

Exploring Classroom Participation in Mizoram the Impact of Educational Structures and Cultural Norms

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Abstract

This study explores the factors contributing to low classroom participation among undergraduate students in Mizoram, a state in Northeast India. Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the research aims to understand the interplay of cultural, societal, and educational influences affecting students in an English as a Second Language (ESL) context. Using thematic analysis on interviews conducted with university professors, multiple key factors were identified, including teacher-centred teaching practices, fear of peer rejection, language barriers, and the exam-oriented educational system. The cultural norm of "Tlawmngaihna," a fundamental value in Mizo culture, which emphasizes humility and altruism, was found to play a critical role in suppressing student engagement, as students fear standing out or being perceived as boastful. Additionally, the reliance on rote memorization and one-sided lectures stifles opportunities for active student participation, critical thinking, and meaningful dialogue. Language anxiety for English, further inhibited classroom interactions. Professors expressed frustration with the rigid structure of the curriculum and the limitations imposed by an exam-focused system, which prioritizes memorization over intellectual exploration. Despite these challenges, teachers observed gradual shifts in student behaviour and remain hopeful for positive changes. This study suggests the need for educational reforms that foster interactive, student-centred learning environments, encourage critical thinking, and mitigate the cultural and linguistic barriers that hinder participation. The findings also offer broader implications for understanding the intersection of cultural influences and classroom engagement in diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: Classroom participation, Vygotsky Sociocultural Theory, Educational Structures, English as a Second Language (ESL), Language Anxiety, Exam-Oriented Learning, Student Engagement, Mizoram, Tlawmngaihna

1. INTRODUCTION

Classroom engagement and participation has become increasingly recognized as a vital aspect of student learning and academic achievement (Therriault, 2019). The lack of active classroom participation and involvement in lectures and discussions has been however a common frustration expressed by multiple teaching professionals in the state of Mizoram, especially in higher education. Mizoram, a state situated in the North-East region of India, boasts a unique cultural history in the Indian context which has significantly shaped the dynamics of educational settings in the region. Being a largely monolingual community, most of the students have English as a Second Language (ESL) (Lalbiakpuii, 2020), wherein

the use of English is largely promoted amongst English-medium schools all over the state, and in most schools being enforced as a rule with consequential actions taken should a student break this rule, however the proficiency level of most of the students, especially in using English for conversations, seems to be very low (Lalbiakpuii, 2020). Feelings of anxiety or fear of evaluation are common traits amongst ESLs (Tanveer, 2007), and culture also plays into these dynamics in classroom settings and learning styles (Charlesworth, 2008). Various circumstances contribute to the general teaching and learning of English in Mizoram. Sangluaii (2001), in her examination of English education in Mizoram, observed that the majority of teachers focus on delivering the content of textbooks rather than emphasizing the language skills employed within the texts. Various societal, cultural and environmental concerns regarding the teacher-student relationships and power dynamics amongst peers as well as teachers also seem to factorize into the issue (Lalbiakpuii, 2020; Lalsangpuii, 2019). The sociocultural perspective, pioneered by Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes on the role of social interactions, cultural context, and historical factors in shaping learning and development. Often in Mizo classrooms, especially at a middle school level, there exists little interaction between the teacher and the students, thus often remaining a one-sided affair (Lalsangpuii, 2019). This often clashes with the student's attitude with power-dynamics and relationships as Mizo students show a significantly high preference for direct conflict responses than mediated or no-conflict responses (Dhillion & Babu, 2013), meaning that students may prefer a more interactive approach with their teachers, rather than simply obeying commands and accepting penalties.

1.1 Theoretical framework

The study was grounded on the paradigm of Vygotsky's socio-cultural approach, which provides the philosophical framework that emphasizes on the roles of social interactions and cultural context in knowledge construction. Vygotsky (1978) proposed that cognitive development is mediated by cultural tools, such as language, symbols, artifacts, and other forms of cultural knowledge. These tools are transmitted through social interaction and play a crucial role in shaping people's thinking and behaviours. He also argued that cultural practices, beliefs, and values influence the ways in which an individual perceives the world and how to tackle problems. Vygotsky also centralizes on the role of language, stating that language not only enables communication but also serves as a tool for thought. Through language, people internalize social knowledge as well as cultural norms, which in turn shape their cognitive processes and development. The average Mizo student's experiences in their early education, signified by a teacher-centric eastern style classroom environment (Smith, 2001), may be one of the cultural factors that affect the overall classroom environment in the future years of the students' educations, as learning involves making sense of new information and experiences by integrating them with existing knowledge frameworks (Piaget, 2013). However, this process of meaning-making is considered to be subjective and varied among individuals.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The oral participation of ESL students in classrooms had always been a recognized issue, going all the way back to 1970 with the introduction of communicative language teachings (Tong, 2010). Within the context of Mizoram, although not entirely absent, the infrequency of student engagement, especially in higher educational settings raises concerns about the quality and effectiveness of the educational experience in the region (Lalbiakpuii, 2020). Specific mentions regarding the state of Mizoram on this issue do not yet exist in contemporary studies, however similar instances have been found amongst other ESL classrooms, such as in Hong Kong, wherein the style of teaching employed is teacher-centred, that is, students are expected to learn everything directly from the teacher in a rote learning type of fashion

