

Issues of Classroom Engagement in a Student-Centered English Classroom

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Abstract

Student engagement is crucial for academic success, motivation, and overall performance and achievements. Active learning requires students' engagement in their learning process through activities that lead them to think critically, collaborate with their peers, and apply knowledge in real-world scenarios. This descriptive phenomenological study investigated the issues related to student engagement in a student-centred English classroom and explored the effective ways to retain active engagement. Data were collected through unstructured interviews. The study revealed that curriculum structure, lack of quality classroom, repetitive textbook exercises, time allotted for the class, lack of teacher and student beliefs, uninterested topics, lack of constructive feedback, lack of coordination between students, students' anxiety, inefficiency in the use of technological tools, mixed ability students in the groups, teachers' demotivating actions, etc. are the issues that are creating problems in students' engagement. The study also revealed that some techniques, such as focusing on hands-on activities, strong school supervision, motivating teaching behaviour, integration of technology in pedagogy, use of easy, interesting and related content-oriented activities, teachers' positive emotions and beliefs, creating a positive, inclusive classroom atmosphere, perceived usefulness, peer influence, and encouragement, etc., are useful to address the engagement issues. This study is expected to support course designers, institutions, language teachers and learners who practice student-centred pedagogy in the classroom.

Key Words: Active engagement, demotivation, technology integration, student-centred pedagogy

Introduction

In the past decade, much research has focused on problems of teacher-centred and student-centred pedagogy, students' motivation and their attitude and aptitude. But Conner (2016) stated that one of the most important issues facing educators today is student engagement. Without engagement, students tend to not only withdraw emotionally but also cognitively from the learning process. Research on students' engagement shows that the success of learning largely depends on how much students actively engage themselves in the learning process. In this context, Mekki et al. (2022) point out that one crucial factor associated with students' poor language performance is

their disengagement in classroom activities. Similarly, Wang et al. (2020) maintain that classroom engagement and student success are positively correlated with classroom quality supported by emotional support from the teacher and instructional support, and one of the key elements influencing students' learning is their degree of classroom engagement. Student engagement is an essential part of the educational process, especially in the unique classroom environment of secondary schools (Metzger & Langley, 2020). Engaged students are more motivated, perform better academically, and have higher well-being than disengaged peers (Mduwile & Goswami, 2024). Likewise, Torto (2020) claims that there is a challenge of low reading, wrong usage of English vocabulary, poor spelling and poor writing skills, which can only be improved if students are actively engaged in the learning process. Student engagement is one of the requirements for active involvement of students in the learning process. It emphasizes the importance of motivation, active learning, and building a sense of community within the classroom (Barkley, 2010). This idea is supported by Brown and Lee (2015), who state that students must participate in the learning process in order to be more active and involved, which will increase their levels of accomplishment, motivation, and retention. Engaged students show higher critical thinking abilities, openness to diversity, higher-order moral reasoning, positive attitude towards literacy, as well as elevated psychological well-being (Brault-Labbé & Dubé, 2010; Pascarella et al., 2010). It means engagement leads to higher creativity

Student engagement refers to the energy and effort that students employ within their learning community (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). This means that student engagement is about the amount of time and effort that a student spends on academically related activities (De Villiers & Werner, 2016). Student engagement is a complex, multidimensional construct that encompasses academic and social aspects of student experiences (Evans et al., 2015). It has been defined as the affective, behavioral, and cognitive involvement of students in the learning process (Reeve, 2012). Shulman (2002) placed engagement at the foundation of his learning taxonomy: "Learning begins with student engagement" (p. 37). They define engagement as the frequency with which students participate in activities that represent effective educational practices and conceive of it as a pattern of involvement in a variety of activities and interactions both in and out of the classroom. Some students are highly engaged (i.e. paying attention or putting in effort in assignments), while others do not engage in learning activities at all (Biggs 2012). Considering the importance of student engagement for students' current and future success, fostering student engagement is essential (Quin 2017), and how teachers interact with students on a day-to-day basis could be influential.

