The Impact of Student-Centred Instruction on the Academic Integration of Libyan University Freshman

أثر التدريس المتمركز حول الطالب في معالجة تحديات الاندماج الأكاديمي لدى المستجدين بكلية التربية

فاطمة الهمالي دريد*

(استاذ مساعد) قسم اللغةالانجليزية ، كلية التربية طرابلس ، جامعة طرابلس ، ليبيا

F.dreid@uot.edu.ly

الملخص :

تستقرئ هذه الدراسة أثر الاستقلالية الطلابية والتدريس التفاعلي في تحفيز الانخراط الأكاديمي لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية بليبيا، وذلك في مواجهةٍ منهجيةٍ لآثار التلقين التقليدي الذي أفضى تاريخياً إلى ركود المهارات التواصلية وقمع المشاركة الفاعلة. وعبر ثمانية أسابيع من التقصي متعدد الأدوات، رُصِدت تحولات عميقة مست الأبعاد السلوكية والوجدانية والمعرفية لعينة البحث، حيث أثمر منح حق الاختيار في المواضيع قفزةً نوعية في إدراك الطلاب لجدوى المحتوى ومسيس حاجتهم المعرفية إليه. فيما نجحت المناظرات المهيكلة في تبديد الصمت المطبق، محولةً القاعة إلى فضاء حيوي تفاعل فيه الجميع بلا استثناء، كما شكلت النقاشات المصغرة ملاذاً آمناً، استعاد عبره الطلبة الأكثر تردداً ثقتهم بأصواتهم وقدرتهم على المحاجة والتعبير. وتكشف النتائج أن الانتقال من مركزية المعلم إلى دور الميسّر قد أطلق "دورة تفاعل إيجابية" تجاوزت حدود الفصل الدراسي، إذ بدأ الطلاب بتمثّل هذه القيم التشاركية كجزء أصيل من هوياتهم المهنية الناشئة بوصفهم معلمي المستقبل ومربي الأجيال. وتؤكد الدراسة أن إرساء دعائم الاستقلالية هو السبيل الأنجع لإحياء تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في السياق الليبي المعاصر، لكنها تشدد في الوقت ذاته على أهمية الدعم التربوي المتدرج لاحتواء القلق المصاحب لكسر رتابة الأنماط التعليمية القديمة. إن هذه التجربة تمثل دعوة لإعادة صياغة العلاقة بين المعلم والمتعلم نحو أفق

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أكثـر رحابــة وانفتاحـاً وتفاعليــة، بمــا يضــمن تحويــل قاعــات العلــم مــن بيئــات للصمت والتلقي إلى منابر صاخبة بالتفكير الناقد والنمو اللغوي الخلاق.
الكلمــات المفتاحيــة: الانخــراط الصــفي (أو التفاعــل الطلابي)،اسـتقلالية المـتعلم، المنــاظرات المنهجيــة (أو المنــاظرات المهيكلــة)،طرق تــدريس اللغــة الإنجليزيــة كلغة أجنبية،التعليم العالي الليبي، التعلم النشط

The Impact of Stuent-Centred Instruction on the Academic Integration of Libyan University Freshman

Fatma A. Ali Dreid*

Assestent professor, English Department, Faculty of Education, Tripoli, Libya

*Corresponding: F.dreid@uot.edu.ly / fatmadreid@yahoo.com

Abstract

This case stday examines the impact of student choice and interactive teaching techniques specifically structured debates and discussion on the classroom engagement of 15 freshman university students majoring in English language teaching. Many Libyan students enter university with a background in traditional, lecture-based instruction that limits authentic participation and communication growth. Using a muli-method approach including survey, interviews, reflective journals, instructor notes, the study tracked changes in behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement over an eight-week period. Findings reveal significant improvement scross all three engagement dimension. Allowing student to vote on weekly topics increased perceived relevance and interest, with the number of students findings topics relevant jumping from 5 to 13. Structured debates successfully prompted active participation, moving the class from a state of baseline silence to a final debate where %100of students contributed simultaneously, small-group discussion provided a "a safespace" that empowred even the most hesitant learners to speak regularly. The results demonstrate that even modest shifts from a teacher-centered to a facilitative role can foster a "virtuous cycle" of engagement. Furthermore, students began to intergrate these interactive methods into their emerging professional identities as future educators. The

study concludes that providing autonomy and structured interaction is anevective strategy for revitalizing EFL learning in Libyan context, though it recommends careful scaffolding to mange the initial anxiety associated with active learning.