(Smith, 2001). Thus, there are commonalities to be found between Hong Kong students and Mizo students wherein a teacher's or a lecturer's expectations of the students' participation in lectures is something the students are not accustomed to, and may otherwise feel threatened when they have to do so. In the specific context of Mizo students, these diminished participation levels seem to be also influenced by cultural factors deeply ingrained in the social fabric of the people, as a fear of standing out can also be commonly perceived amongst different activities such as traffic, the Church, or in daily commutes. Among the Mizo community, this fear is often associated with the fact that "standing out" usually involves it being the consequence of some form of punishment. Understanding and addressing these various cultural factors for limited classroom involvement are essential for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders seeking to enhance the overall educational experience for students in Mizoram. The identification and understanding of these cultural factors can help to provide valuable insights that can inform the development of targeted strategies and interventions to promote active engagement and participation in classrooms. This research is not only essential for the Mizoram educational system but also holds important implications for 6 broader discussions on the intersection of cultural influences and educational practices in diverse contexts, such as in other areas in the North-East region of India.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 English Policy in Mizo Schools

Little research exists as of yet for Mizoram on the given problem, however amongst the contemporary literature available regarding Mizo students in early education, Lalbiakpuii (2020) focuses on the position of English in Mizoram. This is an important factor as most English mediums require the students to communicate in English, with a "no Mizo" rule being enforced, often with consequences or punishments. At a tertiary level, English is often the only official medium of instruction used with the exception for the teaching of other languages such as Mizo or Hindi. Lalbiakpuii (2020) posits that the nature of Mizo society encourages and obliges maximum participation of groups within the society or the community, resulting in peer pressure playing an important role amongst young learners. This is relevant because if a member of a group refuses to communicate in English, the others will automatically refuse to do so. This is often also due to fear of making mistakes, being ridiculed or being outcast from the group. She states that it is not uncommon among the learners to have wrong attitudes about the use of English as English is regarded highly conspicuous in environments outside the classroom, and there are feelings that if an individual has to have the courage to use it, that individual must use it correctly. This has been observed among many of the Mizos and not only to the young learners.

2.2 Training and Proficiency of Teachers

Additionally, Lalsangpuii (2019) states that most Mizo English teachers are not trained enough and thus do not have the proficiency and competency to fully follow the rules as well, although they still enforce it amongst the students. A study done on Malaysian undergraduate students had shown that one of the most influential factors in encouraging and engaging participation were often lecturer traits, wherein the students had reported that being encouraging, approachable and understanding were some of the traits that made them feel more engaged in classrooms (Mustapha et al., 2010), of which results highlighted how negative lecturer traits, like being unapproachable or showing signs of impatience, can discourage students from speaking up.

2.3 Environmental Circumstances and Language Acquisition

Lalbiakpuii (2020) also factors in the environmental situation of Mizoram. She posits that Mizoram's

location does not provide any initiative from the other parts of the country to settle or move-in to the state for educational purposes. As of contemporary times, due to the change of political climates in Myanmar and Manipur, which border the State, situations may change in the near future. In such a situation where most individuals are largely monolingual, learners have limited chances to utilize English. The learners' surroundings do not offer them opportunities to practice the language they're learning, aside from formal schooling. Therefore, the lack of chances to use English in their environment, compounded by the state's remoteness, poses a significant disadvantage for learners trying to acquire their target language.

2.4 Cultural Influences on Classroom Participation

Various studies that have focused on the intrinsic link between culture and active classroom participation has generally emphasized on two types of classroom cultures: Eastern and Western styles (Charlesworth, 2008; Millard, 2013), with the Eastern styles largely based on Chinese students and Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC). The Confucian Ideal of respect towards one's teacher tells of how one is expected to show loyalty and deference to a teacher's wisdom (Smith, 2001). Hofstede (1986) makes the claim that all social interactions are culturally mediated, even in that of higher education, alluding to the fact that the teacher-centric environment of Chinese and other Eastern classrooms is due to the culture of respect given to an educator, and an acceptance of one's own lack of knowledge. In contrast, western education styles use questioning as way of assessing learning and maintaining the students' attention, wherein CHC learners may consider this concept of answering questions before information is given as confusing and simply premature guessing (Valiente, 2008).

