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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN CHILDREN'S ACTIVE EFL LEARNING

Our research aimed to investigate the relationship between the measures of satisfied need for relatedness (perceived academic and personal peer support and teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student) and measures of active English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (teacher-assessed and student self-assessed EFL engagement and EFL anxiety), as well as possible gender differences in an EFL setting. The research included 535 students and 11 teachers from rural primary schools in Slovenia. The predictive value of need for relatedness was the strongest for students' emotional EFL engagement and teacher-assessed EFL engagement of the students, followed by students' behavioral EFL engagement and EFL anxiety. Students who report higher peer support and are assessed as more socially accepted by their teachers experience higher engagement (self-assessed and teacher-assessed) and lower EFL anxiety. All measures of active learning, apart from anxiety, were higher for girls.

Keywords: anxiety, social acceptance, peer relationships, peer support, engagement

Even though we can roughly define school as an educational institution, the students' interactions with their teachers and peers are undoubtedly an important element of the educational process (Vygotsky, 1978), making social relations an inherent part of school life (Goodenow, 1992). Therefore, achieving social goals in school is equally as important as academic goals, and considering both can help explain differences in students' academic performance (Wentzel, 1996). A number of authors have linked social goals to students' academic and social performance (Liem, 2016), long-lasting knowledge, effort and engagement (King, McInerney, & Watkins, 2012), the students' higher social acceptance

and lower peer rejection (Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009) as well as prosocial behaviors (Ojanen, Smith-Schrandt, & Gesten, 2012). In order to evaluate the relationship between social and academic variables in school, we outlined the former as the need for relatedness and the latter as active learning.

In line with recent developments, this article presents the relationship between the need for relatedness and active English as a Foreign Language learning. Some authors, who drew from the self-determination theory, focused mostly on studying the role of autonomy in the school context (Filak & Sheldon, 2003; Matrić & Košir, 2014), while other authors included the need for relatedness in their research of different aspects of education (Bialis-White, 2013; Klassen, Perry, & Frenzel, 2012; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). This supports the notion that the interest in studying self-determination principles in education is very high. In spite of this, there is a lack of literature on the relationship between need for relatedness and active English as a Foreign Language (EFL) engagement. Thus, the present research should offer a new insight into EFL learning and contribute to the improvement of the efficiency of EFL classes as it aims to demonstrate practical implications and the value of the social aspect of education in stimulating engagement in the classroom.

Need for Relatedness

Self-determination theory explores the role of social context and social relationships as aspects of individuals' functioning in educational and other settings (Ryan & Deci, 2008). The theory proposes that in order to understand motivation of individuals, we should consider three basic psychological needs—the need for competence, autonomy and relatedness—and the specific contextual conditions necessary for their satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000), such as physiological growth, integrity and general well-being. The need for relatedness is of particular interest to us and refers to forming relationships characterized by mutual respect and relatedness with others, which rewards individuals with a feeling of support from a social environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In order to enable the satisfaction of need for relatedness, the educational setting must allow the students to experience relatedness with the teachers and peers, thus developing positive social relationships that can reduce the feelings of rejectedness and boost students' motivation (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). In educational contexts, research has linked basic psychological needs to better academic outcomes (Bialis-White, 2013), increased self-regulation and well-being (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), higher motivation (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001), higher engagement and a more positive experience in a school setting (Klassen, Perry, & Frenzel, 2012). In an online EFL learning context, Chen (2014) revealed that high levels of autonomy, competence and relatedness were traits of those learners of EFL who reported a higher online learning

satisfaction. For the purpose of our study, need for relatedness was defined through the measures of perceived peer support and social acceptance, which we briefly revise below.

Perceived Peer Support

Perceived peer support includes academic and personal dimensions. Academic dimension pertains to concrete school tasks, such as explaining the teachers' instructions to classmates, while the personal dimension refers to reassuring classmates with feelings of personal support and safety (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Wentzel, Battle, Russell, & Looney, 2010). Students who experience high peer support achieve higher academic scores (Levitt, Guacci-Franco, & Levitt, 1993), and are better socially adjusted (Bender & Losel, 1997), with better social skills (Malecki & Elliott, 1999), are more readily accepted by their peers (Galand & Hospel, 2013) and have a better self-image (Kloomok & Cosden, 1994). On the other hand, a lack of peer support often brings about feelings of anxiety and depression (Galand & Hospel, 2013).

Teacher-Assessed Social Acceptance of the Student

Often used as a valid alternative to sociometrics, teacher-assessed social acceptance of students helps to determine the social position of students. Research has linked the need for relatedness with students' acceptance by peers; several authors show also that close relationships with peers and teachers encourage students towards desired positive behaviors (Baker, 2006; Gest, Welsh, & Domitrovich, 2005; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Wentzel, 1998). The feeling of acceptance also stimulates students to adopt the values and goals of their environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000b; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). Research suggests that socially accepted students are more responsible and cope better with problems (Wentzel, 1991), are more sociable and less aggressive (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993), and are able to form reciprocal relationships with their peers (Wentzel, Barry & Caldwell, 2004). Hymel, Rubin, Rowden and LeMare (1990) confirmed that individuals who were not socially accepted in early childhood experienced social difficulties in later life.

