

Culturally Situated Engagement in Project-Based English Writing: A Contextualised Framework for Chinese Senior High Schools

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ABSTRACT

Project-based learning has gained traction in English as a foreign language classrooms around the world, yet the role of cultural context in shaping how students engage with project-based writing tasks remains under-theorized. This position paper argues that in Chinese senior high schools, student engagement in project-based English writing ought to be understood as culturally situated. The paper draws on Vygotskian sociocultural theory and self-determination theory to propose a framework that identifies three culturally shaped engagement patterns. Relational engagement refers to participation driven by group harmony and face-saving concerns. Instrumental engagement describes performance-oriented participation motivated by examination goals. Deferential engagement captures participation mediated by teacher authority and expectations. These patterns are not deficiencies relative to Western ideals of autonomous engagement. They are adaptive strategies that students develop to navigate the tension between the collaborative and constructivist ideals of project-based learning and the examination-oriented, teacher-centered realities of Chinese secondary education. The framework is proposed as a set of testable propositions to guide future empirical inquiry. The paper outlines culturally responsive pedagogical principles and a research agenda for studying engagement in non-Western English as a foreign language contexts.

Keywords: project-based learning, student engagement, English writing, Chinese senior high schools, culturally situated engagement, sociocultural theory

INTRODUCTION

Project-based learning has attracted growing attention in English as a foreign language education as a pedagogical approach that connects classroom instruction with real-world tasks. Researchers have examined its effects on various language skills, with writing receiving particular scrutiny because of its complexity and its centrality to academic success. Andargie et al. (2025) conducted a quasi-experimental study with Ethiopian undergraduate students and found that project-based essay writing instruction significantly improved writing performance across multiple test administrations. Similar positive effects have been reported in other English as a foreign language contexts. Gao et al. (2024) implemented a project-based learning class model with Chinese undergraduates and observed significant gains in argumentative writing, including improvements in idea expression, text organization, language use and writing strategies. Jiayi et al. (2026) examined teacher perceptions in a Chinese primary school setting and found that interdisciplinary project-based learning was believed to enhance students' writing in terms of vocabulary, grammar, structure and content.

The rationale for using project-based learning in writing instruction rests on several pedagogical affordances. Chao et al. (2025) reviewed studies across various educational contexts and concluded that project-based learning promotes active engagement, critical thinking, collaboration and creativity through student-centered tasks. The review also highlighted that project-based learning helps learners structure ideas coherently, apply genre-specific conventions and develop problem-solving and time-management skills. Rosli et al. (2025) developed a student-centered project-based learning model for English writing based on insights from Malaysian ESL learners, proposing a six-phase framework that includes pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, assessment and feedback. Ilham (2022) reported that Indonesian tertiary students perceived project-based learning as interesting, challenging and motivating, and that it enabled them to work collaboratively and think contextually about problems.

Despite this growing body of evidence, researchers have predominantly focused on whether project-based learning improves writing outcomes. Less attention has been paid to the processes through which such improvements occur. Learning engagement has been identified as a critical condition for academic achievement in general, and recent studies have begun to examine engagement specifically within project-based language learning contexts. Zhong et al. (2025) investigated English as a foreign language students' engagement in project-based speaking activities from a multidimensional perspective and found that project-based learning significantly enhanced behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement, though its effect on agentic engagement was not significant. Zheng et al. (2025) conducted a longitudinal case study of Chinese undergraduates in project-based collaborative writing and documented dynamic changes in engagement patterns, with some students shifting from active collaboration to withdrawal. Maalfi and Brigui (2025) explored project-based learning in English as a foreign language classes and confirmed its effectiveness in facilitating student interest and engagement through structured project phases.

Marpaung et al. (2026) investigated project-based learning in an Indonesian tertiary English as a foreign language context and reported improvements across behavioral, emotional and cognitive dimensions of engagement. Maulita et al. (2026) examined the relationship between project-based learning and numeracy skills and found that student engagement positively mediated the effect of project-based learning on learning outcomes, providing empirical support for treating engagement as a mediating mechanism. Rofik (2023) studied English as a foreign language students' involvement in collaborative writing projects and found that project-based learning activated participation through team contribution, responsibility and respect for teammates. These studies have advanced understanding of how project-based learning relates to engagement. Yet they have largely treated engagement as a set of general psychological states or behaviors that operate similarly across contexts. The cultural specificity of engagement has received limited empirical scrutiny. This gap is particularly consequential for Chinese senior high school settings, where the educational environment differs markedly from the Western contexts in which much engagement research has been conducted.

The Chinese senior high school English classroom operates under distinct pressures. The National College Entrance Examination, or gaokao, exerts a powerful influence on instructional priorities and student motivation. Dong et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review of empirical research on continuation writing in Chinese senior high schools and found that cognitive and affective factors, including anxiety, cognitive load and imagination, significantly influenced student engagement and writing performance. Chen and Liu (2025) examined lexical richness in compositions written by Chinese senior high school students across three grade levels and identified limited vocabulary range and a number of lexical errors, attributing these features to insufficient mastery of cohesive devices, improper classroom instruction and the pressure of the national examination.

Li and Zhang (2025) implemented a synergy-based reading-for-writing approach in Chinese senior high school English classes and found significant improvement in writing performance, with interview data suggesting

enhanced engagement and reduced anxiety for some learners. Wang (2024) applied project-based teaching to senior high school English writing and found that the approach significantly improved writing motivation, including intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and writing self-efficacy, as well as writing performance in terms of content, vocabulary and structure. Lei (2026) explored project-based learning in senior high school English practical writing and identified persistent challenges including insufficient project design, inconsistent teacher guidance and underdeveloped evaluation systems. Gao and Liu (2024) proposed a five-step project-based learning model for senior high English instruction and noted that teachers faced challenges including time constraints for design and students' limited language proficiency for high-level project participation. Yi et al. (2026) examined a project-based STEM programme in a rural minority school in China and reported challenges including a disconnect between project themes and the rural educational context and time constraints faced by teachers.

These contextual factors suggest that engagement in Chinese senior high school project-based writing may manifest differently from the ways described in mainstream engagement research. Culturally responsive teaching approaches have begun to address this issue in English language education. Harahap et al. (2025) evaluated an integrated project-based learning model based on culturally responsive teaching and found that it effectively improved students' English literacy skills. Rasyimah et al. (2025) examined project-based learning for Cambodian students in Indonesia and found significant improvement in academic writing, alongside positive feedback on increased confidence and collaboration. Tseng et al. (2026) integrated digital multimodal composing with project-based learning for Asian English as a foreign language learners and found that students demonstrated high levels of intercultural knowledge and skills in culturally distinct practice contexts. Suryani et al. (2025) explored technology-enhanced project-based learning through digital storytelling with Indonesian nursing students and reported improved engagement, creative expression and cognitive structuring abilities. Hady et al. (2025) explored project-based learning implementation in teaching recount text writing in secondary school and documented both the benefits and the implementation challenges that teachers encountered.

