



English Language Instruction in Senior High School: Pedagogical Practices and Learner Engagement at Eastern Potia National High School

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Abstract

Learner engagement is a critical predictor of language achievement, yet sustaining engagement in Senior High School (SHS) English classes remains challenging in many rural public school contexts. This study examined English language instructional practices and learner engagement at Eastern Potia National High School, focusing on how teachers design instruction and how learners participate behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. Using a qualitative case study design with classroom observations, semi-structured teacher interviews, focus-group discussions with learners, and document analysis, the study identified instructional patterns and contextual constraints shaping engagement. Thematic analysis yielded two major domains: (1) engagement barriers, including varying proficiency levels, language anxiety, limited exposure to English beyond school, and resource constraints; and (2) pedagogical practices that foster engagement, including interactive routines, structured scaffolding, contextualized tasks, feedback-rich formative assessment, and supportive classroom discourse. Findings show that learner engagement increases when instruction is purposeful, scaffolded, and culturally/contextually relevant, and when teachers establish emotionally safe participation structures. The study recommends sustained professional development on engagement-oriented pedagogy, differentiation, and formative assessment, alongside school-level support for literacy resources and collaborative teacher learning.

Keywords: English language instruction, Senior High School, learner engagement, pedagogy, rural public school

Introduction

English language instruction in Senior High School is expected to develop learners' academic literacy, communication competence, and critical thinking for higher education and employment. In the Philippine K–12 context, SHS English-related subjects (e.g., Oral Communication, Reading and Writing, 21st Century Literature, and specialized communication subjects) require learners to comprehend complex texts, produce academic writing, and participate in formal and informal oral discourse. However, English learning

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outcomes vary widely across contexts, with rural public schools often encountering compounding challenges such as limited instructional resources, uneven learner proficiency, and fewer opportunities for authentic English use outside the classroom.

Learner engagement commonly framed as behavioral participation, emotional investment, and cognitive effort is strongly associated with academic achievement and persistence (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). In language education, engagement is shaped not only by learner motivation but also by classroom interaction patterns, opportunities for meaningful language use, and supportive feedback (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). When learners fear making errors, feel linguistically inadequate, or perceive tasks as irrelevant, engagement declines and language practice becomes minimal reducing the chances for development of proficiency and academic literacy.

Pedagogical practices can mitigate these barriers. Communicative language teaching highlights interaction and purposeful language use; task-based language teaching emphasizes meaning-focused tasks; and scaffolded instruction supports learners in performing beyond their current independent level (Ellis, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). In multilingual classrooms, strategic use of learners' first language(s) can support comprehension and participation, especially when learners are still developing English academic language (Cummins, 2000; García & Wei, 2014). Yet, in many public school settings, teachers must implement these approaches under constraints such as large classes, time limits, and limited access to materials.

This study examined English language instruction and learner engagement in SHS at Eastern Potia National High School. By documenting pedagogical practices and learner engagement patterns in a rural public school context, the study contributes context-sensitive evidence to strengthen SHS English instruction.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to:

1. Identify the major learner engagement challenges in SHS English language classes at Eastern Potia National High School.
2. Examine pedagogical practices used by English teachers to support behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement.
3. Describe how contextual factors in a rural public school shape English instruction and learner engagement.

Methodology

Research Design

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A qualitative case study design was employed to develop an in-depth understanding of instructional practices and engagement in a specific school context. This approach enabled detailed description of classroom processes, teacher decision-making, and learners' engagement experiences.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at Eastern Potia National High School, a rural public secondary school offering SHS. Participants included five SHS English teachers handling core English-related subjects and two focus groups of SHS learners (8–10 learners per group) representing different strands. Purposive sampling was used to include teachers with direct SHS English teaching assignments and learners who could describe engagement experiences across tasks and classroom routines.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through (a) semi-structured interviews with teachers focusing on instructional planning, engagement challenges, and strategies; (b) classroom observations documenting interaction patterns, task structures, language use, and participation; (c) learner focus-group discussions examining motivation, confidence, and participation; and (d) document analysis of lesson plans, modules, rubrics, and sample outputs to triangulate evidence of pedagogical practices.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts and observation notes were coded, clustered into categories, and refined into themes that captured engagement barriers and engagement-supportive pedagogy. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents; member-checking of summarized interpretations with teacher participants; and maintenance of an audit trail of coding decisions.

Results and Findings

Analysis yielded two major thematic domains: **(1) learner engagement challenges in SHS English** and **(2) pedagogical practices that foster engagement**.

