

Case Study



The Impact of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) Level Adjustments on Student Engagement in Emirates School Establishments

تأثير تعديلات مستوى الإطار المرجعي الأوروبي المشترك للغات على مشاركة الطلاب في مؤسسات مدارس الإمارات

Danielle Cummings^{ID}* and Philip Anderson^{ID}

University of Birmingham Dubai, Academic City, Dubai, UAE

Corresponding Author: Danielle Cummings; email: daniellekcumings@live.com

Received: November 26, 2024

Accepted: March 27, 2025

Published: September 4, 2025

Production and Hosting by Knowledge E

© Cummings and Anderson. This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Abstract

When students learning English as an additional language face cognitive challenges, curriculum adjustments to reduce cognitive load can often improve their engagement and understanding. This action research study explores the impact of adjusting the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) level on student engagement within a United Arab Emirates (UAE) public school setting. It examines how refining the English curriculum content from B1 to A1 CEFR level affects the overall classroom environment and student engagement among Grade 9 General Stream students at the Emirates School Establishment in the UAE. Observational data, teacher journaling, formative assessments, and Exit Tickets were used to gauge student motivation and engagement. Results indicated that reducing the CEFR level increased student engagement, lowered classroom noise, and enhanced perceived lesson enjoyment. This suggests that aligning the curriculum level with students' language proficiency fosters a conducive learning environment, supporting cognitive load theory principles. Furthermore, students' collectivist learning preferences were found to influence engagement patterns. These findings highlight the value of setting achievable language standards that support students' learning journey, fostering an environment where they are equipped to build confidence, engage actively, and progress steadily without unnecessary cognitive strain.

الملخص

عندما يواجه الطلاب الذين يتعلمون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة إضافية تحديات معرفية، فإن تعديلات المناهج الدراسية لتقليل العبء المعرفي يمكن أن تحسّن في كثير من الأحيان من مشاركتهم وفهمهم. تستكشف هذه الدراسة البحثية الإجرائية تأثير تعديل مستوى الإطار الأوروبي المرجعي المشترك للغات على مشاركة الطلاب في بيئة المدارس الحكومية في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة. وتبحث في كيفية تأثير تحسين محتوى منهج اللغة الإنجليزية من مستوى A1 إلى مستوى B1 على البيئة الصفية العامة ومشاركة الطلاب بين طلاب الصف التاسع في المسار العام في مؤسسة مدارس الإمارات في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة. وقد استُخدمت بيانات الرصد، ومذكرات المعلم، والتقييمات التكوينية، وتذاكر الخروج لقياس دافعية الطلاب ومشاركتهم. وأشارت النتائج إلى أن خفض مستوى الإطار الأوروبي المرجعي المشترك للغات زاد من مشاركة الطلاب، وخفض ضوضاء الفصل، وعزز من متعة الدرس المُدرّكة.

OPEN ACCESS

ويشير هذا إلى أن مواءمة مستوى المنهج الدراسي مع إتقان الطلاب للغة يعزز بيئة تعليمية مواتية، ويدعم مبادئ نظرية العبء المعرفي. علاوة على ذلك، وُجد أن تفضيلات التعلم الجماعي لدى الطلاب تؤثر على أنماط المشاركة. تسلط هذه النتائج الضوء على قيمة وضع معايير لغوية قابلة للتحقيق تدعم رحلة التعلم لدى الطلاب، وتعزز البيئة التي يكونون فيها مجهزين لبناء الثقة، والمشاركة بنشاط، والتقدم بثبات دون ضغوط معرفية غير ضرورية.

Keywords: CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference), Engagement, Motivation, Curriculum design, Language proficiency

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإطار الأوروبي المرجعي المشترك للغات، المشاركة، الدافعية، تصميم المناهج، الكفاءة اللغوية

1. Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), established in 1971, is a country with an 85% expatriate population (Marquez et al., 2022). Schools that cater to them are private, fee-based schools offering a variety of international curricula (Hayden, 2006), while public schools are mainly attended by Emirati citizens, adhering to the curriculum prescribed by the UAE Ministry of Education (MoE). The Emirates Schools Establishment (ESE) was formed to develop public schools and undertook significant reforms aimed at improving student learning outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2019), including the implementation of frameworks like the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages. The CEFR allows a clearly communicated and transparent standards-based curriculum for the region (Alhashmi et al., 2022). An A1 CEFR level is at the “beginner” level of the scale, while a B2 CEFR level would be enough to enter the undergraduate level at an Emirati Federal Higher Education Institution (Al-Hussein & Gitsaki, 2018).

