



A Generation in Classroom but Disconnected from Meaningful Learning: A Qualitative Study of Learning Gaps in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

The persistent learning gaps in public secondary schools of Pakistan present a critical challenge to educational development and inculcation of quality education. This study explores the rationale of students attending classrooms yet failing to engage meaningfully in learning. The research investigates the perspectives of principals, teachers and students aiming to identify factors contributing to this disconnect. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews from participants i.e. principals, teachers and students, alongside focus group discussions with students. The study examined instructional practices, curriculum and assessment, professional development, school culture, monitoring and principal autonomy. Findings reveal that teacher centered instruction, exam oriented curricula, limited professional autonomy and inadequate resources are major contributors to student disengagement. While some teachers implement student centered strategies, systemic and resource constraints limit their effectiveness. Students reported lack of motivation, passive classroom participation and limited opportunities for critical thinking. Principals acknowledge administrative burdens and insufficient authority to promote pedagogical innovations. The study concludes that bridging the learning gap requires holistic interventions including teacher capacity building, learner centered instruction, enhanced monitoring and supportive school cultures. These insights provide actionable guidance for policymakers, school leaders and educators to transform classrooms from spaces of attendance to environments fostering meaningful learning.

Keywords: Learning Gaps, Student Engagement, English Language Classroom Practices

Introduction

The quality of education has emerged as a central concern for policymakers, educators and researchers worldwide. Education is universally acknowledged as a cornerstone of social, economic and human development (Ahmad et al., 2024). English language education has become one of the most significant components of modern schooling across the world. In many developing countries, including Pakistan, English is viewed not only as a subject taught in schools but also as a gateway to higher education, employment opportunities, technological advancement and global communication. Governments, policymakers, educators and parents often associate English language proficiency with academic success and socioeconomic mobility.

As a result, English has gained a dominant position in educational systems, particularly in secondary and higher secondary education (Chaudhary et al., 2022). Despite this importance, a large number of students remain unable to communicate effectively in English even after spending several years in classrooms studying the language. This situation raises serious concerns regarding the effectiveness of English Language Teaching (ELT) practices and the quality of learning taking place in schools (Huang et al., 2022). In many classrooms, students are physically present and actively participating in routine educational activities, however, meaningful learning often remains absent. Learners memorize textbook content, grammatical rules, essays and examination oriented material without developing genuine language competence. This phenomenon reflects a growing disconnect between classroom instruction and authentic learning experiences. Students may pass examinations and progress to higher classes, yet they frequently struggle with basic communication skills such as speaking, listening, critical reading and meaningful writing in English. The gap between classroom participation and actual learning outcomes indicates the presence of deep rooted learning deficiencies within English language education (Imran et al., 2024). Meaningful learning refers to a process in which students actively connect new knowledge with prior understanding, engage critically with content and apply learning in real life contexts. In language education, meaningful learning involves the development of communicative competence, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and confidence in using language for authentic purposes. However, in many educational contexts, English language teaching remains heavily dependent on traditional teaching methods, rote memorization, grammar translation practices and teacher centered instruction. These approaches often limit student engagement, reduce opportunities for interaction and discourage active language use in classrooms (Jalilzadeh et al., 2023). One of the major factors contributing to learning gaps in English language teaching is the dominance of examination oriented education systems (Montakantiwong, A. 2024). Teachers frequently prioritize syllabus completion and preparation for board examinations rather than focusing on language acquisition and skill development. Consequently, classroom practices are shaped by the pressure to achieve high examination results rather than fostering meaningful understanding and communication abilities. Students become accustomed to memorizing model answers, translations and predefined essays instead of learning how to use English creatively and confidently. Such practices may help learners achieve short term academic success but fail to ensure long term language proficiency (Naeem et al., 2023). The issue becomes more critical in public sector schools where students often come from rural or economically disadvantaged communities. Learners have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, making schools the primary source of language learning. However, when classroom instruction fails to provide meaningful engagement and practical language experiences, students remain disconnected from the actual purpose of learning English (Nawaz et al., 2022). Students disconnect not only affects academic achievement but also influence their confidence, motivation and future educational opportunities. Learners may gradually develop anxiety, fear of making mistakes and negative attitudes toward English language teaching (Nawaz et al., 2023).

Research Questions

1. How do teachers, students and principals perceive the gap between classroom attendance and actual learning?
2. What instructional practices contribute to limited student engagement and learning?
3. What institutional and contextual factors hinder meaningful learning in public schools?



