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Exploring Teachers' Perceptions of Student Engagement in Pakistani ESL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions of student engagement in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms in university. Several studies have been conducted on teachers' perceptions of student engagement globally. However, there is a dearth of such research in Pakistani context. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 12 teachers teaching English to undergraduate students of semesters II and IV in public-sector universities of Lahore. The findings revealed that students from both prior Urdu and English medium of instruction (MOI) engage differently in an ESL classroom. However, students from prior Urdu MOI face more challenges in engaging in the ESL classroom. It is recommended that teachers should devise different strategies to engage students of both Urdu and English MOI to help them reach a level of autonomy where they can use English language in appropriate contexts in the best possible way.

Introduction

In higher education (HE), student engagement has become an expression of interest that is being studied, theorized, and discussed more and more due to mounting evidence of its importance for learning and achievement. It is imperative that we take time to investigate, deliberate, and cultivate student engagement in the ever-evolving context of HE in order to guarantee that our institutions stay student-centered. The focus of the current study is how cognitive, behavioral and socio-cultural engagement is affected by students' prior medium of instruction (MOI) from teachers' perspective. The abilities and work habits that students learn are largely influenced by the quality of the daily interactions that take place in the classroom between teachers and students (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). According to studies, teachers' expectations and judgments of each student's competency affect how they interact with them individually in the classroom (Wang & Hall, 2018).

There is a growing emphasis on student engagement both inside and outside of the curriculum in order to increase student achievement and enhance learning and teaching in HE (Tight, 2020). However, it is now even more crucial to critically consider student engagement strategies we are putting into place at our institutions and the role MOI plays in engaging students. One important part of education is how the MOI affects students' engagement.

Students are more likely to comprehend and interact with the subject when it is presented in a language, they are fluent in. When students can communicate successfully in the MOI, they are more likely to participate in class discussions and activities. Using a language that they are comfortable with helps encourage learning and develop interest in the learning material. Students' engagement may suffer if they find it difficult to communicate in a language, they are not fluent in. Disengagement may result if the MOI is not in line with the cultural and linguistic background of the student. On the other hand, a key factor is the teachers' competency in the language of MOI. Teachers who are comfortable and proficient in the language they use for teaching can interact with pupils more efficiently and communicate more effectively.

The increasing stature of English as a global language has influenced some changes globally, and the question of whether to use it as the MOI in mixed ability classrooms instead of the students' first language (L1) has emerged. Due to educational options, HE classrooms have now become increasingly linguistically varied as far as student body is concerned. English has been and probably will continue to be the principal MOI in Pakistan's HE institutions. Pakistani HE student body mainly belongs to two prior MOI: English MOI and Urdu MOI. Hence, students hailing from prior Urdu MOI or some other language MOI may face challenges in engagement in university where English is the primary MOI.

The MOI has a profound impact on student engagement, influencing various aspects of the learning experience. Students who get instruction in a language they are comfortable with have better comprehension and grasp of the subject matter, which increases student engagement. Students who are learning in a second language (L2) may find it difficult to comprehend the material and will lose interest in the classroom. Students with a strong command of English language are probably going to be more engaged when learning takes place in an English MOI environment. They find it easier to comprehend the subject matter, take part in conversations, and finish homework and/or assignments. Students who do not speak English well may find it difficult to understand, which might cause them to become disengaged and frustrated. They could have trouble asking questions, expressing themselves, or keeping up with the lessons. Students who are not yet fluent in English may become alienated from traditional lecture-based methods or too complex terminology, which will decrease their engagement and classroom participation. Students who are more fluent in English tend to be more confident when speaking in English, which can result in higher levels of engagement. They are more likely to take part in group projects, presentations, and class discussions. Students who lack confidence in their ability to communicate in English might not be able to participate in class activities, which can cause disengagement and a lack of practice, both of which hamper language development.