2.5 Student Perception

Students who participate frequently in classrooms are often considered 'good students', as their participation indicates active attention being given as well as a general interest in the topic, whereas students who do not participate are considered lazy, uninvolved and passive, and this behaviour is often penalized in assessment strategies (Vandrick, 2000). This is the case at least for most western learning strategies. This learning style as well as assessment strategy is also employed by various teachers in Eastern classrooms, where, prior educational institutions where the students have learnt were more aligned with the CHC ideals. This sudden shift in learning styles at higher education may prove to be a turbulent change for students, attributing to lesser participation. However, all students find approaches to teaching somewhat different to their secondary and previous educational experience, regardless of their culture (Millard, 2013).

2.6 Language Insecurity

An ESL's insecurity about their grasp of the language is also an attributing factor to passiveness in the classroom. These students may feel they are not fully able to articulate what they truly want to say clearly in English, and the fear of peer evaluation or teachers' evaluation can also contribute to this speaking anxiety (Vandrick, 2000). As previously mentioned, Mizo teachers and educational institutions often employ a Rule of Language, wherein the Mizo language is not to be used and the use of English is highly promoted. However, this may have proven to be a double-edged sword as the fear of embarrassment or inferiority has led to silence and overall passivity in the classroom settings. (Lalbiakpuii, 2020). This phenomenon, combined with peer pressure and the aforementioned perception of English amongst Mizo students, are all possible areas upon which further exploration may provide explanations on the overall passive nature of Mizo classrooms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants: The participants of the study were selected through purposive sampling due to the specific insight that is required on the topic. Due to a teacher's competence and style of teaching being an important factor in the study, a small sample of 5 teachers and lecturers from Arts departments were contacted, inquiring about whether they would be interested in participating in the research. The study was conducted on colleges in the Aizawl district. Educators from Science or Commerce streams were not approached, as the teaching styles required for such studies differ in nature. Each participant was contacted, after which a convenient location and time were determined for the interview. Prior to the interview the researcher requested the participants to sign a consent form and complete a demographic form of relevant background data.

3.2 Sample: Purposeful sampling is a frequently utilized method in qualitative research, which entails selecting research participants based on the specific requirements of the study (Morse, 1991). Researchers thus opt for participants who can provide a wealth of information conducive to in-depth research (Patton, 2002). The selection criteria for participants were educators of higher education who would be able to articulate their experiences as it relates to the phenomena being investigated.

3.3 Inclusion Criteria

- Educators teaching undergraduate students in Mizoram-based Institutions
- Faculty members of Arts disciplines (English, Psychology, Sociology, etc) as these subjects typically involve more discussion-based learning
- A minimum of 5 years teaching experience, ensuring participants have sufficient exposure to Mizoram classroom participation patterns

3.4 Exclusion Criteria

- Educators teaching pre-university students or postgraduate students, as the study focuses on undergraduates
- Educators from Science and Commerce streams (Mathematics, Chemistry, Physics, etc) as pedagogical approaches to these subjects typically differ significantly from Arts subjects.
- Teachers with less than 5 years of experience, as they may not have enough time to observe long-term participation trends

3.5 Data collection: A semi-structured interview style was utilized as a primary method of data collection in this study, as semi-structured interviews offer a flexible yet structured approach to gathering qualitative data, allowing for both predetermined questions and opportunities for open-ended exploration of topics (Kvale, 1996).

3.6 Interview process: Prior to conducting interviews, informed consent was obtained from all participants involved. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person in a time and space convenient for the participant as well as the researcher. During the interviews, a predetermined set of open-ended questions were used to guide the conversation, with the researcher using a non-directive style of interviewing that employs open-ended questions, allowing the participants the freedom to control pacing and subject matter of the interview. Additionally, participants were encouraged to share any additional thoughts or perspectives they deemed relevant. Also, a more directive style of questioning was used as needed when the researcher required more clarification of information that the participants provided. Interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants, and detailed field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information required. The duration of each interview varied largely based on the depth of discussion and participant responses, typically ranging from 30 to 60 minutes per

session. Video-taping was avoided as ‘shyness’ could have been a factor limiting classroom participation, and thus could also lead to hampered responses.

