

Teaching English to Gen-Z Learners: Pedagogical Challenges and Technological Opportunities

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Abstract

The emergence of Generation Z learners has accelerated a pedagogical transition in English language teaching (ELT) in semi-urban Indian higher education. Born into a digital society, Gen Z students often expect immediacy, interactivity and personalisation in learning environments (Seemiller & Grace, 2022). Yet many classrooms continue to rely on traditional lecture-based methods and treat technology as a presentation aid rather than an integrated pedagogical mediator. To explore this mismatch, we conducted a mixed-methods study among 120 undergraduate students and 20 English teachers across semi-urban colleges in Telangana. Structured questionnaires (five-point Likert scales) measured students' engagement, learning preferences and perceived challenges, and teacher instruments captured instructional practices, assessment concerns and institutional support. Semi-structured interviews with teachers provided contextual insights. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively, and interview transcripts were thematically coded following Braun and Clarke's procedures. Results showed that a large majority of students perceived technology-enhanced tasks (e.g., video lessons, interactive presentations) as more engaging than lecture-based instruction (76% versus 68%), while teachers reported that technology supported interaction (85%) but posed challenges for assessment (65%) and classroom management (60%). The study concludes that technology use, by itself, does not ensure measurable language gains; therefore, our conclusions are limited to perceived engagement and reported pedagogical practices. These findings have implications for teacher professional development, classroom management and curriculum design in Indian multilingual higher-education contexts.

Keywords: Generation Z; Digital pedagogy; Learner-centred learning; ELT; Student engagement

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are experiencing a significant pedagogical transition driven by the growing presence of Generation Z (born circa 1997–2012) learners (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). These students have grown up immersed in mobile technologies, social media and on-demand information (GSI Teaching & Resource Centre, n.d.). Research on so-called “digital natives” cautions against deterministic assumptions, yet generational studies suggest that Gen Z learners value immediacy, interactivity and multimodal presentation formats (Seemiller & Grace, 2022). In the Indian higher-education context, English functions not only as a subject but also as a medium of instruction and a gateway to global participation. Therefore, English language teaching (ELT) must evolve from grammar-translation and lecture-driven approaches towards

communicative, learner-centred and task-based pedagogies (Seemiller & Grace, 2022).

OBJECTIVES & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study pursues three objectives: (a) to identify pedagogical challenges faced by English teachers when engaging Gen Z learners; (b) to examine technological opportunities that support learner engagement and communicative language practices; and (c) to analyse how pedagogical design and technology integration interact in current ELT practices. From these objectives, we formulated the following research questions:

1. **RQ1:** What pedagogical challenges do English teachers encounter when teaching Generation Z students in semi-urban Indian higher education?
2. **RQ2:** What technological tools and activities do Gen Z students and teachers perceive as most

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supportive of engagement and communicative learning?

3. **RQ3:** How does the alignment (or misalignment) between pedagogy and technology integration affect perceived engagement in ELT classrooms?

Problem Statement and Research Gap

Despite considerable investment in digital infrastructure, many higher-education ELT classrooms in India still rely on conventional teacher-centred practices (GSI Teaching & Resource Centre, n.d.). Technologies are often used merely for slide presentations rather than as mediators of communication and collaboration. This misalignment between learners' digital dispositions and pedagogical practices leads to reduced engagement, superficial participation and limited authentic language use. Previous literature has emphasised tool-centric approaches but has paid less attention to pedagogy-first integration of technology (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). This study addresses the gap by investigating both student and teacher perceptions and focusing on how instructional design mediates technology use.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Generation Z and digital literacies

Early digital native narratives portrayed younger cohorts as uniformly fluent in technology; later scholarship complicates this assumption by showing that digital competencies are unevenly distributed and shaped by access, schooling, and task demands. In technology-mediated ELT, this matters because learner comfort with devices does not automatically translate into the literacies required for academic reading, research-based writing, or sustained interaction in English. Accordingly, studies on Gen Z learners often report preferences for interactive, multimodal, and collaborative tasks, but also emphasise that engagement depends on the pedagogical design of activities rather than the mere presence of tools (Beitane, 2022; Chun, 2023; Stockwell, 2022).

At the same time, researchers caution that ubiquitous devices can increase cognitive load and distraction when classroom routines, attention management, and task sequencing are weak. These insights collectively support a key premise of this paper: digital literacies in ELT should be treated as **learned practices** that require explicit

modelling and norms, not as presumed generational traits (Dudeny & Hockly, 2023; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011).

