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**CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LITERATURE PEDAGOGY AND
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS: THE
MODERATING ROLE OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG
SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN**



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Abstract

Student engagement in English literature classrooms is critical for academic achievement, particularly in multilingual contexts such as Pakistan, where disparities in language proficiency can hinder learning. This study examined the impact of culturally responsive literature pedagogy on student engagement and investigated the moderating role of language proficiency among secondary school students. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted with [insert sample size] students from diverse secondary schools. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Results revealed that culturally responsive pedagogy significantly enhanced student engagement, while language proficiency not only influenced engagement directly but also moderated the relationship between pedagogy and engagement. Findings highlight the importance of integrating culturally relevant instructional strategies with language support to maximize engagement in English classrooms. Implications for teaching practice, curriculum development, and educational policy are discussed.

Keywords: *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Student Engagement, Language Proficiency, English Literature, Secondary Education, Pakistan*

Introduction

Student engagement has become a central concern in English as a Second Language (ESL) education due to its strong association with academic achievement, motivation, and language acquisition. Engagement is generally conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning activities (Fredricks et al., 2004). In ESL contexts, particularly in developing countries such as Pakistan, student engagement remains a persistent challenge due to teacher-centered pedagogies, limited classroom interaction, and diverse linguistic backgrounds (Khan & Javed, 2024). These challenges are further intensified in English literature classrooms, where students are expected to interpret complex texts in a second language, often leading to reduced participation and comprehension.

In response to these challenges, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) has emerged as a transformative instructional approach that recognizes and incorporates students' cultural identities, experiences, and linguistic backgrounds into the teaching process. Grounded in the seminal work of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) and further advanced by Geneva Gay (2010), CRP aims to make learning more relevant, inclusive, and meaningful for diverse learners. In literature classrooms, culturally responsive pedagogy involves selecting texts that reflect students' cultural contexts, encouraging critical dialogue, and promoting connections between literary themes and students' lived experiences. Empirical studies suggest that such practices significantly enhance student motivation and engagement by fostering a sense of belonging and relevance in the learning environment (Gulzar et al., 2024; Malik & Imtiaz, 2025).

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Despite its pedagogical potential, the effectiveness of culturally responsive literature pedagogy is not uniform across all learners. One key factor influencing its impact is language proficiency, which determines students' ability to access, interpret, and respond to English literary texts. In multilingual societies like Pakistan, where students often come from Urdu-medium or regional language backgrounds, disparities in English proficiency can significantly affect classroom engagement. Learners with limited proficiency may experience anxiety, lack of confidence, and reduced participation, which can hinder their ability to benefit from culturally responsive teaching strategies (Rahman et al., 2025). Conversely, students with higher proficiency levels are more likely to actively engage in discussions, interpret texts critically, and participate meaningfully in classroom activities.

The interaction between pedagogy and learner characteristics has been widely emphasized in contemporary educational research. Sociocultural theory, proposed by Lev Vygotsky (1978), underscores the role of social interaction and cultural context in shaping learning processes. From this perspective, culturally responsive pedagogy can be seen as a means of scaffolding learning by connecting new knowledge with students' existing cultural and linguistic frameworks. However, the extent to which students can engage with such pedagogical approaches may depend on their level of language proficiency, suggesting a potential moderating effect.

Although previous research has examined student engagement and culturally responsive teaching independently, limited empirical attention has been given to their combined effects in secondary school English literature classrooms, particularly within the context of Pakistan. Moreover, the moderating role of language proficiency in this relationship remains underexplored. Addressing this gap is essential for developing contextually relevant and effective teaching strategies that can enhance student engagement in linguistically diverse classrooms.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the impact of culturally responsive literature pedagogy on student engagement in English classrooms, while examining the moderating role of language proficiency among secondary school students in Pakistan. By integrating pedagogical and linguistic perspectives, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on inclusive education and provide practical insights for improving ESL teaching practices in diverse educational settings.

Problem Statement

Student engagement in English literature classrooms remains a persistent challenge in ESL contexts, particularly in Pakistan, where diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds shape students' learning experiences. Despite the recognized importance of engagement for academic success, many secondary school students exhibit low levels of participation, motivation, and critical interaction with literary texts. This issue is often attributed to traditional, teacher-centered pedagogies that fail to connect instructional content with students' cultural identities and lived experiences (Khan & Javed, 2024).

In recent years, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) has been proposed as an effective approach to enhance engagement by integrating students' cultural contexts into teaching practices, as highlighted by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) and Geneva Gay (2010). While existing studies indicate that culturally responsive practices can improve student engagement, their application in English literature classrooms at the secondary level in Pakistan remains limited and underexplored. Moreover, the effectiveness of such pedagogical approaches may not be uniform across all learners.