Keys words : Student engagement, learner autonomy, structured debates, EFL pedagogy, Libyan higher education, active learning.

There are a lot of benefits linked to effective student engagement. This includes positive educational outcomes and lack of boredom in learning. Unfortunaley, it is a challenge for many educators to keep students engaged. Munna and Kalam (2021) observed that "the major hindrance in student engagement is assessing their current knowledge levels to teach lessons effectively" (P. 96). In this context, traditional approaches mostly disengage learners. They tend not to enjoy learning because of limited interaction. This is the same problem in language classrooms where students avoid talking due to fear that they can be judged or make mistakes. This leads to inactive behaviors. For example, there is silent note-taking, which limits opportunities for meaningful communication and growth (Aflah et al., 2023). When such disengagement persists, it can eliminate self-confidence and reduce the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs that rely heavily on interaction to build future educators' skills.

The problem is particularly relevant in the Libyan university setting, where many freshmen studying to become English teachers enter classrooms shaped by years of traditional, lecture-based instruction. While these methods may convey content knowledge, they rarely invite learners to participate authentically. As a result, the capacity to engage in spoken English, to debate, or to explore ideas critically often remains underdeveloped. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of two specific teaching techniques (student choice of topics and interactive classroom methods, such as debates and discussions) on the engagement of Libyan freshman students preparing to become English teachers. It focuses on this group to understand whether these methods promote behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in class activities, which are central to engagement (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). In addition, the study seeks to determine whether students can be motivated if given a say in lessons.

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To achieve this purpose, the following research questions guide the study:

1.   How does allowing students to choose classroom topics influence their behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement?

2.   In what ways do structured debates and class discussions affect students' participation and motivation in EFL learning?

3.   What differences, if any, are observed between student engagement during traditional instruction and during the intervention period?

4.   How do students reflect on their own experiences of engagement when given opportunities for choice and interaction?

Literature Review

Student Engagement: A Multidimensional Concept

Student engagement has become central in discussions of educational quality across disciplines. Researchers have generally described it as behavioral participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment. Nakamura et al. (2021) highlight its complexity, noting the "multifaceted model" of engagement that connects classroom tasks to motivation and achievement. In higher education, lecture-intensive modes of teaching cause disengagement. This is the major cause of absenteeism in these institutions (Munna & Kalam, 2021). Active learning is necessary to improve motivation, self-efficacy, and persistence.

Studies in EFL settings confirm these challenges. Aflah et al. (2023) worked with university students in Indonesia and found that learners tended to remain passive. They preferred note-taking to speaking. This pattern was enhanced by the fear of making mistakes in English. Their intervention, which introduced small group discussions, demonstrated that interactive methods encouraged participation and improved students' outlook on learning English. This evidence reflects reports from Libya and other regions where disengagement in early university language courses constrains communicative competence.

Student Choice and Autonomy in Learning

One prominent theme in engagement research is the impact of choice. The idea that autonomy enhances motivation draws on self-determination theory (Nakamura et al., 2021). Studies confirm that when students are given

real opportunities to choose, their investment in tasks increases. Wang et al. (2015) investigated EFL vocabulary learning in Taiwan using a 14-week design. Learners who chose their own target words were more motivated and engaged compared to those assigned words. However, this was only for task-specific motivation since it did not reflect in general attitudes toward English learning. This suggested that autonomy strengthens immediate engagement even if it does not alter broader dispositions.

In Thailand, Nakamura et al. (2021) tested choice within task-based instruction. They compared constrained and unconstrained discussion tasks. Students who generated their own options showed greater cognitive engagement, including more negotiation of meaning and self-repair, but also reported higher anxiety. The findings depict the effects of choice, which deepens cognitive involvement, although it may also heighten emotional intensity.