Students come from a variety of backgrounds, and their needs and interests can differ significantly. Understanding these distinctions allows for more inclusive and effective engagement initiatives. In Pakistani context, one of the main factors that affects students' engagement in HE is their prior MOI. This study therefore explores the role of MOI in student engagement in Pakistani HE context.

Literature Review

Student Engagement

Student engagement has been described by Kuh et al. (2011) as a kind of practice that yields a range of outcomes, both inside and outside of the classroom. According to

Krause and Coates (2008), student engagement is the degree to which students participate in activities that have been demonstrated by research in HE and is associated with superior learning outcomes. Similarly, Kuh and Hu (2001) characterize engagement as the amount and kind of effort students themselves put up in attaining their learning objectives that directly lead to desired results.

According to Trowler et al. (2021), joint investments in high-quality learning made by students and institutions yield the best results in terms of student engagement. Higher education institutions have had the capacity to foster an environment that values and encourages student engagement from a variety of angles and is likely to have a number of beneficial effects on both students and the institution. The increased interest in student engagement has theoretical, practical, and economic justifications. While institutional input refers to institutional resources at the same time interactive and engaging educational activities that support and promote student learning are a part of a flexible and challenging curriculum that encourages the students to learn. Student input is often defined as the time, effort, and energy students devote to learning knowledge and skills (Kuh 2003, 2009).

Types of Engagement

Three types of engagement are the focus of this study: Cognitive engagement; Behavioral engagement; and Socio-cultural engagement.

Cognitive engagement

Students' internal investment in the learning of a specific subject or concept has become the focus of cognitive engagement. It includes the psychological features of a student that plays an important role in understanding and acquiring the skill and knowledge required to complete a particular task (Cooper, 2014). Moreover, the cognitive engagement domain is adopted when the investigation of students' input is needed in order to comprehend the acquisition of skills and knowledge taught at school level (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). This focus is particularly important so that it becomes easy to study the link between student engagement and their own involvement.

Cognitive engagement can be seen as a phenomenon that involves students' psychological input in a way that every time, she approaches a task or text she is able to bring something new to it. Her understanding of the taught concept relies on the connections she establishes between her current knowledge and schema. Research demonstrates that students who actively interact with their learning materials learn more than those who only interact with them passively. In fact, it is common knowledge that cognitive engagement is essential to a successful educational process (Barlow et al., 2020).

Behavioral engagement

Behavioral engagement domain is concerned about the queries regarding students' behavior inside the classroom, their participation in the activities that take place inside the school and also the students' interest in the tasks given to them as classroom instructional plan (Mann, 2001). In addition to this, studies have revealed that students' conduct in the classroom in association with school and class rules and expectations cannot be ignored. Moreover, it is observed that students exhibit two types of behaviors, positive and negative. Positive behaviors indicate good student engagement and negative or disruptive behaviors are indicative of low student engagement and in some cases complete disengagement (Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

According to Fisher and Fry (2022), actions and behaviors are included in behavioral engagement. This is usually studied through observable indicators, such as attending class, adhering to regulations, and finishing tasks. Researches who focus on activities that take place inside the school have thrown light on the assistance given to students to accomplish a given task. This has given substantial data regarding students' motivation as a part of their engagement (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Furthermore, researches have elaborated on how such activities help in increasing student engagement instead of disengaging them (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Cooper, 2014; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012).

Another component of behavioral engagement is the amount of interest students take in their tasks, which signifies the "tangible behavioral actions exhibited by the students to show their willingness to engage in classroom activities as well as their will to overcome challenging material" (Birch & Ladd, 1997, p. 97). Research under this area gives a comprehensive view of what goes inside the classroom that will ensure student engagement including focus on asking questions, persistence and readiness to participate in class discussions (Cooper, 2014; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Furthermore, behavioral perspective would answer questions related to students' behavior inside the classroom and students' interest for various activities that take place within the educational institution and it would also exhibit the amount of interest students show towards the completion of a task (Cooper, 2014; Fredricks et al., 2004; Shernoff, 2013; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). The interactions with other students and teachers help engage the students in an ESL classroom. The findings supported by previous studies show that teacher participation during group work is much more important than the utilization of peer group work alone (Nguyen, 2016).