These culturally responsive studies indicate that incorporating learners' cultural backgrounds into project-based learning design produces positive outcomes. However, they have not systematically theorized how cultural factors shape the nature of engagement itself. The cultural dynamics of engagement in Chinese senior high school project-based English writing remain largely unexplored as a theoretical question. Xue et al. (2026) examined how Chinese secondary school students described their use of critical thinking subskills during intercultural project-based tasks and found that the salience and activation of these subskills varied considerably depending on task stakes, rubric design and feedback availability. Their findings suggest that student engagement in project-based learning is not a uniform phenomenon but is shaped by contextual conditions.

This position paper addresses the following argument. Student engagement in project-based English writing in Chinese senior high schools is culturally situated. It cannot be adequately understood through universal psychological constructs that were developed primarily in Western educational contexts. The paper proposes a framework that identifies three culturally shaped engagement patterns: relational engagement, instrumental engagement and deferential engagement. These patterns represent adaptive strategies that students employ to navigate the tension between the collaborative, constructivist ideals of project-based learning and the examination-oriented, teacher-centered realities of Chinese secondary education. The paper first establishes the theoretical grounding for understanding engagement as culturally situated. It then describes each of the three engagement patterns with reference to existing empirical evidence. The discussion section outlines implications for culturally responsive pedagogy and proposes a research agenda for studying engagement in non-Western English as a foreign language contexts.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING: WHY ENGAGEMENT IS CULTURALLY SITUATED

This section establishes the theoretical foundation for understanding engagement as culturally situated. The argument proceeds in three steps. First, the paper defines student engagement as a multidimensional construct. Second, it draws on Vygotskian sociocultural theory to show that all learning activities are mediated by cultural tools and social contexts. Third, it reviews self-determination theory and identifies points where the theory's universal claims require cultural qualification. These theoretical resources together support the claim that engagement in Chinese senior high school project-based writing is not a generic psychological phenomenon but one that takes culturally specific forms.

Conceptualizing Student Engagement

Student engagement has been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond observable participation. Zhong et al. (2025) adopted a multidimensional perspective in their study of project-based speaking activities and distinguished among behavioral, emotional, cognitive and agentic dimensions. Their findings indicated that project-based learning enhanced the first three dimensions but not agentic engagement, which concerns students' proactive contributions to their own learning. Zheng et al. (2025) examined engagement in project-based collaborative writing and found that engagement patterns changed over time, with some learners moving from active collaboration to withdrawal. Their longitudinal approach revealed that engagement was not stable but responsive to individual factors such as language proficiency and contextual factors such as activity type. Maalfi and Brigui (2025) reported that project-based learning facilitated engagement through its structured phases, which pushed learners to move from planning to artifact production. Marpaung et al. (2026) found that project-based learning improved behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement in an Indonesian English as a foreign language context. Rofik (2023) focused on involvement in collaborative writing and found that project-based learning activated student participation through team contribution and responsibility.

These studies converge on a multidimensional view of engagement. Yet they also reveal an important limitation. The dimensions they measure are treated as universal categories that apply across contexts. Whether these dimensions manifest differently in different cultural settings has received less systematic attention. This limitation matters because the behaviors and attitudes that count as engagement in one educational culture may not carry the same meaning in another.

Sociocultural Theory: Engagement as Culturally Mediated

Vygotsky (1978) provided the foundational insight that higher psychological processes develop through social activity and are mediated by cultural tools, with language as the primary mediating artifact. His cultural-historical theory established that human mental functioning cannot be understood apart from the social and material contexts in which it occurs. The theory emphasizes that what appears as individual psychological functioning has its origins in social interaction. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) extended this framework to second language development and argued that language learning is fundamentally a socially mediated process. Lantolf et al. (2018) further elaborated how sociocultural theory applies to second language development, covering concepts such as internalization, mediation and the zone of proximal development.

The relevance of sociocultural theory to engagement lies in its insistence that learning activities are always culturally situated. When students participate in project-based writing, they are not simply deploying generic cognitive strategies. They are engaging with culturally specific expectations about what counts as good writing,

what constitutes appropriate participation and how relationships with peers and teachers should be managed. These expectations are embedded in the cultural practices of the classroom and the broader educational system. The culturally responsive project-based learning studies reviewed earlier provide empirical illustrations. Harahap et al. (2025) found that integrating culturally responsive teaching with project-based learning improved literacy skills. Rasyimah et al. (2025) reported that Cambodian students in Indonesia responded positively to project-based learning when it addressed their specific linguistic and cultural needs. Tseng et al. (2026) found that Asian English as a foreign language learners demonstrated intercultural knowledge and skills when project tasks were designed with cultural sensitivity. These findings suggest that engagement is not simply activated by project-based learning as a generic method. It is shaped by the cultural resonance of the tasks and materials.

The zone of proximal development, a key concept in Vygotsky's theory, also has implications for understanding engagement. Vygotsky (1978) defined the zone as the distance between what a learner can do independently and what a learner can do with guidance from a more capable other. In project-based writing, engagement may be enhanced when tasks are pitched within this zone. Tasks that are too difficult may provoke anxiety and withdrawal. Tasks that are too easy may fail to elicit sustained effort. Dong et al. (2025) found that cognitive load and anxiety influenced student engagement in continuation writing. Li and Zhang (2025) reported that scaffolding helped some learners engage more effectively with writing tasks. These observations align with the zone of proximal development framework, suggesting that engagement depends partly on the match between task demands and learner capacity. However, the zone of proximal development is itself culturally shaped. What counts as appropriate guidance, what forms of assistance are available and what learners expect from teachers all vary across cultures.

Self-Determination Theory and Its Cultural Limitations

Self-determination theory offers a complementary perspective on engagement by focusing on the motivational conditions that support or undermine it. Ryan and Deci (2020) reviewed the theory's core propositions and summarized evidence that intrinsic motivation and autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation predict positive educational outcomes. They identified three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. When these needs are supported, engagement and well-being follow. When they are thwarted, motivation and engagement decline. Vansteenkiste et al. (2020) reviewed advances in basic psychological need theory and discussed themes including the role of need frustration in maladjustment and the universality of need effects across cultural contexts.

The theory has been widely applied in educational research and has generated substantial evidence across diverse settings. However, the universality of the three basic needs has been subject to debate. Ryan and Deci (2020) acknowledged that many educational policies and practices around the world remain anchored in traditional motivational models that fail to support students' needs. Vansteenkiste et al. (2020) noted that researchers have examined the universality of need effects across demographics, psychological characteristics and cultural contexts. The question of whether autonomy has the same meaning and importance in collectivist cultures as in individualist cultures has received particular attention.