Research Context

Students' engagement in an activity-based classroom is essential, without which the objective of teaching cannot be achieved. In my experience. I have seen that many teachers are teaching English, activating students using student-centered pedagogy, but students are not found to be engaged as required by the context of the classroom. Urias (2022) mentions that the lack of students' engagement in an activity-based English classroom is an issue that many English language teachers are facing these days but is not explored much in the context of Nepal. Various studies have looked at the issue of

student engagement in the classroom. There are several reasons as to why this issue persists. The same study also found that when a teacher was positive about the subjects they were teaching, students' attitudes were positively affected and that students felt more positively about the subjects they were learning. Wang et al. (2020) provided evidence that classroom engagement and student achievement are positively connected with classroom quality, supporting the notion that student perception of the teacher correlates with involvement. Engaging students, however, while simultaneously teaching a subject and maintaining classroom management, is a complex and challenging task. And there are different reasons why some students are more engaged and why some students are less engaged. This paper actually intends to explore the question, "What are the issues of students' engagement in an activity-centered classroom? The objective of the paper is to explore issues related to students' engagement in student-centered pedagogy in English classrooms at the secondary level in Nepal.

Literature Review

Student engagement in English language classrooms is necessary, as engaged students are more motivated, perform better academically, and have higher well-being than disengaged peers. Maintaining student engagement can be challenging in these classrooms, as students may become easily bored or distracted by external factors (Mduwile & Goswami, 2024). The study carried out by Barus and Fadlia (2022) also explored students' engagement in EFL classrooms and maintained that student engagement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is significantly influenced by different issues like teachers' support, class structure, task characteristics, and peer interactions. The study also suggested that to improve student engagement, teachers and schools should provide adequate support, create a conducive classroom environment, and design engaging tasks. Other widespread issues of student disengagement in classrooms include lack of resources and time (Urias, 2022). Classes in schools are 45 minutes long, meaning that more time-consuming activities must either be split into multiple days or cannot be completed if they are time-sensitive. It is also often difficult to split activities into multiple days since student attendance is also an issue at this school (Urias, 2022). Minalla (2023) claimed that EFL learners tend to rely heavily on their teachers for guidance and assistance, especially when engaging in communicative tasks. The study also emphasized the importance of encouraging and guiding learners to take more responsibility for their own learning to improve their engagement and performance in student-centered reading activities. Abdullah et al. (2012) stated that engagement between teachers and students is significant in the process of learning.

The relationship between student participation in the classroom and students' academic achievement is undeniable. There are four forms of student involvement in the classroom, namely full integration, participation in the circumstances, marginal interaction, and silent observation. However, these patterns of participation are not static at all times and in every place (Liu, 2001 as cited in Abdullah et al 2012). This is because there are students who may be actively participating in some discussion, but

may be passive or become silent in another discussion (Zainal Abidin, 2007 as cited in Abdullah et al., 2012). Similarly, Mugizi et al. (2021) explored the relationship between student-centred teaching methods and student engagement and investigated how different aspects of student-centred learning, such as active learning, contextual learning, motivation, and collaborative learning, positively impact students' behavioural, affective, and cognitive engagement.

Another reason is that students do not believe they can initiate or sustain the necessary effort required to complete a mandatory task; they actually doubt their abilities (Ford & Roby, 2013). The study further highlighted **project-based learning** and **inquiry-based learning** as particularly successful approaches. The study claimed that these methods improve critical thinking, enhance social skills, and improve questioning abilities that encourage students' engagement. A significant part of a lack of engagement in the classroom may be due to teacher attitudes and classroom environment (Denessen et al., 2015). Other classroom practices, such as textbook-based work, repetitive exercises, and memorisation of facts, have also been shown to have a negative impact on student engagement (Lyons, 2006). Furthermore, teachers may not be adequately prepared or skilled in areas regarding student academic and emotional support required to maintain student engagement (Dar, 2015). This view supports the idea that student engagement demands teachers' emotional support.

Raucau (2016) studied engagement with student-centred learning from the student perspectives, investigating student-perceived barriers and facilitators to engagement with student-centred teaching. Students' relationship with their teachers is another issue in students' engagement. Research shows that students who feel linked to and supported by their professors are more likely to be engaged in their studies (Mduwile & Goswami, 2024). Research has shown that students who have positive relationships with their peers are more likely to be engaged in their learning and have a sense of belonging in school. For example, a study by Wentzel (2003) found that students who had friends in their classes were more engaged in their lessons and had higher academic motivation. Furthermore, the school environment and culture can also impact student engagement. Research has shown that schools that have a positive and supportive climate, with clear expectations for behaviour and a focus on academic achievement, are more likely to have students who are engaged in their learning (Mduwile & Goswami, 2024). This means a positive environment is necessary for students' active engagement.