Conceptual Model

Literature Review

English language teaching (ELT) has become a central component of educational systems worldwide due to the growing importance of English as an international language of communication, education, science and employment (Ogunleye et al., 2024). The concept of meaningful learning was introduced by educational psychologist David Ausubel, who argued that learning becomes meaningful when new information is connected to prior knowledge and experiences (Park et al., 2024). In language education, meaningful learning involves active participation, critical thinking, communication, collaboration and the practical use of language in authentic contexts. Meaningful learning goes beyond memorization and encourages learners to develop deep understanding and long term retention of knowledge (Perry et al., 2023). Language learning should focus on communicative competence rather than the mere acquisition of grammatical rules. Dell Hymes introduced the concept of communicative competence, exploring the importance of using language effectively in social and cultural contexts. Similarly, communicative language teaching (CLT) promotes interaction, student participation, and real life communication as essential elements of language learning. Studies suggest that learners achieve better outcomes when classrooms encourage discussion, problem-solving, collaborative tasks and authentic language use (Ramesh et al., 2023). However, in many educational settings, meaningful learning remains limited due to teacher centered instruction and examination oriented practices. Students often memorize textbook content without understanding how language functions in real life situations. Such practices create superficial learning experiences that fail to develop students' confidence and communicative abilities (Rintaningrum, R. 2023). Studies conducted in Pakistani educational contexts reveal that students often experience inadequate exposure to communicative activities in classrooms. Rote memorization and translation based teaching methods contribute significantly to these gaps. Learners become dependent on memorized answers, grammar exercises and examination preparation rather than

developing practical language skills (Russell et al., 2022). The importance of creating learner centered classrooms where students feel respected, encouraged and actively involved in the learning process (Saleem et al., 2023). Group discussions, role plays, project based learning, peer collaboration and technology integration is commonly recommended strategies for increasing learner engagement and promoting meaningful learning experiences (Sharif et al., 2023).

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the phenomenon of students being physically present in classrooms but not meaningfully engaged in learning. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for an in depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of teaching and learning processes within their natural school contexts. The study seeks to capture the voices of key stakeholders and uncover underlying factors. The study employs a multiple case study design, focusing on five public secondary schools in District Hyderabad, Sindh. Each school represents a distinct case, enabling cross case analysis while preserving the contextual uniqueness of each institution. This design allows for rich, contextualized insights into instructional practices, leadership roles and student engagement patterns that contribute to the observed learning gap. These schools were selected to reflect typical public sector educational settings characterized by large class sizes, standardized curricula and examination-oriented instruction. The selected schools operate under the same administrative and curricular framework, making them suitable for comparative qualitative analysis. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who were directly involved in the teaching learning process and could provide rich, relevant information regarding classroom practices and learning experiences. Principals were selected based on their leadership roles and oversight of instructional practices. English subject teachers were chosen with regular classroom interaction. Students were selected to represent diverse academic performance levels to capture varied learning experiences. Principals and teachers participated in semi-structured interviews. Students participated in focus group discussions at each school. FGDs were used to explore students' classroom experiences, engagement levels, motivation, teaching methods, and perceived barriers to learning. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