This action research study investigates the factors influencing students’ motivation and engagement at a public school in the UAE. It looks to answer the question, “How can curriculum design be optimized to maintain engagement and knowledge retention in schools under ESE?” This study seeks to ascertain what modifications could be employed to enhance engagement and more effectively cater to the learners’ requirements. Specifically, this experiment investigates a potential curriculum adaptation by exploring how changing the ESE English curriculum delivery from the B1 to the A1 CEFR level might impact Grade 9 (aged 14–15) students’ in-class engagement while maintaining adequate progress.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language proficiency and the CEFR framework

While the CEFR for languages is widely used for its clear descriptions of language competencies at all levels, Hulstijn (2007) argues that it does not adequately account for the multiple factors influencing learners’ linguistic development. However, Sugg (2017) accepts the complexities of the CEFR framework and acknowledges that his students are at a generally lower-than-required CEFR level. He attempts to

meet them at that level to increase motivation and English language proficiency. His study revealed students' heavy reliance on translation and their inability to self-correct, which stemmed from a history of low attainment. These findings show that, regardless of the many variables involved in judging a student's language level, overall evidence of low proficiency and difficulty expressing oneself suggests the need for targeted interventions to improve English language skills.

2.2. Learned helplessness and motivation

Consistent low achievement in assessments can lead to students losing motivation, known as the phenomenon of *learned helplessness*, a tenet of the behavioral theory conceptualized by Seligman (Peterson et al., 1993). Martin *et al.* (2017) suggest that by adapting teaching approaches to reinforce students' confidence and resilience, educators can create a supportive environment that reduces the likelihood of students developing helplessness in response to challenges. Indeed, there is already an identified misalignment in different English language assessments in the UAE, suggesting a disconnect between students' future learning progression (AlHabbash et al., 2021). Sugg (2017) advocates the benefits of simplifying the English writing process to increase student confidence and eventual autonomy and motivation.

According to Yadav and Mishra (2017), students' achievement-related cognitions, which could result from sociocultural factors, play an essential role in student motivation and engagement in the classroom. Students from collectivist cultures, like those in the UAE, are generally considered to have interdependent self-construal, which, according to Yadav and Mishra (2017), means that they tend to see themselves as less individualistic and more as a part of a whole. When considering the attributions of success and failure, Yadav and Mishra (2017) conclude that students with low independent self-construal largely tend to credit failure to the situation rather than the self. This disposition can lead to low motivation and quitting, as the solution to problems may be seen to be outside of the student's control.

2.3. Curriculum design and student learning

Scott (2021) and Van Dijk (2013) agree that institutions must first set realistic learning objectives for students. Van Dijk's (2013) study focuses on student engagement as important for retention of material and subsequent subject knowledge progression. Similarly, Martin *et al.* (2017) state that positive levels of motivation and engagement in students tend to result in positive levels of academic achievement. According to Stipek (1996), an unmotivated student is unengaged and passive when faced with tasks, exerting less effort and giving up more easily; they tend to be avoidant when approaching tasks and generally do not enjoy them. This has implications for students' attainment, as student disengagement is not conducive to material retention. It may also be considered that students' motivation and engagement

stem from the relevance of the curriculum's content to their reality and personal contexts. Thus, ensuring the curriculum is appropriate is the first step in guaranteeing student knowledge progression.

While the ESE English curriculum is relatively new and still under development, it is well-tailored to the UAE's cultural context. The UAE's public education sector is smaller than the increasingly expanding private education sector (Kippels, 2024). The public schools in the UAE mainly teach Emiratis and GCC residents, with the majority being Emirati students (Kippels, 2024). Gallagher (2011) establishes that the bilingual approach in the ESE curriculum can empower students enrolled in UAE public schools. However, according to Farah and Ridge (2009), there is a need to move away from a solely textbook-driven curriculum and view the curriculum as a whole, comprised of teaching, curriculum, and assessment. This is in accordance with Khamis *et al.* (2008), who claim that curriculum content, students' beliefs, and teacher interaction may affect students' motivation and, subsequently, their engagement. Farah and Ridge (2009) also highlight students' challenges in undertaking the current mode of summative assessment in the ESE curriculum. Summative examinations mainly permit students to answer predetermined questions compared to prescriptive standards (Sparks, 2015) and do not provide holistic feedback. Kohn (2013) declares that while grading students may appear just, it has been considered to be counterintuitive to promoting intrinsic motivation for learning, ultimately leading to students losing interest, favoring easier tasks, and a reduction in critical thinking overall.

Hattie and Timperley (2007) agree that thorough feedback is integral to effective assessment. Biggs (1998) also asserts that assessments given without qualitative feedback underutilize reflection, which Hattie and Timperley (2007) postulate is an opportunity for students to actively engage and potentially progress during the learning process, as they would be fully aware of the gaps in their attainment. William (2018) also claims that quantitative feedback (e.g., feedback in the form of a letter grade) may not significantly affect student progression compared to qualitative feedback. Holistic feedback leads to a more thorough comprehension of one's attainment and gaps. When students are integrated into the feedback process, they may be less likely to attribute gaps in attainment to a situational context and may be more motivated to align themselves with the curriculum's expectations.