3.7 Data Analysis: Recordings of the semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights across participant responses. The analysis was done by systematically categorizing and quantifying specific words or phrases related to the research topic. Thematic analysis was chosen for its ability to provide a structured yet flexible approach in analysing qualitative data. This method allowed for a systematic exploration of participants' responses while also capturing the richness and complexity of their perspectives and experiences. Transcription procedures were employed to ensure accuracy and consistency in capturing participants' responses. The transcripts were carefully reviewed and edited to maintain fidelity to the original recordings, with any unclear or ambiguous sections clarified through consultation with participants or audio verification.

3.8 Ethical Considerations: Researchers are tasked with identifying and addressing potential ethical concerns throughout the qualitative research process (Creswell, 2009). It was the researchers' responsibility to foster trust with participants, uphold the integrity of the research, prevent misconduct, avoid actions that could reflect poorly on their organizations or institutions, and manage emerging challenges effectively (Creswell, 2009).

The following measures were implemented to ensure the protection of participants' rights:

1. Participants received written notification of the voluntary nature of their involvement in the study and their right to withdraw at any time without facing any repercussions. They were also informed that they could decline to answer any questions during the study.
2. The research objectives were clearly outlined in writing and communicated to the participants.
3. Written consent was obtained from each participant.
4. Participants were provided with written information detailing all data collection methods and activities.
5. Measures were implemented to monitor the data collection process to ensure the safety of participants.
6. Written transcriptions and interpretations of the data were made available to the participants.
7. Participants' rights, interests, and preferences were prioritized when making decisions about reporting the data. The final decision regarding participants' privacy was entrusted to the participants.
8. The level of risk to participants was assessed as minimal.