Chinese senior high school classrooms present a setting in which the cultural assumptions of self-determination theory merit careful examination. The theory's emphasis on autonomy, understood as volition and choice, may align less straightforwardly with educational practices that emphasize teacher authority and collective goals. This does not mean that autonomy is irrelevant in Chinese classrooms. It means that autonomy may be experienced and expressed differently. Students may exercise autonomy within the constraints of teacher-directed activities. They may find satisfaction in meeting teacher expectations and contributing to group

harmony. These forms of engagement are not necessarily less autonomous. They may reflect culturally specific understandings of what it means to be a good student and a cooperative group member.

The three culturally situated engagement patterns proposed in this paper reflect this theoretical perspective. Relational engagement captures the motivation to participate for the sake of group harmony and interpersonal relationships. This pattern draws on the relatedness need from self-determination theory but reframes it in collectivist terms. Instrumental engagement captures the motivation to participate for the sake of examination performance. This pattern reflects the external pressures identified in self-determination theory but acknowledges that such pressures can be internalized in culturally specific ways. Deferential engagement captures the motivation to participate out of respect for teacher authority. This pattern acknowledges that autonomy in Chinese classrooms may take forms that differ from Western ideals. Rather than treating these patterns as deficiencies, the framework treats them as adaptive strategies that students develop to succeed in their specific educational environment.

The theoretical framework presented in this paper is visualized in **Figure 1**. The figure illustrates the relationship between the Chinese senior high school context, the theoretical resources of sociocultural theory and self-determination theory, and the three culturally situated engagement patterns. The Chinese senior high school context is characterized by collectivism, high power distance and examination pressure. Sociocultural theory contributes the concept of cultural mediation, while self-determination theory contributes the concept of need satisfaction. The interaction between context and theory produces three engagement patterns: relational, instrumental and deferential. These patterns are proposed as culturally situated manifestations of engagement in project-based English writing.

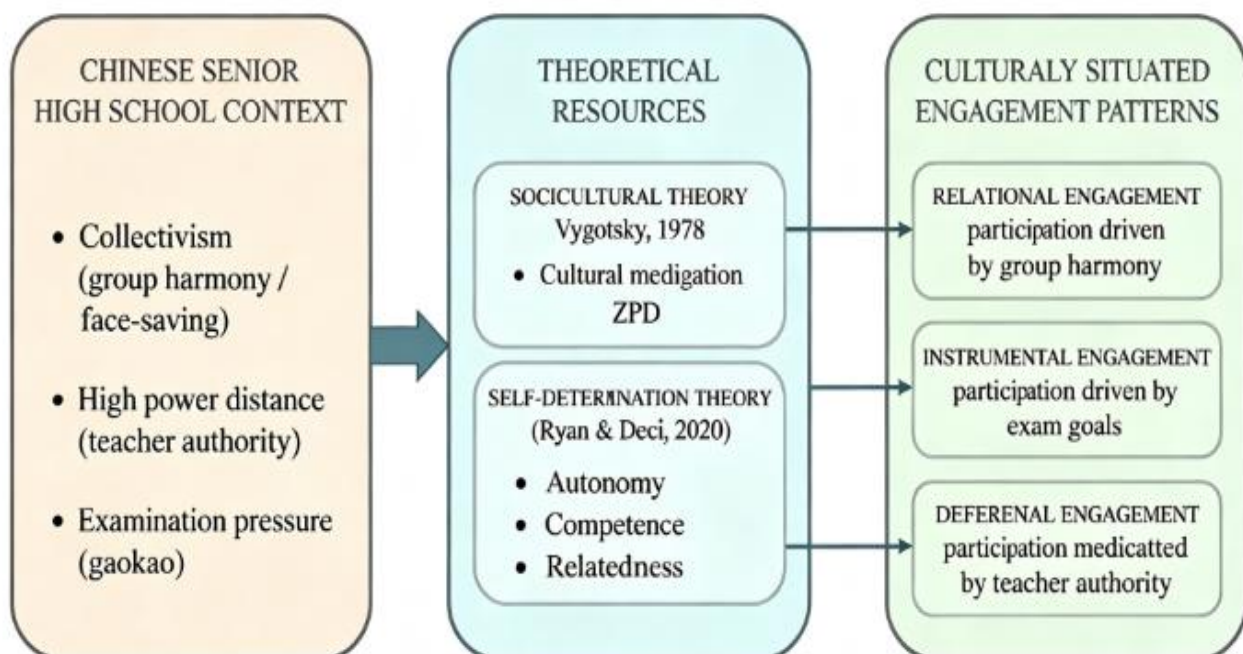


Figure 1. Theoretical framework for culturally situated engagement in project-based English writing

The engagement dimensions reviewed in this section and their culturally situated manifestations in Chinese senior high school project-based writing are presented in **Table 1**. The table maps each dimension onto a proposed culturally situated manifestation, showing how engagement may take context-specific forms.

Table 1. Comparison of engagement dimensions and culturally situated patterns

Dimension	Definition	Culturally situated manifestation in Chinese senior high school PBL writing
Behavioral engagement	Participation in learning activities, effort and persistence	Students complete project tasks but may do so primarily to fulfill group obligations or teacher expectations rather than from intrinsic interest
Emotional engagement	Interest, enjoyment and affective responses to learning	Students may express satisfaction when projects align with examination content or receive teacher approval; anxiety may arise from group dynamics or time pressure
Cognitive engagement	Use of learning strategies, self-regulation and investment in understanding	Students may apply cognitive strategies selectively; deeper strategies may be activated when tasks are clearly linked to examination performance
Social engagement	Interaction with peers and teachers, relationship building	Students participate in group work but may prioritize harmony over critical questioning; teacher authority shapes interaction patterns
Agentic engagement	Proactive contribution to learning, questioning and suggesting	Students may be less likely to question project design or suggest alternatives; agentic engagement may be expressed through seeking teacher clarification rather than challenging task parameters

Note: The dimensions in the first two columns are synthesized from the engagement literature reviewed in this section. The third column proposes culturally situated manifestations based on the theoretical framework and empirical evidence reviewed in this paper.

Table 2 summarizes empirical studies that have examined project-based learning, engagement and writing across various contexts. The table organizes key findings related to engagement and provides a reference for the empirical grounding of the framework proposed in this paper.