The amount of time spent with the students enables the teacher to detect various aspects of social relationships in the classroom, which is why we chose the teachers as a reliable source of information on social acceptance of the students. Compared to other methods of assessing an individual's social status (i.e., peer and self-reports), certain discrepancies may occur when using teachers' assessment of the students' social acceptance, such as the teachers ascribing a higher social status to students who are more academically successful (Košir, 2013). However, teachers' assessment of their students' social acceptance is a valid measure of the students' social acceptance among their peers (Green, Forehand, Beck, & Vosk, 1980). Furthermore, Vazire (2006)

emphasizes that in terms of validity, the use of various sources of data in one research is welcome and yet often overlooked by researchers. Thus, the combination of self-perceived peer support and teacher-reported social acceptance seems like a meaningful combination for the assessment of students' peer relations.

Active Engagement in EFL Learning Settings

Active learning is heavily rooted in the constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1977; Kelly, 1991), which relies on four basic principles: (1) learners construct their own meaning, (2) new knowledge is based on prior knowledge, (3) social interaction enhances learning, and (4) meaningful learning results from authentic tasks. Ivanuš Grmek, Čagran and Sadek (2009) explain that a two-way dialogue between the teacher and the student is essential for active learning to occur; such an approach encourages the students to express their ideas. When active learning occurs, the students are engaged, cooperative, and supportive in their learning environment (Wilson, 1996). Previous research has shown that active learning positively influences academic achievement (Gardner, Heward, & Grossi, 1994) and results in long-term knowledge, good grades, better social skills, and higher autonomy of the student (Shimazoe & Aldrich, 2010). Er, Altunay and Yurdabakan (2012) explored the role of active learning through collaborative learning in EFL settings. The authors reported that the students' EFL reading skills improved dramatically after a 13-week period of being exposed to active learning. Other authors have linked active EFL learning approaches to better vocabulary learning skills (Liu & Lan, 2016), better reading comprehension skills (Asl, Davaribina, & Abdi, 2015) and higher motivation in EFL classes (Gholami, Moghaddamm, & Attaran, 2014). In the following paragraphs, we review the measures we used to define active learning in our research, i.e., active EFL engagement and EFL anxiety.

Active EFL Engagement

Learning engagement is the ability to begin and persist in EFL schoolwork and can be defined through behavioral and emotional dimensions (Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990). Behavioral engagement refers to the students' effort, attention, and persistence in performing school tasks. Emotional engagement, on the other hand, entails the emotions that either help maintain persistence (interest, curiosity, excitement, etc.), or hinder it (anger, frustration, anxiety, fear, etc.). According to Finn (1989), the key aspect of learning engagement is active participation; the students' performance in school is a reflection of their engagement. Highly engaged students tend to be more motivated and academically successful (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Weiss & Garcia, 2015). Wang and Eccles (2013) also reported stronger correlations between teacher support and behavioral engagement; in the case

of peer support, the correlation was stronger with emotional and cognitive engagement, which is further supported by Li, Doyle Lynch, Calvin, Liu and Lerner (2011).

EFL Anxiety

Phillips (1966) defines anxiety as experiencing fear and worries, accompanied with physiological reactions. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) introduced the term situation-specific anxiety, which also covers EFL anxiety that occurs in the specific context of learning a foreign language. As Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) explain, EFL anxiety results from the specific context of foreign language communication in which an individual is placed in an unknown socio-linguistic environment. This specific aspect is the reason why we chose foreign language anxiety as a dimension of active learning – as we will explain in the following text, anxiety significantly relates to the students' speaking abilities and their functioning in foreign language lessons. EFL anxiety refers to three specific areas of language learning, namely, fear of communication (McCroskey, 1970), fear of negative assessment (Watson & Friend, 1969) and test anxiety (Sarason, 1978). A review of the research literature has shown that EFL anxiety affects social interactions and communication (Leary & Kowalski, 1997), increases fear of communication (Zhao, 2013), increases fear of assessment and tests (Aydin, 2008) and negatively relates to academic achievement (Tuncer & Dogan, 2015). EFL anxiety can reflect on different aspects of language learning such as speaking (Woodrow, 2006), writing (Kirmizi & Kirmizi, 2015), reading (Rai, Loschky, & Harris, 2015) and listening skills (Kimura, 2011). Some authors report that girls are more likely to feel anxious (Jones & Myhill, 2004), while others do not report gender differences (Aydin, 2013; Gopang, Bughio, & Pathan, 2015).

