

Pedagogical Practices and Student Engagement in EFL Higher Education: A Classroom-Based Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Pedagogical practices in EFL higher education significantly shape students' engagement and learning experiences, yet classroom-based studies that foreground students' perspectives remain limited. This study explores how instructional approaches in university EFL classrooms influence student engagement, focusing on grammar and speaking courses within an English education programme. Employing a qualitative classroom-based case study design, data were collected through students' reflective journals, complemented by classroom observations and teaching documents, and analysed thematically. The findings indicate that engagement was enhanced when explicit grammar instruction was integrated with contextualised practice, and when speaking activities were designed to be practice-oriented, interactive, and collaborative. Students reported increased confidence and participation in classrooms characterised by supportive interactional patterns and reduced fear of making mistakes. However, speaking anxiety and limited vocabulary continued to pose challenges, highlighting the persistent affective dimensions of language learning. By foregrounding students' reflective voices, this study contributes to discussions on student engagement in EFL higher education, demonstrating how instructional design and affective support intersect in shaping classroom participation. The findings underscore the importance of pedagogical sensitivity and interactional design in fostering meaningful engagement at the university level.

Keywords: Classroom-based qualitative research; EFL higher education; English language teaching; pedagogical practices; student engagement.

INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in higher education occupies a critical position in developing students' linguistic competence, communicative ability, and academic literacy. It facilitates communication among multilinguals in diverse settings, emphasizing the importance of integrating students' other languages into the learning process (Ina & Bayyurt, 2025). At the university level, EFL classrooms are expected to foster not only language accuracy but also meaningful engagement with language use through interaction, reflection, and active participation. Consequently, pedagogy in EFL higher education requires careful consideration of instructional design, classroom interaction, and students' learning experiences.

Despite the extensive body of literature on language teaching methodologies, a persistent gap remains between pedagogical theory and classroom practice. While communicative, learner-centred, and meaning-oriented approaches are widely promoted in ELT discourse, their enactment in real classroom contexts is often shaped by contextual



constraints such as class size, students' varying proficiency levels, curriculum demands, and institutional expectations. Large class sizes can hinder the effective implementation of communicative language teaching (CLT) and other learner-centred approaches. Teachers in South Sudan, for example, reported that crowded classrooms negatively impacted teaching and learning, although they attempted to mitigate this through strategies like group work and debate (Morjakole, 2023). In Indonesia, student resistance to CLT, often due to a preference for structure-oriented learning, has been a notable challenge (Ariatna, 2016). As a result, pedagogical practices in EFL classrooms frequently reflect a combination of theoretical principles and pragmatic adjustments made by teachers.

Recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted the value of classroom-based research in capturing the complexity of teaching and learning as they naturally occur. Classroom-based studies allow researchers to examine pedagogy as a situated practice, revealing how instructional decisions are enacted through classroom interaction, task design, and teacher–student communication. Teachers' instructional decisions often extend beyond the immediate topic and involve managing interactional sequences to guide content discussion. These decisions are crucial for understanding how pedagogical actions unfold in real-time classroom settings (Lee, 2021). In EFL higher education, such research is particularly important because University classrooms, particularly in English education programs, are increasingly characterized by diverse learner profiles and serve as critical sites for both language development and professional preparation. This diversity encompasses cultural, linguistic, and national backgrounds, necessitating that educators are well-prepared to address these varied needs effectively (Heineke et al., 2019; Hutchinson & Hadjioannou, 2011; Keengwe, 2010).

Pedagogical practices in EFL classrooms encompass a range of instructional actions, including how grammar is presented, how speaking opportunities are created, and how feedback is provided to support learning. Teachers often use students' first languages (L1s) to explain grammar concepts, provide translations, and ensure comprehension. This approach is particularly evident in multilingual classrooms, where teachers prioritize student understanding by using bilingual strategies (Källkvist et al., 2024). These practices are closely connected to students' engagement, as the extent to which learners participate, interact, and invest effort is influenced by how learning activities are designed and facilitated. Student engagement has been widely recognised as a key element of effective learning in higher education, particularly in language classrooms where active use of the

target language is essential. It is crucial for improving academic performance and fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter (E & Benjamin, 2024).

Although previous studies have examined EFL pedagogy from either teacher or learner perspectives, fewer studies have explored pedagogical practices and students' learning experiences within the same classroom context. Moreover, much of the existing research focuses on school-level education, leaving EFL pedagogy in higher education relatively underexplored, especially through qualitative, classroom-based inquiry. This gap suggests a need for research that foregrounds pedagogical practices as they are enacted in university classrooms and examines how these practices are experienced by students.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates pedagogical practices in EFL higher education through a classroom-based qualitative approach. By focusing on grammar and speaking classes at the university level, the study aims to explore how pedagogy is implemented in practice and how students experience classroom learning. Through close examination of classroom interaction and student perspectives, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of EFL pedagogy as a dynamic and context-sensitive process in higher education settings. This study responds to the need for classroom-based qualitative research that foregrounds students' perspectives in understanding how pedagogical practices are enacted and experienced in EFL higher education. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How are pedagogical practices enacted in EFL higher education classrooms?
2. How do students experience and engage with these pedagogical practices in grammar and speaking courses?