Table 2. Summary of empirical studies on project-based learning, engagement and writing

Study	Context	Focus	Key findings related to engagement
Andargie et al. (2025)	Ethiopian EFL undergraduates	PBL and writing performance	PBL significantly improved writing performance; students reported positive attitudes toward PBL
Chao et al. (2025)	Multiple contexts (review)	PBL and English writing skills	PBL promotes active engagement, critical thinking and collaboration
Zhong et al.	Chinese	PBL and	PBL enhanced behavioral, emotional

(2025)	polytechnic EFL students	multidimensional engagement	and cognitive engagement but not agentic engagement
Zheng et al. (2025)	Chinese EFL undergraduates	Engagement in PBL collaborative writing	Engagement changed over time; some students shifted from active collaboration to withdrawal
Maalfi and Brigui (2025)	EFL common core students	PBL and engagement/interest	PBL facilitated engagement through structured project phases
Gao et al. (2024)	Chinese undergraduates	PBL and argumentative writing	PBL improved writing scores and increased student interest
Rosli et al. (2025)	Malaysian ESL learners	PBL model development	Proposed six-phase model for writing; identified challenges including group dynamics
Marpaung et al. (2026)	Indonesian EFL context	PBL and student engagement	PBL improved behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement
Rofik (2023)	Indonesian EFL students	Involvement in PBL collaborative writing	PBL activated participation through team contribution and responsibility
Maulita et al. (2026)	Indonesian junior high school	PBL, engagement and numeracy	Engagement positively mediated the effect of PBL on learning outcomes
Ilham (2022)	Indonesian EFL undergraduates	PBL and writing achievement	PBL improved writing achievement; students perceived PBL as interesting and motivating
Jiaxi et al. (2026)	Chinese primary EFL	Interdisciplinary PBL and writing performance	Teachers reported improvements in vocabulary, grammar, structure and content; engagement was seen as a key factor
Hady et al. (2025)	Secondary school EFL	PBL in recount text writing	Documented both benefits and implementation challenges
Rasyimah et al. (2025)	Cambodian students in Indonesia	Culturally responsive PBL and academic writing	Significant improvement in writing; positive feedback on confidence and collaboration

Note: PBL = project-based learning; EFL = English as a foreign language; ESL = English as a second language.

Table 3 summarizes the key contextual factors of Chinese senior high school education and their implications for engagement in project-based writing. These factors provide the contextual grounding for the three culturally situated engagement patterns described in the next section.

Table 3. Chinese senior high school contextual factors and their implications for engagement

Contextual factor	Description	Implication for engagement in PBL writing
Examination pressure	Gaokao exerts strong influence on instructional priorities and student motivation	Students may engage instrumentally with PBL tasks when they perceive clear links to examination performance
Teacher authority	High power distance shapes classroom interaction patterns	Students may engage deferentially, seeking teacher approval rather than exercising independent choice
Collective orientation	Group harmony and face-saving are valued in classroom interactions	Students may engage relationally, prioritizing group cohesion over individual expression or critical questioning
Resource constraints	Limited class time and heavy teacher workloads constrain implementation	Engagement may be compromised when teachers cannot provide adequate scaffolding or when projects are rushed
Large class sizes	Classes often contain 40-50 students, limiting individualized attention	Engagement may vary widely; some students may withdraw from participation when individual support is limited

Note: The contextual factors in this table are derived from studies reviewed in this paper including Chen and Liu (2025), Dong et al. (2025), Gao and Liu (2024), Lei (2026), Wang (2024), and Yi et al. (2026).

The next section applies this theoretical framework to describe the three culturally situated engagement patterns in detail. Each pattern is defined, illustrated with empirical evidence and discussed in relation to the theoretical resources established in this section.

THREE CULTURALLY SITUATED ENGAGEMENT PATTERNS IN PROJECT-BASED ENGLISH WRITING

This section presents the core argument of the paper. Drawing on the theoretical resources established in the previous section and the empirical evidence reviewed from the 32 studies, the paper proposes that engagement in Chinese senior high school project-based English writing manifests in three culturally situated patterns. The patterns are not presented as mutually exclusive categories. A single student may display different patterns at different times or in response to different task conditions. What distinguishes the three patterns is the primary source of motivational orientation: relational engagement is oriented toward peers and group harmony, instrumental engagement toward examination outcomes, and deferential engagement toward teacher authority. These orientations can overlap or shift within the same student across different tasks or classroom conditions. The patterns are also not presented as deficiencies. They are adaptive responses to a specific educational environment.

Relational Engagement: Participation for Group Harmony

Relational engagement refers to participation in project-based writing activities that is primarily motivated by the desire to maintain harmonious relationships with group members and to avoid causing interpersonal difficulties. In this pattern, students contribute to group projects not because they find the writing task intrinsically interesting, but because they do not wish to let their teammates down or to be seen as failing to fulfill their share of the work.

Several empirical studies have documented phenomena consistent with this pattern. Zheng et al. (2025) conducted a longitudinal case study of Chinese undergraduates in project-based collaborative writing and found that engagement patterns changed over time. Some students who initially participated actively later became what the researchers described as team escapers. The study identified individual factors such as language proficiency and contextual factors such as activity type as influences on these changes. The finding that some students shifted away from active participation suggests that relational pressures in group work can have complex effects. Students may participate initially because they feel obligated to contribute. If relational tensions arise or if they perceive that their contributions are not valued, they may withdraw while still maintaining a surface level of involvement.

Rofik (2023) studied English as a foreign language students' involvement in collaborative writing projects and found that project-based learning activated participation through team contribution, responsibility and respect for teammates. The study reported that students were engaged because they felt responsible to their group members. This responsibility was not described as a burden but as a motivating factor. Respect for teammates emerged as a key element of successful collaboration. These findings suggest that relational motivation can support sustained participation when group dynamics are positive.

Zhong et al. (2025) found that project-based learning significantly enhanced social engagement, which they defined as interaction with peers and teachers, among Chinese polytechnic students. However, their study also reported that project-based learning did not significantly enhance agentic engagement, which concerns proactive questioning and suggestion. This finding is instructive. Students may interact with peers and fulfill their social roles within the group, yet they may not feel empowered to question task design or propose alternatives. Social engagement in this context may reflect relational commitment rather than intellectual curiosity or critical reflection.

The culturally responsive project-based learning studies provide additional relevant evidence. Rasyimah et al. (2025) found that Cambodian students in Indonesia responded positively to project-based learning when it addressed their specific needs. The study reported that students showed increased confidence and collaboration, with collaborative work identified as a key factor in their positive responses. Harahap et al. (2025) found that integrating culturally responsive teaching with project-based learning improved literacy skills, with group work as a central component of the instructional design. Tseng et al. (2026) found that Asian English as a foreign language learners demonstrated intercultural knowledge and skills when project tasks were designed with cultural sensitivity. Their findings indicated that students engaged more deeply when they could connect tasks to their cultural backgrounds and when they worked with peers from diverse cultural contexts.

These studies indicate that relational factors are central to engagement in project-based learning for Asian learners. However, the relational engagement pattern proposed here goes beyond the observation that students like working in groups. It suggests that the motivation to maintain group harmony can become the primary driver of participation, potentially overriding other forms of engagement such as cognitive investment or critical

questioning. When this occurs, students may complete project tasks satisfactorily from a behavioral perspective, yet they may not develop the deeper writing skills that project-based learning is intended to foster.

The theoretical significance of relational engagement lies in its relationship to the relatedness need identified in self-determination theory. Ryan and Deci (2020) identified relatedness as one of the three basic psychological needs. Vansteenkiste et al. (2020) reviewed research on basic psychological need theory and discussed how relatedness operates across cultural contexts. In individualist cultures, relatedness is often understood as the need for personal connections with others. In collectivist cultures, relatedness may be more closely tied to group membership and social harmony. Relational engagement reflects this collectivist understanding of relatedness. It is not simply engagement that happens to occur in groups. It is engagement that is fundamentally organized around the maintenance of positive interpersonal relationships.

