

Original Article

Choice Theory and L2 Learners' Engagement, Satisfaction, and Performance

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Abstract

The current study sought to explore the effect of instruction primarily informed by choice theory on the engagement, performance, and satisfaction of EFL students in school settings. Central to choice theory is the claim that all human behaviors are rooted in choices primarily driven by internal instincts and five basic psychological needs, namely survival, freedom, power, love belonging, and fun. To conduct the present study, 159 Iranian male students of English were randomly split into an experimental and a control group. The experimental group was exposed to the choice theory skills program, whereas the control group experienced routine classroom activities over a semester. A questionnaire with four dimensions was used to quantify participants' degree of engagement; a battery of tests developed by the school board of examiners was administered to check their academic performance; and a questionnaire with five criteria assessed their satisfaction with the program. The engagement of the two groups was compared through an independent samples *t*-test, their satisfaction with the program was checked through a second independent samples *t*-test, and their performance scores were analyzed through one mixed between-within-subjects ANOVA. Indices obtained for engagement, satisfaction, and performance showed that students who received activities in congruence with their internal instincts had significantly better indices of engagement, better academic performance, and higher indices of satisfaction with the experiment. Based on the results obtained choice theory is recommended to be integrated into instructional materials.

Keywords: Choice Theory, Engagement, Performance, Psychological Needs, Satisfaction

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades choice theory has commanded second language (L2) practice significantly. As a parallel to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), choice theory (Glasser, 1998a) orients emphasis toward the psychology of internal control (Sullo, 2007) in which satisfying some specific needs is of paramount importance. More specifically, it brings to the fore the genetic needs awaiting to be aptly satisfied under different circumstances. Relatedly, our actions are primarily spurred by one or more of the five basic needs, namely survival, freedom, power, love and belonging, and fun which collectively account for part of our genetic structure (Glasser, 1998a). To Glasser, the brain gives everyone a self-directing ability that is needed to satisfy the needs of life. As such, action is performed in an ongoing effort to make life more fruitful –a sort of experience that everybody needs to have (Glasser, 2000).

Viewed from an educational perspective, the choice theory is deemed directly relevant. By way of illustration, classrooms are composed of heterogeneous students with a gamut of psychological orientations and funds of knowledge which can be categorized as individual differences within the applied linguistics tradition. It follows that, as formulated by choice theory (Gabriel & Matthews, 2011), every single individual's response to the demands and challenges imposed by the complex composition of the teacher, the curriculum, peers, and the social milieu would be subject to regulation by their specific needs and internal drives.

More importantly, effective education is likely to result from well-managed classroom settings where discipline is not frequently breached by students. Attending to students' needs and funds of interest can actively engage them in classroom activities reducing the probability of misbehaviors from students to some significant extent. Seen this way, students are no longer assumed as a subordinate group to be led primarily by some external forces, rather they are acting agents who exercise their power to self-determine their actions, behaviors, and responses deeming themselves responsible for the consequences. To have a better savvy of their betterment regarding different aspects of their personal life they have to (re)appraise their trajectory of development over time.

Self-evaluation, as Glasser (2000) asserts, is a fundamental constituent of choice theory. When actively engaged in their education, students are afforded the power and opportunity to self-evaluate, facilitate accountability, and assist themselves in achieving their goals and building skills as decision-makers. Practicing choice theory in language classes is

likely to awaken students to their direct responsibility toward their own learning and actions in the classroom (Glasser, 2009). It also contends that students need to have a say in their education. If actively involved in their classroom regulations and activities, students are expected to have control over their learning, salvage pride in their participation, feel higher self-esteem, build up their self-confidence, and develop their cognition. This method of behavior management and learner engagement affords a secure learning environment. As such, students will come to class happily and enthusiastically ready to be challenged and get engaged.

Further, choice theory suggests that parents, educators, and the public at large should cultivate an atmosphere that allows others to create quality world pictures that allow them to fulfill their needs responsibly. If students come to this recognition that they can communicate their needs and desires, they will enjoy themselves in a comfortable and secure atmosphere. Against such a backdrop, the learning outcome may ameliorate leading to a decline in disruption significantly (Glasser, 1998b). On this account, we select our actions to satisfy one or more of the five fundamental human needs lodged in our genetic structure. To reiterate the pivotal canon of choice theory, each individual seeks to satisfy five basic needs, i.e., survival, freedom, power, love and belonging, and fun in close alignment with the quality world which is claimed to constitute our motivational structure and prompt our behaviors, actions, and responses (Glasser, 1998a).