Different contexts support the connection between choice and engagement. For instance, Johnson (2024) found that offering choice in the reading materials and assignments heightened the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement for middle school learners. Those who struggled with reading in the past became more interested when given the option to select from a range of texts tailored to their interests. Paullet and Pinchot (2021) also observed that offering weekly assignment options to students in a fully online university course improved their engagement and performance. Lane et al. (2023) provided further evidence and demonstrated that instructional choice reduced off-task behavior across diverse learning settings. Collectively, these studies suggest that the presence of choice is a flexible and low-cost strategy for enhancing engagement, regardless of context.

Student Voice and Agency

Closely related to choice is the broader concept of student voice. Conner et al. (2025) conducted a large study of 1,751 students on this aspect. Results showed that when teachers actively sought and responded to student input, engagement improved in agency, attendance, and grades. Their work distinguishes between choice, where teachers define the options, and voice, where students generate possibilities themselves. Daoayan and Caroy (2024) indicated similar effects in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this context, promoting student voice through discussions, gamification, and debates improved critical thinking and collaborative problem-solving. These findings illustrate that student engagement grows when learners perceive that their perspectives are important.

Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) add that student voice initiatives often enhance disciplinary identity and metacognition. In EFL contexts, where learners may struggle with self-confidence, opportunities to exercise voice may validate their identities as language users, for Libyan freshmen preparing to be teachers, practicing voice and agency could be especially transformative. It can position them as future educators who value participation.

Debates as Interactive Pedagogy

Debates have a long history as a teaching strategy and engagement. One key study by Solehudin (2024) found that interactive debates improved fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and critical thinking for Arabic learners. It also reduced speaking anxiety. The design included classroom observations, interviews, and reflective journals, highlighting psycholinguistic benefits alongside academic ones. Similar results were seen in nursing education, where Carinanos-Ayala et al. (2021) synthesized findings from 14 studies. They concluded that debating improved argumentative capacity, moral judgment, and communication skills, though research designs varied.

Debates also hold potential in non-Western contexts. Ghafar and Region-Iraq (2024) reviewed their historical and disciplinary applications and emphasized how debates stimulate creativity, open-mindedness, and academic success across fields. Hendrickson (2021) focused on political science in the U.S., where debates increased excitement, interest, and self-efficacy. DeSantis (2023) explored structured classroom debates in asynchronous online courses. Despite initial resistance to active learning, students valued the format for promoting deeper understanding and flexibility.

More innovative applications include Guo et al. (2024), who introduced chatbots into debate preparation. While students benefited from idea generation, they relied more heavily on their own proposals in actual

debates. This reflected the need for human-centered interaction even when technology is present. Another consistent finding is that reflection deepens engagement. Solehudin (2024) integrated reflective journals into his study of debates to capture students' perceptions of anxiety reduction and confidence building. Reflective journals also improve self-awareness and motivation in language learning. In this context, learners can document their experiences. It promotes cognitive engagement and emotional processing.

Discussions and Collaborative Learning

Alongside debates, class discussions and collaborative learning activities have been widely shown to support engagement. Sartania et al. (2022) compared tutor-led and collaborative case-based learning in medical education. The collaborative format increased student participation, confidence, and exam scores. This showed that structured discussion is effective and can consolidate knowledge. In another study in Indonesia, small group discussions enhanced critical thinking and motivation (Aflah et al., 2023). These findings are similar to those of Daoayan and Caroy (2024), who found that online discussions during the pandemic promoted autonomy, critical thinking, and cooperative learning. In each case, the discussion provided space for students to engage actively with content and with peers. This strengthened both social and academic dimensions of learning. For Libyan EFL students, who often hesitate to speak in large groups, structured discussions could offer a manageable entry point into more interactive classroom practices.

Literature Review Gap

While the existing literature consistently demonstrates that student voice, choice, and interactive pedagogy enhance engagement in diverse global settings, there remains a critical gap regarding these strategies within the specific socio-educational landscape of Libya. Most current research focuses on Western or East Asian contexts , leaving the experiences of Libyan EFL freshmen who often transition from years of rigid, lecture-based secondary schooling largely unexplored. Although studies by Aflah et al. (2023) and Solehudin (2024) highlight the benefits of discussions and debates in similar EFL environments, the unique cultural shift from a

teacher-centered tradition to a facilitative, autonomy-driven model in Libyan higher education requires deeper investigation. Therefore, this study addresses this void by examining how structured interaction and topic choice influence the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement of Libyan teacher trainees.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a mixed methods case study design, intergrated both quantitive and qualitative data collection and analysis.this approach was used because it can help explore complex social and educational phenomena in real-life contexts. This approach captures both the perspectives of participants and the influence of context. In this study, the case consists of 15 Libyan freshman students enrolled in an introductory course on speaking skills as part of their teacher education program. The choice of a case study was deliberate. Instead of testing a hypothesis under controlled conditions, the goal was to understand how specific techniques played out in one authentic classroom environment.