Sociocultural Engagement

The socio-cultural perspective on student engagement talks about the role of the social context that the student lives in and their experiences. In addition to this, researchers have also looked at the conflicting views regarding engagement i.e., alienation, "a subjectively undesirable separation from something outside oneself" (Geyer, 2001, p. 390). Mann (2001) asserts that significant research has identified some contextual factors such as focus on discipline and students' performances that end up making students disengaged within, HE. Socio-cultural academics have long shown that children and youth from all social and cultural backgrounds participate in significant literary events in their homes and communities, which has implications for students' academic engagement (Polman & Miller, 2010). These socio-cultural studies serve as a helpful reminder that students' participation in one context, such as their home, can have a significant impact on the variety of socio-educational opportunities and experiences they have, or do not have, in other contexts (Barton et al., 2013; Wylie & Hodgen, 2012).

Student participation in the classroom has been found to be influenced by socio-economic and cultural factors. Studies have indicated that students' learning and engagement processes are significantly influenced by their socio-cultural background (Cruz, 2022). Taking into account elements like culture, gender, ethnicity, and societal perspectives is crucial when developing a classroom that is culturally responsive and boosts student engagement. It has been determined that a number of factors, including home location, cultural constraints, and language ability, affect students' engagement in class activities. To improve student engagement in the classroom, it is critical that teachers understand these elements and establish a setting that takes them into consideration (Mathew, 2023).

Teachers' role in Student Engagement

Since student engagement is fundamental to the teaching and learning process, teachers' involvement plays a critical role in shaping students; engagement experiences (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). This helps to explain a lot of the variations in classroom engagement levels that are frequently observed (Hospel & Garland, 2016).

In a similar vein, Shernoff et al. (2016) assert that the primary way to affect student engagement is for teachers to have the capacity to mold their students' immediate learning environment according to the needs of the learners. In fact, it is the teacher who creates such a conducive environment in the classroom. The important part that teachers play in student engagement is supported by recent research from Australian educational institutions. For instance, it was not surprising that teachers' contributions to creating a stimulating and encouraging learning environment were essential to students' school and learning experiences. Since teachers influence the learning settings, curriculum, and pedagogy, it should come as no surprise that their decisions about these areas have a big impact on student engagement and their results (Goldspink et al., 2008).

Material and Methods

Semi structured, face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 teachers teaching English to undergraduate students in public sector universities of Lahore. An interview guide was followed. The interviews were recorded and later on transcribed. Data analysis was done by identifying different themes and sub-themes in the data. To ensure anonymity of the participants codes were assigned to them (P1, P2 etc.).

Results and Discussion

According to the majority of teachers there are several factors that significantly impact student engagement in public universities in Pakistan. Understanding these factors is crucial for developing strategies to enhance student engagement and improve educational outcomes. Public sector schools often lack essential resources such as textbooks, teaching materials, and technology infrastructure, which can impact the quality of education and students' engagement with the curriculum. On the other hand, in Pakistani education system it is observed that students who go to public schools come from underprivileged backgrounds and students who have been to elite English medium schools are financially more stable. The economic condition of a society has a profound impact on cultural practices, values, and norms. The relationship between economics and culture is dynamic, with each influencing the other in various ways. Understanding this interplay can provide insights into how societies adapt to economic changes and how they are shaped and reshaped over time. Teachers in this study perceived this dichotomy as an important reason for disengagement at university level. P2 said that: "The socioeconomic status of students directly impacts their language performance".