Overview of the Current Study and Hypotheses

As relevant literature shows, satisfying basic psychological needs as defined within the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) is an important aspect of the students' engagement, academic achievement, and general well-being. Furthermore, we have established how important students' active engagement is in order to enable active EFL learning and develop communicative skills. However, existing research has not specifically examined the relationship between the need for relatedness and active EFL engagement, which is the aim of this research. Notably, the specific research questions are aimed at (1) establishing whether individual measures of satisfied need for relatedness predict different aspects of active EFL engagement and (2) establishing whether gender is a significant moderator of the relationship between satisfied need for relatedness and EFL engagement.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The following data was collected from a group of 535 students from 35 classes at seven elementary schools in Slovenia. The schools in question were located in smaller rural areas, with up to 400 students. The schools were selected based on their willingness to participate in the research. The students attended grades six through nine (11 to 14-years-old), with a slightly greater number of girls (277; 51.8% of the participants). The research also included 11 EFL teachers of the students. Participation of the students and the teachers was voluntary. Only the students with an informed consent from their parents took part in the research.

Measures

The data used in the research came from two sources, the students and their teachers. The introductory part of the questionnaire for the students included specific demographic data concerning the students (gender; school; year of study; final grades in English as a foreign language, Slovene as the language of instruction and mathematics in the school year 2013/2014). Below, the individual measures of satisfied need for relatedness and active EFL learning are presented.

Need for relatedness. The need for relatedness was defined through the measures of student-perceived academic and personal peer support, and teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student.

Perceived peer support. The measure used to collect information on perceived peer support was based on “The Classroom Life Measure” (Johnson & Johnson, 1983). For the purpose of this research, only the items pertaining to the dimensions of perceived personal (five items) and academic (four items) support were used and translated into the language of instruction. The students assessed each item on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from “never true” (1) to “always true” (4), without the choice of “neutral.” The personal dimension, measuring perceived personal peer support, included items such as “Other students in this class think it is important to be my friend,” whereas the academic dimension, measuring perceived peer academic support, included items such as “Other students in my class want me to be as successful as possible in school” (Johnson, Johnson, & Anderson, 1983). Cronbach Alpha for academic support was .70 and .79 for personal support.

Teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student. The measure, previously validated by Aram, Jurinec, Horvat and Košir (2016), had the EFL teacher assess each students’ social acceptance on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from “never true” (1) to “always true” (4), without the choice of “neutral.” The measure consisted of one question, in which the teachers were instructed to mark the degree to which each student is accepted in their class.

Active EFL learning measures. For the purpose of our study, active EFL learning was defined through behavioral and emotional engagement measures and foreign language anxiety.

Engagement. The data on the students' engagement measures in EFL class came from two sources, the students and the teachers.

Student-assessed EFL engagement. This was measured using two dimensions of the "Engagement vs. Disaffection with Learning Measure" (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kinderman, 2008). The two dimensions measured behavioral (e.g., "In class, I work as hard as I can") and emotional (e.g., "When I'm in class, I feel good") engagement, each consisting of 5 items. The students assessed each item on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from "never true" (1) to "always true" (4), without the choice of "neutral." Cronbach Alpha for behavioral engagement was .76 and for emotional engagement .82.

Teacher-assessed EFL engagement of the student. This was also measured using the same two dimensions of the "Engagement vs. Disaffection with Learning Measure" (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kinderman, 2008); however, the wording of each item was rephrased in the third person singular. Cronbach Alpha for behavioral engagement was .92 and for emotional engagement .94.

EFL anxiety. Foreign language anxiety was measured using the "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale" (Horwitz et al., 1986). The instrument consists of 33 items and covers three specific areas of foreign language anxiety, namely, fear of communication (e.g., "I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers"), fear of negative assessment (e.g., "I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am"), and test anxiety (e.g., item "The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get"). Cronbach Alpha for the instrument was .91.

Results

In this section, the findings will be presented following the aims of the study. The measures of need for relatedness and gender as predictors of EFL active engagement will be presented in order to answer the research questions, indicating the relationship between the measures of satisfied need for relatedness and active EFL engagement and verify whether the relationship between satisfied need for relatedness of EFL engagement is moderated by students' gender. For results of exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, see Appendix. The descriptive statistics, reliabilities and correlations between variables are presented for all measures in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Correlations ($N = 535$)

	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Grade Eng	3.81	1.08	—								
2. Grade Slo	3.81	.99	.67**	—							
3. Grade Mat	3.63	1.04	.66**	.69**	—						
4. PPS_A	2.70	.68	-.03	.07	-.02	—					
5. PPS_P	2.87	.66	.11*	.14**	.07	.60**	—				
6. TASA	3.22	.69	.27**	.24**	.22**	.08	.17**	—			
7. TAE	3.02	.73	.72**	.62**	.59**	-.01	.04	.37**	—		
8. ANX	2.11	.54	-.56**	-.27**	-.29**	-.07	-.16**	-.19**	-.42**	—	
9. SAE_B	3.23	.53	.27**	.34**	.26**	.24**	.20**	.03	.36**	-.13**	—
10. SAE_E	2.82	.64	.09*	.22**	.14**	.36**	.23**	-.10*	.16**	-.08	.59**

Note: In the school year 2013/2014, Grade Eng - Final grade in English; Grade Slo - Final grade in Slovene; Grade Mat - Final grade in mathematics; PPS_A - Perceived academic peer support; PPS_P - Perceived personal peer support; TASA - Teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student; TAE - Teacher-assessed EFL engagement of the student; ANX - EFL anxiety; SAE_B - Student-assessed EFL academic engagement; SAE_E - Student-assessed EFL emotional engagement.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Students who reported higher perceived academic peer support also reported higher perceived emotional peer support. When observing specific dimensions of active engagement, we noticed that teacher-assessed EFL engagement positively related to student-assessed EFL engagement, whereas the correlations with EFL anxiety were negative – which was our initial definition of higher active learning. Grades in English were higher for students who reported higher perceived personal peer support, emotional and behavioral engagement, and who are characterized as more socially accepted and engaged in EFL lessons by their EFL teachers. It is important to note that the correlation between the students' grade in English and EFL anxiety is negative, thereby supporting the notion that EFL anxiety is a response that hinders the students' efficiency in EFL lessons.