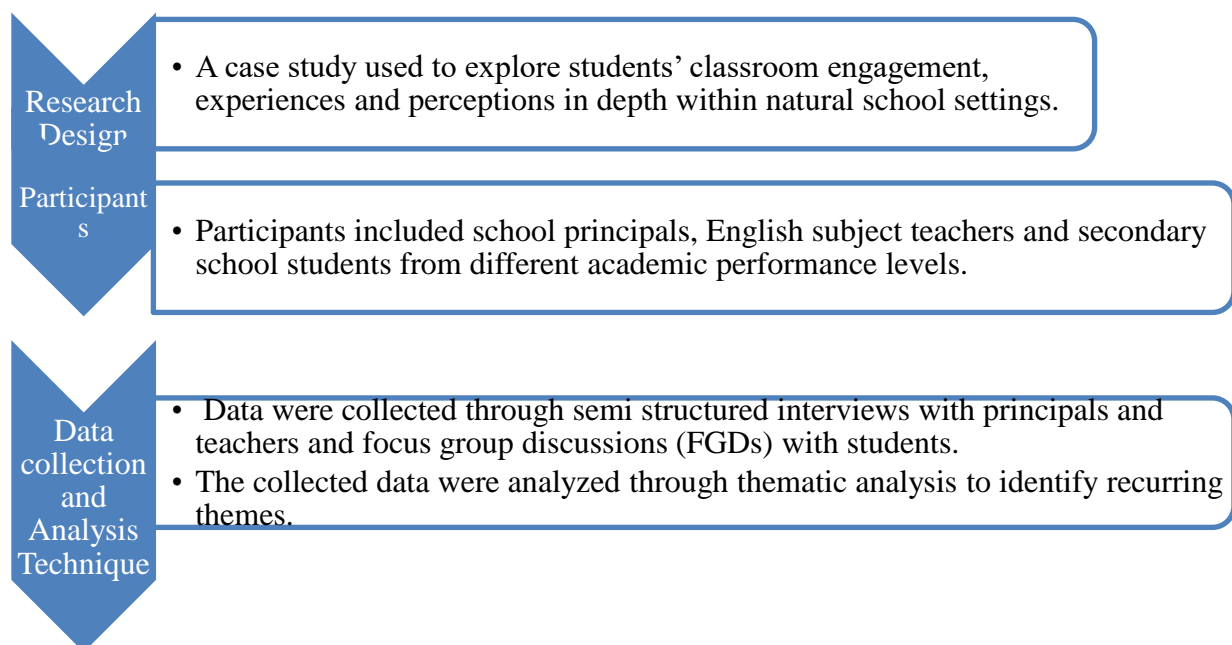


Figure 1: Research Design

Data Analysis

Principals Experiences

Domain 1: Instructional Leadership and Academic Supervision

We Manage Schools, Not Learning. Principals described instructional leadership as an expected responsibility that remains largely unrealized in practice. Although they recognized the importance of guiding teaching practices, their daily routines were dominated by administrative tasks.

One principal reflected: In theory, I am the instructional leader, but in reality, I am busy with files, reports, meetings and official correspondence.

Another principal explained: I go to classrooms only when there is a complaint or discipline issue. Regular academic observation is almost impossible. Principals expressed discomfort with evaluating pedagogy due to lack of training.

Domain 2: Perceptions of Student Learning and Engagement

Attendance is high, learning is low, Principals consistently differentiated between physical presence and cognitive engagement. They expressed concern that students appear compliant but disengaged. One principal noted: Students sit quietly and copy from the board. This silence is taken as discipline, but it is not learning.

Principals also linked disengagement to lack of intrinsic motivation: Students study only when exams are near. Learning has become seasonal.

Domain 3: Curriculum Implementation and Assessment Practices

The system rewards speed not understanding, Principals emphasized that curriculum delivery is rigid and exam driven, leaving little scope for meaningful learning.

One principal explained: Teachers are under pressure to finish the syllabus quickly. There is no space for discussion or exploration. Curriculum talks about skills and understanding, but exams test memory.

Domain 4: Institutional and Systemic Constraints

One principal shared: Managing a class of 60–70 students makes individual learning impossible. Every week there is a new directive from higher authorities and academic planning suffers.

Domain 5: Teacher Professional Development and Support

Principals expressed dissatisfaction with existing professional development structures. Trainings are conducted, but they are mostly lectures. Teachers sit and listen, just like students.

Another added: There is no follow-up. Once teachers return, they continue teaching the same way. Young teachers are more open to new methods, but senior teachers resist change.

Domain 6: School Culture, Vision and Learning Environment

Principals described school cultures that prioritize order, silence and exam results over inquiry and dialogue. A good class is considered one where students are silent, not one where they are thinking. Students are afraid of making mistakes. Fear kills curiosity.

Principals also acknowledged that student voice is largely absent: We rarely ask students how they learn or what they feel.

Table 1: Findings based on Principals Responses

Respondent	Key Themes	Findings
Principals	Instructional Leadership and Academic Supervision Student Learning	Principals view themselves as instructional leaders in theory but in practice are overwhelmed by administrative tasks. Classroom observation is rare and usually complaint driven. Lack of training limits pedagogical supervision. Students attend regularly but show low cognitive

and Engagement	engagement. Learning is surface level, rote based and exam driven. Motivation is mostly extrinsic and seasonal.
Curriculum and Assessment Practices	Curriculum implementation is rushed and exam focused. Understanding and skills development are secondary to memorization and syllabus completion.
Institutional Constraints	Large class sizes (60–70 students), administrative workload and frequent policy changes hinder academic planning and individualized attention.
Teacher Professional Development	Training programs are theoretical, lecture based and lack classroom follow up. Resistance to change exists among senior teachers.
School Culture and Learning Environment	Schools prioritize silence, order and exam results. Fear of mistakes reduces creativity and student voice is largely absent.