Public and non-elite private schools may have large class sizes and inadequate infrastructure, leading to overcrowded classrooms. P6 noted: "The lack of proper classrooms and infrastructure is also a reason for ineffective language learning". This can make it difficult for teachers to provide individualized attention and for students to actively participate in learning activities when they attend undergraduate English classroom. Non-elite and public schools may face challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. According to P7: "The teachers teaching at such schools lack appropriate teacher training and are not familiar with the teaching methodologies".

Teachers in public schools may lack training, experience, or motivation, which can affect their ability to engage students effectively and deliver quality instruction.

Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds may have access to opportunities such as extracurricular activities, tutoring, and educational programs outside of school. P4 reported: "Extra help is accessible to students from English medium backgrounds because of their good financial status". These experiences can enhance these students' English language skills, confidence, and overall engagement in the classroom. On the other hand, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may have limited access to such opportunities, which can impact their engagement and academic performance.

Socio-economic status can influence access to support services such as counseling, special education resources, and academic interventions. Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds may have greater access to these services, which can support their academic and socio-emotional needs and enhance their engagement in English classrooms. Overall, Pakistani students with English as the MOI in school tend to be more actively engaged, proficient in English language skills and developed ability to evaluate concepts critically. Moreover, such students easily adapt to different learning environments, and are more globally aware in their English classrooms. In addition to this, students with Urdu as MOI I school may face challenges while performing tasks that require them to use their cognitive abilities and solve a problem task given to them with ease. One of the main reasons for this according to the interview participants is because Urdu MOI students may have limited exposure to problem-solving methodologies and practices during their education. Their previous educational experiences might have focused more on rote memorization and procedural learning rather than critical thinking and analytical skills development. These methods have been passed down through generations and are deeply ingrained in the educational culture. Cultural norms and educational practices in Pakistan may prioritize passive learning. This can discourage students from taking initiative and thinking creatively to solve problems. P12 said that "Urdu medium students struggle more in problem solving activities and need more guidance".

Limited vocabulary can significantly impact cognitive skills, especially in the context of education and language learning. Prior Urdu MOI students may have a limited English vocabulary compared to their peers who have been educated in English-medium schools. This becomes an important reason for their inability to respond to tasks that involve the use of cognitive skills. Vocabulary knowledge is directly linked to reading comprehension. Students with limited vocabulary struggle to understand texts, which affects their overall academic performance. P10 said: "…when I give them texts to make inferences, they are unable to do so … because they don't have the words".

Students from Urdu medium backgrounds may find it challenging to speak and write fluently in English. They may struggle with grammar, sentence structure, and pronunciation, leading to difficulties in expressing their thoughts and ideas clearly. P3 responded: "Urdu medium students think that … they consider that English language is something you know, it's like a monster for them. They're so scared of English language". Immersing students in an English-rich environment both inside and outside the classroom is crucial for language acquisition. Teachers can expose students to authentic English materials such as literature, films, and news articles and encourage them to practice speaking, listening, reading, and writing in English regularly.

Urdu-medium students may experience social and emotional challenges, such as feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and isolation, as they try to meet the linguistic and

academic demands of an English language classroom. They may also face peer pressure and stereotypes associated with their language background. Teachers teaching classes that have both Urdu and English medium background students may unconsciously resort to code-switching between Urdu and English, especially when they encounter difficulties in understanding or expressing themselves in English. P5 reported that sometimes "… we need to use Urdu to make them understand what we are saying and what we basically require from them". While code-switching can serve as a coping mechanism, it can also appear as an obstacle in language acquisition and fluency in English. Code-switching can help students immediately understand complex concepts or instructions that might be challenging in English alone.

If the content is relevant to students' interests, experiences, and real-world concerns, they are more likely to be engaged. Relevant content helps students see the value and applicability of what they are learning irrespective of the MOI they come from. When participants were asked about the importance of content and the role it played in engaging students in the classroom, the majority of them were of the view that its relevance is of utmost importance. P8 opined:

Content is very much important and … content is actually meant to create ease for students of both English and Urdu medium, but … it is very difficult, because again, it becomes boring for the students who have already acquired those concepts and challenging for those who are learning the taught content for the first time.