Instrumental Engagement: Performance-Oriented Participation

Instrumental engagement refers to participation in project-based writing activities that is primarily motivated by the desire to achieve good examination results. In this pattern, students invest effort in project tasks because they perceive a clear connection between project performance and examination performance. The task itself may not be intrinsically interesting. The effort is sustained by the belief that completing the project well will lead to better scores on high-stakes assessments.

The Chinese senior high school context is characterized by strong examination pressure. Dong et al. (2025) systematically reviewed empirical research on continuation writing in Chinese senior high schools and found that the National College Entrance Examination exerted a powerful influence on instructional priorities and student motivation. The review identified cognitive and affective factors including anxiety, cognitive load and imagination as significant influences on student engagement and writing performance. These findings suggest that examination pressure is not a neutral background condition. It actively shapes how students approach writing tasks and how they invest their effort.

Several studies have reported that project-based learning can improve writing performance in Chinese contexts. Gao et al. (2024) found that project-based learning significantly improved argumentative writing scores among Chinese undergraduates, including sub-scores for idea expression, text organization, language use and writing strategies. The study also reported that students had strong positive perceptions of the project-based learning model and that it significantly boosted their interest compared to conventional teaching. Wang (2024) applied project-based teaching to senior high school English writing and found that it significantly improved writing motivation, including intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and writing self-efficacy, as well as writing performance in content, vocabulary and structure. Li and Zhang (2025) found that a synergy-based reading-for-writing approach improved continuation writing performance and that interview data suggested enhanced engagement and reduced anxiety for some learners.

However, the finding that project-based learning improves writing performance does not necessarily mean that students are engaged because they find writing intrinsically meaningful. An alternative interpretation is that students engage because they have learned that project-based learning tasks help them perform better on examinations. This instrumental motivation is consistent with the extrinsic motivation category in self-determination theory. Ryan and Deci (2020) distinguished among different forms of extrinsic motivation, ranging from external regulation to integrated regulation. Instrumental engagement may represent a form of identified regulation, where students have accepted the value of the activity even if they have not fully internalized it as personally meaningful.

Maulita et al. (2026) provided direct evidence for the mediating role of engagement in project-based learning outcomes. Their study found that student engagement positively mediated the effect of project-based learning on numeracy skills. While their study examined a different subject area, the finding that engagement serves as a mediator is theoretically important. It suggests that the relationship between project-based learning and learning outcomes is not direct but operates through engagement. If engagement is predominantly instrumental, then the benefits of project-based learning may be limited to the specific outcomes that students believe will be tested.

The instrumental engagement pattern has practical implications. When students engage instrumentally, they may focus their effort on the aspects of project tasks that they perceive as most relevant to examinations. They may pay careful attention to vocabulary, grammar and structure because these are explicitly assessed in writing examinations. They may pay less attention to creativity, critical thinking and personal voice because these are less clearly rewarded in high-stakes testing. Chao et al. (2025) reviewed studies on project-based learning and English writing skills and found that the approach improves vocabulary, grammar and organizational skills. These are precisely the skills that are most visible in examination writing. The review also highlighted that project-based learning supports the development of 21st-century skills such as problem-solving, time management and teamwork. Whether students value these skills for their own sake or only because they contribute to examination success is an open question.

Deferential Engagement: Teacher-Mediated Participation

Deferential engagement refers to participation in project-based writing activities that is primarily mediated by teacher authority and expectations. In this pattern, students invest effort because they respect the teacher, want to meet the teacher's expectations or believe that the teacher's approval is important. The project task itself may not be the primary object of engagement. The teacher's role as an authority figure gives the task its significance.

Chinese classrooms are characterized by high power distance, meaning that teachers occupy a position of authority that is not typically questioned by students. This cultural feature has been documented in studies of Chinese education. Chen and Liu (2025) identified improper classroom instruction as one factor contributing to limited vocabulary use in student writing. Gao and Liu (2024) noted that teachers faced challenges in implementing project-based learning, including time constraints for design and students' limited language proficiency. These studies suggest that the teacher's role in Chinese classrooms is central. When teachers implement project-based learning, their attitudes, expectations and levels of support strongly influence student responses.

Several studies have reported on teacher perspectives regarding project-based learning. Jiayi et al. (2026) examined teacher perceptions of interdisciplinary project-based learning in a Chinese primary school and found that teachers believed project-based learning enhanced writing performance in vocabulary, grammar, structure and content. Teachers identified rich teaching resources, high learning participation and a good classroom atmosphere as important factors. They also identified weak language foundation, limited class time and insufficient teacher ability as obstacles. Hady et al. (2025) explored project-based learning implementation in teaching recount text writing in secondary school and documented both benefits and implementation challenges. Amorati and Hajek (2023) found that students appreciated project tasks that were personally relevant and socially meaningful, with their perceptions contributing to commitment and well-being. These findings indicate that teachers play a critical role in shaping student engagement. When teachers are enthusiastic and well-prepared, students respond positively. When teachers face obstacles, student engagement may suffer.

Xue et al. (2026) examined how Chinese secondary school students described their use of critical thinking subskills during intercultural project-based tasks. The study found that explaining and self-regulating were

described as late-stage refinements that were often compressed by time pressure. Perceived task stakes, rubric design and feedback availability emerged as conditions that shaped whether inference and evaluation took productive or constraining forms. This finding is relevant to deferential engagement because it suggests that students' cognitive investment depends partly on what they believe the teacher will value in assessment. If the rubric rewards certain types of thinking, students will invest in those types of thinking. If the rubric rewards procedural compliance, students will comply procedurally.

Deferential engagement has theoretical significance in relation to both sociocultural theory and self-determination theory. From a sociocultural perspective, the teacher functions as a mediator of learning. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that learning occurs through interaction with more capable others. In Chinese classrooms, the teacher is the primary more capable other. The zone of proximal development is activated through teacher guidance. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) extended this framework to second language development and showed that mediation through teachers and peers is fundamental to language learning. Deferential engagement can be understood as a form of openness to teacher mediation. Students who engage deferentially are willing to be guided by the teacher and to align their efforts with teacher expectations. This willingness is not a weakness. It may facilitate learning when the teacher provides appropriate scaffolding.

From a self-determination theory perspective, deferential engagement raises questions about autonomy. Ryan and Deci (2020) emphasized the importance of autonomy for intrinsic motivation and well-being. However, they also acknowledged that autonomy can be expressed differently across cultural contexts. In high power distance contexts, students may experience autonomy through meeting teacher expectations and fulfilling their roles within the classroom hierarchy. They may not feel that their autonomy is constrained by following teacher guidance. They may feel that their autonomy is expressed through responsible compliance. Vansteenkiste et al. (2020) reviewed research on the universality of need effects and noted that cultural context shapes how needs are understood and satisfied. Deferential engagement represents one possible culturally situated expression of the autonomy need.