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a classroom-based qualitative case study design to explore pedagogical practices as they were enacted in naturally occurring EFL classroom contexts and experienced by students. A case study design was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth, contextualised examination of teaching and learning as a bounded phenomenon within its natural setting, without prioritising the measurement of learning outcomes. The classroom itself served as the unit of analysis, allowing pedagogy to be examined as a situated practice shaped by instructional decisions, classroom interaction, and students' lived experiences.

Participants and Setting

The study was conducted in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Islam

Makassar, Indonesia, within two undergraduate courses: Basic English Grammar and Basic Speaking Skill. The participants were 14 undergraduate students 12 female and 2 male, aged between 18 years, who were in their first year of study. Their English proficiency levels ranged from elementary to intermediate, based on lecturer assessment. Participants were recruited through total population sampling, as they were enrolled in the two focal courses taught by the same lecturer, who has 11 years of EFL teaching experience at the tertiary level.

Data Collection

Data were collected over 6 weeks during the odd semester of the 2025/2026 academic year through three complementary qualitative methods, enabling methodological triangulation. First, non-participant classroom observations were conducted to document pedagogical practices, classroom interaction, and student participation during grammar and speaking lessons. A total of 6 observation sessions were carried out (2 in each course), each lasting approximately 45 minutes, and were recorded through a semi-structured observation protocol and detailed field notes. Second, student reflective journals were used to capture students' learning experiences, perceptions of classroom activities, and challenges encountered during learning. Students wrote 1 journal entry weekly in response to open-ended guided prompts, producing a corpus of 8 entries. Journals were written in Bahasa Indonesia and excerpts originally written in Indonesian were translated into English for reporting. Third, teaching documents, including the course syllabi, lesson plans, and instructional materials, were analysed to provide contextual information about pedagogical design and to corroborate observational data.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed thematically following the six-phase procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Analysis proceeded iteratively rather than linearly. In the initial coding phase, journal entries and field notes were coded manually line by line, generating 4 initial codes related to instructional strategies, classroom interaction, and student engagement. These codes were then grouped into categories and progressively refined into four overarching themes reported in the findings. Throughout the analysis, data from the three sources were systematically compared to enhance credibility and to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the classroom context.

Ethical Considerations

To address ethical considerations related to power relations between the lecturer-

researcher and students, participation was voluntary, written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and students were assured that their academic grades would not be affected by their participation or by the content of their journals. All data were anonymised, and pseudonyms are used when reporting journal excerpts.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The results are presented as themes derived from students' reflective journals and are intended to illustrate patterns of pedagogical practice and learning experience rather than to generalise beyond the research context.

Integrating Grammar Instruction with Meaningful Use

Students consistently reported that grammar instruction was delivered in a clear and structured manner, beginning with explanations of rules and followed by guided practice. However, what students found most meaningful was the opportunity to apply grammar knowledge in context rather than merely memorising rules.

One student reflected:

"I do not only learn grammar rules, but I really understand how grammar is used in real sentences and daily communication."

Another student emphasised the importance of practice-based learning:

"Grammar becomes easier to understand when we make our own sentences and directly use it in speaking activities."

These reflections indicate that grammar learning was perceived as more effective when it moved beyond theoretical explanation toward contextualised application, supporting meaningful learning.

Practice-Oriented Speaking Activities and Growing Confidence

Speaking classes were strongly associated with practice-oriented pedagogical activities, such as pair work, small-group discussions, role play, and short presentations. Students reported that these activities created more opportunities to speak English actively and reduced anxiety compared to whole-class speaking.

As one student stated:

"I feel more confident speaking English when I practice in small groups because I am not too afraid of making mistakes."

Another student described a gradual change in confidence:

"At first I was very nervous and afraid to speak, but because the lecturer always encouraged us, I slowly became braver to speak English."

Despite these positive experiences, many students acknowledged that fear of making mistakes and limited vocabulary remained challenges, particularly during spontaneous

speaking tasks.

Supportive and Interactive Teaching Approach

A dominant theme across reflections was students' perception of the lecturer's teaching approach as supportive, interactive, and student-centred. Students highlighted the lecturer's openness, patience, and encouragement as key factors that motivated them to participate.

One student noted:

"The lecturer gives us space to express our ideas without feeling afraid. This makes the class comfortable and enjoyable."

Another student emphasised the importance of interaction:

"The teaching method is not one-way. There are discussions, questions, and direct practice, so the class is not boring."

This supportive classroom atmosphere was repeatedly identified as a factor that helped students overcome anxiety and engage more actively in learning activities.

