

Promoting Learner Engagement in Rural English Classrooms: Challenges and Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Classroom engagement is a crucial factor influencing students' academic achievement and language learning outcomes. Despite its significance, language teachers often encounter several challenges that hinder students' active participation in the classroom. Creating a supportive learning environment can enhance learner involvement and facilitate effective language acquisition. This paper presents a small-scale study that explores the multifaceted challenges affecting classroom engagement among students of Classes IX and X in a rural setting. The study examines the factors that influence students' participation and involvement in language learning activities. The findings reveal that the lack of collaborative activities, insufficient feedback, and an unsupportive learning environment are among the major factors restricting learner engagement. Based on these findings, the paper offers pedagogical suggestions for promoting more meaningful and active learner engagement in English language classrooms.

Keywords: Learner engagement; Participation; Language learning; Pedagogical approaches

INTRODUCTION

Learner engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, and active participation that students exhibit in language classrooms. It encompasses the behavioural, emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions of engagement, which collectively contribute to student involvement and classroom performance. Research suggests that engaged students retain information more effectively and develop higher-order thinking skills, which increase their involvement in academic tasks and contribute to better academic performance and success.

In the context of language learning, learner engagement has emerged as an important area of focus in educational research. However, many language classrooms continue to face persistent challenges related to low learner engagement and classroom participation. These challenges often arise from factors such as mixed-level learners, instructional approaches, classroom environment, and teacher-centred practices.

In language classrooms, engagement plays a vital role in shaping students' interaction with teachers and peers. Since learner engagement can significantly influence learning outcomes, it is important to identify the major causes of

disengagement and implement effective strategies to address them. Furthermore, with the growing emphasis on learner-centred approaches, there is an increasing need to investigate the challenges associated with learner engagement in language classrooms, particularly in rural contexts.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- What are the most common barriers to learner engagement in language learning classrooms?
- Which dimensions of learner engagement (behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and social) most strongly influence classroom performance?
- What teaching strategies are most effective in promoting learner engagement in the classroom?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to explore the key barriers to learner engagement and examine strategies that can contribute to more inclusive, effective, and interactive teaching-learning practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section discusses the major contributions and limitations of previous studies related to different aspects of classroom engagement, which is considered an important factor influencing

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students' active participation, interest, and attention in the classroom. Although numerous studies have examined learner engagement in general educational and language learning contexts, relatively few studies have specifically focused on engagement challenges in language learning classrooms, particularly in rural settings. The following studies highlight the role of learner engagement in language classrooms and the challenges associated with promoting active participation.

Student Engagement Theory

In the field of second language acquisition, learner engagement has gained increasing attention as a key factor influencing language development. It refers to the **degree of students' active involvement in learning activities**, encompassing behavioural, emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions within the classroom (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

Halm (2015) emphasises the importance of understanding why some students experience difficulty in completing composition classes successfully and how language teachers can positively influence learner engagement, academic achievement, and classroom participation. The study involved eight native English-speaking students and adopted multiple methods of data collection. Participants took part in semi-structured interviews conducted at the beginning and end of the study, and classroom observations were carried out once a week throughout the research period. The findings highlight the significant role of teachers in fostering learner engagement and suggest that students who are actively engaged tend to learn more effectively, perform better academically, and enjoy the classroom experience.

Similarly, Carini et al. (2004), in their study "Student Engagement and Student Learning: Testing the Linkages", argue that student engagement is among the strongest predictors of academic learning and development. The study examined different forms of engagement in relation to learning outcomes measured through RAND tests, Graduate Record Examination (GRE) essay prompts, and college GPA. RAND researchers administered these assessments to 1,352 students across 14 four-year colleges and universities during the fall and spring semesters of 2002. Previous research had already established a positive relationship between learner engagement and outcomes such as critical thinking and academic achievement. However, the findings

of this study revealed the relationship between engagement and academic performance was not as strong as initially expected, although the results were more conclusive than those reported by Ewell (2002).