The three patterns described in this section are summarized in **Table 4**. The table presents each pattern with its definition, primary motivational source, theoretical grounding and observed manifestations in existing research.

Table 4. Three culturally situated engagement patterns in Chinese senior high school project-based English writing

Pattern	Definition	Primary motivational source	Theoretical grounding	Observed manifestations in existing research
Relational engagement	Participation driven by group harmony and face-saving concerns	Relatedness need; collectivist cultural orientation	Vygotskian mediation; SDT relatedness need	Zheng et al. (2025); Rofik (2023); Zhong et al. (2025); Rasyimah et al. (2025); Tseng et al. (2026)
Instrumental engagement	Participation motivated by examination performance goals	Extrinsic motivation; identified regulation	SDT extrinsic motivation; sociocultural mediation of	Gao et al. (2024); Wang (2024); Li and Zhang (2025); Dong et al. (2025);

			assessment practices	Maulita et al. (2026)
Deferential engagement	Participation mediated by teacher authority and expectations	Teacher authority; high power distance	Vygotskian mediation through teacher; SDT autonomy in cultural context	Jiaxi et al. (2026); Hady et al. (2025); Xue et al. (2026); Gao and Liu (2024); Amorati and Hajek (2023)

Note: SDT = self-determination theory.

The three patterns are not presented as a typology that classifies students into fixed categories. They are patterns of engagement that may be displayed by the same student at different times, in different tasks, or in response to different classroom conditions. A student may engage relationally in one project because group dynamics are positive, instrumentally in another project because the task is clearly linked to examination content, and deferentially in a third project because the teacher is perceived as especially supportive or demanding. The patterns capture the cultural situatedness of engagement, not individual differences in engagement styles.

The next section discusses the implications of this framework for culturally responsive pedagogy and outlines a research agenda for further investigating engagement in non-Western English as a foreign language contexts.

DISCUSSION: TOWARD CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY AND A RESEARCH AGENDA

The framework proposed in this paper has both pedagogical and research implications. This discussion section addresses three matters. First, it reconsiders how the three culturally situated engagement patterns should be understood in relation to Western models of engagement. Second, it outlines pedagogical principles for designing project-based writing instruction that responds to the cultural context of Chinese senior high schools. Third, it proposes a research agenda for further investigating culturally situated engagement.

Reframing the Three Patterns as Adaptive Strategies

The three engagement patterns described in this paper could easily be misinterpreted as deficiencies. Relational engagement might be seen as dependence on group approval. Instrumental engagement might be seen as shallow motivation. Deferential engagement might be seen as passivity or lack of autonomy. This paper argues for a different interpretation. These patterns are adaptive strategies that students develop to succeed in their specific educational environment. They reflect students' reading of what is expected of them and their effort to meet those expectations in ways that preserve their well-being and their relationships.

Several empirical findings support this interpretation. Zheng et al. (2025) found that engagement patterns changed over time in response to individual and contextual factors. Some students who withdrew from active participation did so not because they were disengaged but because they perceived that their contributions were not valued or that the activity type did not suit their strengths. Their withdrawal was a strategy for managing their learning experience, not a sign of motivational deficit. Xue et al. (2026) found that critical thinking subskills were activated conditionally depending on task stakes, rubric design and feedback availability. Students did not

lack the capacity for critical thinking. They deployed it when the conditions supported it. Amorati and Hajek (2023) found that students committed to project tasks when they perceived the tasks as personally relevant and socially meaningful. Their engagement was not simply a response to task demands but a strategic investment in activities that offered identity-enhancing experiences.

The culturally responsive teaching literature provides additional support for the adaptive interpretation. Harahap et al. (2025) found that project-based learning integrated with culturally responsive teaching improved literacy skills. Rasyimah et al. (2025) found that Cambodian students in Indonesia showed significant improvement in academic writing and reported increased confidence and collaboration. Suryani et al. (2025) found that technology-enhanced project-based learning through digital storytelling improved engagement, creative expression and cognitive structuring abilities. Studies from other Asian contexts corroborate these findings. Tseng et al. (2026) reported that Asian EFL learners demonstrated intercultural knowledge and skills when project tasks were designed with cultural sensitivity. These studies show that when instruction is adapted to learners' cultural backgrounds and needs, engagement increases. The implication is that the three patterns are not fixed characteristics of Chinese learners. They are responses to a particular instructional environment. When the environment changes, engagement patterns may also change.

This reframing has practical consequences. If relational engagement is understood as a deficiency, the pedagogical response might be to reduce group work or to impose more individual assessment. If relational engagement is understood as an adaptive strategy, the pedagogical response might be to design group tasks that leverage relational motivation while also encouraging individual accountability and cognitive investment. Similarly, if instrumental engagement is understood as shallow motivation, the pedagogical response might be to avoid any mention of examinations. If instrumental engagement is understood as an adaptive strategy, the pedagogical response might be to connect project tasks to examination goals while also highlighting aspects of writing that go beyond examination requirements.

Principles for Culturally Responsive Project-Based Writing Instruction

The framework proposed in this paper suggests several principles for designing project-based writing instruction in Chinese senior high schools. These principles are not intended as prescriptions. They are starting points for pedagogical experimentation and adaptation to local conditions.

The first principle concerns the design of project tasks. Project tasks should connect to students' lived experiences and to the cultural knowledge they bring to the classroom. This principle is supported by the culturally responsive teaching studies reviewed in this paper. Harahap et al. (2025) found that integrating culturally responsive teaching with project-based learning improved literacy skills. Rasyimah et al. (2025) found that Cambodian students responded positively when project tasks addressed their specific linguistic and cultural needs. Tseng et al. (2026) found that Asian English as a foreign language learners demonstrated intercultural knowledge and skills when tasks were designed with cultural sensitivity. For Chinese senior high school students, this principle might mean designing writing projects around topics that are familiar from their daily lives, such as school experiences, family relationships, or local cultural practices. It might also mean incorporating Chinese cultural content into writing tasks, allowing students to draw on their existing knowledge rather than always writing about unfamiliar Western topics.

The second principle concerns the relationship between project tasks and examination requirements. Instrumental engagement is a reality in Chinese senior high schools. Ignoring this reality is unlikely to increase student engagement. A more productive approach is to acknowledge the connection between project tasks and examination performance while also designing tasks that develop writing skills beyond what examinations

directly assess. Gao et al. (2024) found that project-based learning improved argumentative writing scores across multiple sub-dimensions. Wang (2024) found that project-based teaching improved writing motivation and writing performance. These findings suggest that project-based learning can serve both examination-related and broader educational goals. The pedagogical challenge is to design tasks that prepare students for examinations while also encouraging them to see writing as more than examination performance. Li and Zhang (2025) found that scaffolding helped some learners engage more effectively with writing tasks while reducing anxiety. This finding suggests that providing clear support structures can help students move from instrumental to more meaningful engagement.

