

Teacher Discourse and Student Engagement in ESL Learning Settings

1. Dr. Tayyaba Bashir, Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Kotli, AJK. Email: tayba.sardar@hotmail.com
2. Muhammad Umair Khan, Visiting Lecturer, Department of English, University of Mianwali.
3. Khalil Ahmad, Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Islamabad. Email: khalilahmadk80@gmail.com
(Corresponding Author)

Abstract

This study examines the intricate relationship between teacher discourse and student engagement in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms within district Kotli Azad Kashmir schools. Grounded in a qualitative research design, the investigation explores the impact of three key dimensions of teacher discourse—Clarity and Comprehensibility, Encouragement and Support, and Interactive Communication—on student engagement. Classroom observations were conducted across a diverse range of schools to capture a comprehensive view of these interactions. The findings of the study affirm the crucial role that teacher discourse plays in shaping student engagement. The analysis reveals that when teachers communicated with clarity and employed comprehensible language, student engagement levels were notably elevated. Such environments facilitated active participation and comprehension, aligning with previous research highlighting the fundamental importance of clarity in pedagogy. Encouragement and support from teachers emerged as another influential factor in promoting emotional and cognitive engagement. The positive atmosphere created by supportive teacher behavior fostered a greater willingness among students to contribute, ask questions, and partake in discussions. This underscores the significance of emotional connection within the learning environment. The study also underscores the value of interactive communication between teachers and students. Classrooms characterized by dialogic interactions and open-ended questions witnessed heightened levels of student engagement. These findings extend existing literature on the benefits of interactive teaching methods, showcasing their potential to enhance both cognitive and emotional engagement. The implications of these findings underscore the importance of incorporating effective teacher discourse strategies into educational practices to cultivate more engaging ESL learning environments.

Keywords: Teacher discourse, ESL learning, student engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement.

Introduction

Student engagement is universally acknowledged as a vital component of effective teaching and learning across a wide array of subjects. It serves both as an indicator of educational quality and as a catalyst for academic success (Groccia, 2018). In the classroom setting, student engagement manifests in several dimensions, including cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects. Cognitively engaged students actively participate in their own learning by diving deep into problem-solving, critical analysis, and conceptual understanding (Reschly et al., 2020). This form of engagement correlates strongly with increased retention and mastery of subject matter, enabling students to transition from being passive recipients of information to active participants in the knowledge-building process. Emotional engagement, another crucial dimension, addresses the affective aspects of learning. This involves students' feelings of connection and investment in the subject matter and learning environment (Reschly et al., 2020). A classroom where emotional engagement is encouraged often leads to a higher level of motivation, increased self-efficacy, and a greater willingness to engage cognitively and behaviorally. When students feel emotionally connected to the learning experience, they're more likely to engage at other levels, contributing

to a holistic educational experience (Gupta & Pandey, 2018) and increased learning satisfaction (Abdelrady & Akram, 2022). Behavioral engagement, the third cornerstone, is visibly demonstrated through attendance, active participation, timely submission of assignments, and adherence to classroom norms and guidelines (Nguyen et al., 2018). This outward expression of engagement often indicates the presence of both cognitive and emotional engagement and contributes to a disciplined and cohesive classroom environment.

In English Language Learning (ELL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, the importance of student engagement is amplified due to unique challenges and opportunities. For example, the hurdle of language barriers can be monumental for ESL students. Those who are engaged are more likely to actively participate in the learning process, thereby improving their chances of overcoming linguistic (Akram et al., 2020) and psychological challenges (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023). Active participation often includes not only traditional studying but also proactive behaviors like seeking extra help, practicing spoken English in real-world settings, and participating in group discussions (Chen et al., 2022).