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One critical yet insufficiently examined factor is language proficiency, which significantly influences students' ability to comprehend, interpret, and engage with English literary texts. Students with lower English proficiency often face barriers such as limited comprehension, reduced confidence, and minimal classroom participation, which may weaken the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy. Conversely, students with higher proficiency may benefit more effectively from such approaches, suggesting a potential moderating role of language proficiency in shaping the relationship between pedagogy and engagement.

Although prior research has separately examined student engagement, culturally responsive teaching, and language proficiency, there is a lack of empirical studies that integrate these variables within a single framework, particularly in the context of secondary school English literature classrooms in Pakistan. This gap limits the development of contextually relevant and inclusive instructional strategies. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by investigating the impact of culturally responsive literature pedagogy on student engagement, while examining the moderating role of language proficiency among secondary school students.

Research Questions

1. What is the effect of culturally responsive literature pedagogy on student engagement in English classrooms?
2. To what extent does language proficiency influence student engagement in English literature classrooms?
3. Does language proficiency moderate the relationship between culturally responsive literature pedagogy and student engagement?
4. How do variations in language proficiency shape students' responses to culturally responsive teaching practices?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the impact of culturally responsive literature pedagogy on student engagement in English classrooms.
2. To assess the level and role of language proficiency among secondary school students in Pakistan.
3. To investigate the moderating effect of language proficiency on the relationship between culturally responsive literature pedagogy and student engagement.
4. To provide pedagogical recommendations for enhancing student engagement through culturally responsive practices in ESL classrooms.

Literature Review

Student Engagement in ESL Classrooms

Student engagement is widely recognized as a critical determinant of academic success, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. It encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions that collectively influence students' participation and learning outcomes (Fredricks et al., 2004). In the context of Pakistan, research indicates that student engagement in English classrooms remains comparatively low due to traditional lecture-based teaching methods and limited interaction opportunities. A study by Khan and Javed (2024) found that students from Urdu-medium backgrounds face greater challenges in engaging with English instruction compared

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to those from English-medium backgrounds, highlighting disparities rooted in linguistic proficiency.

Additionally, classroom-based interventions such as cooperative learning have demonstrated significant improvements in students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in Pakistani ESL classrooms, suggesting that interactive pedagogies can mitigate disengagement (Ahmed et al., 2022). These findings underscore the need for pedagogical approaches that actively involve students and address their diverse learning needs.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) and Student Engagement

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), introduced by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) and expanded by Geneva Gay (2010), emphasizes the integration of students' cultural backgrounds into teaching practices to enhance learning relevance and inclusivity. CRP is grounded in the idea that learning becomes more meaningful when instructional content reflects students' identities, experiences, and sociocultural realities.

Empirical evidence consistently supports the positive impact of CRP on student engagement. For instance, Rahaman (2024) reported that culturally responsive teaching strategies—such as incorporating diverse learning materials and fostering inclusive classroom environments—significantly enhance students' motivation, participation, and sense of belonging. Similarly, Gulzar et al. (2024) found that culturally responsive teaching has a statistically significant positive effect on academic performance and student engagement in multicultural classrooms.

Within the Pakistani context, Malik and Imtiaz (2025) highlighted that CRP practices such as translanguaging, culturally relevant texts, and multilingual storytelling increase student participation and oral engagement in ESL classrooms. Moreover, culturally responsive approaches contribute to inclusive education by bridging the gap between home and school cultures, thereby fostering a supportive learning environment (Mohammad et al., 2025).

Despite these benefits, the implementation of CRP faces several challenges, including rigid curricula, lack of teacher training, and limited institutional support, which may hinder its effectiveness in practice.

Language Proficiency and Student Engagement

Language proficiency plays a pivotal role in shaping students' ability to engage with English literature. In multilingual settings such as Pakistan, students often enter classrooms with varying levels of English proficiency, which directly influences their comprehension, confidence, and participation.

Research suggests that students with lower proficiency levels are more likely to experience anxiety, reduced classroom interaction, and difficulty in interpreting literary texts, leading to lower engagement levels (Khan & Javed, 2024). Conversely, higher proficiency enables students to actively participate in discussions, critically analyze texts, and express their ideas more effectively.

Furthermore, pedagogical strategies that account for linguistic diversity—such as scaffolding, collaborative learning, and translanguaging—have been shown to improve both language development and engagement (Malik & Imtiaz, 2025). These findings highlight the importance of considering language proficiency as a key factor in ESL teaching and learning processes.