2.4. Implementation of the CEFR in UAE schools

Binothman *et al.* (2024) found that UAE schools require a curriculum that acknowledges students' need to communicate fluidly in Arabic and English, allowing them to express thoughts and ideas without linguistic insecurity, thereby enhancing their learning process. This finding has important implications for how CEFR has been implemented, as it was originally launched by the Council of Europe (CoE) to acknowledge plurilingualism, the interconnection of language learning across multiple European contexts (Council of Europe, 2020). Mohamed (2022) believes that its implementation in Arabic-speaking countries requires an additional consideration of local education traditions, linguistic backgrounds, and learning approaches. UAE students, for example, navigate a complex environment encompassing Modern Standard Arabic,

colloquial Arabic, and English (Mohamed, 2022). This creates additional cognitive demands not typically accounted for in the original CEFR framework (Sweller, 2011). Similarly, AlHabbash *et al.* (2021) highlight how the Emirates Standardized Test (EmSAT), used to assess students for University, aligns with lower CEFR levels (A1–B1) while the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which students often need later for career advancement, aligns with higher CEFR levels (B1–C2). This disconnect between assessment standards creates potential challenges for UAE students' academic and professional progression.

Academic standard misalignment becomes particularly problematic when considering learning progression and mastery theories. According to Scott (2021), mastery of core components of the curriculum in the early phases of learning leads to a more capable progression in later phases. Thus, ensuring a curriculum prioritizes mastery of stages of learning may facilitate schema acquisition in students (Young, 2014). This could increase students' confidence in the subject, avoid learned helplessness, and lead to knowledge acquisition. Bruner's (in Sawyer, 2006) concept of the "spiral curriculum"—where learning is structured to reinforce and build on prior knowledge—supports mastery in students by revisiting and deepening previously taught concepts. Integrating aspects of this curriculum design into existing frameworks may strengthen students' understanding.

In alignment with Sweller *et al.*'s (2011) Cognitive Load Theory, general teacher observations over the academic year have shown that ESE Grade 9 General Stream English students are engaged and motivated to work in English lessons when the tasks are suited to the A1 CEFR level. According to Martin *et al.* (2017), engagement and motivation are intertwined as motivation encompasses the propensity toward learning, while the observable behaviors that reflect these tendencies are defined as engagement. The prescribed course material for this class, set at the B1 CEFR level, triggered negative student behavior, indicating a lack of engagement and motivation.

The CEFR framework defines language proficiency levels from A1 (beginner) to C2 (mastery), with each level representing increasingly complex linguistic competencies. Classroom evidence indicated that students were at the A1 level and had difficulty retaining the taught B1 ESE English curriculum, thus performing poorly on diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments. This pattern revealed a gap between the current ESE English curriculum's B1 level learning outcomes and the students' A1 English ability. Theoretically, this gap is significant as it represents the missing developmental stages in language acquisition, where learners must move from basic communication to more sophisticated linguistic interactions.

3. Methodology

This study used a treatment and control design with a sample of 29 Grade 9 Emirati students enrolled in schools following the ESE English curriculum for the past three years. The same Grade 9 General class was observed by the teacher-researcher three times over two weeks. Each class was 45 minutes long,

with no external interruptions, which ensured consistent instructional time. The first lesson was used as a control, while the other two were interventions. The observations were conducted in the morning, before the lunch break, to maintain consistency in students' energy levels. All students in the class were native Arabic speakers and demonstrated English language skills at the A1 CEFR level. The experiment was conducted entirely in English, and the main difference between the control and intervention lessons was the English CEFR level. To investigate the group's lesson engagement and enjoyment, a mixed-methods approach was implemented in the class over the three lessons to ensure triangulation of data collection methods and limit biases (Pine, 2009). A teacher journal, substantiated by in-class audio recordings, in-class formative assessments, and a reflective questionnaire, in the form of an Exit Ticket, were used to measure students' engagement with the material and overall enjoyment. Exit tickets are a quick, informal assessment that helps teachers gain information about students' perceptions while encouraging critical reflection among students (King-Sears & Johnson, 2020). To measure student engagement, the teacher tallied and tabulated the number of times students needed to redirect their attention to the task (Table 1). The teacher also compared the overall noise levels of the students during the control and treatment lessons to ascertain their engagement. The teacher's reflective journal documented the students' enjoyment of class material and concentration levels during lesson tasks. The students were also asked to self-rate their level of enjoyment on a smiley-face scale composed of three graphic faces with happy, neutral, and sad expressions. Graphic smiling faces were used to gauge students' responses instead of textual elements, as according to King-Sears and Johnson (2020), incorporating non-textual elements into Exit Tickets may allow students to communicate their experiences more accurately. This approach ensured a balance between qualitative and quantitative data collection.