Additionally, the multicultural nature of many ESL classrooms makes emotional engagement particularly essential (Yacob et al., 2022). Diverse classrooms require a delicate balance of inclusivity, sensitivity, and cultural awareness. When students are emotionally engaged, they are more likely to foster a culture of mutual respect and understanding, which is vital for effective learning in a multicultural environment. Teachers, recognizing this, often strive to generate emotionally engaging discourse that incorporates various cultural perspectives, thereby boosting the overall engagement level of the classroom (Mazelin et al., 2022). The ESL classroom often prioritizes real-world applicability, incorporating the development of listening and speaking skills alongside reading and writing. Engaged students are more likely to take part in activities like group projects, role-playing, and presentations that simulate real-world language use. These activities not only bolster language skills but also contribute to students' confidence in their ability to use English in practical settings (Ho, 2020).

Lastly, learning a new language is a long-term commitment, one that requires sustained engagement over a prolonged period. Motivated and engaged students are more likely to maintain the discipline and focus needed to improve steadily and reach language proficiency over time (Al-Adwan et al., 2022). It is therefore suggested in several studies to keep students engaged by means of technological applications (Akram et al., 2021). In short, student engagement, while critical in all educational contexts, becomes even more crucial in ESL settings, where students face the added challenges of language barriers, cultural differences, and the need for real-world language skills. As such, both teachers and policymakers must place a heightened focus on strategies to foster engagement in ESL classrooms for the benefit of effective language acquisition and cultural integration.

Understanding the dynamic interplay between teacher discourse and student engagement in English as a Second Language (ESL) settings is critical for the success of language education programs. As globalization continues to foster diverse and multicultural societies, the need for effective ESL programs becomes increasingly paramount (Paneerselvam & Mohamad, 2019). For many individuals, acquiring English language skills serves as a means of accessing better educational and career opportunities. While pedagogical methodologies, curricula, and classroom technologies are often the focus of discussions about language learning, the role of teacher-

student interaction cannot be understated. These interactions, which often occur through verbal and non-verbal discourse, form the backbone of a thriving ESL classroom environment (Kiang & Yunus, 2021).

Teacher discourse refers to the myriad ways in which educators communicate with their students, including but not limited to verbal exchanges, gestures, and written communication (Herbel-Eisenmann et al., 2013). Discourse is not merely the transference of knowledge from teacher to student but a complex interaction that shapes and reshapes learners' understanding, motivation, and engagement. It plays a vital role in scaffolding the learning process, making the content accessible, and fostering an inclusive learning environment (Lefstein et al., 2020). Besides, it also serves as a mechanism through which teachers can assess, in real-time, the level of student understanding, engagement, and participation. The power of discourse extends beyond grammar rules and vocabulary lists to involve cultural norms, affective factors, and critical thinking skills—all elements integral to effective language learning (Chen et al., 2020).

Student engagement, on the other hand, is a multifaceted construct involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. An engaged student is not only attentive but also emotionally invested and active in the learning process (Bond et al., 2020). Effective engagement is an integral part of successful language acquisition. Students who are engaged are more likely to participate in classroom activities, take risks in using the new language, and consequently, have a higher chance of reaching language proficiency. Given that ESL learners often come from diverse cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, maintaining high levels of engagement can be a complex endeavor. What engages one student might not necessarily engage another due to varying individual needs, cultural nuances, and prior educational experiences (Bond, 2020).

The intersection between teacher discourse and student engagement becomes even more complex when observed in an ESL setting. The language barrier is an obvious challenge. Often, ESL teachers must tailor their discourse to a classroom with varied levels of English proficiency, making it imperative for them to find the 'sweet spot' between being comprehensible yet challenging (Burns, 2019). Additionally, cultural diversity in ESL classrooms makes it essential for teachers to adopt a discourse style sensitive to different cultural norms about interaction, respect, and authority. Furthermore, the socioemotional aspects of being a language learner—such as fear of making mistakes, or the feeling of being an 'outsider'—can affect student engagement and necessitate a certain discourse style to mitigate these factors (Kayi-Aydar, 2019).

In sum, the relationship between teacher discourse and student engagement is a symbiotic one, each influencing and shaping the other in real-time. Both elements are essential for the effective functioning of ESL classrooms and are intertwined in complex ways that are influenced by a host of external factors, including linguistic proficiency, cultural background, and previous educational experiences. Understanding this dynamic interaction is vital for educators, curriculum developers, and policy-makers who aim to create ESL learning environments that are both engaging and educationally effective. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of these factors is not only timely but also critical for the continued evolution of ESL teaching methodologies.