Need for Relatedness and Gender as Predictors of EFL Active Engagement

A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted in order to determine the predictive value of need for relatedness and gender in active EFL learning. All predictor variables were mean-centered and the predictors were entered in three steps. The predictor in the first step was gender, in the second step the predictor was individual measures of satisfied need for relatedness, and in the third step, interactions between all mentioned predictors. The procedure of determining predictive value of need for relatedness and gender through hierarchical multiple regression was repeated for each dimension of active EFL learning.

Student self-assessed behavioral EFL engagement. Using the Pearson product-moment correlation, bivariate correlations among the key variables of the study were computed. Overall, for tAs shown in Table 2, gender, entered as a control variable in the first step, accounted for a significant portion of variance (7%) as a predictor of student self-assessed behavioral EFL engagement.

Our data indicated lower behavioral EFL engagement for boys ($M = 3.09$; $SD = 0.56$) than for girls ($M = 3.36$; $SD = 0.46$). In the second step, the three dimensions of need for relatedness were entered, accounting for an additional significant 5% of variance; in this case, the significant predictors of student self-assessed behavioral EFL engagement were only the dimensions of perceived peer personal and academic support, whereas this was not true for teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student. The only significant interaction in this case was between perceived academic and personal support (Figure 1).

Table 2. Hierarchical Multiple Regression with Predictors of Student Self-Assessed Behavioral EFL Engagement

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SEB	B	B	SEB	β	B	SEB	B
Step 1:									
Gender	.27	.04	.26***	.25	.04	.24***	.25	.04	.24***
ΔR ²			.07***						
Step 2: Need for relatedness									
PPS_A			.11	.04	.14**		.10	.04	.13*
PPS_P			.09	.04	.11*		.10	.04	.13*
TASA			-.02	.03	-.03		-.02	.03	-.02
ΔR ²					.05***				.001
Step 3: Interaction									
Gender x PPS_A							-.10	.08	-.06
Gender x PPS_P							-.07	.08	-.05
Gender x TASA							.11	.07	.07
PPS_A x PPS_P							.11	.05	.10*
PPS_A x TASA							.00	.06	.00
PPS_P x TASA							-.05	.06	-.04
ΔR ²									.02*
Total R ²			.07			.12			.02*
F for ΔR ²			38.48***			17.14***			8.27***

Note: PPS_A - perceived academic peer support; PPS_P - Perceived personal peer support; TASA - Teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student. †p < 0.10. *p < 0.05. **p < 0.01. ***p < 0.001.

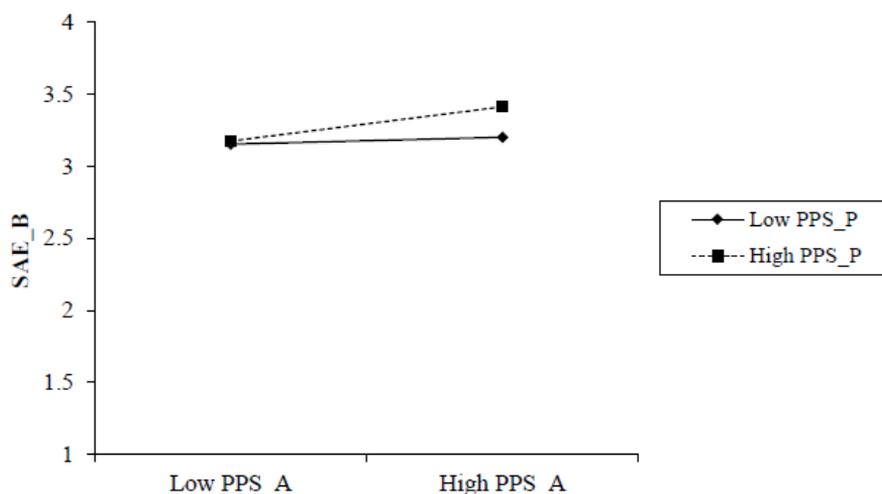


Figure 1. Interaction between perceived personal and academic peer support in predicting student self-assessed EFL behavioral engagement. SAE_B - Student self-assessed EFL behavioral engagement; PPS_P - Perceived personal peer support; PPS_A - Perceived academic peer support

There was no relation between perceived personal peer support and behavioral engagement in the case of low academic support. However, in the case of high academic support, higher personal support was related to higher behavioral engagement.