Participants and Case Context

The participants were 15 students in their first semester at faculty of education Tripoli university, all majoring in English language teaching. Their backgrounds were diverse but shared several common features. Most had studied English in secondary school for six years, largely through grammar-translation approaches. They had inadequate opportunities to speak English in class before entering university. Additionally, many had not engaged in formal debates or interactive discussions conducted in English. The group included eight male students and ten female students, with an average age of 18 years. Traditionally, this course relied on teacher-led explanations of conversation models. Attendance was relatively stable, but instructors often observed silence, hesitation, and minimal voluntary participation. For this reason, the course offered an ideal site for testing interventions aimed at boosting engagement.

Selection Criteria

The only requirement here was that the students be enrolled in the speaking-skills course, which is mandatory for all freshmen. The sample size

was limited to one class group of 15 to make it manageable to introduce consistent interventions and track change over time. No students were excluded. Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis. Students also provided consent for their responses to be analyzed anonymously.

Intervention Description

Baseline Phase (Weeks 1–2):

The intervention was done in two phases over eight weeks. In the initial two weeks, teaching was done via the conventional model. The teacher presented dialogues, clarified vocabulary, and had students either repeat or engage in role-playing activities. Students filled out a baseline survey on their engagement levels and attitudes towards participation. These weeks provided a comparison point for later data.

Intervention Phase (Weeks 3–8):

- **Student Choice:** Each week, students voted on topics they wanted to discuss. A short list of three to five topics was presented. This was usually connected to daily life or familiar issues, such as social media, family roles, or university life. At times, students proposed their own topics, which were then included in the vote. The chosen topic guided the week's speaking activities. This process gave students a sense of control and investment in the material.

- **Debates:** Structured debates took place every two weeks. Students were divided into two teams, each assigned a position on the selected topic. Preparation time was provided. This included guidance on how to formulate simple arguments, use connectors, and respond to counterpoints. Debates were short (lasted about 20 minutes), but organized in a clear structure. There were opening statements, rebuttals, and closing remarks.

- **Discussions:** In non-debate weeks, the instructor facilitated class discussions. Small-group discussions were mostly used. This educator also used strategies such as think-pair-share, guiding questions, and prompts for personal connections.

Instructor Role:

In this case study, the instructor was more of a facilitator. Thus, the flow of talk was less controlled. It was more about managing turn-taking and encouraging quieter students to participate. During debates, the instructor

enforced rules of respectful exchange. In discussions, the role was to pose probing questions and ensure all students had chances to contribute. Importantly, the instructor maintained reflective notes after each class to track patterns of participation and atmosphere.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments
Student Surveys/Interviews:

At the start of the study (Week 1) and end (Week 8), students completed surveys. Firstly, Likert-scale items were used to measure behavioral engagement in terms of attendance and frequency of participation. It also addressed emotional engagement (interest, enjoyment), and cognitive engagement (focus, perceived effort). For example, students rated statements such as "I enjoy speaking activities in class" on a five-point scale. Open-ended questions asked about their experiences in previous English classes, expectations, and later reflections on how the intervention affected them. A small number of follow-up interviews clarified certain survey responses, particularly when students reported dramatic changes.

Reflective Journals:

Students kept short weekly journals in English or Arabic, depending on comfort level, describing their feelings about participation, their interest in the week's topic, and how they experienced the debate or discussion. Prompts included: "What part of today's activity helped you speak more?" or "Did you feel interested in this week's topic? Why or why not?" Journals were collected at the end of each week. This method gave students space to express themselves honestly without the pressure of speaking in front of peers.