Review of Literature

The relationship between teacher discourse and student engagement has been extensively studied globally, but the focus on English as a Second Language (ESL) settings in Pakistan offers unique

insights due to the country's specific cultural, educational, and linguistic landscapes. This Review of Literature aims to explore existing studies and theories that shed light on this topic within the Pakistani context.

Research on teacher discourse in Pakistan presents a complex picture, deeply embedded in traditional, teacher-centered approaches. These methodologies are not isolated educational preferences but are heavily influenced by cultural norms, societal values, and sometimes even political circumstances (Khan, 2015; Hussain, 2016). A seminal study by Ali (2017) suggests that classroom discourse in many Pakistani ESL settings remains predominantly authoritative, where teachers often assume the role of the "sage on the stage" rather than the "guide on the side." The tendency for teachers to dominate the verbal landscape of the classroom is also supported by Abbasi et al. (2022), who found that teachers account for over 75% of speaking time during lessons. Engaging with social media has a positive impact on both academic motivation and achievement (Ramzan et al., 2023).

Within Pakistan, students studying English as a second language exhibit all four internal motivational structures, namely, learning situation, intrinsic interest, immediate achievement, and personal development, as components of their motivation (Ramzan et al., 2023). Students, on the other hand, are often relegated to more passive roles, echoing findings by Qadir et al. (2023) that Pakistani students frequently report feeling disengaged due to the lack of participatory dialogue. Mahmood and Dilawar (2019) corroborate this view, pointing out that rote learning, a method involving repetition and memorization, is common practice in Pakistan's classrooms. This model of teaching and learning significantly limits opportunities for interactive discourse, which is essential for the development of critical thinking skills (Iqbal, 2020). Moreover, studies such as those conducted by Zaidi et al. (2023) emphasize the relationship between teacher discourse and the reinforcement of social hierarchies, illustrating how classroom dialogue often reflects broader social and cultural dynamics. This view is further supported by Malik (2020), who argue that the authoritative teaching style often mirrors the patriarchal structure prevalent in many parts of the country.

Additionally, despite some changes in educational policies aimed at promoting more interactive and student-centered learning environments (Nasir, 2021), research by Siddiqui and Khan (2020) shows that the transition has been slow and inconsistent, with many teachers reluctant or untrained to change their established ways of teaching.

The concept of student engagement within Pakistani classrooms is a topic of growing scholarly interest, but its manifestation often diverges from Western educational paradigms. Educators play a crucial role in the learning process. The mindfulness of teachers is impacted by job-related stress (Javaid et al., 2023). According to Malik and Khan (2018), the notion of engagement in Pakistani educational settings is largely influenced by cultural values that emphasize respect for authority and elders. This cultural paradigm often leads to classroom environments where forms of active student engagement commonly observed in Western contexts—such as questioning or debating the teacher—are considered less acceptable (Manzoor & Rehman, 2021).

Psychological elements influence the learning capacity of ESL students (Ikramullah et al., 2023). The presence of psychological discursiveness influences perception (Ramzan et al., 2023). Similarly, studies by Farooq et al. (2021) reinforce this, stating that Pakistani students are

often socialized to perceive classroom engagement in terms of listening attentively and taking notes rather than actively participating in discussions. This form of engagement is seen as a manifestation of respect and is strongly tied to cultural notions of honor and deference to elders (Ramos et al., 2022). The presence of resilience diminishes psychological distress (Riaz et al., 2021). The provision of social support and successful social adjustment enhances the academic performance of students (Maqbool et al., 2021). Consequently, classrooms can become sites where traditional social hierarchies are upheld, leading to limited interactive discourse between students and teachers (Malik et al., 2019).