All 29 students attended each lesson; therefore, the class dynamic was consistent across all three lessons. Consent was obtained to audio-record students and for their use of formative assessments in data collection; students were made aware of the recording at the beginning of every lesson. The recording device was placed in the same location on the teacher's desk, which was situated at the front of the classroom, in each lesson to ensure consistency among recordings.

In the control lesson, the class was taught the ESE English curriculum, following the prescribed ESE Unit 8 CEFR B1 lesson plans. The in-class activities were taken from the prescribed textbook. A YouTube video was used at the beginning of the lesson to pique students' interest and draw their attention to the lesson's topic. Unit 8 in the ESE English coursebook is entitled "Natural Disasters." As such, two lessons based on volcanoes were drafted at the A1 level as a treatment condition, in alignment with the coursebook's topic. The themes and types of activities in both intervention classes were designed to closely follow the structure of the control lesson. The questions were in a multiple-choice format, similar to the question types given in the summative assessment. The main difference between the control and intervention lessons was the language complexity. While the control class used academic words and complex sentence structures, the intervention lessons used common words and simplified sentence structures. As in the control lesson, new vocabulary was introduced at the start with videos, picture aids,

and simple definitions. Answers were elicited from students at the end of a set time, and feedback and clarification were given orally. As the focus of this study was the effect of the CEFR level on student engagement and motivation, incorporating oral feedback was not considered a measured variable. At the end of each observed lesson, the same Exit Ticket was administered to the students to gauge their perceptions of the lessons.

Before handing out the Exit Tickets to each student, the teacher instructed the students not to write their names on the paper and then explained the meanings of each section in detail. The teacher then allowed a high-achieving student who demonstrated a sound understanding of each section to translate the Exit Ticket into Arabic for the entire class. She then checked the class's understanding by asking concept-checking questions related to the contents of the Exit Ticket. The teacher then stressed to the students the importance of expressing their opinions honestly so that beneficial changes could be made, as according to Gerber *et al.* (2013), student questionnaires may have a positive bias due to the influence of social desirability. Lastly, she assured protection of the students' anonymity by stating that a student would collect the Exit Ticket papers. When administering the Exit Tickets to the students, the teacher instructed some students not to write their names on the paper. The teacher also had to request some students to translate the contents of the Exit Tickets to their seatmates in the first lesson, as some students still needed help understanding the instructions. According to García and McDonough (2018), explicit instructions are essential for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. However, as students were used to translating instructions, there is a possibility that incorrect translations may have occurred. The teacher used instruction-checking questions at the end of the students' translations to ensure accuracy. On the two subsequent days of the experiment, there was less need for iteration and translation. Still, the instructions were repeated each day, albeit with less emphasis, as the students understood what was required of them.

After each lesson, the teacher journaled an in-depth reflection on each lesson, which was simultaneously corroborated by the in-class audio recordings. The reflections included the students' reactions to the in-class activities and the teacher's perceptions of the students' behaviors during each phase of the lesson. Observations on the frequency of calls to attention were noted separately, quantified, and recorded for each lesson (see Table 1).

Table 1

The relationship between the teacher's calls to attention and the students' levels of enjoyment.

Lessons	Calls to attention	Student enjoyment 😊	Student enjoyment 😐	Student enjoyment ☹️
Control	52	24	5	0
Experiment 1	36	21	8	0
Experiment 2	39	20	9	0

4. Results

In this experiment, a teacher journal promoted critical reflection on the lessons (Light, 2014), and it was substantiated by audio recordings to validate the teacher's in-class observations to achieve a more objective and holistic outlook of the lessons' proceedings. The teacher journal indicated that the teacher called the students to attention 16 fewer times in the first intervention lesson than in the control lesson (Table 1). According to the audio recordings, the noise level in the classroom was also lower in the intervention lessons than in the control lesson. Students still appeared to rely on peer collaboration to answer the questions in the intervention formative assessments. However, as the class was quieter, it could be assumed that students had less need for collaboration, as they found they could largely understand the material. According to the teacher journal, students generally appeared more engaged and empowered in the intervention lesson. The teacher journal also emphasized the importance of repetition in the control lesson, as students were not only more frequently called to attention, but instructions also had to be reiterated more frequently than in the intervention lessons, even after concept-checking questions were asked by the teacher and answered by the class.

Teacher observations suggest that students who were called to attention typically expressed higher levels of enjoyment in the class, even though the teacher journals concluded that students seemed to enjoy and be more engaged in the intervention lessons (Table 1). According to the teacher journal reflections, "the students generally seemed interested and even impressed" with the content of the intervention lessons as they were captivated by the vivid imagery in the videos, the inner workings of volcanoes, and the extent of destruction a volcano could cause. It was also recorded that the class appeared "quieter than the previous lesson." The discrepancy between the students' feedback and the teacher journal reflections could be because the teaching methods may have become monotonous as the same lesson structure was repeated in all three classes or that the students' perception of enjoyment lay in a more communal environment. As the students were believed to have high interdependent self-construal (Yadav & Mishra, 2017), incorporating activities carried out in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development may have increased the students' levels of enjoyment (Shehzad, 2022).