Content that provides opportunities for feedback and reflection promotes active engagement by encouraging students to assess their understanding, clarify misconceptions, and refine their thinking. P9 indicated: Immediate feedbacks sometimes and surprise test, make them actively participate in the classroom". When teachers were inquired about the importance of feedback to both English and Urdu medium students, they all agreed that feedback has a very important place in the entire teaching learning process.

Learning experiences that are embedded in real-world contexts and applications make content more meaningful and engaging for students. When students can see the relevance and practical implications of what they are learning, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged. Feedback creates a dialogue between teachers and students. This interaction encourages students to ask questions, seek clarification, and become more involved in their learning process. The choice of teaching methodologies, such as lectures, discussions, group work, hands-on activities, and multimedia presentations, can impact student engagement. Varied and interactive approaches that cater to different learning styles and preferences are more likely to engage students than traditional, one-size-fits-all methods. Methodologies that promote active learning, where students are actively involved in the learning process through problem-solving, inquiry, exploration, and reflection, tend to enhance engagement. On the other hand, if teachers use only Urdu language in class, this could pose a great threat to effective teaching and learning. P11 elaborated: "… teachers at times switch to Urdu instead of bringing them to the level of English medium students, I think that they switch permanently to Urdu medium which of course, is not a good thing to do".

Active learning encourages students to take ownership of their learning and fosters deeper understanding and retention of the material. If the teaching methodology is such that it engages students in activities that make use of their cognitive abilities only then they will become life-long learners. Some teachers in Urdu medium schools may themselves have limited proficiency in English. This can hinder their ability to model correct

pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary usage for their students. Urdu medium schools often lack resources such as textbooks, audiovisual aids, and language learning materials best suited to meet the needs of English language learners. Teachers in Urdu medium schools may face pressure to cover a prescribed curriculum within a limited time frame. Providing timely and constructive feedback, as well as offering support and encouragement, is crucial for fostering student engagement. Teachers who regularly assess student progress, address misconceptions, and provide guidance and encouragement, motivate students to stay engaged and practise persistence in their learning efforts.

Large classrooms can significantly impact student engagement in various ways, often presenting challenges that can hinder effective learning. Teachers perceived that classroom engagement is also affected by the strength of the class. In large classrooms, it can be challenging for teachers to provide personalized attention to each student. Students may feel overlooked or neglected, leading to disengagement and a sense of anonymity. P1 believed that "… if the class strength is too large that we cannot keep an eye on all the students, it is very difficult to make them engaged. So, class strength matters a lot". Another participant, P8 stated that "… sometimes the strength of the class is so big, that it becomes very difficult even for the teacher to have check on each and every student".

Students come with different backgrounds experiences, abilities, interests, and prior knowledge. Differentiated instruction helps meet their individual needs and provides appropriate challenges for each student. Varying teaching methods can help maintain students' attention. Short activities, changes in format, and interactive elements can prevent boredom and keep students focused. Using a variety of strategies ensures that all students feel included and valued. It helps create an environment where everyone has the opportunity to succeed. When students are exposed to a variety of teaching methods, they are more likely to find ones that resonate with them, leading to greater engagement and a sense of ownership over their learning. Flexibility in teaching strategies allows teachers to adapt to the specific needs of the subject matter. The ability of a teacher to change teaching strategies that would cater to the needs of the students has a positive impact on not only students' learning but plays a crucial role in maintaining positive teacher-student relationship. P3 highlighted the need to include different platforms that would encourage students to show their creative skills:

There should be the speaker's club … there should be the writers club … there should be a video making and film making club that are specially for English language students so that they can enhance their creativity, critical thinking and there should be a platform on which they can participate by themselves.