Notwithstanding the promise choice theory, as an alternative to the mainstream approaches to language teaching, appears to hold, it has been underrepresented in the research line of English language learning in the Iranian context. Viewed from a different angle, students are mainly exposed to the same pre-determined materials with their psychological needs and drives unanimously downplayed. As such, materials are unlikely to drive optimal academic success, give them enough satisfaction, and promote their engagement in learning activities.

Given the potentials choice theory appears to bear concerning students' self-development and self-control, the present study seeks to survey the effect of the theory on Iranian students' engagement and satisfaction in a classroom setting, on the one hand, and also examine the effect of practicing the choice theory-informed approach on students' academic performance.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Choice Theory

Choice theory, originally developed by Glasser (1998a), gives all credit to the internal system of needs and the will to learn. It follows that optimal learning calls for acknowledging every single student's needs and concerns and at the same time catering to them instead of coercively assimilating them into a framework externally demarcated. Caring for basic needs is considered to be of significance. Marked as basic needs in choice theory are survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Under the spell of these basic needs, individuals are assumed to (re)act in different social interactions. These kinds of stuff collectively make it possible for us to survive.

As an index of rapport and affection, love and belonging are underscored by choice theory. A lack of affectionate relationship between the teacher and students does not herald an appropriate setting for optimal learning and promotion. Conversely, it signals an environment that might witness disruption, failure, and frustration on the part of the teacher and students as well. The teacher can initiate such a relationship by using kind words, sharing her personal life stories with them, teaming students up in performing classroom activities, etc.

Empowering students is another agenda that is suggested to be met in the classroom. Failure to legitimize students to play their part in different educational arrangements adequately runs the risk of orienting them toward destructive behaviors in and out of the classroom. Differently stated, students should be offered the power to feel self-worth and have a space to exercise sovereignty by being absorbed into managerial activities, curriculum development, and any other related activities.

Freedom appears to be easily maintained in educational settings provided that the teacher is not already absorbed into the mandate of a coercive curriculum in which full obedience of students and the teacher as well has already been normalized. Provided with the freedom to opt for the topic of their assignments, respecting their funds of knowledge in assigned reading materials, and offering them the freedom to self-select their group members in teamwork exemplify freedom that can be fostered in educational settings.

There is little controversy as to the positive role fun is claimed to play in optimal learning. Studies have demonstrated that humor can influence learning to some significant extent. Humor has been reported to transform the classroom climate into a non-threatening

learning milieu in which students' willingness to take responsibility for learning increases (Graham, 1995). If skillfully integrated into teaching materials, humor elements can create a positive environment that affords learning opportunities to be benefited from.

Closely related to the collection of five desires just outlined is the quality world that students carry. This world approximates Esteban-Guitart and Moll's (2014) funds of identity concept, in that they both mark an assemblage of "cognitive and visual pictures and perceptions that represent what people have found to be meaningful in their lives" (Gabriel & Matthews, 2011). It is hard to imagine that schools and educational materials are an item to be found in students' quality world. So far, so difficult, so to speak. However, informed by choice theory, the teacher may develop the capacity to negotiate with students to embed schooling as part of their quality world.

2.2. Studies on Choice Theory, Engagement, Satisfaction, and Performance

Over the two recent decades, the choice theory has enjoyed a wide currency in second language development (SLD) studies and personal transformation (e.g., Burdenski & Wubbolding, 2011; Lyngstad, 2022). As an instance of alternatives to the mainstream education system, choice-based instruction has been reported to wield promising effects on students' progress under different circumstances. Burdenski and Wubbolding (2011), for example, reported how combining choice theory and humanistic psychology could benefit purposeful instruction. Lyngstad (2022), on the other, asserts that choice theory enjoys the potential to craft "an entry point into transformational learning within individuals by developing their sense of critical reflection on their behaviors, their needs and the origins of how they constructed their unique perception of reality" (p. 5).