Moderating Role of Language Proficiency

Recent studies emphasize that the relationship between teaching practices and student engagement is not linear but influenced by individual learner characteristics. Drawing on sociocultural theory by Lev Vygotsky (1978), learning is viewed as a socially mediated process shaped by both cultural and linguistic contexts.

In this regard, language proficiency can function as a moderating variable that influences the effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy. While CRP provides culturally meaningful learning experiences, students with limited language proficiency may struggle to fully benefit from such approaches due to comprehension barriers. On the other hand, students with higher proficiency levels are better positioned to engage with culturally embedded content, participate in discussions, and derive deeper meaning from literary texts.

Empirical evidence supports this interaction effect. Studies in ESL contexts indicate that culturally responsive practices are more effective when combined with language support mechanisms, suggesting that proficiency enhances the impact of pedagogy on engagement (Malik & Imtiaz, 2025; Rahaman, 2024). However, there remains a lack of comprehensive empirical research explicitly testing this moderating relationship, particularly in secondary school literature classrooms in Pakistan.

Although existing literature provides substantial evidence on the importance of student engagement and the effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy, several gaps remain. First, most studies have examined CRP and student engagement independently, with limited integration of these variables into a single analytical framework. Second, the moderating role of language proficiency has not been sufficiently explored, particularly in the context of English literature classrooms. Third, there is a scarcity of empirical research focusing on secondary school students in Pakistan, where linguistic diversity and cultural heterogeneity are highly pronounced.

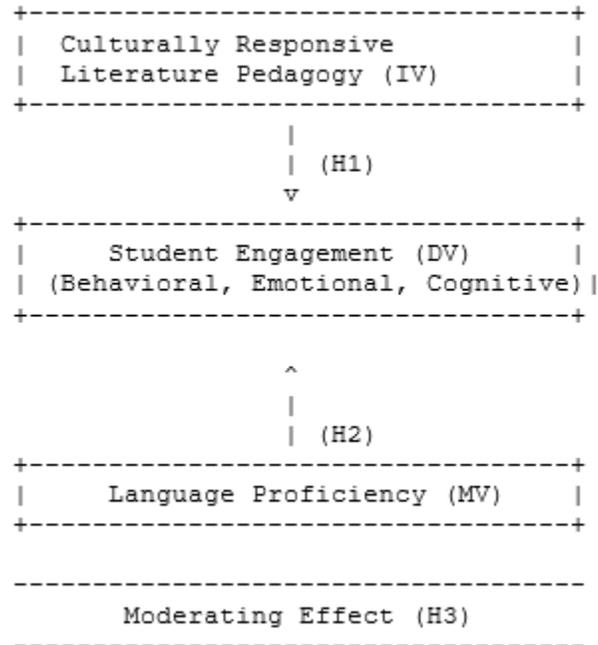
Therefore, this study seeks to bridge these gaps by examining the relationship between culturally responsive literature pedagogy and student engagement, while investigating the moderating role of language proficiency. This integrated approach is expected to contribute to both theoretical and practical advancements in ESL education by providing contextually relevant insights for improving teaching practices in diverse classrooms.

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Conceptual Framework



Hypotheses

H1: Culturally responsive literature pedagogy significantly affects student engagement.

H2: Language proficiency significantly affects student engagement.

H3: Language proficiency moderates the relationship between culturally responsive literature pedagogy and student engagement.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research approach using a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between culturally responsive literature pedagogy and student engagement, as well as the moderating role of language proficiency. A quantitative design was considered appropriate as it enabled the measurement of variables and the testing of hypothesized relationships through statistical analysis.

Population and Sampling

The target population of the study comprised secondary school students enrolled in English classrooms in Pakistan. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to ensure representation from diverse educational settings. Initially, schools were selected using cluster sampling, followed by simple random sampling to select participants within each school.

A total of [insert sample size, e.g., 300–500] students participated in the study. The sample size was deemed adequate based on statistical requirements for multivariate analysis and moderation testing.

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Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of four sections:

1. Culturally Responsive Literature Pedagogy (CRP):

This construct was measured using adapted items based on the framework of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) and Geneva Gay (2010). The scale assessed the extent to which teachers incorporated students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and relevant content into literature instruction.

2. Student Engagement:

Student engagement was measured across three dimensions—behavioral, emotional, and cognitive—using a validated scale developed by Fredricks et al. (2004). Items captured students' participation, interest, and investment in learning activities.

3. Language Proficiency:

Language proficiency was assessed through a self-reported scale evaluating students' reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension skills in English.