Data Analysis

Survey and interview data were analyzed in two stages. First, quantitative Likert-scale responses were compared between the baseline and post-intervention surveys. This allowed identification of trends in behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Second, open-ended responses and interview notes were thematically coded, focusing on themes such as motivation, confidence, and enjoyment. Reflective journals were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process

involved reading all entries multiple times, generating initial codes (e.g., "confidence," "fear of mistakes," "interest in topic"), clustering them into themes (e.g., "growing confidence," "value of choice"), and reviewing these themes across weeks to track changes. Special attention was paid to recurring motifs and to shifts in language use, such as the move from negative to positive terms when describing speaking tasks.

Triangulation across surveys, interviews, journals, and instructor notes enhanced the reliability of the findings. Multiple data sources were compared to ensure a more balanced interpretation of engagement, rather than relying on a single measure.

Findings

Student Choice and Relevance

Allowing students to vote on discussion topics transformed the way they approached class. At the start, only a handful expressed interest in the speaking activities. By the end, almost all wrote in their journals that they were "looking forward" to the weekly session. One student summarized the shift simply: *"When I speak about football or social media, I forget my fear. It feels natural."* Survey data confirmed this change. At baseline, just 5 of 15 students agreed that topics felt relevant to their lives (3 or higher). After six weeks of topic choice, 13 students agreed. Table 1 shows that every student reported growth in both interest and perceived relevance. Some made dramatic jumps; for example, S4 and S10, who began with the lowest scores, reported near-maximum engagement by the end.

Table 1

Reported Interest and Relevance by Student (N=15)

Student	Baseline Interest (1–5)	Post-study Interest (1–5)	Baseline Relevance (1–5)	Post-study Relevance (1–5)
S1	2	5	2	5
S2	3	4	2	5
S3	2	5	3	5
S4	1	4	2	4
S5	3	5	3	5
S6	2	4	2	4
S7	2	5	2	5

S8	3	5	3	5
S9	2	4	2	4
S10	1	4	2	5
S11	2	5	3	5
S12	3	5	3	5
S13	2	4	2	4
S14	3	5	3	5
S15	2	4	2	4

Scale: 1 = very low, 5 = very high.

Discussions as Safe Spaces

While debates energized the classroom, discussions offered a more supportive environment for quieter students. Reflective journals often contrasted the two formats. One student admitted, "In debate, I feel stress, but in discussion, I feel free to try." Another wrote, "Small group is my chance. I speak more here than anywhere." Instructor notes confirm that participation during small-group discussions was nearly universal. Even the three students who described themselves as "silent" at baseline began speaking regularly by Week 5. By the end of the intervention, those students were initiating turns in whole-class discussions, something they had never done before.

Debates as a Facilitator for Active Participation

Debates stood out as moments of high visibility. Instructor notes recorded that during the first debate, only 11 students spoke, but by the final debate, all 15 contributed at least one argument. Students' journals capture the transformation. One student wrote: *"At first, I was shaking. After my group supported me, I tried. Now I know I can speak loudly in English."* Another explained: *"The debate gives me energy, like a game. I want to win but also to show my English."* Survey results revealed a dramatic increase in self-reported speaking frequency. At baseline, fewer than one in five students said they "often" spoke in class. By the end, 12 of 15 students placed themselves in that category (Figure 1).
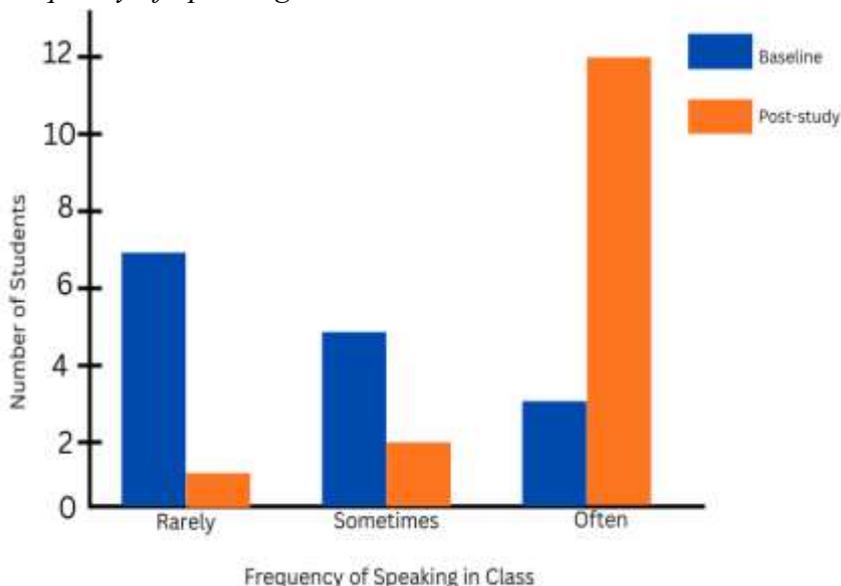
This shift was visible not only in numbers but also in the length and confidence of student contributions. Whereas baseline answers were often one or two words, debate transcripts showed that by Week 8, students were