Student self-assessed emotional EFL engagement. As reported in Table 3, gender accounted for 3% of statistically significant variance in predicting student self-assessed emotional EFL engagement, with boys assessing their emotional engagement lower ($M = 2.70$; $SD = 0.67$) than girls ($M = 2.92$; $SD = 0.60$).

In the second step, the three dimensions of need for relatedness were entered, which generated an additional significant 13% of variance. It is important to note that only perceived academic peer support was a significant predictor of emotional engagement whereas this was not the case with perceived personal peer support and teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student. Interaction between perceived academic peer support and teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student, entered in the third step, yielded a small, yet statistically significant 1% of variance, and is presented in Figure 2.

In the condition of lower perceived academic peer support, teacher-assessed social acceptance did not predict self-reported emotional EFL engagement. However, in the condition of higher perceived academic support, the predicting role of teacher-assessed social acceptance was present in such a way that self-reported EFL engagement was lower for individuals whose teacher-assessed social acceptance was higher.

Table 3. Hierarchical Multiple Regression with Predictors of Student Self-Assessed Emotional EFL Engagement

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SEB	B	B	SEB	β	B	SEB	B
Step 1:									
Gender	.22	.06	.17***	.17	.05	.13***	.17	.05	.14***
ΔR ²			.03***						
Step 2: Need for relatedness									
PPS_A				.29	.05	.31***	.30	.05	.32***
PPS_P				.06	.05	.06	.06	.05	.06
TASA				-.15	.04	-.15	-.14	.04	-.14
ΔR ²						.13***			.001
Step 3: Interaction									
Gender x PPS_A							-.06	.10	-.03
Gender x PPS_P							-.12	.01	-.06
Gender x TASA							.05	.08	.03
PPS_A x PPS_P							.03	.06	.02
PPS_A x TASA							-.12	.07	-.09†
PPS_P x TASA							.09	.07	.07
ΔR ²									.01*
Total R ²			.03			.16			.17
F for ΔR ²			16.06***			25.76***			1.08***

Note: PPS_A - perceived academic peer support; PPS_P - Perceived personal peer support; TASA - Teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student. †p < 0.10. *p < 0.05. **p < 0.01. ***p < 0.001.

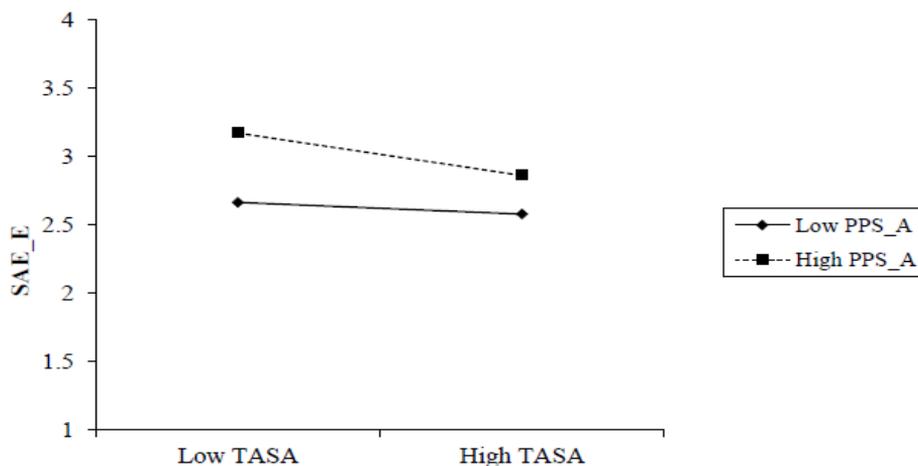


Figure 2. Interaction between perceived academic peer support and teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student in predicting student self-assessed EFL behavioral engagement. Note. SAE_E - Student self-assessed EFL emotional engagement; PPS_A - Perceived academic peer support; TASA - Teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student

Teacher-assessed EFL engagement. As is shown in Table 4, in the first step of a hierarchical multiple regression, gender accounted for a significant portion of variance (7%) in teacher assessed EFL engagement, with the score again lower for boys ($M = 2.82$; $SD = 0.76$) than for girls ($M = 3.20$; $SD = 0.66$).

Individual dimensions of need for relatedness entered in the second step accounted for an additional significant 12% of variance. However, teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student positively predicted teacher-assessed EFL engagement, which shows that students who experienced more social acceptance also tended to be more engaged in EFL lessons. Perceived academic peer support also negatively predicted teacher-assessed EFL engagement, which can be further explained when taking into account the positive correlation between teacher-assessed EFL engagement of the student and the students' grade in English; in this context, it is understandable that students with better grades do not require much academic peer support. Interactions, entered in the third step, accounted for a small portion of total variance (2%) through the interaction between teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student and gender (Figure 3).

In the case of boys, teacher-assessed social acceptance was not a predictor of teacher-assessed EFL engagement of the student. On the other hand, in the case of girls, teacher-assessed social acceptance was a significant predictor, as teacher-assessed EFL engagement was higher for girls with higher teacher-assessed social acceptance.