4. Demographic Information:

This section included variables such as gender, age, grade level, and medium of instruction. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Validity and Reliability

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by experts in ESL education and educational research. A pilot study was conducted with a small sample of students ($n = 30-50$) to refine the instrument.

Construct validity was assessed through factor analysis, while reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. All constructs demonstrated acceptable reliability values ($\alpha \geq 0.70$), indicating internal consistency.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected from selected secondary schools after obtaining necessary permissions from school administrations. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained prior to data collection. The questionnaires were administered in person during classroom hours, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Completed questionnaires were collected immediately to ensure a high response rate.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and SmartPLS software. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were computed to summarize the data.

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To test the hypotheses, the study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which is suitable for analyzing complex models involving latent variables and moderation effects. The analysis was conducted in two stages:

1. Measurement Model Assessment:

This included evaluating factor loadings, composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity.

2. Structural Model Assessment:

Path coefficients, t-values, and significance levels were examined to test direct relationships. The moderating effect of language proficiency was analyzed using interaction terms within the PLS-SEM framework.

Data Analysis and Results

This section presents the results of the data analysis conducted to examine the relationships among culturally responsive literature pedagogy, student engagement, and language proficiency. The analysis was performed using SPSS for descriptive statistics and SmartPLS (PLS-SEM) for measurement and structural model assessment.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize respondents' perceptions of the study variables.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Culturally Responsive Literature Pedagogy	3.78	0.64
Student Engagement	3.65	0.71
Language Proficiency	3.59	0.68

Interpretation

The results indicated that respondents perceived a moderate to high level of culturally responsive pedagogy ($M = 3.78$), suggesting that teachers somewhat incorporated cultural elements into literature instruction. Student engagement ($M = 3.65$) was also moderately high, reflecting acceptable levels of participation and involvement. Language proficiency ($M = 3.59$) indicated variability among students, highlighting differences in their ability to comprehend and interact in English classrooms.

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated using factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE).

Table 2: Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	0.87	0.91	0.62
Student Engagement	0.89	0.92	0.65
Language Proficiency	0.85	0.90	0.60

All constructs demonstrated high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha and CR values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. The AVE values were above 0.50, indicating adequate convergent validity. These results confirmed that the measurement model was statistically sound and suitable for further analysis.

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Table 3: Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Construct	CRP	Engagement	Proficiency
CRP	0.79		
Engagement	0.56	0.81	
Proficiency	0.49	0.52	0.77

The square root of AVE for each construct (diagonal values) was greater than the inter-construct correlations, confirming discriminant validity. This indicates that each construct was distinct and measured a unique concept.

Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was analyzed to test the hypothesized relationships.

Table 4: Direct Effects (Path Coefficients)

Hypothesis	Relationship	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	CRP → Student Engagement	0.45	6.21	0.000	Supported
H2	Language Proficiency → Student Engagement	0.32	4.87	0.000	Supported

The results revealed that culturally responsive literature pedagogy had a significant positive effect on student engagement ($\beta = 0.45, p < 0.001$), indicating that culturally relevant teaching practices enhance students' participation and involvement. Similarly, language proficiency also showed a significant positive effect on engagement ($\beta = 0.32, p < 0.001$), suggesting that students with higher proficiency are more actively engaged in classroom activities.

5. Moderation Analysis

The moderating effect of language proficiency was tested using an interaction term.

Table 5: Moderating Effect

Hypothesis	Relationship	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
H3	CRP \times Language Proficiency \rightarrow Engagement	0.18	2.96	0.003	Supported

The interaction effect between culturally responsive pedagogy and language proficiency was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$), confirming the moderating role of language proficiency. This indicates that the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy on student engagement varied depending on students' proficiency levels.

Specifically:

- Students with higher language proficiency benefited more from culturally responsive teaching, demonstrating greater engagement.
- Students with lower proficiency experienced comparatively weaker effects, possibly due to comprehension barriers.

This finding highlights the importance of integrating linguistic support strategies alongside culturally responsive practices to maximize student engagement across diverse proficiency levels.

6. Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Table 6: R-Square Values

Dependent Variable	R^2 Value
Student Engagement	0.52

Interpretation

The R^2 value of 0.52 indicated that 52% of the variance in student engagement was explained by culturally responsive pedagogy and language proficiency. This reflects a moderate to substantial explanatory power, suggesting that the model provides a strong understanding of factors influencing engagement in English classrooms.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between culturally responsive literature pedagogy and student engagement, with a particular focus on the moderating role of language proficiency among secondary school students in Pakistan. The findings revealed that culturally responsive pedagogy significantly and positively influenced student engagement, supporting the premise that instructional practices aligned with students' cultural backgrounds enhance their participation, motivation, and cognitive involvement. This result is consistent with the theoretical propositions of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) and Geneva Gay (2010), who emphasized that culturally relevant teaching fosters meaningful learning experiences and strengthens students' connection with academic content.