4. Results

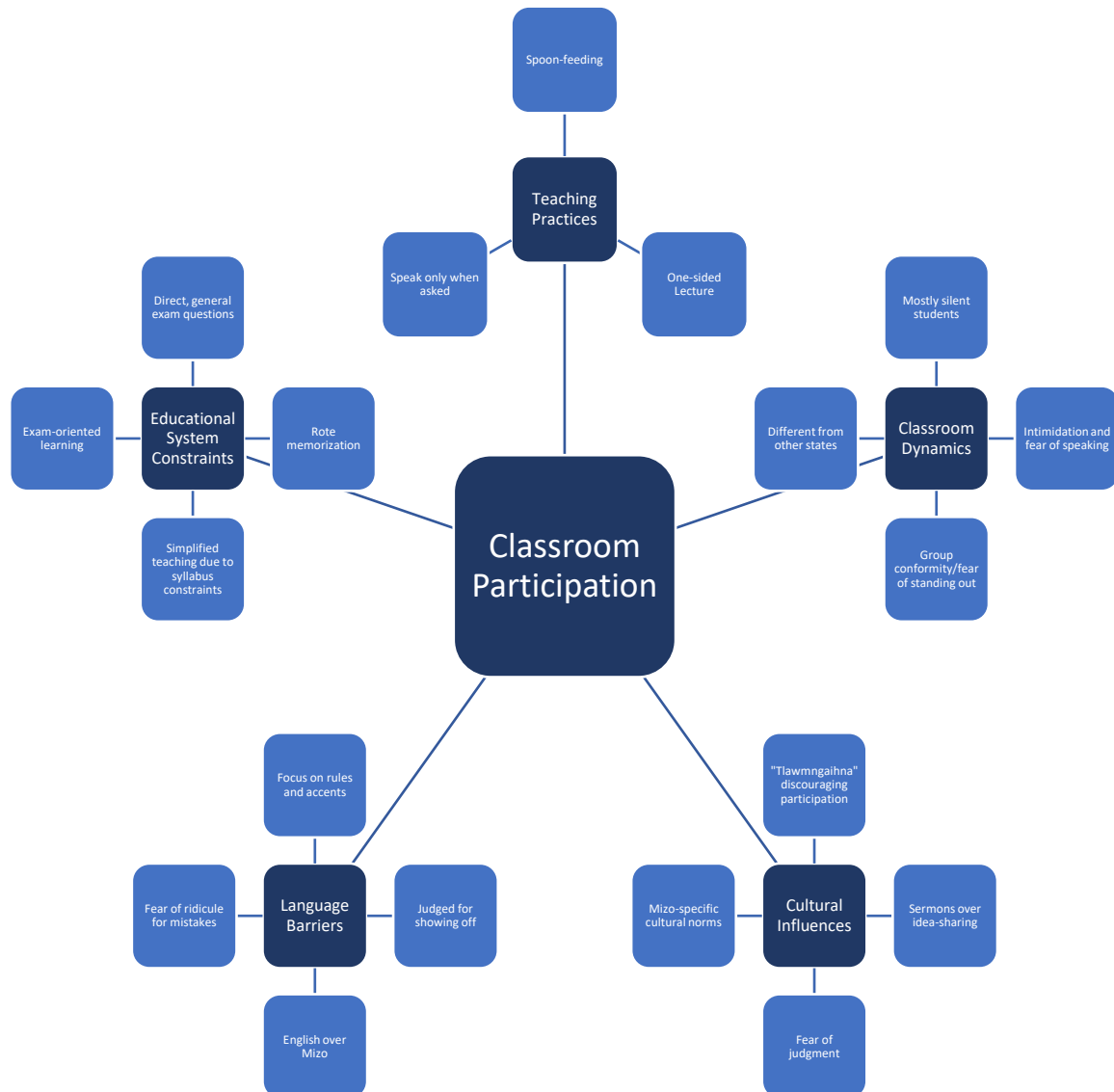


Table 1. Major Themes Identified for Classroom Participation

The thematic analysis of classroom participation in Mizo undergraduate classrooms revealed several key patterns related to teaching practices, classroom dynamics, cultural influences, language barriers, and the broader educational system. Each overarching theme had distinct sub-themes that provide insight into the factors contributing to low levels of classroom interaction. Teaching practices in Mizoram classrooms were found to be largely teacher-centred, with a tendency towards spoon-feeding information to students. Teachers noted that students often only participated when directly prompted and that lessons were typically delivered in a one-sided lecture format, limiting student engagement. In terms of classroom dynamics, students were observed to remain mostly silent, with many teachers citing a sense of intimidation or fear of standing out as reasons for the lack of participation. This was further amplified by group conformity, where students were hesitant to deviate from the collective behaviour of their peers. Teachers also reported that participation levels were noticeably different from those in other Indian states. The influence of cultural norms was a significant factor in limiting classroom interaction. The Mizo cultural concept of "Tlawmngaihna"-which emphasizes humility and selflessness-appeared to discourage active participation,

as speaking out could lead to judgment from peers. The sermon-like structure of cultural practices, where ideas are conveyed through speeches rather than through discussion, was reflected in classroom behaviour, with students being less accustomed to debating or exchanging ideas. Language barriers also played a major role in limiting classroom engagement. The emphasis on English as the medium of instruction and the strict enforcement of English-only rules in many schools led to a fear of making mistakes and a reluctance to speak, due to concerns about being ridiculed or judged for showing off their language skills. English is often perceived as a language placed on a pedestal, further heightening students' anxiety about participation. Lastly, the educational system itself posed structural challenges to engagement. Teachers were constrained by rote memorization, simplified teaching methods, and a rushed syllabus. Exam preparation dominated the teaching approach, focusing on direct, fact-based questions rather than fostering critical thinking, analysis, or discussion. This exam-oriented structure further discouraged meaningful classroom participation.

5. Discussion

The data collected from interviews with professors in Mizoram reveals a multi-faceted interplay of factors contributing to the lack of classroom participation in undergraduate (UG) settings. The findings were found to be related to past educational experiences wherein the overall educational structure of schools and colleges were heavily criticized, and were also aligned with several established theories in educational psychology, particularly those related to group conformity, fear of peer rejection, and culturally embedded teaching practices.

Most teachers in Mizoram define classroom participation as a simple form of interaction that primarily involves a back-and-forth exchange, typically initiated by a teacher's question and followed by a student's answer. However, true classroom discussions, wherein students actively share ideas, opinions, or thoughts, are almost entirely absent. Similar instances have been observed in Hong Kong students wherein Smith (2001) describes the Confucian ideal of respect toward teachers, where questioning or contributing during class might be seen as undermining the authority of the teacher. Such cultural expectations create a classroom atmosphere in Mizoram where students prefer passive listening over active participation, thus reinforcing their silence in educational settings. However, teachers expressed a desire to see more dynamic discussions and debates in their classrooms, but they noted that, at best, they could only expect students to respond to direct questions. However, they also reported that they have observed gradual changes in each new generation of students, and also report that they are hopeful positive changes may soon be seen in the upcoming 5-10 years.