Table 4. Hierarchical Multiple Regression with Predictors of teacher-assessed EFL Engagement

	Teacher-Assessed EFL Engagement							
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3			
	B	SEB	B	SEB	β	B	SEB	B
Step 1:								
Gender	.38	.06	.26***	.06	.23***	.35	.06	.24***
ΔR ²			.07***					
Step 2: Need for relatedness								
PPS_A			-.10	.05	-.09†	-.11	.05	-.10*
PPS_P			.03	.06	.03	.04	.06	.03
TASA			.37	.04	.35***	.36	.04	.34***
ΔR ²					.12***			
Step 3: Interaction								
Gender x PPS_A						-.04	.11	-.02
Gender x PPS_P						-.11	.11	-.05
Gender x TASA						.17	.09	.08†
PPS_A x PPS_P						.08	.06	.06
PPS_A x TASA						-.01	.08	-.01
PPS_P x TASA						-.13	.08	-.08
ΔR ²								.02†
Total R ²			.07		.19			.21
F for ΔR ²			38.09***		31.13***			13.71***

Note: PPS_A - perceived academic peer support; PPS_P - Perceived personal peer support; TASA - Teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student. †p < 0.10. *p < 0.05. **p < 0.01. ***p < 0.001.

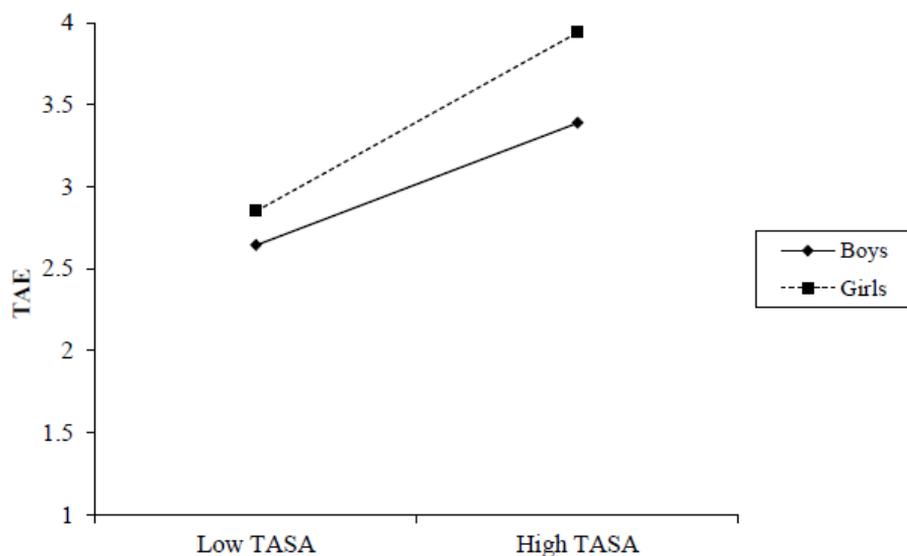


Figure 3. Interaction between gender and teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student in predicting teacher-assessed EFL engagement of the student. TAE - Teacher-assessed EFL engagement; TASA - Teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student

EFL anxiety. Table 5 shows that gender was not a statistically significant predictor of EFL anxiety.

In the second step, need for relatedness accounted for 5% of the total variance and was therefore a significant negative predictor of EFL anxiety through the dimensions of perceived personal peer support and teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student. None of the interactions yielded statistically significant predictive values.

Discussion

In the present study, we aimed at exploring the relationship between need for relatedness and active EFL learning. Based on the model between context, basic psychological needs, motivation and outcomes (Skinner et al., 2008), we supposed that the dimensions of satisfied need for relatedness are indeed factors that in greater measure influence active EFL learning than would be expected in the opposite relationship. More specifically, we were interested in correlations among individual dimensions of need for relatedness and active EFL learning and, finally, examined how individual dimensions of need for relatedness and gender predict students' active EFL learning.

Positive correlations between student self-assessed and teacher-assessed engagement and teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student were found in our study. At the same time, these measures negatively correlated with EFL anxiety.

Table 5. Hierarchical Multiple Regression with Predictors of Student EFL anxiety

	EFL Anxiety									
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			
	B	SEB	B	B	SEB	β	B	SEB	B	
Step 1:										
Gender	.004	.05	.00	.02	.05	.02	.01	.05	.01	.01
ΔR ²			.001							
Step 2: Need for relatedness										
PPS_A			.02	.04	.04	.03	.03	.04	.04	.04
PPS_P			-.12	.04	.04	-.14**	-.12	.04	.04	-.15**
TASA			-.14	.03	.03	-.17***	-.13	.04	.04	-.16***
ΔR ²						.05***				
Step 3: Interaction										
Gender x PPS_A							.04	.09	.03	.03
Gender x PPS_P							.02	.09	.01	.01
Gender x TASA							-.11	.07	-.07	-.07
PPS_A x PPS_P							-.02	.05	-.02	-.02
PPS_A x TASA							.00	.07	.00	.00
PPS_P x TASA							.11	.06	.09	.09
ΔR ²										.01
Total R ²			.001			.05				.06
F for ΔR ²			.01			7.60***				3.85***

Note: PPS_A - perceived academic peer support; PPS_P - Perceived personal peer support; TASA - Teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student. †p < 0.10. *p < 0.05. **p < 0.01. ***p < 0.001.

