

Exploring Interpersonal Justice in EFL Education: A Conceptual Review of Its Impact on Students' Well-being and Engagement

Yan Wang^{*1 & 2} 

Abstract

Among increasing interest in emotional and relational dimensions of language teaching, this conceptual review highlights the essential effect of interpersonal justice in promoting learner well-being and engagement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. Based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), asserting that learning is most effective when individuals' basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are fulfilled, this review investigates the effect of interpersonal justice can address these needs and it also synthesizes extended empirical results to investigate the effect of respectful, empathetic, and dignified class interactions on cultivating engagement, and well-being in EFL students. Recontextualization of the previous research in this review illustrates that previously examined justice-related elements had contributed to enhancing learner engagement and well-being. Justice educational activities, including unbiased feedback, active listening, and dignity-preserving communication, reduce anxiety, foster trust, and maintain learner persistence, thereby promoting engagement and well-being. The review ends with practical implications for teachers and policymakers and outlines future research directions focused on extending comprehension of interpersonal justice as an affective and motivational structure in EFL settings.

Keywords: EFL students, engagement, interpersonal justice, self-determination theory (SDT), well-being

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^{*1} Corresponding Author: School of Foreign Studies, Henan University of Urban Construction, Pingdingshan, 467036, China

² College of Arts and Sciences, University of the Cordilleras, Baguio City, 2600, Philippines;
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7920-5664>; E-mail: catherine802311@126.com

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, a growing attention has been devoted to those studies that examine the emotional and psychological aspects of language learning, mainly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) circumstance where learners often encounter heightened academic stress, apprehension and cross-cultural variances (Derakhshan, 2022a; Mameli et al., 2021; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). Based on prior studies (Derakhshan, 2022b; Shakki, 2022; Strachan, 2020; Wang et al., 2021, 2022), the effectiveness of language education relies on the teaching quality as well as the interaction of psychological, emotional, and relational factors. Among them, learner well-being and engagement are the two most significant affective constructs, which play a crucial role in EFL learners' success (Zhang, 2024). Well-being, extensively defined as a state of emotional balance, life satisfaction, and buoyancy, is critical for learners to succeed in cognitively and socially challenging settings (Zheng, 2022). In the EFL context where students regularly face vulnerability and stress, boosting well-being is advantageous and essential (Derakhshan & MacIntyre, 2025a; Zheng, 2022).

In addition, learner engagement, which is closely associated with well-being, involves students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral participation in learning activities, and it is often conceptualized as a constructive psychological condition characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Chen & Shu, 2024). In the EFL context, engagement is regarded as a key predictor of success, responsiveness to feedback, and persistence (Derakhshan et al., 2022; Kirkpatrick et al., 2025) as engaged students potentially maintain motivation, actively participate, and enhance their communicative competence. Nevertheless, engagement and well-being are greatly affected by the class setting, especially the nature of teacher–student rapport and the presence of supportive interpersonal dynamics (Derakhshan, 2022a; Mameli et al., 2021; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021).

Even though Individual-level aspects are frequently highlighted, the social and relational aspects of EFL learning settings are overlooked. A significant relational element is classroom justice, rooted in Organizational Justice Theory (Colquitt, 2001), which includes distributive, procedural, and interactional (Chory et al., 2017). Among these dimensions, interpersonal justice has received little attention in

language teaching studies, despite its potential impact on students engagement and emotional stability (Clemente, 2018). Interpersonal justice pertains to the extent to which people feel they receive respectful treatment, dignity, and justice in social interactions (Čiuladienė & Račelytė, 2016; Clemente, 2018; Rasooli et al., 2019). In a learning climate, interpersonal justice is commonly uttered through actions like active listening, fair feedback, dignified communication, and assurance (Chory et al., 2017; Rasooli et al., 2019). Fair and respectful behavior of teachers meets learners' basic psychological needs, nurturing stronger rapport and trust (Molinari & Mameli, 2017). In emotionally demanding settings such as EFL classes, where students frequently face linguistic insecurity and social exclusion, the presence of interpersonal justice may function as an emotional support system, enhancing both engagement and well-being (Mameli et al., 2021).