Teachers Responses

Domain 1: Instructional Practices

Teachers unanimously reported that teaching practices were dominated by teacher centered approaches. Their primary focus was completing the prescribed syllabus within strict timelines, which limited opportunities for interactive, participatory and experiential learning.

One teacher reflected: Most of the day is spent explaining chapters from the textbook. I write examples on the board, and students copy. There is very little discussion or critical thinking and opportunities to explore English as a language. Even if I plan group activities or ask students to debate or discuss, it rarely works. Students are used to listening passively and memorizing content. Managing large classes of 60–70 students makes it difficult to engage everyone meaningfully.

Domain 2: Perceptions of Student Learning and Engagement

Teachers consistently described that attendance does not equal learning, a mismatch between student presence and actual learning. While most students attend school regularly, they are often passive recipients of information rather than active learners.

One teacher remarked: Many students sit quietly and appear attentive, but when asked to explain a concept, they struggle. Silence is often mistaken for understanding.

Domain 3: Curriculum Implementation and Assessment Practices

Teachers mentioned that curriculum delivery and assessment structures shape both teaching strategies and student learning behaviors. The examination system reinforces rote learning and prioritizes content coverage over understanding.

One teacher explained: The syllabus is dense, and exams are the main focus. If I want to explore topics in depth, I risk falling behind. We often teach what will likely appear in exams rather than what students truly need to understand.

Domain 4: Institutional and Systemic Constraints

Teachers emphasized structural and systemic barriers that limit instructional effectiveness. Challenges included overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching materials, and administrative responsibilities.

One teacher said: In a class of 60 students, it is impossible to give individual attention or check each student understands.

Another teacher explained: We lack proper teaching aids and even basic resources, which makes learning more theoretical than practical.

Domain 5: Teacher Professional Development and Support

Teachers noted that “Training Exists, but It Rarely Changes Practice”. Professional development opportunities were limited and often not aligned with classroom realities. Most training was theoretical and lacked follow-up.

One teacher explained: We attend workshops or seminars, but they are lecture based. There is no practical guidance on how to apply strategies in real classrooms. After training, we are expected to change teaching, but no one checks whether the methods are implemented or effective.

Domain 6: School Culture, Vision and Learning Environment

Teachers described school culture as emphasizing order, obedience and examination performance rather than creativity, inquiry, or deep learning. Students are afraid to make mistakes. Fear discourages questioning and curiosity. Success is defined by exam results rather than understanding.

Table 2: Findings based on Teachers Responses

Respondent	Key Themes	Findings
Teachers	Teacher centered instruction, syllabus completion pressure	Teaching is dominated by lecture and textbook explanation. Interactive learning is limited due to large classes and exam pressure. Students mostly copy notes with minimal discussion and critical thinking.
	Passive learning, silence and students engagement	Teachers observe that students appear attentive but lack conceptual understanding. Silence is often misinterpreted as learning.
	Rote learning, exam driven teaching	Dense syllabus and exam pressure force teachers to prioritize content coverage over deep learning. Teaching aligns with likely exam content.
	Overcrowding and lack of resources	Large class sizes, lack of teaching aids and administrative duties significantly reduce teaching effectiveness and individualized support.
	Training exists but not practical	Professional development is theoretical; lecture based, and lacks follow up or classroom implementation support.
	Compliance culture, fear of mistakes	School environment discourages questioning and creativity. Success is measured through exam performance rather than understanding.

Students Responses and Focused Group Discussion

Domain 1: Learning Experiences and Classroom Participation

Students consistently described we Are in Class, but Learning Feels Minimal. Classroom learning is largely passive and dominated by teacher centered instruction. Most of their time was spent copying notes from the board, listening to lectures or memorizing content for exams. In most classes, the teacher just explains the chapter while we copy everything in our notebooks. Sometimes I don't understand, but I still write it because exams are near. Even if we want to answer or share my ideas, I stay quiet. Teachers finish the chapter quickly and we cannot speak much.

Domain 2: Motivation and Engagement

Students revealed that we come to school but learning is not always engaging. Motivation to learn is primarily extrinsic focused on passing exams rather than intrinsic curiosity or interest in knowledge.

One student stated: *I study only for the exams. If exams were not there, I would probably not pay much attention in class. Some topics are hard to understand, so I just memorize them. Understanding deeply takes time we don't have.*

Domain 3: Curriculum and Assessment Perception

Students indicated that the curriculum and assessment system shape their learning strategies. Memorization dominates because exams reward it, leaving little space for understanding or application. We are told to focus only on what the teacher says will be in the exam. Even if we like other parts of the chapter, they are not important for marks.