The predictive role of need for relatedness and gender for active EFL is discussed in terms of individual measures of active EFL learning. Gender was the strongest predictor of student-assessed behavioral EFL engagement: the girls declared to be more engaged than the boys. Similar conclusions were found by Frawley, McCoy, Banks and Thornton (2014), whose research showed that girls report higher engagement more frequently than boys do. Apart from gender, behavioral EFL engagement was higher for those participants who reported higher perceived peer support. This indicates that students must experience higher personal and academic peer support in order to increase their behavioral engagement. Of course, as this was only a correlational study, the relationship could theoretically also be in the opposite direction: when students were more engaged, others were more eager to support them.

Student self-assessed emotional EFL engagement, on the other hand, was most strongly predicted by perceived academic peer support, which positively predicted emotional engagement. This shows that higher emotional EFL engagement can be achieved through higher academic peer support. A smaller amount of variance was explained by gender with girls assessing their engagement as higher than boys, which again relates to the findings of Frawley et al. (2014). Interestingly, the interaction between perceived academic peer support and teacher-assessed social acceptance predicted student-assessed emotional EFL engagement. This means that students who perceived higher academic peer support and were assessed as more socially accepted by their teachers reported lower emotional EFL engagement. After reviewing the correlations between the students' grades and individual dimensions of need for relatedness and active EFL learning, it was concluded that more academic support is required by students who achieve lower grades in EFL. Achieving lower grades in EFL negatively affects the students' emotional engagement; as such, students probably do not perceive EFL lessons as interesting and enjoyable. The correlational analysis was consistent with several previous studies. Highly engaged students perceived higher peer support, which was reported also by Li et al. (2011) and Kiefer, Alley and Ellerbrock (2015).

Predictive values of need for relatedness in teacher-assessed EFL engagement of the student reveal that teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student was a positive predictor while perceived academic peer support was a negative predictor. This shows that the teachers ascribe higher EFL engagement to students they perceive more socially accepted. The interaction between gender and teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student also positively predicted teacher-assessed EFL engagement for girls, indicating that the teachers assessed more socially accepted girls as more engaged, whereas there was no relation between teacher-assessed social acceptance and teacher-assessed EFL engagement for boys. Furthermore, their

assessment of EFL engagement is lower for those students who report higher perceived academic support. Positive and strong correlation between EFL grades and teacher-assessed engagement indicated that highly engaged students have better EFL grades and, consequently, need less academic peer support, which explains why, in this case, academic peer support negatively predicted teacher-assessed EFL engagement.

In the last part of our research, we tried to establish a possible predictive role of gender in experiencing EFL anxiety. However, no gender-induced differences were established. Similar findings were also reported by Aydin (2013) and Gopang et al. (2015), even though other authors suggest that girls tend to experience higher anxiety than boys (Jones & Myhill, 2004; Frawley et al., 2014). The only significant negative predictors of EFL anxiety were perceived personal peer support and teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student. This supports the notion that EFL anxiety is lower when the students receive more personal peer support and are more socially accepted. In addition, in order to reduce EFL anxiety, academic peer support is not as important as students offering classmates personal support and a feeling of security, which is consistent with the findings of Slater and McKeown (2004), Sprengel and Job (2004), and Puklek Levpušček (2006). Similarly, other authors relate the lack of personal and emotional support with higher anxiety and depression (Galand & Hospel, 2013; Huang, Eslami, & Hu, 2010), while Leeves and Banerjee (2014) list high perceived support as one of the strategies for coping with negative emotions such as anxiety.

Implications and conclusions

Our results suggest that a positive attitude towards including social goals in the learning process should be fostered at school level. In addition, the school should work on developing a positive attitude of the EFL teachers towards developing students' social skills. Often, the quality of schools is measured through students' academic achievements (Ryan & Brown, 2005; Ryan & Weinstein, 2009; Vogrinc, 2014), which shows a far greater focus towards academic goals and a lesser focus on social goals. In Slovenia, social and emotional development and acquiring social skills should, in theory, be an integral part of the curriculum for children (Krek & Metljak, 2011). However, in teaching practice, Pompe (2016) reports that the curricula for the first three grades of elementary school already lack content relating to social learning and children's psychosocial needs. We believe this shows that more experts from the areas of developmental and educational psychology should be actively engaged in forming the EFL curricula.

At the teacher level, a shift should be made towards educating them in the area of social development of students. EFL teachers can introduce aspects of social relationships to their students in class conversations by encouraging greater acceptance, discussing student behaviors, and addressing the issue

of anxiety and other negative emotions students can experience in school. Another way of teaching students about peer relationships is “big brother/sister activities” (e.g., older students including younger students in group activities and helping them to socialize). However, such activities in school often pertain solely in offering help with schoolwork, when it should also enable the children to develop their social skills.