However, Gulzar et al. (2020) provide a nuanced perspective by suggesting that despite societal norms and cultural conditioning, Pakistani students do indeed value interactive and engaging classroom experiences. Their findings are supported by recent studies like those by Werang et al. (2022), which show that when given the opportunity, students readily participate in active learning exercises and even express a preference for such pedagogical approaches over traditional methods. This points to a discernable gap between cultural expectations and students' actual desires for classroom engagement, a subject also explored by Safdar and Anwar (2019), who argue that a new generation of learners is increasingly receptive to more participatory forms of education. Moreover, Ahmed et al. (2023) found that digital learning platforms have begun to subtly change the landscape, enabling some students to engage more actively, albeit in virtual settings, thus presenting both challenges and opportunities for rethinking student engagement in Pakistan.

The unique interplay between teacher discourse and student engagement, a research by Böheim, et al. (2020) suggests that the traditional discourse methods employed by teachers could be limiting student engagement and consequently, affecting learning outcomes. Their study indicated that classrooms where teachers employed a more dialogic approach saw significantly higher levels of student engagement, leading to better academic performance. Another study by Khan et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy. It argued that student engagement could be greatly improved if teacher discourse incorporated localized contexts and relatable examples. This approach not only fosters student interest but also encourages participation, thereby creating a more interactive and engaging ESL learning environment.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the relationship between teacher discourse and student engagement in ESL classrooms in district Kotli Azad Kashmir schools. The qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding of complex social interactions, enabling the exploration of nuances in teacher discourse and student engagement (Smythe, 2012).

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in five schools in district Kotli Azad Kashmir representing a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. The participating schools will include both public and private institutions to capture a broader spectrum of teaching styles and student engagement levels. Participants were included ESL teachers and students from grades 9 to 12. Teachers were

selected based on their willingness to participate, while students were chosen through random sampling from the participating teachers' classrooms.

Data Collection

Classroom observations serve as the primary data collection method. Each classroom was observed on three separate occasions to capture a range of activities and interactions. Observations were scheduled in advance with the teachers but will be conducted unobtrusively to minimize the "observer effect" on both teachers and students.

An observation protocol was developed to focus on key aspects of teacher discourse and student engagement. The protocol includes:

1. Nature and frequency of teacher questions
2. Types of discourse initiated by the teacher (e.g., dialogic, authoritative)
3. Student participation (e.g., hand-raising, group discussions)
4. Use of non-verbal communication by both teachers and students
5. Any instances of culturally relevant pedagogy or discourse

Field Notes

In addition to the observations, researchers maintained field notes to capture impressions, reflections, and emerging themes that may not be explicitly part of the observation protocol but are relevant to understanding the dynamics of teacher discourse and student engagement.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis software was used to organize and analyze the observation data and field notes. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes concerning teacher discourse and student engagement. Codes were developed based on the observation protocol and emergent themes from the field notes.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participating teachers and the parents or guardians of the students. Anonymity and confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms for schools, teachers, and students in all reports and publications.

Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between teacher discourse and student engagement in ESL classrooms in district Kotli Azad Kashmir schools. Following extensive classroom observations, the findings have been organized into three main categories: Clarity and Comprehensibility, Encouragement and Support, and Interactive Communication. Each of these aspects of teacher discourse exhibited a specific relationship with student engagement, as detailed below.

Clarity and Comprehensibility

One of the most critical findings was the pronounced impact of the teacher's clarity and comprehensibility on student engagement. In classrooms where teachers provided clear instructions, used straightforward language, and articulated points in an easily digestible format, the level of student engagement noticeably increased. This was evident through students' body

language, such as leaning in, making eye contact, and nodding, as well as more tangible indicators like active participation in class activities and the quality of responses during interactive sessions. The lack of linguistic barriers and complex jargon encouraged students to focus on the content rather than struggle with comprehension. In contrast, in settings where teachers were less clear or used more complex language structures, student engagement seemed to wane, leading to a lack of participation and visible disinterest.