Student characteristics, the classroom environment, the curriculum, and teacher-student relationships are some of the variables that can affect student involvement (Jikri et al., 2023). The interaction between teachers and students is the most important factor in increasing student engagement to achieve good performance (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). One important duty of educators is to encourage student involvement. A teacher who is pleasant, sympathetic, and encouraging can encourage student participation and learning. On the other hand, a teacher who lacks enthusiasm or warmth may demotivate students and discourage them from taking part. Teachers can increase student engagement with a variety of instructional strategies, such as group projects, active learning, and technology integration. They can also provide constructive feedback, praise, and encouragement to help students stay motivated and on track. Student

characteristics, such as motivation, interest, and prior knowledge, can influence student engagement (Yu & Prince, 2022). Technology is another factor that can influence student engagement. Research has shown that students are more engaged when technology is integrated into their lessons meaningfully. For example, a study by Kay (2006) found that students who used computer-based simulations in their science classes were more engaged in their lessons and had higher levels of understanding and retention of the materials. Tools like social networking, knowledge organisation, text-based, and website creation tools are effective in promoting engagement (Bond et al., 2020). This idea clearly advocates

Components of Students' Engagement

Kinzie (2008) claims that student engagement has two key components: the first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success. The second is the ways the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities.” (cited in Barkley & Major, 2020). Student engagement as "students' includes six engagement scales: academic challenge, active learning, student and staff interactions, enriching educational and supportive learning environment and work integrated learning (Coates 2009). Likewise, Bovill (2014) outlines factors that influence student engagement at institutions that include teacher factors, school factors, student factors, family and community factors, and curriculum and resources factors.

Fredricks et al. (2004) distinguished between three types of student engagement: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. Conner (2016) breaks down behavioural engagement into three components: positive behaviour, participation in educational activities, and participation in school-related activities. Additionally, Fredricks et al. (2004) stated that students' reactions to their teachers, schools, and friends are referred to as emotional engagement, and it includes feelings of enjoyment and fulfilment from academic pursuits (Fredricks et al., 2004). Cognitive engagement refers to the psychological efforts made by students to tackle a challenging academic component. Zhang and Kim (2024) claimed four dimensions of student engagement, namely behavioural engagement, affective engagement, cognitive engagement and interactive engagement. Similarly, Reeve (2013) proposed the concept of agentic engagement emphasizing student-initiated, proactive and transactional types of engagement (cited in Zhang & Kim, 2024).

Methods of the Study

I chose a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of the teachers regarding classroom engagement issues. Qualitative descriptive studies offer a comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those events. A qualitative descriptive approach was used, as this is thought to be particularly useful through the provision of rich, straightforward and factual explanations for different perspectives that provide invaluable insight into the student experience (Sandelowski, 2000; Maxwell, 1992 as cited in Hennessy & Murphy, 2025). The descriptive phenomenological approach is connected to the real experiences of our participants and enables us to explore the social and cultural context in which teaching and learning take place (Webster & Metrova, 2007). In order to investigate the issues with students' engagement and the strategies to address them, I gathered information through semi-structured interviews. I purposefully selected four secondary-level English teachers (two male and two female) who employ student-centred pedagogy in teaching English in the classroom from four community schools in Rupandehi district, Nepal.

I selected teachers who have already gained 10 years of experience teaching English at the secondary level. To ensure the participants' confidentiality, I utilised their pseudonyms. Sundar, Rama, Rupesh and Shital were the pseudonyms created for my participants. I performed in-depth interviews with my participants frequently until I reached sufficient data for my study. Since it is the greatest and most efficient method to provide in-depth information on the topic the interviewer has planned while preserving open communication (Morris, 2015). Teachers were able to share their firsthand accounts of students' participation and engagement issues since the interviews were held in a relaxing and encouraging environment. I conducted interviews with every English teacher in Nepali to learn more about their experiences with issues of student engagement and possible strategies to address such issues. I also recorded the interviews on my smartphone with their permission. I translated the material from Nepali to English after listening to the recorded information several times. To produce common themes, the interview data were evaluated and grouped into different themes. Finally, data were interpreted and discussed using descriptive analysis and presented under four main headings.

Analysis and Findings

The study aimed to explore the issues of students' engagement and various strategies for enhancing student engagement in the classroom through active learning in secondary schools. Through the analysis of the data, four themes were identified: curriculum and course-related issues, activity-related issues, student-related issues and technology-related issues. The data were analyzed under these themes with interpretations linking to the available literature.