Choice theory, unlike the orthodox pedagogical techniques –which more often than not treat all students as a homogeneous group with a set of common needs and a similar level of readiness for some materials determined and imposed externally– affords opportunities for individualized education (McGee & Lin, 2017). In light of the possibilities that choice theory appears to open up, students might feel more comfortable with the materials in conformity with their internal instincts, become more motivated, and accordingly make more investments in learning activities.

A positive correlation is believed to exist between active classroom participation and learning (Bryson & Hand, 2007). Fredricks et al.'s (2004) review of definitions styled in the

literature led them to present the trio of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of the engagement model. Central to behavioral engagement are students' deep involvement in academic activities, the amount of time they spend on tasks, and if they invest in (extracurricular undertakings. Emotional engagement is primarily indexed by the attitude students come to take toward the school climate including peers, the teacher, curriculum, etc. Sense of belonging is also taken to be part of emotional engagement. Cognitive engagement, in turn, refers to their "personal investment in learning, the use of learning strategies, and self-regulation" (Zhang, 2020, p. 379).

Students continuously make evaluations of their exposure to educational materials and activities, on the one hand, and outcomes, on the other. As such, students' satisfaction is a product of their experience. Satisfaction is a construct that is defined by personal inclinations and institutional regulations (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006). To illustrate, if an educational activity happens to be in line with students' funds of identity (quality world), it is likely to satisfy them more than the activities which are out of tune with their quality world. Likewise, an affectionate and caring classroom climate is assumed to occasion more satisfaction on the part of students than an unfriendly environment.

Academic performance is usually more often than not marked by summative assessment results formally implemented in line with institutional standards. Although it is conceptually formulated to display an individual's initiative, effort, and merit (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2007), in reality, it is relegated to some score obtained from a set of tests and questions developed by individual teachers or institutions (Bhagat, 2013). Operationalized this way, academic performance, as Bhagat asserts, turns out to be limited to students' scores made on the exams taken at the end of the semester.

Engagement, on the other hand, is speculated to drive academic success (Nakamura et al., 2021; Philp & Duchesne, 2016) itself being impacted by choice (Reeve, 2012). When afforded choice, learners are likely to have high motivation for engagement in learning activities. Motivated enough, students are likely to develop a positive attitude toward education and pursue make due progress in the course time. Treated this way, students will be dragged into the heart of classroom activities getting deeply engaged in whatever is judged to be conducive to their success and prosperity. There remains no doubt that a caring social community is as efficient as schools with their students' satisfaction and engagement would lead to optimal academic performance.

The following research question leads the current study:

1. What effects would be employing Glasser’s choice theory techniques and strategies have on EFL learners’ engagement, academic performance, and satisfaction?

3. Method

3.1. Design and Context of the Study

The present study followed a pretest, treatment, and posttest design to examine the effects of including choice theory in students' language learning activities on their academic performance in a school setting. In addition, students' engagement as well as their satisfaction with the experiment were surveyed through administering a final-experiment questionnaire.

The study took place in a private school called Rahyar in the northwest of Tehran, Iran. At the time of the experiment, it entertained approximately 700 primary, secondary, and high school students. The first author was teaching English language subjects for almost 4 years, 2 days a week, 6 hours a day. The school had already planned to include Glasser's choice theory in the whole school program. The school was organizing in-service training courses at regular intervals to familiarize both the staff and teachers with the tenets of choice theory, address the concerns, and rise to the challenges.

3.2. Participants

Students from seventh (13–14 years old), eighth (14–15 years old), and ninth (15–16) graders in one private secondary school in Tehran were asked to participate in the present study (Table 1). The total number of participants in this research was 159 (51 seventh, 68 eighth, and 40 ninth graders, respectively). All students had an English subject (school book) once a week along with their English classes(2 sessions a week) learning 4 skills of English with a focus on improving students’ English language literacy.

Table 1.

