authentic cultural input and communication seem to engage students (Sarah, R2).

In Reflection 3, Sarah repeatedly brings up that she wants to activate students more and that her teaching needs to be more learner-centred. She finds that she is still too nervous and forgets to involve the students. She concludes that being comfortable in the classroom "is a basic requirement for me to be able to apply what I have learnt" (Sarah, R3).

RQ2 How can the use of student engagement as a theortical framework strengthen the nexus of theory and practice?

- AR projects as scaffolds for connecting theory and practice:
- Operationalizing the concept
- Shared theoretical framework

Tim explains that he initially found it hard to fully understand the theoretical framework but feels that it "became pretty concrete in the end when we did the action research and kind of had to take it down to a level where we chose a definition, had to apply it ourselves, and state how we measured and so on. So, it became more concrete in the end but that also shows that it takes more than just a lecture" (Tim /FD).

The STs pointed out that since they all used the same theoretical framework, they could support one another (Adam, FD) and benefitted from discussing together (Vera, FD)

RQ2 How can the use of student engagement as a theortical framework strengthen the nexus of theory and practice?

The importance of **consistency**

Adam explains: "since it was in a way a theme throughout /…/ the first time it kind of went over my head, but then it came up several times, this student engagement, then I started to feel more like 'okay, I know this'. Then at the end, when we got to test it in the action research, I felt like 'okay, I'm getting the hang of it now' [when we] constantly heard about it … repeatedly" (Adam, FD).

and **coherence** between settings

Tim reports that his practice school supervisor repeatedly encouraged him to use approaches that involve students and encourage them to think for themselves. He noted that this was in keeping with the "student-centred and engaging methods" his university supervisor had encouraged him to develop (Tim, R2)

Concluding remarks on using *student engagement* as a shared theoretical framework to strengthen the nexus between theory and practice as part of an AR project in TE.

- The concept had immediate appeal (cf. Hiver et al., 2021)
- STs were readily able ot recognize engagement in a variety of contexts in their own practice, which is a prerequisite for the integration of theory and practice (cf. Bengtsson, 1993)
- The concept had broad applicability (could be used for different purposes)

- A challenging concept due to its multidimensionality and complexity:
    - A more complex understanding developed over time with more experience
    - Consistency, repetition and coherence between settings functioned as important scaffolds

- STs' ability to apply the theoretical framework was connected to their individual level of development on their journey to becoming teachers (Canrinus et al., 2017):
- In all cases the conceptual framework helped develop their understanding of practice but sometimes STs were not yet able to transform this knowledge into action.
- Still, when application at the level of understanding has taken place, research has shown that with time, when the necessary skills are more fully developed, the next steps may very well be taken (Bendtsen, 2016).

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Thank you!

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