Curriculum and Course Related Issues

Uninteresting and irrelevant topics of the textbooks discourage students and negatively influence their engagement. The interview data indicated that the curriculum structure, syllabuses and textbooks influence students' engagement in the classroom. One of the participants expressed his frustration: *It is so difficult for me to retain students' engagement in the lesson, as some of the lessons are irrelevant. For example, there is an exercise in a grade nine English book, "interpreting figures," which seems to be irrelevant in English class* (Rupesh). He clearly indicated that irrelevant topics create difficulty in creating interest among the students, which results in disengagement of students. This idea is supported by Barkley (2010), who maintains that teachers attempt to engage students with a systematic examination of content, delivery, and grading and the relevancy of the topics. Fink (2003) proposes a new learning taxonomy to help teachers focus on the kind of deep, permanent learning that goes beyond information gathering. It consists of foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension.

Regarding the same issue, another participant replied: *students don't engage in the activities because the exercises in textbooks are not generally asked in the exam, and the evaluation system is more based on what students write in the exam rather than what they know or perform* (Rama). This view supports the idea that the evaluation system should focus on content coverage to increase engagement. In this context, Holmes (2017) maintains that a carefully designed curriculum that incorporates continuous assessment activities can greatly boost student engagement, which will improve the learning environment and raise student satisfaction levels. Another participant responded *that the fear that they will be negatively evaluated in the daily assessment is the reason behind their participation in whole-class discussions* (Sundar). This response of the teacher clearly indicates that assessment is a crucial issue for students' engagement.

Activity Related Issues

Engagement is more likely to develop when student-teacher relationships are strong (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). The teachers' design of activities and the selection of appropriate materials or tools have a major role to play in the engagement of students during the class activity. If the activity is designed well, and if materials are comfortable, simple and easy to use, it is more likely that students will complete the task while being fully engaged. One of the participants stated. *"Students engage if they find the task easy and simple and remain unengaged if the task is challenging and confusing. If teachers lecture more, the students seem passive and unengaged"* (Shital). This participant reveals that teachers should focus on student-friendly, simple activities and tasks. If Students feel free or get autonomy, they are more likely to engage themselves in classroom activities. This view is supported by Wenceslas et al. (2019), who state that the chief role of the teacher is to facilitate learning by creating easy and simple tasks so that learners engage using innovative strategies.

Furthermore, Nsenga and Andala (2022) claimed that the implementation of techniques such as role plays, games, inquiry-based, project-based, and task-based techniques influences the level of students' engagement. By contrast, the absence of learner-centred teaching techniques could negatively influence students' classroom engagement. In one of the interview questions, another participant claimed: *"When students feel that their teacher doesn't understand them and feel there is no good rapport, and if teachers lack adequate ideas about handling activities in the classroom, it leads to disengagement"* (Rupesh). This participant raises the question of teacher-student relationship and pedagogical expertise of the teacher for enhancing students' engagement.

In this context, Wenceslas et al. (2019) state that the level of teachers' pedagogical knowledge affects students' participation, collaboration and creativity as aspects of students' classroom engagement. This idea is in harmony with what Roucau (2016) mentions: some factors that influence disengagement include lack of clarity, unfamiliarity with the methods and content and the risk of obtaining lower grades. Another participant expresses a similar view as he states: *When students don't feel they have autonomy in their learning and have no good relationship with the peers and teachers, they aren't encouraged to engage in the activities, or they might feel less motivated* (Rama). This participant clearly articulates the idea that lack of autonomy and lack of student –student and student teacher relationships create demotivation for classroom engagement. Peer relationships are equally crucial to student engagement as teacher-student ties (Fayombo, 2014). Another participant focused on: *students engage in the way teachers engage. If teachers believe strongly that their students must engage, teachers facilitate and encourage their engagement.* This point of the participant focuses on positive teachers' beliefs about students' learning for enhancing students' engagement.

Student Related Issues

Based on the information available from the interview, as a researcher and as a teacher in English language teaching in the Nepalese context, it is clear that students suffer

from high levels of disengagement in language classes. Students need to be actively engaged for effective learning in the classroom. However, we find some issues related to students, as one of the participants claimed: *“Many students don’t have a strong desire to know more, ask questions and search for answers and lack motivation to explore, learn new things, acquire new knowledge, or seek relationships”* (Rama). Another participant stated, *“many students like to work individually. Some of them believe that working in pairs and groups is a kind of time-wasting”* (Rupesh). This means students don’t prefer to work in groups, which may be because of their emotions or age. This view is clearly articulated by Mustapha & Norliza (2010), who claim that various factors that are related to students’ disengagement might be their age, gender, and emotions. This view of the participant is quite relevant to Abdullah et al. (2012), who maintain that it is interesting to note that there are students who just sit quietly, just taking notes, listening to the lectures, using a laptop or pretending to read. Ahmad (2021) also maintained that one of the reasons for poor participation is students’ introversion, where individuals prefer doing things alone, or with a very small group of individuals they know very well.