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using linking devices such as *"because," "for example,"* and *"on the other hand."*

Figure 1

Frequency of Speaking in Class

Frequency of Speaking in Class

Changes Across Engagement Dimensions

The surveys captured growth across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Mean Engagement Scores (1–5 scale, N=15)

Dimension	Baseline Mean	Post Study Mean	Change
Behavioral (speaking frequency)	2.1	4.3	+2.2
Emotional (enjoyment)	2.7	4.6	+1.9
Emotional (anxiety, reverse-scored)	3.9	2.4	-1.5
Cognitive (reasoning in speech)	2.5	4.2	+1.7

The biggest change was in behavioral engagement: students moved from rarely participating to speaking frequently (+2.2). Emotional

engagement also improved, as enjoyment rose and anxiety fell. Cognitive engagement grew more gradually but was evident in journals where students began writing about "thinking of reasons" and "planning answers."

Student Reflections on Transformation

      The journals revealed three recurring themes: relevance, confidence, and enjoyment.

- **Relevance:** Students consistently described topics of their choice as "connected to me." One wrote, *"We are not learning only English. We are speaking about our life in English."*
- **Confidence:** Several noted that they were "less afraid of mistakes" and had learned that classmates would listen supportively.
- **Enjoyment:** The most frequent phrase was "not boring." Students contrasted the intervention with their secondary school experiences: *"Before, English class was writing grammar only. Now it is alive."*

      A particularly striking reflection came from a student in Week 7: *"I will be a teacher. I see now that if I give choice and discussion, my students will not sleep. They will be awake like us."* This shows that engagement strategies not only affected immediate learning but also shaped students' emerging professional identities.

      Discussion

      The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the theoretical link between learner autonomy and heightened engagement. Specifically, the dramatic shift in perceived relevance jumping from 5 to 13 studentsafter the introduction of topic voting aligns with Self-Determination Theory as discussed by Nakamura et al. (2021). This suggests that when Libyan students are empowered to choose, they move from passive "silent note-taking" to active "authentic participation"Furthermore, the universal participation observed in the final debate (100% contribution) validates the claims of DeSantis (2023) regarding the power of structured formats to compel participation. However, consistent with Nakamura et al. (2021), the anxiety reported by some students during these high-stakes interactions underscores the necessity of the "safe space" provided by small-group

discussions. Ultimately, this "virtuous cycle" of engagement observed in the Libyan classroom confirms that even modest shifts toward a facilitative role can revitalize EFL learning in traditional contexts

The case study explored whether giving Libyan EFL freshmen a choice of topics and engaging them in debates and discussions would improve classroom engagement. The findings showed substantial growth in behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. In this section, these results are interpreted in relation to the broader literature, the research questions, and the unique Libyan context.

The first research question asked how giving students a choice of discussion topics would affect engagement. The findings revealed a dramatic shift. At baseline, only a minority of students expressed interest in class topics. After six weeks of voting and proposing themes, nearly all reported high interest and relevance. This outcome aligns with what Patall et al. (2010) and Wang et al. (2015) found: choice promotes a sense of ownership that drives motivation. The Libyan students echoed the same logic, writing in journals that topics felt "close to my life" or "natural." In cultures where education is typically teacher-driven, as Lamb and Wedell (2015) observed, even small opportunities for choice can have outsized effects. Students who began as hesitant and quiet became eager to contribute once their preferences were acknowledged.