The little attention on interpersonal justice in EFL literature echoes a significant theoretical gap, predominantly considering learners' heightened sensitivity to justice in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. Several empirical studies (Berti et al., 2016; Donat et al., 2016; Grazia et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2018; Kazemi, 2016; Mameli et al., 2018; Mameli et al., 2021; Molinari & Mameli, 2017; Tas et al., 2025) have investigated constructs related to justice in association with student outcomes, namely motivation, psychological well-being (PWB), academic performance, classroom identification, sense of belonging, agency, engagement, and social autonomy. However, these studies have not concentrated on the unique effect of interpersonal justice within language learning domains or its particular relationship to student engagement and well-being. This conceptual review seeks to address the theoretical gap in EFL research by synthesizing current studies and reframing their results within the theoretical lens of interpersonal justice, with particular attention to the role of justice regarding psychological factors. By doing so, this review illustrates that interpersonal justice is not a marginal aspect of instructional design but rather a critical driver of learners' well-being and engagement, a concern that resonates globally within the contemporary educational landscape. Accordingly, the present review provides conceptual definitions of justice and its various aspects in academic settings, concentrating on interpersonal justice. Then, it investigates the concepts of engagement and well-being and their connection in language learning. Following

this, it reviews important empirical research that highlights the connections among those variables. Eventually, the review ends with recommendations for class exercises and routes for future studies in culturally reactive, multilingual EFL settings.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Classroom Justice (Interpersonal)

Justice holds significant importance in educational settings since these settings distinctly establish various fields for the distribution of justice, and play a vital role in seating learners in schools, keeping track of capabilities, and allocating knowledge, scores, care, attention, support, and respect (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016). Injustice in education leads to students' unequal learning chances, access, resources, social experiences, scores, and teaching methods. It may drastically affect their motivation to learn, success, future job, professional roles, and living opportunities (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016). Justice encompasses three main dimensions of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice (Chory et al., 2017; Ehrhardt-Madapathi et al., 2018).

Distributive justice pertains to people's views on justice regarding the distribution of results, like scores, presents, or chances. This type of justice concerns whether individuals believe they have perceived an appropriate share based on certain instructional axioms (Yang, 2021). This is characterized by three axioms, namely, need, equity, and equality (Levinson et al., 2022). The principle of need highlights that resources should be distributed based on people's specific needs, like socio-economic disadvantages or learning challenges. In addition, equity advocates that results should correspond to individuals' help or efforts, rewarding performance and merit (Feifei, 2024). Equality supports uniform distribution, ensuring that everyone receives equally, irrespective of their input or conditions (Jasso et al., 2016). These axioms function within various social settings and are frequently affected by culture, particularly in academic settings where perceptions of justice can differ significantly among learners (Levinson et al., 2022).

Conversely, procedural justice refers to the perceived justice of the procedures and

methods employed to decide in the class. It centers on how rules are enforced, how scores are assigned, and whether learners have input in class policies (Wallace & Qin, 2021). In EFL settings, procedural justice is manifested in clear scoring rubrics, permanent disciplinary measures, and comprehensive participation policies. Learners potentially trust their teachers, actively engage, and accept feedback even when the results are not favorable, when they consider these procedures as fair (Rasooli et al., 2019). Furthermore, procedural justice is seen as the foundation of social exchange, as fair processes encourage teacher-student mutual respect and cooperation (Kaufmann & Tatum, 2018).

In classes, interactional justice means learners' justice perceptions in teachers' interactions with them, making it a key element of teacher justice, which is believed to be an essential part of teachers' social support (Bakchich et al., 2025). When learners perceive a respectful setting where they are treated courteously, and information is regularly, honestly, and logically communicated, then interactional justice is thought to be maintained (Sun, 2022). In EFL classes, interactional justice is vital for promoting emotional security and motivation, especially in linguistically varied settings (Yan, 2021). The other type of justice is Interpersonal justice, which is an aspect of interactional justice (Colquitt, 2001; Fouquereau et al., 2020). It refers to how learners perceive equity and fairness within the classroom, as a realization of treatment, worth, respect, and inclusion in interpersonal class interactions. These are vital for fostering learning settings that are emotional and supportive (Chory et al., 2017; Mameli et al., 2018). In educational contexts, this is reflected in teacher actions like being attentive, presenting fair feedback, and providing emotional support. Based on the literature, learners' points of view on interpersonal justice led to enhanced satisfaction, trust, and engagement with their teachers (Chory et al., 2017). When students perceive these elements of justice, they tend to feel content and sustain or even enhance their engagement and well-being, which is critical for educational performance (Molinari & Mameli, 2017).