Blended, flipped and mobile learning in ELT

Blended and flipped models combine face-to-face instruction with online components and can increase learner autonomy and exposure to authentic input when tasks are structured and interactive. Evidence from recent syntheses suggests that blended approaches can support engagement, and in some contexts, language proficiency, when the learning sequence is coherent, and learners receive clear guidance on what to do online and how it connects to classroom interaction (Kukulska-Hulme, 2021; White, 2021).

Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) extends learning beyond the classroom by leveraging smartphones and apps for micro-practice, collaboration, and timely feedback. However, the effectiveness of MALL depends on teacher scaffolding, careful task design, and classroom management strategies that limit off-task behaviour (Kessler, 2023; Zheng et al., 2022). Importantly, these approaches also require institutional supports such as connectivity, device access, and teacher training; without these, technology integration risks becoming superficial or disruptive (Motteram, 2013).

Teacher readiness and TPACK

Teacher readiness is central to technology integration because teachers translate tools into learning opportunities through task design, feedback routines, and assessment practices. Research indicates that when teachers treat technology as a pedagogical mediator rather than a presentation aid, they are more likely to design interactive lessons and coordinate content, pedagogy, and technology decisions (Cowie & Sakui, 2021; Tondeur et al., 2021). The Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework formalises this coordination as the intersection of content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and technological knowledge (Koehler & Mishra, 2009).

Crucially, TPACK is not a purely individual competency; it develops through sustained professional development, reflective practice, and contextual supports (Tondeur et al., 2021). In many

higher-education settings, including semi-urban institutions, teachers may have access to digital tools but limited training or incentives to redesign assessment and manage digitally mediated interaction (Pellerin, 2021; Tondeur et al., 2021). This gap helps explain why teachers may endorse technology in principle yet report constraints in practice, particularly around evaluating learning and maintaining participation norms in group tasks.

Social constructivism and collaborative learning

Sociocultural perspectives emphasise that language learning emerges through interaction, mediation, and participation in meaningful activities, with learning shaped by tools, peers, and instructional scaffolding. In this view, technology matters not as an “add-on” but as a mediational means that can enable collaboration, feedback, and extended discourse when aligned with clear learning goals (Lantolf & Thorne, 2021). Similarly, digital learning research in ELT highlights that collaboration (e.g., peer feedback, project work, group discussions) can be strengthened by digital platforms, but only if norms, roles, and accountability structures are made explicit (Reinders & White, 2021).

This theoretical framing is especially relevant for semi-urban settings where learners may be enthusiastic about tools but still require structured routines for academic interaction in English. When collaborative tasks are digitally mediated without explicit norms, teachers may experience increased off-task behaviour and difficulty monitoring participation and quality of output (Reinders & White, 2021).

Across these strands, the literature supports two interconnected propositions: (a) Gen Z learners often respond positively to multimodal, collaborative tasks, but engagement depends on task design and digital literacy support (Chun, 2023; Dudeney & Hockly, 2023), and (b) effective implementation depends on teacher readiness to integrate pedagogy, technology, and assessment practices (Koehler & Mishra, 2009; Tondeur et al., 2021).

Drawing on TPACK and sociocultural perspectives, this study treats technology as a pedagogical mediator rather than an end in itself (Hubbard, 2021; Lantolf & Thorne, 2021). Under this model,

learner engagement is expected when tools are used to structure interaction and support meaning-making, but implementation challenges are expected when teachers have insufficient support to redesign assessment and manage digitally mediated collaboration.

Therefore, we expect (i) students to report higher engagement with technology-supported, interactive tasks than with conventional lecture-heavy routines, and (ii) teachers to report that the main constraints lie less in access to tools and more in assessment, classroom management, and monitoring participation in technology-mediated group tasks, especially in semi-urban institutional contexts where infrastructure and training may be uneven (Motteram, 2013; Tondeur et al., 2021). These expectations directly inform the study’s research questions and the interpretation of item-level questionnaire responses and interview themes.

METHOD

We adopted a mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021), collecting quantitative and qualitative data concurrently and integrating the results during interpretation. This design enables triangulation by comparing numeric trends with contextualised insights and enhances validity by addressing the research questions from multiple perspectives.

Context and participants

The study was conducted at undergraduate colleges in the Nalgonda district of Telangana, representing semi-urban higher-education contexts where access to digital resources is improving yet uneven. A total of 120 undergraduate students and 20 English teachers participated. Students were purposively selected to represent Gen Z cohorts and were enrolled in undergraduate programmes where English serves as a medium of instruction. Teachers had at least three years of ELT experience and prior exposure to technology-enhanced instruction. Demographic details (e.g., age, discipline, linguistic background) were not systematically collected, which we acknowledge as a limitation.