Domain 1: Learner Engagement Challenges in Senior High School English

Theme 1: Uneven English Proficiency and Limited Academic Literacy

Teachers consistently reported wide variation in learners' English proficiency, including weaknesses in vocabulary, grammar control, reading comprehension, and writing organization. This unevenness affected the pacing of instruction and learners' willingness to participate publicly.

Participant responses:

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“May mga bata na kaya mag-explain in English, pero marami rin na basic sentence pa lang, hirap na.” (Teacher 2)

“Kapag writing na, ang problema nila ay how to start at paano i-organize.” (Teacher 5)

This suggests that engagement is constrained by skills barriers: when tasks exceed learners’ current proficiency, learners withdraw rather than risk error. Research indicates that academic language proficiency develops over time and requires sustained scaffolding, especially in cognitively demanding tasks like academic writing and text-based discussion (Cummins, 2000).

Theme 2: Language Anxiety and Fear of Making Mistakes

Teachers and learners described anxiety during oral participation—particularly recitations, speeches, and group reporting due to fear of correction, peer judgment, and pronunciation concerns.

Participant responses:

“Natatahimik sila kapag English speaking na. Takot matawa-an.” (Teacher 1)

“Sir/Ma’am, minsan alam namin sagot pero nahihiya kami mag-English.” (Learner FGD)

This reflects foreign language anxiety, which can reduce willingness to communicate and limit opportunities for practice (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre, 2007). In classrooms where participation structures are high-stakes or error correction is public, learners may adopt avoidance strategies.

Theme 3: Limited Exposure to English Beyond the Classroom

Learners reported that English is rarely used at home and in daily community interactions. Teachers noted that limited exposure affects vocabulary growth and confidence in spontaneous speech.

Participant responses:

“Sa bahay, hindi kami nag-e-English. Sa school lang talaga.” (Learner FGD)

“Kapag walang practice outside, bumabalik sila sa silence kapag oral tasks.” (Teacher 3)

Language acquisition benefits from meaningful input and opportunities for output (Swain, 1995). When exposure is limited, classroom time becomes the primary site for language practice, increasing the importance of interaction-rich lessons.

Theme 4: Resource and Time Constraints in Rural Public School Contexts



Teachers reported reliance on printed modules, limited access to multimedia, and time pressure due to curriculum coverage and large class sizes.

Participant responses:

“Gusto namin ng more activities, pero kulang sa oras at minsan sa materials.” (Teacher 4)

“Hindi lagi kaya ang video or online materials.” (Teacher 2)

Instructional constraints shape the feasibility of communicative and task-based pedagogy. Resource limitations often reduce variety of texts and authentic materials, potentially lowering interest and cognitive engagement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Domain 2: Pedagogical Practices that Foster Learner Engagement

Theme 5: Structured Interaction Routines Promote Behavioral Engagement

Teachers used consistent routines warm-up prompts, pair/share, group roles, and short oral drills to normalize participation and reduce performance pressure.

Participant responses:

“Pag may partner discussion muna, mas maraming sumasali kaysa biglang recitation.” (Teacher 1)

“Mas okay pag by pair muna, then saka sharing.” (Learner FGD)

Predictable interaction structures increase participation by lowering social risk and making expectations clear supporting behavioral engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Gradual participation structures can increase learners’ willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, 2007).

Theme 6: Scaffolding and Differentiation Support Cognitive Engagement

Teachers broke tasks into steps (model–guided practice–independent output), provided sentence starters, vocabulary banks, graphic organizers, and tiered tasks for mixed proficiency levels.

Participant responses:

“Kapag may guide questions at halimbawa, mas kaya nilang magsulat.” (Teacher 5)

“Yung template, malaking tulong. Alam na namin paano simulan.” (Learner FGD)



Scaffolding aligns with socio-cultural learning theory and supports learners within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Differentiated supports help learners sustain cognitive effort rather than disengage when tasks feel too difficult (Tomlinson, 2014).

Theme 7: Contextualized and Culturally Relevant Tasks Increase Emotional Engagement

Teachers contextualized speaking and writing tasks around local realities (community issues, livelihoods, school events, local narratives) to make language use meaningful.

Participant responses:

“Mas nagiging alive sila kapag topic ay related sa community nila.” (Teacher 3)

“Mas madali mag-share kapag tungkol sa experiences namin.” (Learner FGD)

Relevance enhances emotional engagement and motivation. Culturally responsive pedagogy highlights connecting instruction to learners’ lived experiences to improve participation and meaning-making (Gay, 2018).

Theme 8: Feedback-Rich Formative Assessment Strengthens Engagement

Teachers used draft-and-revise cycles, rubric-guided feedback, conferences, and peer review to improve writing and speaking. Many emphasized progress monitoring rather than one-shot grading.