Demographic Background of Participant Students in the Present Study

Grade	Age	Number
Seventh	13-14	51
Eighth	14-15	68
Ninth	15-16	40

3.3. Instruments

The questionnaire which was administered to measure the engagement of the students in this research had four dimensions, namely argentic, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement developed by Jang et al. (2012). As this questionnaire addresses a more comprehensive range of engagement dimensions compared with its counterparts it was preferred over them. To measure the participants' academic performance at the end of the semester, the test battery developed by the school was administered to all participants of the study. The content validity of the test was assured by the school examination board, the language department, and the supervisor who specialized in choice theory. It is worth noting that the test was administered and scored by the board of examiners. Glasser's (1998a) five-criterion questionnaire was employed to assess the students' feelings of satisfaction with the program. The questionnaire comprised five essential needs, namely a sense of survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. This satisfaction questionnaire has been reported to be valid enough for reflecting students' sense of satisfaction with programs in different educational systems (Burns et al., 2006).

3.4. Procedures

During 10 sessions spread over one academic year, the participants in the control group were exposed to the curriculum normalized in the school which included communicative language teaching and task-based instruction. This group was given weekly quizzes, was taught 2 or 3 pages of the school English course book, and were assigned some homework, and classroom activities. Their counterparts in the experimental group, however, received choice theory-based instruction for 10 sessions. The overall program by which the experimental group was treated was rooted in Glasser's suggested framework. The framework is outlined below.

Session 1: In this introductory session, the rules, objectives, and participants' responsibilities were spelled out. By doing so, it was intended to establish rapport among participants in the study including the teacher, and provide some initial material for working on as classroom activities.

Session 2: As the next move, the principles of choice theory as the leading theoretical framework were sketched out to specify the road map as clearly as possible. The freedom they could enjoy in opting for their activities was elaborated on.

Session 3: In this stage, the participating students came to get familiar with the concept of needs and develop some awareness as to their own immediate and long-term needs to be satisfied.

Session 4: Following the awareness they appeared to have developed as to their needs, they were instructed on the quality of a good life that can be pursued and lived.

Session 5: Students' consciousness was raised as to behavioral components and self-assessment.

Session 6: To make the participants have a better savvy of decent behavior patterns, a set of socially acknowledged behaviors were suggested. In addition, the concept of responsibility and also responsible behaviors were represented.

Session 7: They were also awakened to the external control which is (in)visibly exercised on them and the ways they could resist such control.

Session 8: Internal drives were brought to their attention and constructive habits were exemplified to provide them with a model to build upon.

Session 9: Further, they were briefed on the processes involved in reality therapy and strategies whereby they could transition from ineffective to efficient behavior, from destructive to constructive options, and from a dull to a happy lifestyle.

Session 10: Last but not less important, an attempt was made to gain knowledge regarding students' overall perspectives, individual differences, strengths, and weaknesses.

3.5. Data Collection and Data Analysis

When the experiment came to an end the participants in both groups completed the engagement questionnaire, sat for the academic performance test (as scheduled by the school), and expressed their attitudes toward the experiment by completing the satisfaction questionnaire adapted from Glasser (1998a).

The data obtained at the end of the experiment from engagement and satisfaction were submitted to two independent samples *t*-tests to see if the groups differed in terms of these two dependent variables from each other as a result of being exposed to different teaching programs. The data obtained from these two groups' academic performance on the pretest and posttest were subjected to a mixed-methods ANOVA. This analysis made it possible to compare the performance of the groups across the pretest and posttest to observe the effect of choice theory on academic achievement.

4. Results

An independent-samples *t*-test was performed to compare the two groups' involvement to reveal the impact of choice theory strategies on the engagement of EFL students in classroom activities. As displayed in Table 2, the experimental group ($M = 51.60$, $SD = 4.32$) gained a higher mean in terms of engagement than the control group ($M = 44.19$, $SD = 7.90$).

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistics for Learners' Engagement

Group	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Experimental	80	51.60	4.31
Control	79	44.19	7.89

As an extension to the mean comparison, the results of the independent *t*-test indicated that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' mean scores of engagement on the posttest ($t = 7.41$, $p < 0.0001$). Phrased differently, the experimental group improved their engagement significantly more than the control group thanks to the treatment that the former group received over the experiment arranged.