Instruments

Questionnaires

Two structured questionnaires were developed, one for students and one for teachers. Each employed a five-point Likert scale (1=Strongly

Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree). The student questionnaire comprised items on engagement (e.g., “I participate actively when digital tools are used”); learning preferences (e.g., “I prefer tasks involving videos, presentations and online collaboration”); and perceived challenges (e.g., “I find it difficult to focus when using my smartphone in class”). The teacher questionnaire addressed instructional strategies (e.g., “I design tasks that require students to interact using digital tools”), pedagogical challenges (e.g., “It is difficult to monitor students’ off-task use of devices”) and institutional support. Content validity was established through expert review by two ELT scholars. Cronbach’s alpha for the overall scale was 0.82, indicating satisfactory internal consistency (Cohen et al., 2023).

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight teachers selected from the survey sample. Interviews explored perceptions of Gen Z learners, experiences with technology integration, assessment practices and classroom management. Sample prompts included: “Describe your most successful technology-enhanced lesson with Gen Z students,” and “What challenges do you face when assessing group projects completed online?” Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were conducted in person or via video conferencing platforms.

Data collection and ethics

Data were collected over an eight-week period. Student questionnaires were administered during class sessions, while teacher questionnaires and interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online. Prior to participation, all respondents received information sheets outlining the study’s objectives and voluntarily consented. Participants’ anonymity and confidentiality were assured, and pseudonyms were used in reporting. Ethical guidelines were upheld during the entire research process. Consent was acquired from all participants before collecting data.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (means, percentages and standard deviations) in order to profile engagement levels and teaching practices. Given the ordinal nature of Likert scales, medians were also inspected when appropriate. Qualitative interview data were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke’s six-phase procedure (familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report) (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings from both strands were integrated at the interpretation stage through narrative comparison across strands. Similarities and differences between student and teacher perspectives were examined, and qualitative themes were used to contextualise quantitative patterns. This integration enabled the generation of meta-inferences about how pedagogy and technology interact in semi-urban ELT contexts.

RESULTS

Student questionnaire

Descriptive statistics indicated that 76% of students agreed or strongly agreed that technology-enhanced English classes increased their engagement compared with traditional lectures. Seventy-one per cent favoured multimedia-supported tasks such as video-based lessons, interactive presentations and online collaboration. Sixty-eight per cent perceived lecture-based instruction as less effective in capturing their attention, whereas 14% expressed a continued preference for traditional methods, and 18% were neutral. Mean scores supported these observations (digital affinity: $M=4.12$, $SD=0.55$; preference for hybrid approach: $M=3.45$, $SD=0.72$). Table 1 presents item-by-item results, clarifying that percentages refer to separate questionnaire items and are not mutually exclusive. For a broader descriptive profile of student response clusters, see Table 2

Table 1. Student questionnaire items (N = 120) with counts and percentages.

Survey Item	Agree/Strongly Agree (n)	Percentage (%)
Increased engagement (Technology-enhanced)	91/120	76%
Preference for multimedia tasks	85/120	71%
Traditional lecture less effective	82/120	68%
Neutral responses	22/120	18%
Preference for conventional methods	17/120	14%

Table 2. Student cluster themes (N = 120) with means, standard deviations and interpretations.

Cluster	Theme	Mean (M)	Std. Dev (SD)	Interpretation
1	Academic Engagement	4.35	0.62	Very High
2	Multimodal Preferences	4.20	0.71	High
3	Collaboration	3.95	0.84	High
4	Challenges/Distractions	2.80	1.10	Moderate
5	Traditional vs. Tech	3.45	0.95	Neutral/Moderate

Teacher questionnaire

Teachers largely endorsed technology-enhanced instruction: 85 % reported higher student interaction during digital tasks. However, 65 % identified assessment as a major challenge, noting difficulties in evaluating individual contributions in

online group activities, and 60% cited classroom management issues such as off-task device use. Teachers rated interaction benefits highly ($M=4.50$, $SD=0.60$) but expressed concerns about assessment and management ($M=3.10$, $SD=0.88$). Table 3 summarises these findings.

Table 3. Teacher questionnaire items (N = 20) summarising counts and percentages.