5.1 Group Conformity and Fear of Peer Rejection

One of the most significant themes that emerged was the influence of group conformity and fear of peer rejection. This cultural tendency aligns with Lalbiakpuii's (2020) description of "Tlawmngaihna," of which the interviewed teachers agreed that these factors play a critical role in suppressing student participation. The cultural norm of "Tlawmngaihna", a philosophy which emphasizes altruism, humility and self-effacement, may be involved in the discouragement of students speaking out, as they fear being perceived as prideful or different from their peers. This cultural expectation of conformity is further reinforced by peer dynamics, where students who attempt to stand out by asking questions or engaging in discussions are often ridiculed or ostracized, with evidence of students themselves complaining and being distraught about these situations to their teachers in private conversations or meetings. Vandrick (2000) had observed that students from collectivist cultures often struggle with participation due to social pressures, of which

this preference for group harmony over individual expression is similar to findings from Charlesworth (2008), who identified similar patterns in Eastern educational settings. Smith (2001) also explains how the fear of "losing face" plays a significant role in students' reluctance to participate, particularly in an ESL context. This is closely related to the data of Mizo students' anxiety over answering wrong and fear of making mistakes in front of peers. This environment may foster a reluctance to participate, as students prioritize social acceptance over academic engagement.

5.2 Previous Schooling Methods and Exam-Oriented Learning

The teachers unanimously agreed that the educational practices in Mizoram, particularly the emphasis on rote memorization and spoon-feeding, further inhibit active participation. The teaching style in Mizoram has traditionally been lecture-based, with a focus on preparing students for exams through direct instruction rather than encouraging critical thinking or discussion. Lalsangpuii (2019), noted that Mizo classrooms are often characterized by didactic teaching styles that limit student interaction. This teaching approach is a continuation of earlier schooling experiences that focus on rote memorization rather than critical thinking, as described by Sangluaii (2001). This emphasis on direct instruction restricts opportunities for students to engage in open dialogue or question-asking, thus reinforcing a passive learning culture, and, as highlighted by the interview data, this method of teaching does not promote the development of independent thought or the confidence needed to participate in classroom discussions. A direct quote from one of the interviewees mentions how 'participation' is interpreted by the students as limited to "teachers asking a question and them answering", which, according to the teacher is because "from a young age to primary levels, elementary levels, we've never utilized a participative educative system, more so only a one-sided ordeal". A study on Mizo primary students by Fanai (2015) points out that intelligence in Mizo society is often equated with academic success and the ability to perform well in exams, reflecting a cultural emphasis on measurable academic performances rather than on other forms of intellectual or creative engagement. The rigidity of the exam-oriented system, where questions are often predictable and require straightforward answers, leaves little room for creativity or intellectual exploration, further entrenching passive learning habits. This reliance on an exam-oriented system further exacerbates this issue, as the primary goal of education is often framed around performing well in standardized tests like NEET and JEE. While this approach is pragmatic given the high-stakes nature of these exams, it however discourages the development of higher-order cognitive skills like analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Dhillon & Babu, 2013). The rigidity of this system, with its emphasis on predictable, fact-based questions, means that both teachers and students prioritize efficiency in content delivery over explorative learning. The educational practices in Mizoram contrast with the constructivist principles of learning, where students are encouraged to construct their own understanding through interaction with the material (Piaget, 2013). Instead, the learning environment is more aligned with a behaviourist approach, focusing on stimulus-response patterns where correct answers are rewarded but deeper inquiry is not necessarily fostered.

Despite all such limitations, there is a growing recognition among teachers of the need to integrate more interactive elements into their teaching. As the interviewed professors noted, there have been efforts to introduce group presentations, discussions, and role-playing activities. "We generally try and facilitate discussions," says one English professor, "but we've found that the students generally don't talk much in the class, even if we mention contemporary topics or things that are trending on social media, they usually keep quiet". These efforts, as we can see, have been met with varying levels of success, suggesting that any shift towards a more participative learning culture will require systemic changes in both pedagogical

methods and curriculum design. It also highlights a potential area for further research into how incremental changes in teaching practices could gradually shift classroom dynamics in Mizoram.. Teachers recognize that for students aiming to succeed in these exams, mastering the ability to recall large amounts of information quickly is essential. As a result, despite the desire to encourage more interactive and dynamic teaching methods, the existing educational goals and pressures necessitate the continued use of rote memorization as a primary teaching strategy.