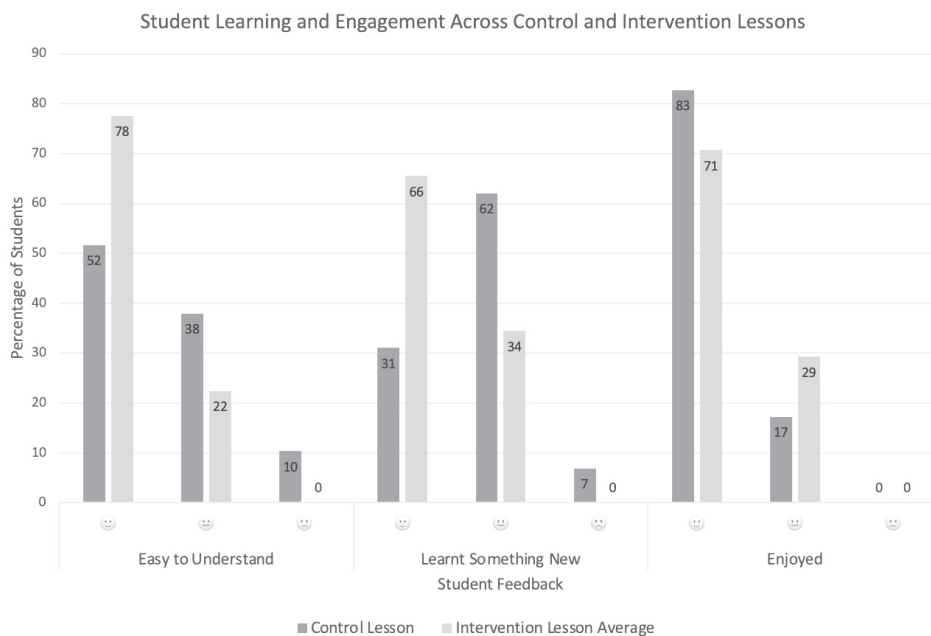
According to Leenknecht *et al.* (2021), formative assessments are an essential part of the learning process, which could result in greater feelings of autonomy, subject competence, and motivation in students. In the control lesson, students primarily relied on peer support to complete the formative assessments, as it was observed that they could not answer some questions without support. This partially accounted for the increase in noise levels in the classroom. In the intervention classes, the students generally worked individually, so the noise level in the classroom was lower. Teacher journals indicated that while only two students asked for more time to complete the questions in the control lesson, 93% of papers were fully answered, compared to an average of 95.5% in the intervention lessons, where the teacher journals reported that several students requested more time. No consistent or significant difference was reported in the number of correctly answered questions, so the results of the formative assessments were

not highlighted in this study. Additionally, this study aimed to measure student engagement rather than progression, so the focus was placed on the engagement observed during the tasks, rather than on the results of the tasks.

All of the Exit Tickets were filled out at the end of all of the lessons, and there were no cases of incomplete forms. Compared to the control lesson, 35% more students claimed to have learnt something new in the experiment sessions (Figure 1). This aligned with the teacher’s expectations of the learning outcomes. Moreover, 26% more students also claimed the intervention classes were easier to understand, even though the results from the formative assessments showed no significant difference in the accuracy of answers between the control and intervention lessons (Figure 1). This suggests that students relied heavily on the support of higher-attaining students to complete the formative assessments in the control lesson, but were able to answer more questions independently in the intervention lessons. The Exit Tickets also showed that the students reported learning and understanding more of the class material in the intervention lessons (Figure 1). As seen in Figure 1, students’ responses on the Exit ticket were overall more positive in the intervention lessons than in the control class. As such, it may be considered that this experiment positively influenced students’ learning.

Figure 1

Student learning and engagement across control and intervention lessons.



5. Discussion

While Hulstijn (2007) criticizes the CEFR model for determining language proficiency, students in this study have displayed overall low proficiency and difficulty expressing themselves and interpreting others in

English. Therefore, considering them at the A1 CEFR proficiency level is apt. In alignment with Sugg (2017) and Martin *et al.* (2017), this experiment attempted to lower the CEFR level of the English curriculum in order to foster a deeper understanding of the material among students. This study isolated the delivered curriculum's CEFR level as the main factor behind student motivation and in-class engagement – the teacher's approaches to teaching, the types of learning activities, the types of feedback, and other factors were not considered in the research to isolate this variable.

Students in this study typically relied on their colleagues for translation and explanation, unlike Sugg's (2017) students, who relied more on teacher validation of their responses and translations to English. While Martin *et al.* (2017) suggest that students learn helplessness after a period of reliance, it could be argued that the students in this study were indeed helpless to the ESE English curriculum as they were unable to access the B1 CEFR material, as opposed to them being unwilling to work without aid. As with Sugg (2017), the students in this experiment showed more autonomy and engagement after simplifying the curriculum to the A1 CEFR level in the intervention classes. Still, students' lack of proficiency in English may have detracted from their potential contribution to this study.