Multidimensional Model of Student Engagement

One of the most widely cited frameworks in engagement research is the **Multidimensional Model proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004)**, which conceptualises engagement as comprising **behavioural, emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions**. Behavioural engagement refers to students' observable participation in classroom activities, including attentiveness, effort, and persistence. Emotional engagement involves students' affective responses to learning, such as interest, enjoyment and anxiety. Social engagement refers to peer interaction, cooperation, and collaborative meaning-making. Cognitive engagement reflects learners' investment in understanding complex ideas, use of learning strategies, and willingness to exert effort in challenging tasks.

Lawson and Lawson (2013) define engagement as the active investment of energy in learning activities. Research in second language learning further highlights the multidimensional nature of engagement, demonstrating that engagement extends beyond observable behavioural participation to include cognitive processes, emotional responses and social interaction reflected in learners' attitudes, perceptions and classroom experiences (Baralt et al., 2016; Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Lambert et al., 2017).

Several studies suggest that behavioural and emotional engagement are particularly important in second language learning contexts, as learners' willingness to communicate, confidence, and attitudes directly influence participation and language use (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence have consistently been identified as barriers to learner engagement, often leading to reduced participation and limited opportunities for language practice.

Despite the growing body of research on learner engagement, there remains a need for **context-specific studies** that examine how engagement manifests in particular classroom settings and educational levels. Furthermore, many previous studies have relied on self-report measures or classroom observations independently, highlighting

the need for more triangulated approaches that combine multiple sources of data. Addressing these gaps can provide deeper insight into how instructional practices influence learner engagement across its behavioural, emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions.

METHODS

This study adopted a Convergent Mixed Methods Design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to examine the factors related to learner engagement and how disengagement contributes to low participation in language learning classrooms. The convergent design was selected to provide a balanced, in-depth, and comprehensive understanding of learner engagement through the simultaneous collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

The Locale and Participants

The study was conducted in four classrooms across two schools located in the rural areas of Hojai District, Assam. The sample included a total of 89 students (N=89; M=36, F=53) and three English language teachers from classes IX and X. The participants represented diverse linguistic backgrounds, including Assamese, Hindi, Karbi, Bengali, and Bodo.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected through a combination of classroom observations, student questionnaires, self-reports, picture-based tasks, and interactions with students.

- **Classroom Observations:** Classroom observations were conducted to capture a range of classroom activities, including group work, pair work, individual tasks, whole-class discussions, and direct instruction. Comprehensive field notes were maintained, focusing on different dimensions of learner engagement during these activities. Particular attention was given to understanding when, why, and how students participated actively and sought assistance from teachers and peers during instructional tasks.
- **Student Questionnaire:** The student questionnaire was designed to understand students' learning experiences with particular focus on learner engagement. The questionnaire aimed to gather students' perceptions regarding their level of participation in classroom discussions, learning activities, and collaborative tasks, as well as the challenges that affected their participation.

- **Self-Reports:** The self-report instrument was adapted from Measuring L2 Engagement: A Review of Issues and Applications (Zhou, Hiver & Al-Hoorie), a widely recognised framework for assessing second language (L2) engagement. This instrument was intended to explore students' perceptions of engagement in language classrooms across four dimensions: behavioural engagement (participation, attentiveness, and involvement in tasks), cognitive engagement (mental effort, strategy use, and investment in learning), emotional engagement (interest, enjoyment, feelings toward classroom activities), and social engagement (interaction with peers and teachers). The original statements from the L2 engagement framework were carefully reviewed and modified to suit the specific context of the language classroom. Items were selected and reworded to ensure clarity, reflect classroom realities, and maintain the core constructs of the original framework for theoretical consistency. For each dimension of engagement, five statements were administered, from which students could select one or more options they perceived as the most applicable to themselves. Based on their responses, cumulative scores were computed for each dimension of learner engagement.
- **Picture-based Task:** The picture-based task consisted of a sequence of pictures representing different stages of a story. The activity was administered in groups, during which students were initially encouraged to think through the story in their mother tongue and then describe the actions or events using simple English sentences. After constructing individual sentences, students collaboratively synthesised them into a short narrative in English based on the complete sequence.
- **Interaction with students:** Informal and guided interactions with students played a significant role in understanding their learning preferences, sources of motivation, and factors influencing classroom participation. These interactions aimed to explore what encouraged students to participate actively, which classroom activities they found engaging, and why some students felt hesitant, anxious or uncomfortable participating in classroom discussions and activities.