5.3 Cultural and Social Dynamics

Cultural factors play a significant role in shaping classroom behaviour in Mizoram. The concept of "Tlawmngaihna" not only influences group conformity but also affects how students perceive themselves and others in the classroom. The societal emphasis on modesty and the avoidance of standing out can lead to a classroom environment where students are reluctant to express their opinions or engage in discussions. Smith's (2001) observations on the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC), where deference to authority is ingrained in social and educational interactions, can help in drawing parallels between CHC and Mizo culture, suggesting that the reluctance to engage in classroom discussions is not merely a matter of personal reticence but is deeply intertwined with the cultural expectation of respecting authority figures. The influence of cultural practices, such as the traditional reliance on sermons and speeches rather than interactive dialogues, also contributes to a one-sided teaching style that does not encourage student participation, as such an approach often limits opportunities for dialogic learning, as described by Millard (2013), who emphasizes the importance of interactive dialogues in fostering critical thinking and engagement.

A study by Fanai (2015) explored the role of cultural values in shaping the academic self-concept of Mizo children, which involves how family and community expectations play a significant role in shaping children's attitudes towards education, with an emphasis on respect for elders and communal harmony influences not only in home life, but inadvertently also in the way students behave in educational settings, thus making it evident how these community-driven values impact students' willingness to participate in classroom discussions,. "Tlawmngaihna" fosters a self-concept where Mizo students may feel uncomfortable with self-promotion or standing out in classroom interactions, reinforcing previous recurring themes of group conformity and reluctance to participate actively.

Teacher Proficiency and Educational Structure

While teacher proficiency was generally viewed positively, there is an acknowledgment that the current educational structure in Mizoram does not support more dynamic or interactive teaching methods. Teachers expressed frustration with the constraints imposed by the syllabus, which is often too ambitious and leaves little time for discussion or creative teaching methods. "The syllabus construction is very ambitious, way too much," explained one professor, "so we don't have time to give for discussions". The need to adhere to a standardized curriculum, coupled with the pressure to prepare students for competitive exams, further limits opportunities for fostering an interactive classroom environment.

All teachers also reported relying heavily on pre-prepared notes, largely due to the examination system and the learning levels of the students. They expressed frustration that any attempts to introduce questions requiring students to elaborate in their own words were often met with resistance from moderation boards. These boards tend to favour direct questions that require straightforward answers, focusing on recall rather than higher-order thinking skills like evaluation, analysis, or application. As a result, exam questions are typically limited to prompts like "Define," "Name," or "Explain," which restricts the depth of learning. A professor of Psychology, who was involved in preparing examination questions explains, "we Have to

follow the systems in place. When we set questions like that (explorative questions) we get complaints from our colleagues, so the next year we repeat the same type of questions. Sometimes it's clear what questions will come from which unit, and to the fast learner it's simple to just memorize that part and get high scores. But questions which attempt to make the students use their own understanding can't be done. We are told to ask questions that are to the point, have a definitive answer, that could be referenced from an already given reference". Despite these constraints, teachers have made efforts to encourage more student interaction through various strategies such as group presentations, discussions, and role-playing exercises. However, they acknowledged that the success of these methods has been inconsistent, and they have struggled to engage students reliably. Smith (2001) suggests that learners accustomed to one style of teaching may be overwhelmed with another, as observed with Hong Kong students who also follow similar cultural norms of authoritarian respect similar to the Mizos. Mustapha et al. (2010) on a study with Malaysian students, found that lecturer traits such as being encouraging, approachable, and understanding are among the most influential factors in encouraging student participation. These traits help create a supportive environment where students feel comfortable engaging, even when they fear making mistakes, thus teachers who actively invite student opinions and make it clear that mistakes are part of the learning process might help mitigate the effects of cultural expectations that otherwise suppress participation. The Malaysian study further emphasizes that a positive classroom climate, supported by encouraging behaviours from both teachers and classmates, can make a significant difference in student participation, suggesting further that Mizo educators might benefit from incorporating their current interactive teaching techniques, such as group activities or discussions, that balance the traditional respect-oriented culture with opportunities for students to voice their thoughts without fear of reprimand. Such a shift in teaching practices in Mizoram, towards a more student-centred approach, could help bridge the gap between cultural expectations and interactive learning, however Smith (2001) warns on how implementing such changes requires sensitivity to the cultural context, as teachers need to understand students' backgrounds and adjust their expectations accordingly.