Regarding the same concern, another participant reported: *Many students are not interested in showing initiative. Students who are less intimate with me don’t start or join classroom discussions unless they are asked to* (Sundar). Another participant quite confidently answered: *“To my surprise, some students bow down their heads thinking that I might ask them questions, during discussions prefer setting in the corners to taking part in classroom discussions”* (Shital). These views clearly indicate that students seem to be less interested in classroom discussions due to the lack of a strong relationship between teacher and students. This idea is supported by Hennessy and Murphy (2025), who stated, “positive interactions among peers, staff, the campus and institution at large, were all found to give rise to a sense of belonging in the community (p.196). Some students do not participate in class because they are introverts. They just do not like talking out loud and feel uncomfortable being the centre of attention. For an introvert, talking in class is a major point of anxiety. They do not feel confident in their understanding of the subject (Ahmad, 2021).

Regarding another query about why students are reluctant to participate in classroom activities and interactions, one participant stated: *“Some students seem to be disinterested to participate because they find the content difficult and don’t prepare for the level of difficulty they might encounter in the classroom”*. This view of the participant shows the possibility of encountering the difficulty level that students might face in classroom activities. In this regard, Hennessy and Murphy (2025) claim that students have trouble in their courses in their first year and expressed a general feeling that they lack preparation for the level of difficulty they encounter. In this context, Ahmad (2021) maintained that some students will not speak because they have nothing of value to contribute. This may occur due to a failure to complete the homework assignment, finding the textbook difficult to read, or having no context to relate the material to their own experience. These ideas clearly indicate that students need to be

well prepared for the possibility of difficulty level to participate actively in the classroom.

Technology Related Issues

Technology is one of the factors that influences student engagement. Students' access to technology is an issue, which may also impact their level of confidence and prior level of experience. Assuming that technology and the Internet can be accessed, the provision of technical support is necessary to ensure students do not get lost along the way due, for example, to anxiety about receiving lower grades as a result of technology issues (Mejia, 2016). Regarding this issue, one of the participants stated, *"Some of the students are not confident enough in using technology and hesitate to participate in classroom activities, especially when they are asked to present using PowerPoint in class"* (Sundar). The teacher further expressed that such students need technical support. This idea of the participant matches with what Lim (2004) and Salaber (2014) claimed providing thorough and clear explanations of how technology is to be used, including an emphasis on using ICT for self-directed learning, is also helpful, if not necessary, to ensure student engagement. Consideration should be given to allowing students a choice in which technologies are used (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Technology can eradicate issues of low technology confidence (Northey et al. 2018).

Conclusion

In English teaching practice, the issue of student engagement is a serious problem, especially in activity-based classrooms. The study reveals that there are teacher-related, student-related, curriculum-related, and technology-related engagement issues that need to be addressed for an effective teaching-learning process. Teachers should find a balance between the difficulty of language tasks and students' abilities, because students are willing to be engaged in activities that are challenging enough to evoke a sense of focus and concentration but not so difficult that it becomes overwhelming. Hence, interest and enthusiasm, along with suitable language tasks, can create a kind of flow of engagement. The study also concludes that course and curriculum should be interesting, and topics of the study should be relevant to the real-life situation of the students to enhance students' engagement. Similarly, students should be trained enough to use technology. The study also indicates that the teacher-student relationship is a factor in enhancing engagement. An effective strategy to promote student cognitive engagement is think-aloud. Readers make their thinking processes explicit by verbalising their thoughts. This can be valuable for helping develop reading comprehension skills and encouraging metacognition to become a more effective reader. Moreover, to foster interactive engagement, teachers should support students who share a common interest or passion to engage in collective learning. The study concludes that the actions of the teacher, like focusing on hands-on activities, strong school supervision, motivating teaching behaviour, integration of technology in pedagogy, use of easy, interesting and related content-oriented activities, teachers' positive emotions and beliefs, creating a positive, inclusive classroom atmosphere, perceived usefulness, peer influence, and encouragement, etc. are useful to address the engagement issues.

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