2.2. Learners' Well-being and Engagement

The main objective of Positive Psychology (PP) is to improve joy and well-being

while recognizing personal challenges and dealing with them from a perspective of social empowerment instead of weaknesses (Wang et al., 2021). Well-being pertains to life satisfaction and involves healthy relationships, self-esteem, proficiencies, autonomy, and purposes (Derakhshan & Alrabai, 2025; Elmas & Aksoy, 2026). It has been argued in the literature that students' well-being is a vital factor for learners as it promotes their engagement and affects their achievement (Derakhshan et al., 2025; Pan et al., 2023). Indeed, those with higher well-being are typically more successful in obtaining better scores and are less prone to failure (Derakhshan & MacIntyre, 2025a).

In addition, learner engagement in learning is typically explained as a multidimensional concept that includes three aspects referring to emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement (Al-Obaydi et al., 2023; Han & Wang, 2021; Shakki, 2023). The first relates to learners' feelings of school enjoyment and attachment; the second concerns the strategies and processes employed by learners to connect concepts and past experiences; and the last refers to the attempt and conduct demonstrated in completing learning activities (Derakhshan, 2025; Derakhshan & Datu, 2025). In regard to its foundational elements, studies indicate that engagement includes vigor, dedication, and absorption (Chen & Shu, 2024). The first refers to an individual's sense of energy, enthusiasm, persistence, and resilience within an academic setting. In contrast, the second refers to an individual's enthusiasm, commitment, and pride in a task that aids them in navigating difficulties. The Last refers to a great level of engagement in an activity where people want to do it nonstop. Based on these aspects, one can argue that the quality of interpersonal justice in the class can enhance learners' levels of engagement, which is infrequently explored in literature.

2.3. Empirical Studies

Recent research in language teaching has led to a growing focus on the emotional and relational learning aspects, especially in EFL settings where learners frequently encounter cultural conflicts and language-related vulnerabilities (Bakchich et al. 2025; Derakhshan, 2022a; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). Interpersonal justice is one of

the emerging constructs that captures learners' impressions of respectful treatment, fairness, and dignity during class interactions. It is evident that, in addition to emotional support, the respectful treatment provided by educators significantly affects students' engagement and well-being (Gao et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2022). The present part integrates various empirical research that targets justice, and provides insightful information on how justice-directed teacher actions affect emotional and motivational results. Using SDT as a framework, the review reinterprets the results to illustrate how caring, respectful, and equitable relationships between teachers and students satisfy learners' fundamental psychological needs and cultivate a secure, highly engaging learning climate (Li, 2021).

Some prior studies offer strong evidence that interpersonal justice serves as an engagement motivator and behavioral drive. For example, Rasooli et al. (2019) investigated the effect of justice-directed teacher practices on student psychology within a class. They discovered that when teachers always provide impartial feedback, actively listen, and communicate in ways that preserve dignity, learners are more willing to build trust, experience lower anxiety levels, and show higher resilience. These results imply that equitable and respectful communication creates psychologically secure settings that enhance students' well-being. Kazemi (2016) indicated that learners' perceptions of justice, especially regarding relational treatment and feedback, greatly boost their motivation in language learning settings. He proved that when learners feel respected and receive positive and fair feedback, their internal motivation is enhanced, resulting in cognitive and emotional engagement in class tasks. Within the framework of this review, interactions between teachers and learners establish emotional security and resilience regarding students' levels of engagement.

In their study, Kaufmann and Tatum (2018) investigated learners' fairness perceptions, particularly the effect of procedural and interactional justice on their WTC, which is a critical indicator of language learning engagement. The research highlighted that when teachers demonstrate respectful, equitable, and clear behaviors, students potentially feel confident and ready to engage in class discussions. This boosts the idea that justice-directed teaching minimizes psychological obstacles and promotes inclusive, highly engaging learning settings. Moreover, Berti et al. (2016)

studied the effect of teacher justice perceptions and parental support on learning motivation and extended social beliefs. Their results indicated that views on teacher justice are predictive of internal motivation and belief in a just learning setting, significantly enhancing engagement. Furthermore, Grazia et al. (2020) conducted a longitudinal study examining the effect of interpersonal justice on learners' emotional reactions, like anger and agency. Their findings advocate that respectful treatment affects emotional states, which subsequently affect students' cognitive engagement and participation. This is consistent with the idea that perceived justice encourages a class setting where learners feel emotionally secure and are motivated to engage, persist, and invest meaningfully in learning a language.