The third principle concerns the role of the teacher. Deferential engagement means that teachers exert strong influence on student engagement. This influence can be used productively. When teachers express enthusiasm for project tasks, when they provide clear expectations and consistent support, and when they model engaged writing behavior, students are likely to respond with increased engagement. Jiaxi et al. (2026) found that teachers believed rich teaching resources, high learning participation and a good classroom atmosphere were important factors in improving writing performance. Gao and Liu (2024) noted that teachers faced challenges including time constraints for design and students' limited language proficiency. These challenges suggest that teacher preparation and institutional support are essential for successful implementation. Yi et al. (2026) found that time constraints and workload pressures faced by teachers were significant challenges in implementing project-based learning in rural minority schools. Lei (2026) found that inconsistent teacher guidance was a persistent challenge in project-based learning implementation. These findings indicate that the deferential engagement pattern is not simply a student characteristic. It is also a response to teacher availability and quality of guidance.

The fourth principle concerns the design of group work. Relational engagement means that group dynamics strongly influence student engagement. This influence can be harnessed for positive outcomes. When groups are well-structured, when roles are clearly assigned, and when accountability mechanisms are in place, relational motivation can support sustained effort and collaboration. Rofik (2023) found that project-based learning activated participation through team contribution, responsibility and respect for teammates. Rosli et al. (2025) identified group dynamics as a key challenge in project-based learning implementation. Zheng et al. (2025) found that some students shifted from active collaboration to withdrawal, suggesting that group dynamics can also undermine engagement. The pedagogical response is to design group work that minimizes opportunities for withdrawal and maximizes opportunities for meaningful contribution.

The fifth principle concerns assessment. Students engage with what they believe will be assessed. If assessment focuses only on final products, students may engage with the product without engaging deeply with the writing process. If assessment includes process-oriented components such as drafts, reflections and peer feedback, students may invest more in the writing process itself. Dong et al. (2025) found that cognitive load and anxiety influenced student engagement, suggesting that assessment design should consider the affective consequences of assessment practices. Xu and Zheng (2024) found that the behavior dimension of writing assessment literacy predicted writing engagement, suggesting that helping students understand assessment expectations can increase engagement. The implication is that teachers should be explicit about assessment criteria and should design assessments that reward process as well as product.

These five principles are summarized in **Table 5**. The table presents each principle, the engagement pattern it addresses, and the supporting empirical evidence.

Table 5. Principles for culturally responsive project-based writing instruction in Chinese senior high schools

Principle	Engagement pattern addressed	Supporting empirical evidence
Connect project tasks to students' lived experiences and cultural knowledge	Relational engagement	Harahap et al. (2025); Rasyimah et al. (2025); Tseng et al. (2026)
Acknowledge and leverage the connection between project tasks and examination requirements	Instrumental engagement	Gao et al. (2024); Wang (2024); Li and Zhang (2025); Dong et al. (2025)
Provide clear teacher expectations and consistent support	Deferential engagement	Jiaxi et al. (2026); Gao and Liu (2024); Yi et al. (2026); Lei (2026)
Structure group work with clear roles and accountability	Relational engagement	Rofik (2023); Rosli et al. (2025); Zheng et al. (2025)
Design assessment that rewards process as well as product	All patterns	Dong et al. (2025); Xu and Zheng (2024); Xue et al. (2026)

Figure 2 illustrates the pathway from theoretical framework to pedagogical principles. The figure shows how the three culturally situated engagement patterns inform the five pedagogical principles, which in turn shape instructional design decisions in Chinese senior high school project-based writing classrooms.

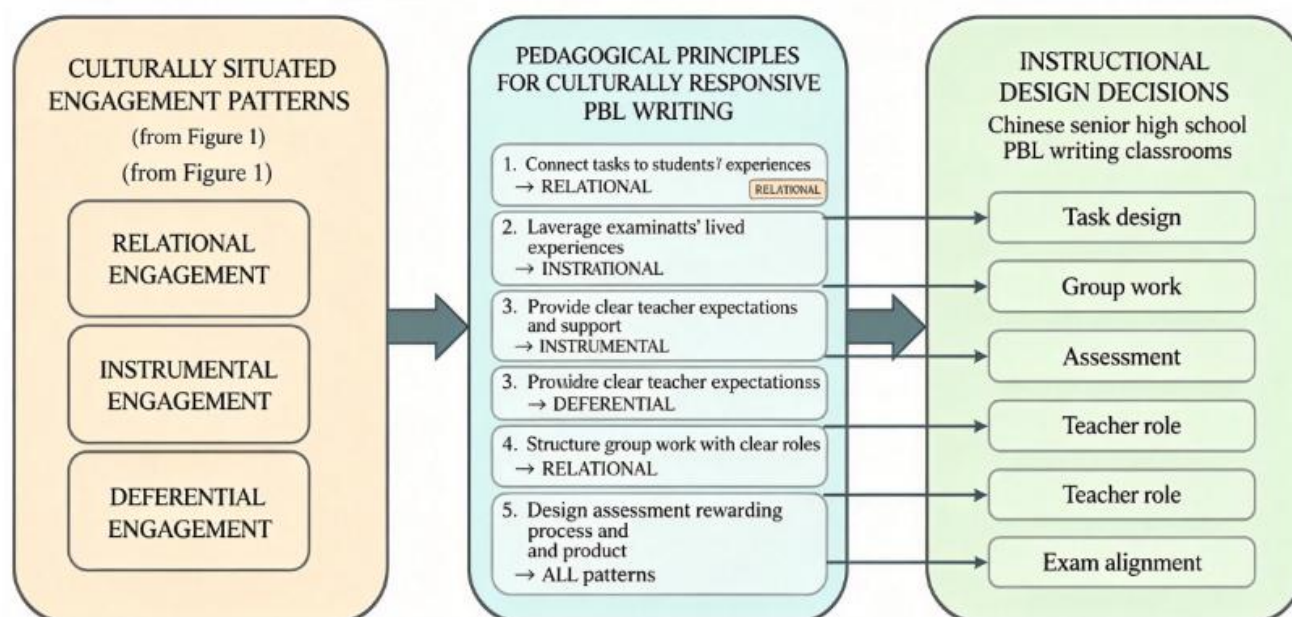


Figure 2. From theoretical framework to pedagogical principles for culturally responsive project-based writing instruction

A Research Agenda for Culturally Situated Engagement Studies

The framework proposed in this paper suggests several directions for future research. These directions are organized around three themes: measurement, process and comparison. Unlike the theoretical framework itself, which is proposed as a set of testable propositions, these research directions are intended as concrete, actionable steps that researchers can take to empirically investigate culturally situated engagement.