Student Engagement and Reflective Awareness

Students' reflections demonstrated not only behavioural engagement but also emotional and cognitive engagement. Many students showed awareness of their learning processes, including recognising their own challenges and progress.

One student reflected:

"I realise that making mistakes is part of learning. From this class, I learn to be brave and keep trying even when I am not confident."

Students also offered pedagogical suggestions, such as increasing speaking practice and pronunciation-focused activities, indicating that they positioned themselves as active participants in evaluating classroom learning.

The findings of this classroom-based study highlight the complexity of pedagogical practices in EFL higher education and their influence on students' learning experiences. Consistent with previous research on EFL pedagogy, the results show that teaching practices reflect a balance between form-focused instruction and meaning-oriented learning.

The integration of explicit grammar explanation with contextualised practice aligns with constructivist perspectives on learning, in which students actively construct understanding by connecting new knowledge with prior experience. This approach fosters deeper learning and retention (Chieu et al., 2004; Cooperstein, 2004; Floyd & Dunham, 2025). Students' reflections suggest that grammar instruction became meaningful when it was linked to communicative use rather than treated as isolated rules. Research highlights the importance of embedding grammar instruction within meaningful contexts, as opposed

to teaching isolated rules. This approach helps students see grammar as a tool for effective communication and meaning-making (Bond, 2018; Jones et al., 2013; Liamkina & Ryshina-Pankova, 2012).

From the perspective of teacher cognition, the pedagogical practices observed in this study appear to be shaped by lecturers' professional judgement regarding students' proficiency levels and classroom realities. Rather than strictly adhering to a single method, the lecturer adapted instructional strategies to support comprehension, participation, and confidence building. Speaking activities played a crucial role in shaping student engagement. While interactive tasks encouraged participation, students' persistent anxiety highlights the importance of addressing affective factors in EFL pedagogy. A supportive classroom environment, as described by students, functioned as an enabling condition that allowed learners to take risks and use English more freely.

Overall, the findings suggest that pedagogical challenges in EFL higher education should be understood not as instructional shortcomings, but as reflections of the dynamic interaction between pedagogical goals, teacher decision-making, and student learning experiences within a specific classroom context. These findings contribute to EFL pedagogy by illustrating how instructional decisions, classroom interaction, and affective support collectively shape students' engagement in higher education contexts.

By foregrounding students' reflective perspectives, this study extends classroom-based EFL research by demonstrating how pedagogical practices are experienced affectively and cognitively by learners in higher education contexts.

CONCLUSION

This classroom-based qualitative study examined pedagogical practices in EFL higher education through students' reflective journals, classroom observations, and teaching documents in Grammar and Speaking courses. The findings demonstrate that effective pedagogy in university EFL classrooms involves continuous negotiation between instructional structure, communicative practice, and student engagement. Grammar instruction that combined explicit explanation with contextualised use, together with practice-oriented and collaborative speaking activities, contributed positively to students' understanding, confidence, and reflective awareness, although speaking anxiety and limited vocabulary remained persistent challenges.

Theoretically, this study contributes to scholarship on student engagement in EFL higher education by foregrounding students' reflective voices as a lens for understanding how pedagogy is experienced. It shows that engagement in university EFL classrooms is

multidimensional, encompassing behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, and that it is co-constructed through the interaction of instructional design and affective support rather than produced by either factor alone. In doing so, the study extends constructivist accounts of contextualised grammar learning to the under-researched context of EFL teacher education programmes in higher education.

Practically, the findings imply that lecturers should design EFL classroom activities that deliberately balance explicit instruction, communicative practice, and emotional support. Concretely, this involves linking grammar explanation to immediate communicative application, sequencing speaking tasks from low-risk formats such as pair work toward whole-class performance, cultivating an error-tolerant classroom climate, and using reflective journals not only as data but as a pedagogical tool that promotes learners' metacognitive awareness. Such a balance is particularly important in grammar and speaking courses, where students require both linguistic clarity and confidence-building opportunities.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted in a single institution, involved two courses taught by one lecturer, and drew on a small, context-specific group of participants, which limits the transferability of the findings. The primary data source, students' reflective journals, is self-reported and may be shaped by social desirability, particularly given the lecturer's dual role. In addition, the study did not measure learning outcomes, so no claims can be made about the effects of the observed practices on language achievement, and the relatively short duration of data collection precludes conclusions about long-term engagement.

Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal designs that trace how student engagement and pedagogical practices evolve across a full academic programme, and through multi-site studies that compare EFL classrooms across institutions and sociocultural contexts. Combining students' reflective accounts with teacher cognition data, for example through stimulated recall interviews, would illuminate how instructional decisions and learner experiences interact in real time. Mixed-methods studies linking pedagogical practices to measurable language outcomes, as well as investigations of how technology-mediated speaking practice might mitigate speaking anxiety, also represent promising directions.

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