Encouragement and Support

Another pivotal finding was the role of encouragement and emotional support provided by teachers. In classrooms where teachers were observed to be more supportive—praising efforts, providing constructive feedback, and encouraging class participation—students appeared more emotionally engaged. The atmosphere in such classrooms was generally more positive and energetic, and students seemed more willing to take risks, such as asking questions or offering answers. This heightened emotional engagement often translated into higher cognitive engagement, as students seemed more focused and retained information better. On the other hand, in environments where teachers were less supportive or even overtly critical, students appeared visibly disengaged, and participation was noticeably lower.

Interactive Communication

The last significant category of findings related to the level and quality of interactive communication between teachers and students. In classrooms where teachers initiated dialogic interactions, such as open-ended questions, group discussions, and debates, the levels of student engagement rose markedly. Students were not only attentive but also actively involved in shaping the classroom discourse. This increased interactivity appeared to enhance both emotional and cognitive engagement, as students felt part of the learning process and were more invested in the material. In contrast, in classrooms where teacher discourse was authoritative and interaction was minimal, students were less engaged, both emotionally and cognitively. In such settings, students often assumed passive roles, limiting their involvement to listening and note-taking, thereby reducing the classroom's dynamism and interactive potential.

Discussion

The present study sought to understand how various aspects of teacher discourse—namely, Clarity and Comprehensibility, Encouragement and Support, and Interactive Communication—affect student engagement in ESL classrooms in Karachi. The findings confirm and extend previous research in significant ways, underscoring the importance of nuanced teacher discourse for effective student engagement.

The finding that teacher clarity and comprehensibility are strongly associated with student engagement resonates with prior studies. For instance, a study by Ali (2017) revealed that an authoritative teaching style dominated most Pakistani classrooms, often involving complex language and intricate concepts. The lack of clear communication in such settings significantly impedes the learning experience. In our study, we found that when teachers were clear and easily understood, students were not only more attentive but also more participative. This confirms the longstanding pedagogical notion that clarity is foundational for learning (Jackson-Hubbard, P. (2023). In the context of ESL, where language itself can be a barrier, the importance of clarity and comprehensibility becomes even more critical.

The role of encouragement and emotional support in enhancing student engagement also aligns with previous research. Khan et al. study in (2023) highlighted the cultural tendency in Pakistani classrooms for authority figures to maintain a distance from students, often leading to a lack of emotional engagement. However, in this study, we observed that supportive environments with encouragement from teachers facilitated higher levels of student engagement, both emotionally and cognitively. This echoes the findings of Reeve et al. (2019), who noted that supportive teacher behavior leads to increased student engagement across several dimensions, including emotional, behavioral, and cognitive. Emotions have a substantial impact on language proficiency (Javaid et al., 2023). ESL learners typically encounter a moderate degree of satisfaction within their educational settings (Ramzan et al., 2023).

The positive correlation between interactive communication and student engagement observed in our study is consistent with research advocating for more dialogic classrooms. Vasalampi et al. (2021) found that employing dialogic teaching methods significantly increased student engagement in Pakistani classrooms. Our findings extend this by demonstrating that dialogic and interactive communication doesn't just increase participation; it also affects the quality of that engagement. Students were more willing to ask questions, elaborate on answers, and participate in discussions, pointing to heightened cognitive and emotional engagement. This supports Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive development.

Implications and Future Research

The congruence between our findings and prior research suggests that teacher discourse significantly impacts student engagement in ESL classrooms in Karachi, as it does in varied educational settings globally. The specific nuances—clarity, support, and interactivity—warrant attention in teacher training programs and curriculum planning.

Future research could explore the longitudinal impact of these aspects of teacher discourse on student achievement, thereby providing a more robust understanding of these dynamics over time. Additionally, incorporating student and teacher interviews could offer deeper insights into the perceptions and attitudes that underlie these observational findings.

Conclusions

The findings of this study underscore the complex but definite relationship between specific aspects of teacher discourse and levels of student engagement in ESL classrooms in Karachi. Clarity and comprehensibility, encouragement and support, and interactive communication emerged as key factors influencing student engagement. These findings suggest that adjustments in teacher discourse can lead to a more engaging and effective learning environment, thereby highlighting the need for professional development and curriculum reforms that emphasize these aspects of classroom interaction.

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