Furthermore, a second independent-sample *t*-test was run to compare the two groups' feelings of satisfaction at the end of the study concerning choice theory effects. As displayed in Table 3, the experimental group gained a mean ($M = 58.75$, $SD = 6.62$) higher than the control group ($M = 49.82$, $SD = 9.43$).

Table 3.

Descriptive Statistics for Learners' Satisfaction

Group	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Experimental	80	58.75	6.62
Control	79	49.81	9.42

The results of the *t*-test indicated that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the posttest of the feeling of satisfaction ($t = 8.94$, $p < 0.0001$). Differently stated, the experimental group, after receiving the choice theory techniques, expressed more satisfaction with the instructional materials presented following the guidelines of choice theory than the control group who were exposed to the

same materials operationalized in line with some normalized procedures.

As presented in Table 4, the academic performance of groups quantified as mean scores appeared to be approximately the same on the pretest (M = 18.03; M = 18.41). On the posttest, however, the experimental group (M = 19.56) outperformed the control group (M = 18.65).

Table 4.

Descriptive Statistics for the Performance of Groups in the Pre- and Posttest

	Group	Mean	SD	N
Pretest	Experimental	18.03	1.46	80
	Control	18.41	1.41	79
	Total	18.22	1.44	159
Posttest	Experimental	19.56	.672	80
	Control	18.66	1.76	79
	Total	19.11	1.40	159

One mixed between-within-subjects ANOVA examined the interaction effect of *treatment* and *test* on participants' final-term performance. The values obtained for the interaction in focus appeared to be statistically significant with a large effect size, Wilks' Lambda = .756, $F = 50.75$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .244$. Relatedly, the treatment with the pretest-posttest values combined appeared to ensue non-significant differences in terms of the group's performance, $F = 1.68$, $p = .196$, $\eta^2 = .011$. Viewed collectively, these values warrant post hoc comparisons to be conducted to locate the differences among the groups involved. As the groups had comparable performance indices reported as mean scores in the pretest post hoc comparisons are oriented toward the posttest performance of the groups involved.

The pair-wise comparison run revealed that the experimental group's mean score was statistically larger than that of the control group on the posttest. The mean difference value -.892 proved to be statistically significant at $p < .0001$. The results obtained stand proof of the effect which was hypothesized to ensue from employing choice theory techniques on students' performance.

5. Discussion

The current study used complementary data sets to investigate applying choice theory strategies to the engagement, performance, and satisfaction of EFL students. The findings demonstrated that choice theory makes a big difference compared with communicative and task-based language teaching in terms of students' engagement, academic performance, and satisfaction as well. Generally viewed, these findings stand as further proof of the positive effect choice theory is claimed to play in academic success. They are also in congruence with a line of studies that have reported academic efficacy, self-esteem, and healthy behaviors to ensue from implementing choice theory-informed instruction under different academic circumstances (e.g., Mason, 2016; Mason & Dye, 2017; Wubbolding, 2017).

As it appeared to be the case, those students who were treated with choice theory showed more interest in engaging in the activities undertaken in the classroom. When the atmosphere is supportive and the materials are in tune with students' funds of identity, they prefer to deal with the challenges and get intimately involved in performing the tasks and exploring them. When students show higher degrees of willingness to engage with learning materials, their attention becomes concentrated on the learning task, a sense of collaboration with the teacher and peers increases, and more importantly, innovation is triggered.

The group that was treated with choice theory had a significantly higher index of engagement compared with that of the control group which led to some parallel patterns in their academic performance and satisfaction. This finding corroborates the positive correlation held to exist between engagement and learning (Bryson & Hand, 2007). Choice theory-based instruction occasioned more engagement leading to better learning which was measured through the test given at the end of the semester. It is unwise to position engagement as an intervening variable between the choice theory-informed approach and the academic performance of the experimental group.

Choice theory operationalized as a classroom teaching approach enabled students to spend more time on tasks, to develop positive attitudes toward the school climate, to feel a sense of belonging to the classroom climate, and to self-regulate their learning. These changes better constitute behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Zhang, 2020).