Data Analysis

The data collected through classroom observations, questionnaires, self-reports, picture-based tasks, and student interactions were analysed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The analysis involved identifying, interpreting and examining patterns and themes related to learner engagement and classroom participation.

Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, ethical consent was obtained from all the participants. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and ensuring the secure storage of all collected data.

FINDINGS

To address the first research question, “What are the most common barriers to learner engagement in language learning classrooms?”, data were gathered through student questionnaires and classroom observations.

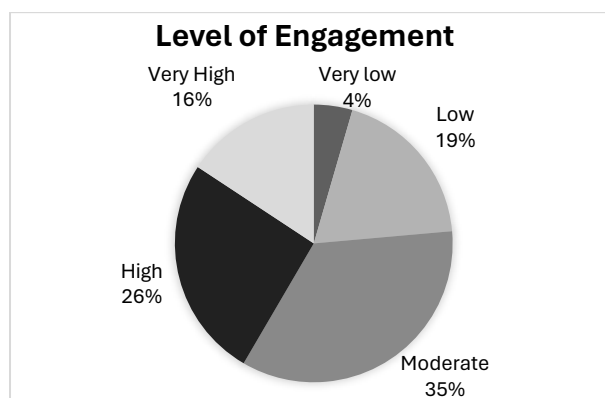


Figure 1. Students' Reported Levels of Classroom Engagement

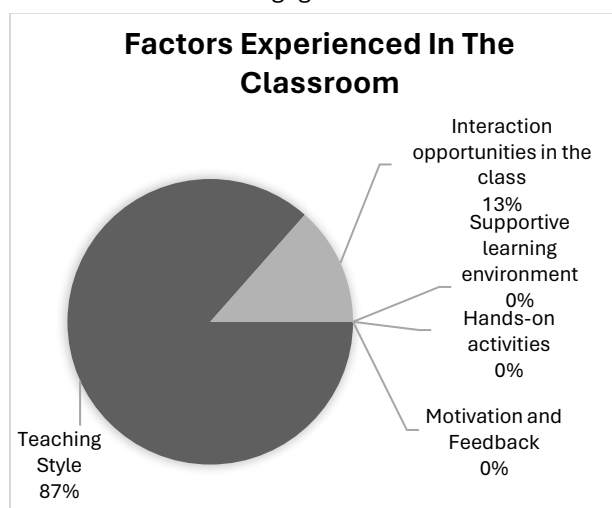


Figure 2. Factors Influencing Learner Engagement in Language Classrooms

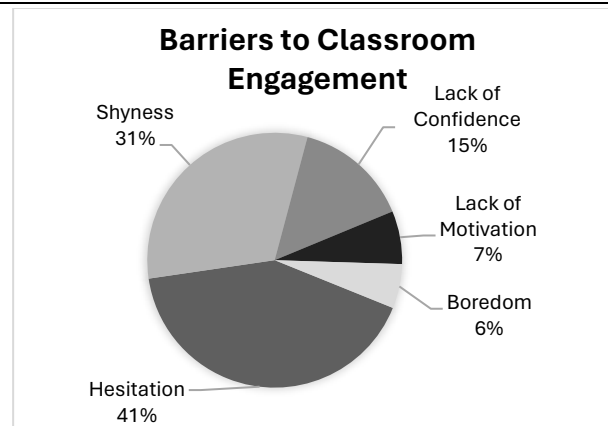


Figure 3. Major Barriers to Learner Participation in Classroom Activities

Key Findings from the Student Questionnaire:

- **Engagement Levels:** Figure 1 indicates that the largest group of respondents (31 out of 89 students) reported a moderate level of engagement. This suggests that most students participated in classroom activities to some extent, although their involvement was not always active or consistent.
- **Influential Factors:** Figure 2 reveals that teaching style emerged as the most influential factor affecting learner engagement. Interaction opportunities within the classroom were identified as comparatively less influential. Other factors listed in the questionnaire, such as supportive learning environment, motivation and feedback, and hands-on activities, received minimal responses and therefore did not emerge as major contributors in this dataset.
- **Barriers to Participation:** Figure 3 shows that hesitation was identified as the primary barrier to active classroom participation, as reported by 37 out of 89 respondents. Shyness emerged as the second most significant barrier, reported by 29 respondents. In addition, lack of confidence, low motivation, and boredom were identified as factors affecting learner participation among a smaller group of students.