The study further found that language proficiency had a significant positive effect on student

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engagement. Students with higher proficiency levels were more confident in expressing their ideas, interpreting literary texts, and participating in classroom discussions. This aligns with existing research suggesting that linguistic competence is a critical determinant of active participation in ESL classrooms. In multilingual contexts like Pakistan, where students often transition from local or Urdu-medium instruction to English-medium learning, disparities in language proficiency can create unequal opportunities for engagement.

Importantly, the moderation analysis demonstrated that language proficiency significantly influenced the strength of the relationship between culturally responsive pedagogy and student engagement. Specifically, the positive impact of culturally responsive teaching was stronger among students with higher levels of English proficiency. This finding supports the sociocultural perspective of Lev Vygotsky (1978), which highlights the role of language as a mediating tool in learning. While culturally responsive pedagogy provides relevant and inclusive learning experiences, its effectiveness depends on students' ability to comprehend and engage with the instructional content. Therefore, without adequate language support, the benefits of such pedagogical approaches may not be fully realized for all learners.

Overall, the findings suggest that culturally responsive literature pedagogy is a powerful strategy for enhancing student engagement; however, its effectiveness is contingent upon students' linguistic readiness. This underscores the need for integrating culturally responsive practices with language scaffolding techniques to ensure inclusive and equitable learning outcomes.

Conclusion

This study concluded that culturally responsive literature pedagogy plays a significant role in enhancing student engagement in English classrooms at the secondary school level in Pakistan. The findings demonstrated that when teaching practices are aligned with students' cultural contexts and experiences, students become more actively involved in learning processes. Additionally, language proficiency emerged as a crucial factor influencing engagement, both directly and as a moderator.

The study contributes to the growing body of literature by empirically validating the interaction between pedagogy and linguistic competence. It highlights that improving student engagement in ESL classrooms requires not only innovative teaching approaches but also attention to students' language development. Thus, a combined focus on cultural relevance and linguistic support is essential for effective English literature instruction.

Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for educational practice, policy, and research. From a pedagogical perspective, teachers should adopt culturally responsive teaching strategies that incorporate students' cultural backgrounds, local contexts, and lived experiences into literature instruction. This can foster a more inclusive and engaging learning environment.

From a policy standpoint, curriculum developers and educational authorities in Pakistan should emphasize the integration of culturally relevant content in English syllabi. Teacher training programs should also focus on equipping educators with skills in culturally responsive pedagogy and language scaffolding techniques.

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends existing frameworks by introducing language proficiency as a moderating variable, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of how engagement is shaped in ESL contexts. It reinforces the importance of considering both cultural and

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linguistic dimensions in educational research.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. Teachers should integrate culturally relevant texts, examples, and classroom discussions to enhance students' connection with the subject matter. At the same time, they should employ language support strategies such as scaffolding, peer collaboration, and translanguaging to assist students with lower proficiency levels. Educational institutions should organize professional development programs to train teachers in culturally responsive teaching methods. Additionally, schools should encourage interactive and student-centered learning approaches rather than relying solely on traditional lecture-based methods. Policymakers should consider revising English curricula to include diverse cultural perspectives that reflect the sociocultural realities of students in Pakistan. This will not only improve engagement but also promote inclusivity and critical thinking.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships among variables. Second, the data were collected through self-reported questionnaires, which may be subject to response bias. Third, the study focused on a specific geographical context within Pakistan, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or educational settings.

Additionally, language proficiency was measured through self-assessment rather than standardized testing, which may affect the accuracy of the results. Future studies may address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs and objective measures of language proficiency.

Future Directions

Future research should explore the longitudinal effects of culturally responsive pedagogy on student engagement to better understand causal relationships. Researchers may also investigate additional moderating or mediating variables, such as motivation, teacher effectiveness, or classroom environment, to develop a more comprehensive model.

Further studies could expand the scope by including diverse educational levels, such as primary and higher education, as well as comparative analyses across different regions or countries. Additionally, qualitative research methods, such as classroom observations and interviews, could provide deeper insights into students' experiences and perceptions.

Finally, future research should focus on developing and testing intervention-based models that integrate culturally responsive teaching with language development strategies, thereby offering practical solutions for enhancing engagement in ESL classrooms.

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