The group treated with the choice theory-based instruction came to outperform the control group in their summative exam. Due to practicality concerns, the assessment of

academic performance was delimited to their scores on the institutional test battery of the course. This single index of academic improvement to which extreme importance is attached by students, parents, and schools under the spell of neoliberal performativity (Brown et al., 2022), shows that the choice theory-based approach by providing a better learning zone in the school, encouraging students to participate in classroom activities, attending, though partially, to their needs and fancies, and tuning the materials to their quality world made students improve their performance in the final exam given by the school.

Expectedly, the indices gained for the satisfaction of the experimental and control group differed significantly. What is implied to be of importance is the effect that choice theory has exercised on the experimental group's sense of satisfaction. As alluded to above, a choice theory made the climate friendlier, and more in line with their funds of identity. As such, students were dragged into classroom activities spending more time on different tasks and pursuing their academic goals with more perseverance. The marked shift from the communicative approach to choice theory-based instruction in the experimental group privileged them to have better academic achievement.

The significant index of satisfaction for the experimental group reported in the present study has to be explained more by resorting to students' better performance than any other factor manipulated throughout the experiment. It is no exaggeration to claim that every aspect of human life is now under the sway of performativity which is a central principle in neoliberalism. As such, is no chance of opting out of neoliberal education of performativity worldwide, notwithstanding local differences. As Ball (2016) maintains "systems of performativity seek to pre-empt and displace judgment and de-contextualize practice with a form of responsiveness to external drivers" (p. 1052). Simply reiterated, since some certificate mostly indicated by scores is foregrounded bracketing professional mastery, students feel more satisfied when they make higher scores on tests. Against such a backdrop, students privileged by choice theory had better semester-end performance which brought them a significant degree of satisfaction. Such an interpretation might appear to give rise to some paradoxical situation; on the one hand, choice theory attends to students' quality world, and on the other, satisfaction ensues from performativity than professionalism. The point is that performativity has been instilled in the quality world of students making them struggle to inch toward that ought-to individual than value professional mastery.

The findings of the present study are suggestive of valuing students' internal instincts

in curriculum development and classroom activities for better engagement, satisfaction, and academic performance. Material developers can design tasks that allow students to personalize their performance more in tune with their internal instincts. Designed this way, tasks might foster students' deeper engagement with classroom activities, give more satisfaction with learning materials, and lead to their academic success. Teachers, on their part, can strike some healthy balance between students' inclinations and pedagogical requirements by being supportive, on the one hand, and implementing the assigned materials, on the other.

Further studies may broaden this line of study by extending the duration of the experiment to longer periods to see if choice loses its attraction to students and becomes routine over time or remains as effective as its early days of introduction. Crucially, the effect of the program on students' satisfaction and engagement can be triangulated through interviews and self-reflective diaries to gain a better understanding of the way choice theory improves these constructs. In addition, academic performance might be organized into different subscales instead of being oversimplified as one single score gained at the end of the program. This way, a diagnostic dimension is added to the assessment which primarily serves as an index of the effect of offering choice to students in their learning.

6. Conclusion

Engagement, academic performance, and satisfaction as the dependent variables measured in the present study displayed the positive effect choice theory is predicted to play on different aspects of students' education. Granted, schools and teachers can inter alia opt for the principles of the theory, along with the local particularities and peculiarities, to bring positive changes to students' well-being and education. To embark on it, teachers and school staff as well need to show resilience regarding alternative approaches which appear to be conducive to students' progress and professionalism. There is little controversy that such an intervention may bring with it extra work, challenge, and more reflection on the part of teachers and school administrators. But considering school and beyond school success and the well-being of students can convince every caring teacher to fight for the inclusion of any alternative approach pregnant with the potentiality to improve the situation. Technically phrased, teachers' underlying theories of teaching and telos seem to be of the essence in this regard.

Other than consenting to challenges in the way of bringing change, teachers' perception of students' abilities feature prominently. Implicit theories which every teacher might hold as to their students' intelligence are of paramount importance. If considered resilient and malleable to affordances, students are likely to be treated with new approaches including choice theory-based instruction. On the contrary, if they are considered to have fixed mindsets, no attempt will be at work to (re)orient their learning strategies. Choice theory, as an alternative to the mainstream approaches, is suggestive of awakening students to their growth mindset and working on them to position the belief in their habitus.

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