Key findings from the Teachers' Strategies Affecting Classroom Interaction:

- **Instructional Practices:** Table 1 indicates that none of the three teachers consistently provided clear or differentiated instruction, and adaptations for diverse learner needs were minimal. Varied assessment methods were largely absent, and insufficient scaffolding was

provided for struggling learners. The classrooms also lacked pair work and group work activities, reflecting a predominantly teacher-centred instructional approach.

■ **Teaching Strategies:** Teachers 1 and 2 demonstrated limited efforts to encourage student participation, resulting in comparatively lower classroom interaction. In contrast, Teacher 3 actively encouraged participation, which contributed to greater learner involvement and a more interactive classroom environment.

■ **Student Engagement Patterns:** Table 2 reflects low levels of behavioural, social, emotional, and cognitive engagement among students. Frequent signs of boredom and disinterest were observed during classroom

activities, along with minimal evidence of higher-order thinking skills such as analysis and evaluation. Observed behaviours included fatigue, inattentiveness, and limited participation in classroom discussions. Opportunities for collaboration and peer interaction were also minimal.

To address the second research question, “Which dimensions of learner engagement (behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and social) most strongly influence classroom performance?”, findings from the self-reports and picture-based tasks provided valuable insights into students’ perceptions, including motivation, effort, confidence, and emotional responses, which were not always directly observable through classroom behaviour.

Table 1. Teachers’ Instructional Practices and Strategies Affecting Classroom Interaction

Classroom Observation (Teacher)	Teacher1	Teacher2	Teacher3
Clear/Differentiated Instructions	×	×	×
Varied assessment methods	×	×	×
Provides Feedback	×	×	✓
Encourages Students’ Participation	Not much	Not much	✓
Scaffolding for struggling students	×	×	×
Pair/group Work given	×	×	×

Table 2. Observed Patterns of Learner Engagement during Classroom Observation

Classroom Observation (Students)	Yes	No
Focussed on the task at hand (Behavioural)		×
Contributes to discussions or activities (Social)	Only a few	
Observable expressions of boredom/disinterested (Emotional)	✓	
Analyse, evaluate/apply concepts (Cognitive)		×
Opportunities to collaborate and learn (Social)		×
Seeks assistance/guidance from the teacher (Behavioural and emotional)	Only a few	

Key Findings from Self-Reports, Picture-based Task, and Student Interaction:

Table 3. Dimensions of Learner Engagement
Based on Self-Report Scores

Aspects of Engagement	Total Score
Behavioural Engagement	137
Emotional Engagement	115
Social Engagement	110
Cognitive Engagement	82

The self-report findings indicate that the behavioural and emotional dimensions of engagement (Table 3) appeared to have the strongest influence on students’ classroom participation and learning outcomes. The results suggest that when students lacked emotional support, interest, or motivation, their classroom involvement and academic progress were negatively affected. Similar patterns

were observed during the picture-based task conducted as part of the study.