Besides, Sonnleitner and Kovacs (2020) investigated informational and procedural justice in evaluation practices that significantly affect learners' affective responses and trust. Their study indicated that justice has a vital effect in shaping learners' well-being and engagement, highlighting the need for continuous cultivation by responsive and reflective teaching approaches. Additionally, Song et al. (2022) had a cross-cultural investigation on the effect of teacher care and teacher-learner relationship on EFL learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). Based on the findings, those who viewed their teachers as just, emotionally supportive, and compassionate were much more inclined to participate in class discussions, overcome linguistic difficulties, and actively engage in learning activities. These results strongly bolster the central debate, namely, interpersonal justice expressed through justice, care, and respectful communication is a crucial relational element in language teaching. These results emphasize the importance of interpersonal justice as a factor that enhances engagement and well-being.

Furthermore, Molinari and Mameli (2017) presented a significant extension to SDT by suggesting that justice should be recognized as an extra fundamental psychological need in academic settings. Their research indicated that perceptions of interpersonal justice were strong predictors of learner well-being, engagement, and intrinsic motivation. In longitudinal research, Mameli et al. (2021) provided insights on the evolution of perceptions of interpersonal justice change over time. The results highlighted that fair treatment is correlated with reduced anger and heightened learner agency, despite its direct impact on engagement varying at different time intervals.

This result reinforces the concept that interpersonal justice serves as a well-being catalyst as well as a sustaining factor for learner engagement. In their study, Bakchich et al. (2025) inspected the connection between learners' sense of attachment and teacher interactional justice in school, particularly considering the mediating role of learners' socioeconomic status (SES). Based on the results, irrespective of SES, learners who recognized greater degrees of interactional justice reported feeling a stronger sense of attachment in school. These results imply that empathetic and respectful teacher behavior plays a vital role in fostering learners' emotional attachment to school, which can predict both engagement and well-being. When educators treat learners with respect and fairness, it contributes to a supportive setting that improves learners' engagement and motivation. In his study, Yang (2021) studied the effect of learners' perceived fairness on various aspects of justice, highlighting the significant effect of positive learner-teacher relationships in forming these concepts. Yang claims that learners potentially view their learning setting as equitable when teachers exhibit care, immediacy, and credibility. This perception is associated with increased motivation, engagement, and well-being, thereby positioning the rapport between teacher and learner as a fundamental aspect of supportive and fair EFL teaching. Besides, Sun (2022) investigated the effects of teacher credibility and immediacy on EFL learners' views of all justice aspects. Based on the results, teacher immediacy can promote intimacy and emotional security, thus improving perceptions of justice. Likewise, teacher credibility has been proven to affect learners' involvement and trust. The review found that both factors can affect learners' emotional reactions and justice evaluations, indicating that justice in EFL classes is not just procedural but profoundly relational.

Integrating these results indicates a captivating yet under-explored theoretical route, namely, interpersonal justice could be a direct predictor of learner well-being and engagement within EFL settings. Based on SDT, this review underscores the significance of understanding the effect of social interactions in the class on learners' psychological results. SDT indicates that students struggle when meeting their fundamental psychological needs, namely, autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). A classroom climate based on interpersonal justice significantly contributes to well-being and engagement by satisfying these needs. Fair

and equitable treatment improves learners' relatedness by nurturing genuine teacher-learner relationships that ensure emotional security. It supports a sense of competence by recognizing learners' efforts, which reinforces their confidence and self-efficacy. Moreover, by affirming students' viewpoints, it bolsters autonomy, enabling them to take charge of their learning. These psychologically enriching experiences foster emotional resilience and inner motivation, which are key indicators of well-being, while driving learners to engage actively, persist through obstacles, and maintain cognitive involvement in language learning activities. Consequently, interpersonal justice is consistent with SDT's motivational principles and simultaneously functions as an emotional structure that supports learner engagement and well-being.