Participant responses:

“Hindi ko agad binabagsakan ng grade. Revision muna para matuto.” (Teacher 5)

“Mas naiintindihan ko kung ano kulang kapag may feedback.” (Learner FGD)

Formative assessment improves learning by clarifying goals, providing actionable feedback, and supporting self-regulation (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In language learning, revision cycles also reduce anxiety and promote mastery orientation.

Theme 9: Strategic Use of L1 to Support Comprehension and Participation

Teachers reported using Filipino/local language strategically to clarify instructions and complex concepts, while encouraging English output during tasks.

Participant responses:

“Pag complex ang topic, nagta-Tagalog muna ako para malinaw, then balik sa English output.”
(Teacher 2)



“Mas nakakasunod kami kapag na-explain muna sa amin.” (Learner FGD)

Research on bilingual education and translanguaging suggests that strategic use of learners’ full linguistic repertoire can support comprehension and participation, especially for academic tasks (Cummins, 2000; García & Wei, 2014).

Discussion

The findings show that learner engagement in SHS English at Eastern Potia National High School is shaped by both learner factors (proficiency gaps, anxiety, limited exposure) and instructional conditions (resources, time). These constraints often reduce willingness to communicate and constrain cognitive engagement, particularly in speaking and writing tasks requiring academic language.

At the same time, teachers enact engagement-oriented pedagogy through structured participation routines, scaffolded instruction, contextualized tasks, feedback-rich formative assessment, and strategic language support. These practices reflect an adaptive balance between communicative approaches and explicit guidance necessary in contexts where learners need structured support to participate confidently and develop academic literacy. The results are consistent with engagement theory (Fredricks et al., 2004) and language learning research emphasizing meaningful interaction and supportive conditions for output (Swain, 1995; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

The study also highlights teacher agency: despite constraints, teachers innovate within their realities improvising materials, designing locally relevant tasks, and building emotionally safe participation structures. This supports evidence that teacher-driven adaptation and continuous professional learning are crucial for improving outcomes in resource-limited schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Conclusion

English language instruction in Senior High School at Eastern Potia National High School is shaped by persistent engagement barriers that stem from wide variation in learners’ English proficiency, heightened language anxiety, limited opportunities for authentic English use beyond the classroom, and structural constraints common in rural public school settings. Many learners enter SHS with uneven foundations in reading, writing, listening, and speaking, which affects their confidence and willingness to participate in oral and written tasks. The fear of making mistakes, particularly in public speaking situations, further limits active engagement, while restricted access to English materials and exposure outside school reduces opportunities for sustained language practice. These interrelated factors create conditions in which learner participation may become minimal, surface-level, or dependent on teacher direction.



Despite these challenges, teachers at Eastern Potia National High School demonstrate adaptive pedagogical practices that actively work to counter disengagement. Through scaffolded instruction, structured interaction routines, and inquiry- and task-based activities, teachers create learning environments that encourage learners to participate gradually and meaningfully. The use of pair and group work, guided discussions, contextualized tasks grounded in learners' lived experiences, and formative feedback enables learners to make sense of language content while reducing anxiety associated with public performance. These interaction-rich practices support not only behavioral participation but also emotional safety and cognitive engagement, allowing learners to experiment with language, reflect on feedback, and construct meaning collaboratively.

Strengthening and sustaining these effective practices requires systemic support at the school and institutional levels. Ongoing professional development that focuses on engagement-oriented pedagogy, differentiation for mixed-proficiency classrooms, and language-sensitive instructional strategies can further enhance teachers' capacity to support learner engagement. Improved access to instructional resources—such as varied reading materials, writing exemplars, and low-cost multimedia tools—can expand opportunities for meaningful language use. In addition, establishing collaborative teacher learning communities can provide spaces for shared reflection, exchange of strategies, and collective problem-solving, allowing teachers to continuously refine their practice. When supported by such structures, adaptive and learner-centered English instruction has strong potential to improve learner engagement and English language learning outcomes in rural public secondary school contexts.

Implications

Schools should provide sustained professional development focusing on (a) engagement-oriented classroom discourse and questioning, (b) scaffolding and differentiation for mixed proficiency classes, (c) feedback-rich formative assessment for writing and speaking, and (d) language-sensitive instruction in multilingual classrooms. School leaders may strengthen support by allocating time for teacher collaboration (learning action cells/PLC-style sessions), improving access to print and multimedia texts, and encouraging classroom routines that reduce language anxiety. Future research may employ mixed-methods designs linking observed pedagogy with engagement scales and performance measures (writing quality, speaking rubrics, reading comprehension), or longitudinal approaches examining how engagement evolves across SHS semesters.

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