The effect also extended beyond interest to confidence. When students chose topics they knew well, they reduced their fear of mistakes. This depicts Derakhshan et al. (2021), who found Iranian learners felt more secure when discussions were built on familiar, self-selected themes. The Libyan cohort, who had often described silence and fear in previous classrooms, experienced empowerment through relevance. Interestingly, choice did not eliminate all anxiety. Some students still expressed worry in debates. This aspect resembles findings by Nakamura et al. (2021) that freedom of choice can raise anxiety alongside engagement. For the Libyan group, however, this anxiety was productive. Students felt more pride afterwards.

The second research question asked about the impact of structured debates and discussions on engagement. Results show that debates influenced behaviors significantly. For instance, all 15 students spoke during the final

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debate. This is very different from the silence observed at baseline. This outcome resonates with DeSantis (2023), who reported that debates compel participation by structuring turn-taking and encouraging argument.

There was also a crucial emotional effect. Many described debates as exciting and fun, although some admitted to being nervous. This outcome reflects Solehudin's (2024) finding that debates can reduce anxiety over time despite an initial increase. The Libyan students' journals revealed the same thing. In this context, they felt fear at first, before they were satisfied. In this way, debates acted as a form of productive struggle that pushed students beyond comfort zones and rewarded them with growth. Cognitively, debates required students to organize ideas, use connectors, and anticipate counterarguments. This was seen in the journals where several wrote about "thinking of reasons" or "preparing evidence." This supports research that interactive methods promote deep processing (Conner et al., 2025). What is remarkable is how quickly students moved from one-word responses at baseline to extended turns with reasoning. This demonstrated cognitive engagement that had been absent in traditional instruction.

Discussions played a different role. While debates energized, discussions reassured. Students consistently described small-group exchanges as "safe." Even the three self-identified "silent students" spoke regularly by Week 5. This depicts Ghafar and Region-Iraq's (2024) observations that discussions offer a more supportive entry point for shy learners. The findings also align with Sartania et al. (2022), who found that collaborative case-based learning improved confidence and performance. For Libyan students, whose secondary schooling rarely included open conversation, the small groups offered a bridge. By the end, even the quietest students had initiated turns in whole-class discussions, evidence of both behavioral and emotional growth.

The balance between debates and discussions seems crucial. Debates created high-energy challenges, while discussions sustained inclusivity. Without debates, the class might not have experienced the same surge in confidence and risk-taking. On the other hand, the lack of discussions might have resulted in some quieter students remaining marginal. Together, the two methods complemented each other.

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The third research question asked how students described changes in engagement across the term. The findings revealed consistent improvement in all three dimensions. Behaviorally, speaking frequency rose sharply. Emotionally, enjoyment increased, and anxiety decreased. Cognitively, students began to reflect on reasoning and argumentation. These patterns reinforce Korhonen et al. (2019), who emphasized that engagement is multidimensional and interconnected. In the Libyan case, relevance (emotional) encouraged speaking (behavioral), which in turn required reasoning (cognitive). This interplay reflects a virtuous cycle of engagement. The journals illustrated this well. Phrases like "I feel free," "I want to speak," and "I think carefully before my answer" capture how students themselves perceived growth across dimensions. The fact that many used the word "fun" to describe English class, contrasting with their earlier view of it as "boring," signals an emotional transformation.

The final research question asked which features of choice and interaction students found most meaningful. Three themes stood out: relevance, confidence, and enjoyment. Relevance was achieved through choice. Students consistently highlighted that talking about familiar topics made them want to participate. This reflects the power of contextualizing language learning in daily life, a point Conner et al. (2025) made about identity and motivation. Confidence was built through interaction. Students noted that they became "less afraid of mistakes" and valued classmates' supportive responses. This is consistent with findings from DeSantis (2023) that interactive methods reduce fear by normalizing imperfect speech.

Enjoyment emerged from both debates and discussions. Several described the intervention as "not boring," a phrase that recurred across journals. This echoes Hendrickson (2021), who found debates increased excitement and self-efficacy, and Daoayan and Caroy (2024), who noted that online discussions enhanced motivation by making tasks engaging.