Domain 4: Classroom Environment and Teacher Interaction

Students described we are afraid to speak or make mistakes. Classroom environments are rigid and hierarchical, where questioning or making mistakes is discouraged.

One student shared: *If I give a wrong answer, the teacher scolds me or laughs. So, I just stay quiet and copy what others do. Some teachers speak very fast and do not check if we understand. Even if we want to ask, we cannot keep up.*

Domain 5: Learning Resources and Support

Students pointed out the scarcity of learning materials and resources as a major barrier to effective learning. The shortage of English language learning resources in schools creates difficulties in improving reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. Many students reported limited access to libraries, internet facilities, audio visual materials and language practice activities, which affects their interest, confidence and academic performance in English subject classroom.

Table 3: Findings based on Students Responses

Respondent	Key Themes	Findings
Students	Passive classroom participation	Students experience classrooms as teacher dominated spaces. Learning mainly involves copying notes and memorization with limited participation and understanding.
	Extrinsic motivation	Learning motivation is primarily exam oriented. Intrinsic interest in subjects is low and understanding is often sacrificed for memorization.
	Memorization culture	Students focus only on exam relevant content. Curriculum is perceived as exam bound, limiting curiosity and deeper exploration.
	Fear based participation	Students are reluctant to speak due to fear of mistakes, criticism or embarrassment. Teacher student interaction is hierarchical and rigid.
	Resource scarcity	Limited access to libraries, ICT tools and language resources restricts skill development, particularly in English language learning.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the persistent learning gap in public secondary schools is not the result of student absenteeism but the outcome of multiple intertwined factors operating across systemic, instructional and classroom levels. Despite high levels of school attendance, students remain disengaged and struggle with meaningful learning, a phenomenon consistent

with global patterns in low and middle income educational contexts where presence in class does not automatically translate into learning outcomes. This study's shows the dominance of teacher centered instruction which prioritizes syllabus coverage and examination preparation over student interaction and cognitive engagement. Principals and teachers confirmed that classrooms are largely structured for information transmission rather than active engagement, which students experienced as passive and repetitive. This study unraveled how rote and teacher dominated practices correlate with low learner engagement and limited understanding. Teacher discourse impacts learner engagement and motivation, showing that even within the same instructional setting, the quality of teacher talk, interaction patterns, questioning strategies, feedback, plays a significant role in sustaining student motivation and participation. Principals in this study articulated that systemic constraints including administrative overload, limited resources and heavy syllabus requirements restrict their capacity to provide substantive instructional leadership. Teachers described training as theoretical and lacking follow up, teacher education programs need to integrate practical, context responsive training models that extend beyond infrequent workshops.

Conclusion

Based on this study, it was concluded that the persistent learning gap is multidimensional, arising from systemic, instructional, classroom-level and student related factors. First, instructional practices were found to be predominantly teacher centered and lecture based, prioritizing syllabus coverage and exam preparation over interactive and participatory learning. Both teachers and students reported limited opportunities for discussion, group work, or inquiry, which constrains students' cognitive engagement and critical thinking. Second, curriculum and assessment practices reinforce rote learning and memorization. The rigid syllabus and exam oriented evaluation system compel teachers to focus on recall based teaching and students' motivation is largely extrinsic, aimed at obtaining grades rather than developing deep understanding. Similarly, institutional and systemic constraints, including overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources and administrative burdens on principals and teachers, further limit instructional innovation and individualized student support. Principals' limited autonomy and administrative overload restrict their capacity to supervise teaching quality or implement school wide learning improvements effectively. Moreover, teacher professional development exists but is largely theoretical, inadequately contextualized and poorly supported with follow up mechanisms. Consequently, teachers revert to traditional instructional methods that are familiar but less effective in fostering meaningful learning. School culture and learning environment were found to prioritize compliance, discipline and exam performance over creativity, inquiry and construction of learning by student. Fear of mistakes, hierarchical teacher student relationships and lack of supportive classroom culture discourage students from participating actively and asking questions independently.

Recommendations

1. Shift to concept based, competency driven curricula that prioritize understanding over memorization.
2. Integrate formative and performance based assessments to encourage active learning and critical thinking.
3. Empower principals with instructional leadership authority to monitor teaching quality and support teachers effectively.

4. Provide training in mentorship, supervision and school based innovation. Encourage learner centered instructional strategies, including group work, role play, project based learning and inquiry activities.
5. Promote a participatory and student centered classroom culture that values questions, exploration and creativity. Reduce fear of mistakes and encourage active engagement through positive reinforcement.

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