3. Conclusions, Implications, and Further Suggestions

In order to study the value of classroom interpersonal justice on the engagement and well-being of EFL students, the present conceptual review synthesized a wide array of research. Accordingly, this review revealed a consistent trend where learners who are fairly treated in their relationships experience greater emotional stability, lower anxiety, and greater flexibility. These factors are particularly crucial in EFL settings, where learners often encounter significant linguistic and cultural difficulties, amplifying the significance of the relationship. Interpersonal justice serves as a strong motivator for fostering students' engagement and well-being. In other words, when students are treated with respect and value, they indicate greater perseverance, more engagement, and enhanced communication, along with increased emotional safety and psychological comfort. This boosts the idea that students' engagement is cognitive as well as deeply emotional, with relational justice affecting behaviors and well-being. A fair and comprehensive class setting, which relies on ethical and empathetic teacher-learner interactions, fosters a sense of attachment, lessens anxiety, and encourages resilience. These emotional states are essential for academic achievement as well as for the EFL students' well-being.

This review considered the SDT structure to clarify the effect of justice-focused interactions on learner psychology. In EFL settings, in which cultural stress, linguistic vulnerability, and psychological stress are frequently evident, the teacher's

interpersonal behavior turns into a fundamental element. Approaches like active listening, respectful communication, and impartial feedback contribute to creating a safe and encouraging classroom setting. When students feel safe and comfortable, they potentially take communicative risks and fully engage in language learning activities. Class settings that emphasize interpersonal justice foster linguistic advancement and promote the emotional and social development needed for lifelong learning. Learners who perceive greater levels of justice report stronger emotional connections with their teachers, greater class cohesion, and enhanced motivation (Chory et al., 2017). These relational aspects significantly improve learner engagement and well-being, highlighting the academic significance of justice.

This review proposed some promising directions for future studies, as they were not taken into account in prior studies. For instance, certain aspects of engagement and well-being require further investigation to specify the effect of various aspects of justice on student results. Broadening the scope to involve all dimensions of justice, along with interpersonal justice, will enhance understanding of how these interrelated domains of interaction affect students' educational results. Researchers could take advantage of applying Latent Class Analysis (LCA) to identify other groups of students who react to perceived justice distinctly, therefore indicating nuanced mental and behavioral profiles regularly missed in conventional statistical analyses. Longitudinal research could examine the effect of different types of justice on the learning process over an extended period. Future research should take into account demographic factors like the age of the teacher, their experience in teaching, and cultural background to reveal how justice varies among different teacher profiles.

Moreover, Latent Curve Modeling (LCM) is a popular approach for longitudinal research, which permits researchers to monitor the developmental trajectories of learner engagement and well-being over time in response to fluctuating insights of justice in the classroom. Although the perceptions of the learners are crucial, the perspectives of teachers have the same significance due to their role in regulating class dynamics and their emotional response. Likewise, advanced research methods like Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) could be utilized to investigate these relationships, providing information on the moderating and mediating effects of demographic elements. In addition, Multi-level Modeling (MLM) and Dynamic

Structural Equation Modeling (DSEM) signify promising additions of traditional approaches, letting researchers explain nested data structures and time-varying relationships that are both related to academic settings. Furthermore, existential positive psychology (EPP) suggests a convincing agenda for scrutinizing justice-related themes from a more detailed humanistic viewpoint. As Derakhshan and MacIntyre (2025a, b) stated, EPP approach centers on meaning-making, authenticity, and resilience which these issues echo with students' and teachers' experiences of justice.

Moreover, the evolution of technology is transforming academic settings, and research focused on justice in digital and AI-based settings is increasingly becoming important. Studying relational justice in tools like smart teaching systems, digital and AI-enhanced classes, and adaptive learning applications can indicate their effects on perceived justice. Innovations such as emotion-sensitive AI instructors can demonstrate the growing connection of technology and justice dimensions in learning path.

In addition, this review offers important insights for teachers, policy-makers, and curriculum developers from a practical perspective. EFL teachers can enhance their teaching practices by integrating elements of interpersonal justice into their daily interactions. By viewing class dynamics through a justice-directed perspective, teachers can more successfully promote student engagement and well-being, particularly in intercultural and multilingual settings where justice and respect are of greater importance. Teacher training programs should include relational justice skills, aiding teachers in creating comprehensive and emotionally reactive learning settings. Policymakers and curriculum designers should strive to include justice, dignity, and empathy in educational guidelines and assessment criteria, recognizing the emotional difficulties of teaching and its vital effect on student growth.

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About the Author

Yan Wang is currently studying at the University of the Cordilleras for her doctorate and working at Henan University of Urban Construction. Her research interests include English Language Studies, English Language Teaching and translation.