An unexpected feature was how many students connected these methods to their future teaching identities. One wrote, "I will be a teacher. I want to give a choice too." This aligns with Haverly and Davis (2024), who argue that teachers who experience engaging classrooms are more likely to

reproduce them. The intervention, then, not only improved immediate learning but also planted seeds for pedagogical change.

Not all outcomes were smooth. Anxiety during debates remained an issue for a few students. One admitted, "Sometimes I feel too much pressure." While most overcame this, it raises the question of how to structure debates to support rather than overwhelm. Carinanos-Ayala et al. (2021) noted similar concerns, stressing the need for scaffolding. Another surprise was how strongly students embraced reflective journals. Initially, some saw them as extra work, but by mid-study, many described them as helpful. This supports Tinto (2023), who argued that reflection consolidates engagement. For students with limited prior writing practice, the journals became a space to articulate growth.

The cultural context also influenced findings. In Libya, students are often hesitant to challenge peers or teachers openly. Debates, which require direct opposition, seemed to both clash with and stretch this cultural norm. While some students struggled, others embraced the uniqueness. This tension may explain why discussions felt more comfortable: they fit cultural preferences for harmony.

Conclusion, Recommendations, and Future Research Suggestions

This case study set out to see whether student choice and interactive methods could increase engagement among 15 Libyan freshman EFL teacher trainees. The evidence showed that both strategies made a real difference. Students who had begun the semester quiet and hesitant ended it speaking more often, enjoying tasks more, and thinking more carefully about what they said. Topic choice made activities relevant, debates gave energy and challenge, and discussions provided safe spaces for those less confident. Reflective journals revealed not only growth in engagement but also a shift in how students saw themselves as future teachers.

It can be concluded that student choice and interactive teaching methods are effective in this specific context. Although this was a small-scale study, it shows that even modest changes in classroom practice can bring meaningful growth.

Several practical steps emerge for Libyan teacher educators. First, giving students some say in what they study qudes not require significant

resources. Weekly votes on topics, or the chance to propose issues within a theme, can make classes feel relevant without disrupting curriculum goals. Teachers should not fear that choice will lead to chaos. On the contrary, students in this study took the responsibility seriously. Secondly, debates should be included, but with care. They energized the class and built confidence, but also produced anxiety for some. Teachers can reduce this by offering clear structures, adequate preparation time, and encouragement for quieter voices. Debates work best when combined with supportive formats like small-group discussions. Thirdly, reflective journaling proved valuable even for beginners. Students used it to process their own growth and to connect classroom methods to their future teaching identities. Teacher educators can adopt journaling as both a learning tool and a professional development exercise. Finally, instructors themselves must adopt a facilitative role. In this study, the shift from lecturer to guide was key. Encouraging participation, prompting reasoning, and validating contributions helped sustain the cycle of engagement. Teacher education programs should prepare future teachers to work in the same way.

The findings also carry theoretical weight. Engagement is often discussed as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive, but in this context, those dimensions interact rather than standing apart. Choice created emotional relevance, which encouraged behavioral participation, which then required cognitive effort. The study shows how these dimensions reinforce one another when supported by active methods. Another implication concerns identity. Students repeatedly linked their classroom experiences to their future teaching practice. This suggests that engagement is not only about immediate learning but also about professional formation. In non-Western contexts, where teacher education often emphasizes content over practice, this connection deserves more attention.

Of course, the study had constraints. The sample was small, just 15 students in one course, and lasted only eight weeks. Engagement was measured through self-report surveys and journals, which may carry bias. The dual role of instructor-researcher could also have influenced responses, as students may have wanted to please the teacher. Finally, the novelty of the methods may have produced a Hawthorne effect, where engagement rose

simply because something new was introduced. These factors limit the generalizability of the results.

Future studies should expand in scale and scope. A larger sample across several Libyan universities would provide stronger evidence of effectiveness. Longer studies could reveal whether engagement gains are sustained beyond one term. Further work should also examine cultural factors more closely. For example, how do Libyan students negotiate debates, which involve direct opposition, in a culture that often values harmony? Research could also compare different formats of debates or discussions to identify which reduces anxiety most effectively. Another promising avenue is the impact on teacher identity. Since many participants connected their experience to their future teaching, larger studies could track whether these trainees later adopt similar methods in their own classrooms. This would link engagement in teacher education to the next generation of Libyan school classrooms.

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