Survey Item	Agree/ Strongly Agree (n)	Percentage (%)
Improved interaction & participation	17/20	85%
Assessment concerns	13/20	65%
Classroom management difficulties	12/20	60%

Qualitative Themes

Thematic analysis produced three overarching themes:

- **Pedagogy-first technology integration:** Teachers emphasised that digital tools must serve communicative and task-based objectives rather than replace pedagogy. When asked what made technology-enhanced lessons successful, teachers highlighted clear learning goals, time-bound tasks and scaffolding (Koehler & Mishra, 2009).
- **Classroom management and cognitive engagement:** Participants noted that students sometimes drift toward entertainment apps or multitasking. Teachers reported using monitoring software, group contracts and peer accountability to maintain focus (GSI Teaching & Resource Centre, n.d.)
- **Assessment and feedback:** Interviewees voiced concerns about assessing group work completed digitally and advocated for process-oriented assessment methods (e.g., reflective journals, peer assessment). Some teachers used automated writing evaluation tools but cautioned that these tools should complement rather than substitute human feedback (Hockly, 2019).

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings

Quantitative trends (high engagement with digital tasks, concerns about assessment and

management) were consistent with qualitative themes. For example, the 76% of students who reported increased engagement resonated with teacher observations of lively participation during collaborative digital tasks. Meanwhile, the 65 % of teachers who identified assessment challenges elaborated in interviews, which described difficulties in monitoring individual contributions and designing fair grading criteria. Collectively, the findings suggest that technology can enhance engagement when integrated into pedagogically sound, collaborative tasks, but it also amplifies management and assessment challenges.

DISCUSSION

Engagement and multimodality

The results affirm that Gen Z learners are attracted to multimodal, interactive and collaborative tasks (GSI Teaching & Resource Center, n.d.). The preference for video-based lessons, interactive presentations and online collaboration aligns with previous research on mobile and blended learning (Stockwell,2022; Kukulska-Hulme,2021). High engagement scores suggest that technology can provide scaffolding for communicative competence when integrated into task-based instruction (Kessler,2023). However, a minority of students still favoured traditional lectures, indicating that blended approaches remain necessary to accommodate diverse learning preferences (Bennett et al.,2008).

Teacher readiness & TPACK development

Although teachers recognised the value of digital tools, many struggled with assessment and classroom management. These challenges highlight the need for professional development that deepens TPACK and addresses assessment strategies for digital tasks (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). Programs could include designing rubrics for collaborative work, using analytics to track participation and establishing classroom norms for device use (Tondeur et al., 2021). Institutional support, access to stable internet, hardware and training, is essential.

Social constructivism & collaborative learning

The popularity of group projects and multimedia tasks underscores the social constructivist premise that learning is co-constructed through interaction (GSI Teaching & Resource Centre, n.d.). When teachers structured tasks within clear time frames and goals, students engaged collaboratively in ways that leveraged the Zone of Proximal Development (GSI Teaching & Resource Centre, n.d.). However, without clear guidance, digital collaboration sometimes devolved into off-task behaviour. This finding supports calls for explicit instruction in digital citizenship and peer-accountability structures (Reinders & White, 2021).

Implications

The study suggests several actionable implications. First, teacher education programmes should prioritise TPACK-aligned professional development, providing hands-on experience with digital tools and assessment strategies. Second, classroom management policies need to adapt to digital environments, including establishing norms for device use, employing monitoring software and cultivating peer accountability. Third, assessment practices should expand beyond summative testing to include process-oriented measures such as reflective journals, portfolios and peer evaluation. Finally, institutions must ensure equitable access to devices and connectivity and provide technical support, especially in semi-urban contexts (Pellerin, 2021).

LIMITATIONS & DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is limited by its purposive sample and cross-sectional design. Participants came from

semi-urban colleges in Telangana, and their experiences may not generalise to other regions or institutional contexts. The sample size (120 students and 20 teachers) restricts inferential analysis. Furthermore, we did not collect detailed demographic data (e.g., age, discipline, English proficiency), nor did we measure actual language outcomes; thus, conclusions are limited to perceptions of engagement and pedagogical practices. Longitudinal research could examine how sustained technology integration influences language development over time, and experimental designs could compare different instructional models. Future studies might also explore Gen Z learners' digital literacies and self-regulation strategies more deeply.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that technology-enhanced instruction can increase engagement among Gen Z learners when integrated through pedagogy-first design. Students reported higher engagement with multimodal tasks, while teachers observed improved interaction, yet faced assessment and management challenges. The study underscores that technology alone does not guarantee language improvement; rather, effective ELT depends on informed pedagogical strategies, collaborative tasks and supportive institutional infrastructure. Aligning digital tools with communicative goals and providing professional development will be essential for harnessing technology's potential in semi-urban Indian higher education.

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