5.4 Language Barriers and English Proficiency

The role of language in the classroom was another significant theme. Although most schools in Mizoram are English-medium, the emphasis on correct grammar, accent, and pronunciation has created a barrier to participation. Students often fear making mistakes in English, which could lead to ridicule or judgment from their peers. This aligns with Tanveer's (2007) work on language anxiety, where fear of negative evaluation is a significant factor inhibiting ESL learners' willingness to speak. The enforcement of English as the medium of instruction, as highlighted by Lalbiakpuii (2020), places additional pressure on students, who fear making mistakes in front of their peers. This fear is compounded by the societal perception that English is a marker of intelligence and sophistication, leading students to remain silent rather than risk embarrassment. "English is kept at such a high pedestal (in Mizoram)" exclaims an English professor, "it almost seems like we fear the language at times, so we can't articulate what we want to say or what we are thinking because we are so fixated on speaking the language perfectly, especially in classroom scenarios". This barrier is particularly detrimental in a classroom setting, where the ability to express ideas and engage in discussions is crucial for learning. The implications of these findings suggest that addressing language barriers in Mizoram classrooms requires a more supportive approach, where errors are normalized as part of the learning process. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) view of language as a cultural tool that facilitates cognitive development. Rather than treating language proficiency as a gatekeeping mechanism for participation, educators could create environments where students feel

comfortable practicing their language skills without fear of judgment. This could involve integrating more informal, conversational opportunities within the classroom, thereby reducing the pressure associated with formal speaking contexts.

5.5 Limitations

The study's findings must be contextualized within the limitations present in the process of research. The small sample size, although providing in-depth qualitative insights may not represent all perspectives of educators in Mizoram's context, furthermore, students' perspectives would also provide valuable insights into the inner workings of Mizo classrooms that may differ from the educators. Thus, a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of teacher-student interactions is yet to be further explored, which would provide light on further issues that inhibit engagement and participation from the student body.

5.6 Implications

The findings suggest several implications for educational practice in Mizoram. First, there is a need to shift away from the traditional lecture-based, exam-oriented teaching style towards a more interactive and student-centred approach (Smith, 2001) This could involve incorporating more discussion-based activities, group work, and problem-solving exercises that encourage students to think critically and engage actively with the material.

Second, it is essential to address the cultural and social dynamics that inhibit participation. This might involve creating a classroom environment that values diversity of thought and encourages students to express their opinions without fear of judgment. Teachers could play a crucial role in this by modelling and portraying open-mindedness and providing positive reinforcement for student participation.

Finally, there is a need to reconsider the emphasis on English proficiency as a barrier to participation. Teachers could focus on fostering a more supportive environment where mistakes are seen as a natural part of the learning process, rather than a source of embarrassment. Additionally, incorporating more opportunities for students to use English in a less formal, more conversational context could help build their confidence and reduce anxiety around speaking in class.

6. Conclusion

The data collected through the interviews with the educators of Mizoram aid in providing valuable insights into deeply rooted cultural, social, linguistic and structural barriers which contribute to the hindering of classroom participation and engagement in undergraduate settings. These findings illuminate light on the effects of traditional educational structures, which, with its emphasis on exam-oriented learning and reliance on rote-memorization, limit available opportunities for active engagement, as well as broader sociological factors, such as the influence of "Tlawmngaihna", fear of peer judgment and the desire for group conformity, further add to reinforce a passive learning environment. The aforementioned linguistic challenges associated with English as a medium of instruction add another layer of complexity, creating hesitation and anxiety around verbal participation. Furthermore, the structures driven by the need to prepare students for competitive exams such as NEET and JEE, inadvertently promotes a passive learning culture, where students are more focused on memorizing information than on understanding and applying it.

However, despite these barriers, the interviewed participants displayed agency and a strong desire to cultivate more interactive and participative classrooms, with many having expressed a willingness to incorporate more interactive teaching methods, often employing various strategies including group

discussions, presentations and role-playing activities to encourage student engagement, however with varying success, as these efforts are often hindered by systematic constraint which further highlight the complexity of the issue. The frustrations with the current systems are evident, particularly regarding the constraints imposed by rigid syllabus structures and standardized testing, that often leaves little room for innovative teaching methods. It is concluded that a shift towards a more comprehensive student-centered learning, which fosters critical thinking and engagement and employs culturally sensitive practices that addresses cultural and social norms, may hold promises for increasing engagement and participation. Meaningful change will however require more than pedagogical adjustment, requiring a concerted effort from educators, policymakers, and the broader community to create an environment where students feel empowered to express themselves without fear of judgment or failure. The need for re-evaluation of the broader educational framework, including curriculum design, assessment methods, and cultural attitudes toward classroom discourse however should also not be understated. The study also highlights the need for future research that explores longitudinal shifts in student engagement as educational reforms and societal attitudes evolve. Additionally, increase of the understanding of how Mizoram's experiences compare with similar sociocultural contexts in other regions could provide valuable insights into fostering a more inclusive and participatory learning environment. By addressing these challenges through thoughtful interventions, Mizoram's education system can better equip students with the confidence and skills necessary for active academic and professional participation.

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