Figure 4. Students Participating in Group Discussion during the Picture-Based Task

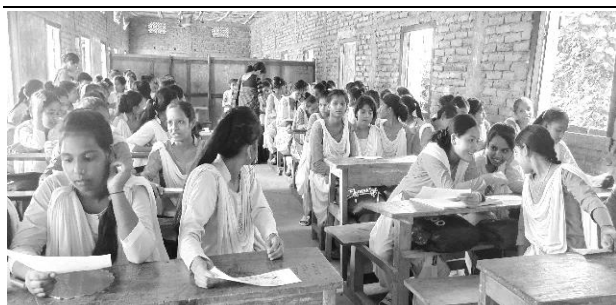


Figure 5. Teacher Providing Linguistic Scaffolding during the Activity



Figure 6. Students Engaging in Oral Participation during the Picture-Based Task



Figure 7. Collaborative Learner Interaction during the Picture-Based Activity

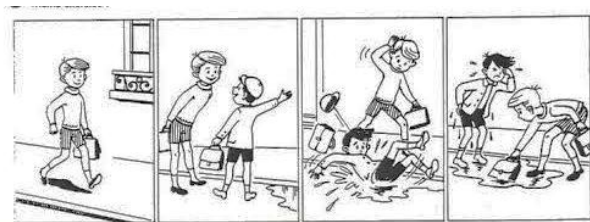


Figure 8. Teacher Scaffolding during the Picture-Based Task Activity

Figures 4 to 7 presented above illustrate students' participation during the picture-based activity. During the task, the teacher provided guidance through prompts, vocabulary assistance, and sentence starters, which helped students gain confidence and produce English sentences independently. Figure 4 shows students actively participating in group discussions, while Figure 5 highlights the teacher's role in providing linguistic scaffolding. This support encouraged voluntary oral

participation among students, as reflected in Figures 6 and 7. These observations demonstrate the teacher's role as a facilitator in transforming peer interaction into active classroom participation.

For example, Students initially described the picture in Assamese using sentences such as "The boy school'le goi ase," meaning "The boy is going to school" (Figure 4). The teacher then scaffolded students' learning by asking how the sentence could be expressed in English and modelling the correct sentence: "The boy is going to school." With this support, students attempted to describe the following pictures in English, producing sentences such as "The boy is going to school on the road with his friend," despite minor grammatical errors. The activity generated interest and positive emotional responses, which contributed to increased participation and engagement. These findings illustrate how teacher scaffolding and structured prompts can improve students' confidence and involvement in classroom activities.

Interactions with students further revealed that learners enjoyed group work and picture-based activities, which they found engaging and motivating. However, many students expressed hesitation in participating due to fear of making mistakes and possible embarrassment. Since students were not accustomed to collaborative learning activities, they initially felt uncomfortable working in groups. Many also struggled to frame sentences in English and lacked sufficient vocabulary, although they were able to express their ideas clearly in Assamese.

Additionally, the use of English was limited both inside and outside the classroom, which appeared to affect students' language development and confidence. Since most explanations and classroom instructions were delivered in Assamese, students often faced difficulty understanding lesson content presented in English. Collectively, these factors influenced learners' confidence, participation and overall engagement in English language learning.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study suggest that variations in learner engagement are closely associated with both instructional practices and students' emotional experiences within the classroom. Although many students demonstrated moderate levels of engagement, the presence of hesitation, shyness, and lack of confidence indicates that affective factors significantly influence classroom

participation. These findings highlight the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment in which students feel comfortable expressing their ideas without fear of making mistakes or being judged.

The classroom observation data further suggest that limited opportunities for interaction and collaborative learning may have contributed to lower participation. Since most classroom instruction is predominantly teacher-directed, students often remained passive recipients of information rather than active participants in the learning process. The absence of pair work, group activities, and interactive classroom tasks appeared to reduce opportunities for communication, peer learning, and collaborative meaning-making. Incorporating collaborative learning activities and interactive questioning strategies may therefore help enhance learner participation and classroom involvement.

The findings also indicate that instructional strategies play an important role in shaping learner engagement. Teacher 3, who actively encouraged participation and provided greater classroom support, demonstrated comparatively higher levels of student interaction and engagement than the other teachers observed in the study. This suggests that supportive teacher behaviour, encouragement, and scaffolding can positively influence learners' willingness to participate in classroom activities.

In addition, frequent signs of boredom and disinterest observed during classroom observations may reflect the limited use of varied and stimulating instructional approaches. Research on learner engagement suggests that activities involving discussion, problem-solving, higher-order thinking, and differentiated instruction are more effective in sustaining learners' attention and motivation. In contrast, teacher-centred instructional approaches may reduce opportunities for active participation and meaningful engagement.