Students' interdependent self-construal was considered to be a reason for the positive correlation between the progressively lower levels of classroom noise and lower levels of enjoyment reported, as Yadav and Mishra (2017) state that students from collectivist cultures generally prefer to work with their colleagues, while in this study, the students were tasked with formative assessments aimed at the individual. Teacher journal entries and Exit Ticket responses reveal an unexpected pattern where higher student engagement was often accompanied by lower reported enjoyment, which contrasts with Stipek's (1996) suggestion that enjoyment and motivation align. Although this study was only directed at gauging the effect of the CEFR level on the students' engagement and not on student enjoyment, incorporating more stimulating teaching methods and activities within Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Shehzad, 2022) could have increased both of these factors as the results indicate potential tension between individual assessments and collectivist learning preferences. This suggests that curriculum developers should balance fostering individual accountability and appropriate collaboration.

Farah and Ridge (2009) state that the ESE English curriculum faces challenges and must be developed further. Stabback (2016, p.16) concurs that "good quality curriculum development is an ongoing and continuous process," thus, it could be expected that beneficial changes to the ESE English curriculum would need an extensive amount of time to research and implement thoroughly. Additionally, the distinctly different cultural and educational context suggests a need for a more contextualized approach to both assessment and curriculum design (Mohamed, 2022).

According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), if students understood their low-achieving areas through more comprehensive feedback from assessments, they may have been more inclined to engage in all lessons. Additionally, as the lessons were teacher-led and the structure of the lessons was neither varied nor incorporated technology, these could have led to waning engagement. Alsawaier (2018) claims that gamification in classes may increase student motivation and engagement. While the findings of this study

seem to conclude that adjusting the CEFR level of the English curriculum would be the next course of action, it is worthwhile to note that this study was conducted over a very short time, with a context-specific, small sample. As Mohamed (2022) points out, educational systems with different cultural, social, or linguistic dynamics may yield different results when adjusting the CEFR levels of their curricula. The findings, therefore, need to be considered within the UAE's unique pluralistic context, where students navigate different colloquial forms of Arabic on top of English. Future research could involve studies with larger and more regionally diverse student populations to examine how these complex linguistic environments impact engagement with the CEFR and how necessary it is to make adjustments.

As this study was conducted over a short time frame, thoroughly measuring the retention of material was not possible. A longitudinal study spanning several weeks may more robustly measure the effects of this intervention. However, as students appeared focused and engaged, the grounds for solid retention and knowledge progression were present, according to Van Dijk's (2013) findings, as the students' learning objectives were suitable for their level. Although the lesson topic was not specifically relevant to the UAE context – there are neither active nor dormant volcanoes in the UAE – the topic maintained the students' attention as the lessons' videos and imagery were vivid and awe-inspiring, inciting the students' interest. However, cultural relevance could have positively affected student engagement. While the intervention lessons showed positive results, the topic may have been less relatable to the students' lived experiences. Integrating culturally relevant content reflecting the students' realities and interests could further enhance motivation and engagement. Incorporating UAE-specific natural disasters, like flooding, into the intervention lessons may have bridged the gap between students' personal lives and the lesson's content, leading to more engagement. Another limitation of this study may be the reliance on teacher journal reflections. According to Rosenbaum (1991), some biases are difficult to address. Despite data triangulation through audio recordings, observational bias is always possible, as the teacher's perspectives may have affected the assessment of students' engagement.

This study also focused on the CEFR level of the curriculum as the main factor influencing student engagement, without accounting for other external variables. Factors such as a student's home environment, personal interests, relationships with peers and the teacher, or socio-emotional dynamics could also have impacted their engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These unexamined factors may affect the validity of this study's findings, as student motivation and engagement are often influenced by a complex interplay of elements.

As this experiment only focused on adjusting the CEFR level of the content and not revising the entire ESE English curriculum, moving away from a textbook-driven curriculum to one driven by experiential learning or a more student-centered design could potentially benefit the students. Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that a more flexible, level-adjusted approach may benefit English students. Mirroring broader patterns in UAE education, these curricular adjustments can create a learning environment where students feel more secure in expressing their understanding of content (Binothman et al., 2024). At the time of this research, the students of this study only received a letter grade for diagnostic

and summative assessments. Factors such as the mode of summative assessments, feedback after assessments, and the curriculum design may affect students' beliefs and subsequent engagement and progression. Introducing a summative assessment that encourages students to think critically and answer questions in a written format instead of multiple-choice answers encourages higher-order cognition, according to Polat (2020). Potentially, addressing these curriculum issues could lead to the students developing mastery in the lower levels of the curriculum, leading to knowledge progression.