The first theme concerns measurement. Most existing engagement measures were developed in Western educational contexts and may not capture culturally situated forms of engagement. Zhong et al. (2025) adopted a multidimensional perspective but measured engagement using categories developed in Western research. Xu and Zheng (2024) developed a measure of writing assessment literacy and examined its relationship to writing engagement, but their measure was also based on Western assessment frameworks. Future research should develop engagement measures that are sensitive to Chinese cultural contexts. Such measures might include items that assess relational motivation, instrumental motivation and deferential motivation as distinct forms of engagement. They might also assess the conditions under which these forms of engagement support or undermine writing development.

The second theme concerns process. The studies reviewed in this paper have predominantly used cross-sectional designs or short-term interventions. Zheng et al. (2025) conducted a longitudinal case study and found that engagement patterns changed over time. Their study showed that engagement is dynamic, not static. However, their study was limited to one group of students. Future research should examine how engagement patterns develop over longer periods and across multiple projects. Xue et al. (2026) found that critical thinking subskills were activated conditionally depending on task conditions. Their findings suggest that engagement is sensitive to contextual factors. Future research should examine which contextual factors most strongly influence engagement and how teachers can design conditions that support productive engagement.

The third theme concerns comparison. The framework proposed in this paper is specific to Chinese senior high schools. Whether similar engagement patterns appear in other cultural contexts is an open question. Tseng et al. (2026) found that Asian English as a foreign language learners demonstrated intercultural knowledge and skills in culturally distinct practice contexts. Their study included students from multiple Asian countries, providing a basis for comparative analysis. Future research should compare engagement patterns across different cultural contexts within Asia and between Asian and Western contexts. Such comparisons would test the universality claims of existing engagement theories and would provide evidence for the cultural situatedness of engagement.

Additional research directions emerge from the specific studies reviewed in this paper. Andargie et al. (2025) found that project-based learning significantly improved writing performance in an Ethiopian context. Replicating their study in Chinese senior high schools would provide evidence on the effectiveness of project-based learning in this specific context. Chao et al. (2025) reviewed studies on project-based learning and English writing skills and identified challenges including time constraints and resource limitations. Future research should examine how these challenges can be addressed in Chinese senior high schools, where class sizes are large and teacher workloads are heavy. Maulita et al. (2026) found that engagement positively mediated the effect of project-based learning on learning outcomes. Testing this mediation model in the Chinese senior high school writing context would provide empirical support for the framework proposed in this paper. Marpaung et al. (2026) found that project-based learning improved behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement in an Indonesian context. A similar study in Chinese senior high schools would reveal whether the same patterns of improvement appear. Ilham (2022) found that Indonesian tertiary students perceived project-based learning as interesting and motivating. Investigating Chinese senior high school students' perceptions of project-based writing would provide insights into their motivation and engagement. Hady et al. (2025) explored project-based

learning implementation in secondary school and documented both benefits and challenges. Their findings provide a basis for comparative analysis with Chinese secondary school contexts. Amorati and Hajek (2023) found that students appreciated project tasks that were personally relevant and socially meaningful. Examining what Chinese senior high school students find personally relevant and socially meaningful would inform the design of culturally appropriate writing projects. Suryani et al. (2025) found that technology-enhanced project-based learning through digital storytelling improved engagement. Exploring the role of technology in Chinese senior high school project-based writing would identify opportunities and challenges for technology integration. Rasyimah et al. (2025) found significant improvement in academic writing for Cambodian students in Indonesia. Comparing their findings with similar studies in Chinese senior high schools would reveal whether culturally responsive project-based learning produces consistent effects across different Asian contexts.

Summary of Contributions

This paper has made three contributions to the literature on project-based learning and student engagement in English as a foreign language contexts. First, it has proposed a theoretical framework for understanding student engagement in project-based English writing as culturally situated. Second, it has identified three culturally situated engagement patterns in Chinese senior high school project-based writing: relational engagement, instrumental engagement and deferential engagement. Third, it has outlined pedagogical principles for designing culturally responsive project-based writing instruction and proposed a research agenda for further investigating culturally situated engagement.

The paper does not claim that the three engagement patterns are unique to Chinese senior high schools. It claims that they are particularly salient in this context and that understanding them requires attention to the cultural and institutional forces that shape Chinese secondary education. The paper also does not claim that these patterns are fixed or unchangeable. It treats them as adaptive strategies that students develop in response to their educational environment. When the environment changes, engagement patterns may also change. The implication for practice is that teachers and policymakers can design instructional environments that support more productive forms of engagement while recognizing the cultural constraints within which they operate.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that student engagement in project-based English writing in Chinese senior high schools is culturally situated. The argument was developed through a framework identifying three engagement patterns: relational, instrumental and deferential. These patterns are not deficiencies. They are adaptive strategies that students develop to navigate the cultural and institutional demands of Chinese secondary education. The paper has made three contributions. It has offered a theoretical framework that integrates sociocultural theory and self-determination theory to explain how cultural context shapes engagement. It has identified three culturally situated engagement patterns that have received limited attention in existing literature. It has outlined pedagogical principles and a research agenda to guide future work.

Several limitations require acknowledgment. The framework is theoretical and awaits empirical testing in Chinese senior high school classrooms. The three engagement patterns are derived from existing literature rather than from original data collected in Chinese schools, so the claims made here should be treated as testable propositions rather than established findings. The paper has drawn on existing studies for illustration, but these studies were not designed to test the proposed framework. The framework may also require adaptation across different regions, school types and student populations within China. Urban and rural schools, key provincial schools and ordinary schools, and students from different socioeconomic backgrounds may exhibit these patterns

differently. The framework presented here is intended as a general heuristic that requires contextual calibration rather than a one-size-fits-all description. Its applicability to other educational contexts remains uncertain.

Despite these limitations, the paper offers a starting point for rethinking engagement in project-based English writing beyond Western theoretical frameworks. The field of English as a foreign language education has long relied on theories developed in Western contexts. This paper has contributed to a growing body of work that takes cultural context seriously in understanding learning and motivation. The practical implications are clear. Teachers should understand student engagement in context. Relational concerns, examination pressures and teacher authority are real influences that shape how students participate in project-based writing. Instructional design should work with these influences rather than against them. Teacher education should prepare teachers to adapt project-based learning to their specific classroom realities. Policymakers should recognize that examination systems and curriculum policies shape engagement in powerful ways.

For researchers, the framework offers testable propositions. Future studies could investigate whether the three engagement patterns predict different writing outcomes. They could examine whether these patterns change in response to instructional interventions. They could develop and validate measures of culturally situated engagement. They could conduct cross-context comparisons to test the universality of existing engagement theories. The paper concludes with a call for culturally situated approaches to engagement research. Engagement is not a generic psychological state. It is shaped by the cultural and institutional contexts in which learning occurs. Recognizing this situatedness does not reject general theories of engagement. It expands them to account for the full range of human learning experiences. The framework proposed here is one step toward that expansion. Further steps will require collaborative efforts across contexts, cultures and disciplines.

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