The picture-based task conducted during the study further demonstrated the importance of scaffolding and collaborative learning in promoting learner engagement. Students showed greater confidence and willingness to participate when they were allowed to discuss ideas in groups and receive linguistic support from the teacher. The use of prompts, sentence starters, and vocabulary assistance helped students gradually move from expressing ideas in their mother tongue to constructing simple English sentences. These

findings suggest that scaffolded and visually supported tasks can reduce learners' anxiety and encourage active participation, particularly in multilingual rural classroom contexts.

The study also highlights the relationship between emotional engagement and classroom participation. Many students reported fear of making mistakes, embarrassment, and lack of confidence as barriers to participation. Such emotional barriers appeared to limit learners' willingness to communicate in English and participate actively in classroom activities. This finding supports previous research in second language learning, which emphasises the influence of affective factors such as confidence, motivation, and anxiety on learner engagement and language acquisition.

Overall, the findings underscore the importance of adopting learner-centred, interactive, and supportive teaching practices in rural English language classrooms. Strategies such as collaborative learning, scaffolding, differentiated instruction, regular feedback, and visually engaging tasks may help foster behavioural, emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of learner engagement. The study further suggests that meaningful learner engagement is not determined solely by students' abilities, but is also shaped by classroom environment, teacher support, and opportunities for active participation.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of the study suggest that collaborative learning activities, scaffolded instruction, and learner-centred teaching strategies can significantly enhance learner engagement in rural English language classrooms. Pair work, group discussions, picture-based activities, and interactive tasks encouraged greater participation and reduced learners' hesitation and anxiety.

The study also highlights the importance of supportive teacher behaviour, regular feedback, and positive reinforcement in creating an inclusive classroom environment. Providing opportunities for peer interaction and active participation may help improve learners' confidence, motivation, and overall classroom engagement.

Limitations

One limitation of the study is the relatively small sample size, which may not fully represent all rural English language classrooms. Since the study was conducted in only two schools within a specific rural

context, the findings may not be generalizable to other educational settings.

In addition, the study relied on classroom observations and self-reported responses, which may have been influenced by participants' perceptions and classroom behaviour during the period of observation. Due to the observer's paradox, teachers and students might have altered their behaviour because they were aware of being observed.

Another limitation is that the study focused primarily on classroom-based engagement and did not extensively examine external factors such as socio-economic conditions, parental support, access to learning resources, or institutional infrastructure, all of which may also influence learner engagement in rural contexts.

Despite these limitations, the study provides useful insights into the challenges and possibilities associated with promoting learner engagement in rural English language classrooms.

CONCLUSION

The present study explored learner engagement in rural English language classrooms through the lens of the Multidimensional Engagement Framework proposed by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), which conceptualises engagement as comprising behavioural, emotional, cognitive, and social components. By integrating data from student questionnaires, classroom observation, self-reports, picture-based tasks, and interactions with students, the study provides insight into the factors influencing learner participation and classroom engagement in rural multilingual contexts.

The findings indicate that behavioural and emotional dimensions of engagement appeared to have the strongest influence on classroom participation and learning outcomes. Emotional barriers such as hesitation, shyness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence were found to significantly affect learners' willingness to participate in classroom activities. At the same time, the study revealed that supportive teacher behaviour, collaborative learning opportunities, scaffolding, and interactive classroom tasks contributed positively to learner engagement.

The study also highlights the importance of creating supportive and learner-centred classroom environments in rural English language classrooms. Opportunities for peer interaction, regular

feedback, and visually supported activities were found to encourage greater participation and confidence among learners. Overall, the findings suggest that meaningful learner engagement is shaped not only by learners' abilities, but also by classroom practices, emotional support, and opportunities for active participation.

Despite certain limitations, the study contributes to the growing body of research on learner engagement in second language learning contexts, particularly in underrepresented rural classrooms. The findings may offer useful insights for teachers, researchers, and educators seeking to promote more inclusive, interactive, and engaging English language learning environments.

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