Diverse teaching methods can inspire creativity and innovation amongst both teachers and students and encourage thinking outside the box and exploring new ways of understanding and expressing ideas.

Discussion

The teachers were of the view in this study that in order to increase student engagement in the classroom, a useful strategy for bridging the gap between pupils' native Urdu language and ESL would be code-switching. Rauf (2018) has talked about the importance of code switching by saying that the use of mother tongue in the classroom keeps the environment flexible and students feel encouraged and it increases their participation in the classroom. Teachers may utilize Urdu to clarify difficult ideas, directions, or English vocabulary item to make sure that students grasp the subject. When a teacher employs Urdu to describe a certain concept that may be better expressed in the

mother tongue, it can help to clarify things and reinforce understanding and help students engage in the ESL classroom.

The role of feedback cannot be denied in any educational setting. Students feel more confident when they receive constructive and encouraging feedback from their teachers. Herra and Kulinska (2018) assert that an essential component of interactions between students and teachers to increase their engagement in the classroom is feedback. Students are more likely to participate more actively and take chances while using English when they feel that their efforts are valued. Students can learn what they are doing well and where they need to improve by receiving feedback. Their ability to create realistic goals is aided by this clarity, which gives the learning process greater meaning and motivation.

Teachers were of the view that another reason for low engagement in an ESL setting is a large classroom. Teachers may find it difficult to provide each student with individualized attention in large classes. In the view of Panhwar and Bell (2022), in a large classroom, students sitting in the front only get the chance to participate in the lesson and rest do not and this effects their engagement on all levels that is cognitive, behavioral and socio-cultural engagement. Students may feel ignored as a result of this lack of individualized interaction, which may lower their motivation and engagement levels.

ESL classrooms are mostly mixed ability classrooms, with varied degrees of language proficiency. If the content is either simple or too complex for some students, it can be challenging for the teacher to differentiate instruction and customize lessons in a large classroom, which might cause such students to lose interest and disengage with the lesson. Students may feel less accountable in large class settings. Lower engagement might result in some students withdrawing, particularly if they are less secure in their ability to communicate in English. Hennessy and Murphy (2023) contended that students' inability to communicate in English is a big hurdle in their engagement in an ESL classroom. Social obstacles can arise in large classes, making it difficult for shy or introvert students to participate. This resistance is particularly noticeable in ESL classes, when students may be reluctant to participate due to a fear of making mistakes.

Conclusion

This study focused on the role of students' prior MOI on their engagement experiences at undergraduate level. The study findings revealed that teachers play an important role in engaging students in an ESL classroom. In addition, prior MOI affects students' engagement differently and teachers need to devise different strategies to engage students from both prior Urdu and English MOI so that they can reach a level of autonomy where they can use English language in appropriate contexts in the best possible way. The teachers showed more concerns about Urdu medium students' engagement than English medium students. The majority of the teachers were of the opinion that the prior MOI has an important role to play when it comes to engaging in the English classroom. All the teachers agreed that students need diversity and flexibility in their lessons and activities to engage in the lesson.

Engaging lessons that take into account students' different levels of English ability might increase learning. For example, in order to incorporate interactive exercises, real life situations and visual aids can increase the accessibility and interest in learning. Moreover, in order to engage students belonging to both Urdu and English MOI background, teachers can utilize strategies such as bilingual instruction and English language support where necessary, create a secure and accepting classroom environment, encourage peer support and collaboration, and foster language development through purposeful and engaging

activities. This will in turn help the students to reach a level of autonomy where they can use English language in appropriate contexts in the best possible way.

This study focused on only three dimensions of engagement (cognitive, behavioral, and socio-cultural engagement). To improve our comprehension of each component, more investigation is required to examine the connections between the elements in the current study. There is also the need to gauge student engagement in a broad manner through quantitative study and also from students' perspective. While relationships and a broader sense of belonging are acknowledged, cognitive, behavioral, and socio-cultural perspectives of student engagement need a lot of attention.

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