6. Conclusion

This experiment implied that students in this sample were not engaging optimally with the learning material in the current ESE English curriculum. The topics and teaching methods of the intervention and control lessons were similar, while the CEFR levels of the control and intervention lessons varied.

Several topics for further research emerged from this study. Firstly, delving into the current learning culture of the school would greatly benefit the ESE in understanding what drives students' motivation within the context of this particular school. Once this has been identified, incorporating teaching methods that foster student engagement within Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development may prove to be beneficial (Shehzad, 2022). Secondly, curriculum developers may address monotony by varying lesson structures and providing diversified elements through technology. Thirdly, curriculum developers may consider tailoring the curriculum to students' actual CEFR levels, reflected in diagnostic and summative assessment data, as adjusting material complexity could enhance engagement and learning outcomes, according to Sweller *et al.*'s (2011) Cognitive Load Theory. English students may be streamed into classes based on their CEFR level to reduce their cognitive load and maximize learning. Curriculum designers may also develop comprehensive feedback mechanisms for summative assessments beyond letter grades, as qualitative feedback allows students to reflect and improve.

This study also suggests potential ramifications for wider educational policies in the UAE. Given the nation's focus on improving English proficiency and integrating global standards, adjusting the curriculum to match student competency levels could significantly improve student outcomes. Curriculum planners might consider adjusting the English curriculum to better suit students' linguistic context, focusing not just on content but also on more meaningful engagement and motivation strategies.

In summary, a quality curriculum responds to students' diverse needs, fosters continuous improvement, and prioritizes student outcomes. A well-designed curriculum empowers students to make the most of the knowledge available to them (Stabback, 2016). Ensuring students engage with the curriculum will maximize material and subsequent knowledge progression.

Acknowledgements

None.

Funding Information

None.

Competing Interests

None.

Author Biography

Danielle Cummings has had a long-standing interest in education and philosophy. She is currently an English Teacher at a secondary school in the United Arab Emirates. Danielle is currently pursuing a Master of Arts degree in Philosophy, with a focus on AI and Ethics at GCAS College Dublin and is expected to graduate in 2025.

Philip Anderson is an Assistant Professor at the University of Birmingham Dubai in the School of Education. A former secondary school teacher and head of department, Philip has a rich background in creativity and the arts and brings a blend of practical academic insight to the field of education. He holds a Master of Arts in Applied Professional Studies in Education from the University of Sheffield. His main research interest is creativity in education, with a special emphasis on music's role. This is further reflected in his current PhD research at the University of Durham, which investigates the confidence of trainee primary teachers in delivering musical activities. His other research interests are in digital pedagogies and the elevation of teacher research. In addition to their teaching and research responsibilities, Philip is an active member of the research committee at the University of Birmingham Dubai and is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

References

- [1] Alhabbash, M., Alsheikh, N. and Al Mohammedi, N. (2021) "The affordance of culturally-based texts and EFL Arab college students' gain in communication skill: A mixed method study," *The journal of language and linguistic studies*, 17(1), pp. 346–367. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17263/jlls.903443>.
- [2] Alhashmi, M., Taha-Thomure, H., & Almazroui, K. (2022). Arabic language teachers' perceptions of a standards-based educational reform in the UAE. *Gulf Education and Social Policy Review*, 2(2), 91–114.
- [3] Al-Hussein, M., & Gitsaki, C. (2018). Foreign language learning policy in the United Arab Emirates: Local and global agents of change. In C. Chua (Ed.), *Un(intended) language planning in a globalising world: Multiple levels of players at work* (pp. 97–112). De Gruyter.
- [4] Alsawaier, R. S. (2018). The effect of gamification on motivation and engagement. *International Journal of Information and Learning Technology*, 35(1), 56–79.