EFL teachers should infuse their lessons with more activities that demand interaction with others and introduce the language learning process in authentic living environments, as is preferred in contemporary EFL teaching trends (European Council, 2011). The EFL students should also be active agents in the learning process to allow emotional and cognitive processes to take place through the students' own activity, cooperation and support (Wilson, 1996). In EFL teaching practice, this means introducing additional language activities that encourage communication with peers and the teacher, such as collaborative learning, group work, discussion, role-play, simulation, peer learning, problem-solving, research work, and using the language in real-life situations (Bass-Dolivan, 2011). Such activities require the EFL students to contribute to the development of their social skills as well as those of their classmates.

EFL anxiety is definitely an important aspect of EFL learning and it negatively affects the language learning process (Horwitz, 2001). As our data shows, EFL teachers can reduce anxiety by boosting social acceptance and personal peer support as well as by introducing certain teaching practices which are known to reduce anxiety, such as open tests, pair work, group or project work (Wilson, 1999). By introducing a flexible seating arrangement (e.g., sitting on the floor or sitting on chairs with no desks), the teacher can make communication in the classroom easier, making social contacts a more frequent element of EFL lessons.

These suggestions could help increase the role of social goals in education and our research supports the idea that social goals are an important part of active EFL learning. We can conclude that higher perceived academic peer support from students' classmates increases the students' motivation and improves the way they function in school through higher emotional and behavioral engagement. This introduces more interest and higher participation in EFL classes. Higher perceived personal support, when the student feels cared for by their classmates, reduces EFL anxiety which, consequently, reduces the fear of communicating, negative assessment, and tests in EFL classes. This supports the idea that peers can make EFL lessons more enjoyable for those students who feel anxious in EFL lessons, even though the key moderator of an appropriate peer context is still the teacher. The finding that students with lower EFL grades do not experience EFL lessons as fun and interesting calls upon EFL teachers to ensure that lower-achieving students also experience positive emotions in EFL classes by giving them

feedback on their improvement in other ways and not just grades. Gender differences show that girls are more likely to prefer learning new things, participate in EFL lessons, and are more motivated. However, teachers who believe girls are more engaged in EFL lessons than boys should focus more on stimulating engagement in boys (e.g., using male sensitive topics, computer assisted EFL, content and language integrated learning, etc.) and also make sure that they do not overlook those girls, who are, in fact, not highly engaged.

Certain aspects of this research limit the generalizability of our findings and should be taken into account when interpreting our results. In particular, we believe that measuring the need for relatedness and active EFL learning over a longer period would definitely improve the quality of our data in terms of generalizability and would help explaining the nature of the relationship between the need for relatedness and active EFL learning, which is a strong suggestion for future research. We also suggest examining the relationship between developmental changes, academic success, social relationships, and active engagement in EFL classes. Considering gender bias present in schools, further research on reducing gender differences is also advisable.

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Appendix

Additional Analyses

Perceived peer support. Cronbach Alpha for academic support was .70 and .79 for personal support. KMO was appropriate (.87), allowing for PCA using the Direct Oblimin rotation, which revealed the first component accounting for 43.36% of total variance and second component accounting for additional 10.79% of total variance. All loadings were from .58 to .83. CFA confirmed a two-factor structure $\chi^2(535) = 33.087$, $p = .061$; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .031, $p\text{-close} = .94$, with effect coefficients ranging from .86 to 1.12.

Foreign language anxiety scale. Cronbach Alpha was .91 whereas the KMO value was .96, allowing for PCA, through which one component was extracted and accounted for 34.71% of total variance. Loadings for individual items ranged from .31 to .75. CFA confirmed a one-factor structure, $\chi^2(535) = 737.968$, $p = .000$; CFI = .94; RMSEA = .048, $p\text{-close} = .79$, with effect coefficient values between -.72 and 1.38.

Student self-assessed EFL engagement. Cronbach Alpha for behavioral engagement was .76 and .82 for emotional engagement. KMO test value (.87) allowed for PCA using Direct Oblimin rotation, which showed a two-factor structure, with the first factor accounting for 43.67% of total variance and the second, an additional 11.80% of total variance. The loadings on individual items were between .38 and .88. CFA confirmed the two-factor structure, $\chi^2(535) = 45.050$, $p = .049$; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .029, $p\text{-close} = .98$, with effect coefficients ranging from 1.00 to 1.18.

Teacher-assessed EFL engagement. Cronbach Alpha for behavioral engagement was .92 and .94 for emotional engagement. A suitable KMO test value (.95) allowed for PCA where—contrary to an expected two-factor structure—one component was extracted through Direct Oblimin rotation, accounting for 73.51% of total variance. All loadings were from .80 to .90. CFA confirmed a single factor structure $\chi^2(535) = 22.764$, $p = .152$; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .024, $p\text{-close} = .98$, with effect coefficient values between .88 and 1.09.

The single-item nature of the measure used for teacher-assessed social acceptance of the student allowed for preliminary analyses. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, $D(535) = .262$, $p < .001$, pointed to a lack of statistically significant normal distribution, which lead us to believe that this might be due to the size of our sample, based on the central limit theorem (Field, 2014). We further assessed distribution normality with the use of histograms, allowing us to conclude that the sample average distribution approaches normality.