- [5] Biggs, J. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning: A role for summative assessment? *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 103–110.
- [6] Binothman, M., Alhabbash, M., Al Mohammedi, N., & Ibrahim, A. (2024). Unraveling high-school students' learning experiences in English, Science, and Math: A mixed methods study. *Cogent Education*, 11(1), 2351243.
- [7] Council of Europe. (2020). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Companion Volume. Namur: Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4>
- [8] Farah, S., & Ridge, N. (2009). *Challenges to curriculum development in the UAE*. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242611859_Challenges_to_Curriculum_Development_in_the_UAE
- [9] Gallagher, K. (2011). Bilingual education in the UAE: Factors, variables, and critical questions. *Education, Business and Society*, 4(1), 62–79.
- [10] García-Fuentes, C., & McDonough, K. (2018). The effect of explicit instruction and task repetition on Colombian EFL students' use of politeness strategies during disagreements. *Language Learning Journal*, 46(4), 470–482.
- [11] Gerber, C., Mans-Kemp, N., & Schlechter, A. (2013). Investigating the moderating effect of student engagement on academic performance. *Acta Academica*, 45(4), 256–274.
- [12] Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81–112.
- [13] Hayden, M. (2006). *Introduction to international education: International schools and their communities*. SAGE.
- [14] Hulstijn, J. H. (2007). The shaky ground beneath the CEFR: Quantitative and qualitative dimensions of language proficiency. *Modern Language Journal*, 91(4), 663–667.
- [15] Khamis, V., Dukmak, S., & Elhoweris, H. (2008). Factors affecting the motivation to learn among United Arab Emirates middle and high school students. *Educational Studies*, 34(3), 191–200.
- [16] King-Sears, M. E., & Johnson, T. M. (2020). Universal design for learning chemistry instruction for students with and without learning disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 41(4), 207–218.
- [17] Kippels, S. (2024). The growth of private schools in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. In K. P. Antonina Santalova (Ed.), *Privatization in education* (p. 105). Oxford University Press.
- [18] Kohn, A. (2013). The case against grades. *Counterpoints*, 451, 143–153.
- [19] Leenknecht, M., Wijnia, L., Köhler, M., Fryer, L., Rikers, R., & Loyens, S. (2021). Formative assessment as practice: The role of students' motivation. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 46(2), 236–255.
- [20] Light, J. (2014). Reflective writing for language teachers. *TESL Canada Journal*, 31(1), 100.

- [21] Marquez, J., Lambert, L., Ridge, N. Y., & Walker, S. (2022). The PISA Performance Gap between national and expatriate students in the United Arab Emirates. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 21(1), 22–45.
- [22] Martin, A. J., Ginns, P., & Papworth, B. (2017). Motivation and engagement: Same or different? Does it matter? *Learning and Individual Differences*, 55, 150–162.
- [23] Ministry of Education. (2019). *UAE Cabinet approves formation of Emirates Schools Establishment's Board*. Ministry of Education UAE. <https://www.moe.gov.ae/En/MediaCenter/News/Pages/UAEeducarioninst.aspx>
- [24] Mohamed, S. (2022). The application of the CEFR to the assessment of L1 competence and plurilingual competence. In *Bilingual Writers and Corpus Analysis* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- [25] Pine, G. J. (2009). *Teacher action research: Building knowledge democracies*. SAGE Publications.
- [26] Peterson, C., Maier, S. F., & Seligman, M. E. (1993). *Learned helplessness: A theory for the age of personal control*. Oxford University Press.
- [27] Polat, M. (2020). Analysis of multiple-choice versus open-ended questions in language tests according to different cognitive domain levels. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 14, 76–96.
- [28] Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 54–67.
- [29] Rosenbaum, P. R. (1991). Discussing hidden bias in observational studies. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 115(11), 901–905.
- [30] Sawyer, R. K. (Ed.). (2006). *The Cambridge handbook of the learning sciences*. Cambridge University Press.
- [31] Scott, D. (2021). *On learning: A general theory of objects and object-relations*. UCL Press.
- [32] Shehzad, N. (2022). ESL teachers' experiences on XReading as a formative assessment tool in extensive reading: A study of a federal institution in the UAE. In *The Sharjah International Conference on Education in Post COVID-19* (pp. 13–26). Springer Nature Singapore.
- [33] Sparks, S. D. (2015, November 9). *Types of assessments: A head-to-head comparison*. Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/types-of-assessments-a-head-to-head-comparison/2015/11>
- [34] Stabback, P. (2016). *What makes a quality curriculum?* UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000243975>
- [35] Stipek, D. J. (1996). Handbook of educational psychology. In D. C. Berliner & R. C. Calfee (Eds.), *Macmillan Library Reference USA*. Prentice Hall International.
- [36] Sugg, R. (2017). *Process writing for the rest of us: A writing foundation course for CEFR A1-B2 level students*. [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://h-bunkyo.repo.nii.ac.jp/record/1139/files/kenkyukiyo52%](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://h-bunkyo.repo.nii.ac.jp/record/1139/files/kenkyukiyo52%20)

2528Sugg%2529.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwi0lftko5SNAxVR_7sIHRAgOu4QFnoECBUQAQ&usg=AOvVaw2YwPwBQzTJn9EkLw-gUo4k

- [37] Sweller, J., Ayres, P., & Kalyuga, S. (2011). *Cognitive load theory*. Springer.
- [38] Van Dijk, H. G. (2013). A theoretical understanding of student engagement in curriculum review and development. *Administratio Publica*, 21(1), 84–101.
- [39] William, D. (2018). *What do we mean by assessment for learning?* YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-myBw36_DA
- [40] Yadav, P., & Mishra, A. K. (2017). Personal and social factors in achievement-related cognition: A study of attribution, appraisal, and emotion among university students in Delhi. *Psychological Studies*, 62(3), 291–304.
- [41] Young, M. (2014). *Knowledge and the future school: Curriculum and social justice*. Bloomsbury Academic.