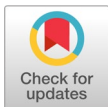


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The Theory-Practice Divide: Perceptions of MPhil ELM and TESOL Students, and the Implementation of Student-Centered Learning in Lahore Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore the academic expectations, professional development needs and field-level realities of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) across postgraduate university students and practicing school teachers. This study used qualitative research design, grounded in constructivist theory and guided by Training Needs Assessment (TNA) philosophy. A total sample of 33 participants across three distinct cohorts were selected using purposive sampling to capture multi-layered perspectives. 15 MPhil Educational Leadership and Management (ELM) students were divided in two focused group discussions. 7 MPhil TESOL students were included in open ended questionnaires to explore the SCL preferences and preparation gaps. Semi structured interviews were conducted with 11 in-service school teachers. Data were analyzed qualitatively. Findings revealed that MPhil students demonstrate strong theoretical alignment with SCL methodologies, including task-based learning, collaborative inquiry, and reflective practice, yet participants prefer a critical need to operationalize these methodologies in practical field settings. In-service teachers have independently developed resource constrained SCL adaptations like peer teaching, storytelling, and collaborative tasks. The study concludes by diagnosing the structural mechanics of the theory practice divide. The study suggests that MPhil ELM, and TESOL curricula need to be grounded with school realities by integrating mandatory school observation hours, localized Pakistani case studies and low-tech pedagogical strategies. It offers to establish structured peer-mentoring networks that formally validate, share and scale the low-tech constructivist innovations developed by in-service teachers.

Keywords: educational leadership, professional development, reflective practice, student-centered learning, teacher education, TESOL, training needs assessment

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Introduction

The strategies for learning and teaching in the educational field are changing. They are shifting from teacher centered (Goodwin, [2024](#)) to student centered models. This shift is visible in postgraduate teacher training programmes as well. This study explored TESOL and ELM programmes in Pakistan. Here, these postgraduate programmes focus on pedagogical approaches, such as task-based language teaching, to equip teachers with essential professional skills. For ELM students, leadership models help them become professional leaders and to start capacity building programmes to support constructivist learning at their own workplace (Rinantanti et al., [2024](#)). Pakistan experiences curriculum changes. These changes demand revised programmes for teacher training focusing on students centered learning techniques, but as Ahmad (2021) rightly says, our classroom dynamics are still not explored fully in research. The pattern of rote learning and lecture system still prevails in today's classrooms (Ali & Ibrahim, [2021](#)). This refers to the fact that formal instructions have not yet been fully applied to implement SCL educational strategies. Teachers need to move away from their traditional role and guide students to work collaboratively and construct new knowledge in a more progressive manner (Chand, [2023](#); Saleem et al., [2021](#)). This helps students to move away from being only passive listeners, and become active participants to construct knowledge (Saleem et al., [2021](#)). Instead of listening to the teacher when students are engaged with the task in hand, their attention span is improved and studies suggest that SCL is a more effective way of learning as compared to the rote learning methods (Wijnia et al., [2024](#)).

Policy documents and curriculum design protocols lay the emphasis on the prioritizing learner centered strategies that promote collaborative environment (Lu, [2024](#)). Higher education sector is unable to clear this void and does not explicitly document whether these programmes are really able to help educators to step into the work field with learner centered approaches or not (Ukwigize et al., [2025](#)). Studies refer that a mismatch between SCL goals and institutional examination culture leaves educators confused. They remain in a fix to implement student centered methods because institutions continue to promote final grades as a mark of true achievement (Efgivia et al., [2021](#)). Constructivist theory relies on Jean Piaget's constructivism. This theory looks into cognition as a part of brain development biologically (Efgivia et al., [2021](#)). Constructivist theory also

relies on Lev Vygotsky's social constructivism (Mat & Jamaludin, [2024](#)). In this approach teachers help students to take charge of their own learning, and teachers' role is to scaffold their guide to adopt student entered learning (Tang, [2023](#)). In this way students develop new concepts based on the knowledge and frameworks they already have developed in their minds (Nurhasnah et al., [2024](#)). Hence Vygotsky and Piaget can't be separated according to Nurhasnah et al. ([2024](#)), from constructivist learning theory. Chand ([2023](#)) explains the Vygotsky point of view that learners need interaction with adults, cognitive growth tools and peers to work with. Hence culture, language, and the institutional environment collectively have a profound impact on students' learning (Nurhasnah et al., [2024](#)).

Training programmes claim to target teachers' growth and students' achievements. Research shows that teacher training programmes are designed to align classroom instruction with institutional standards, thereby improving overall student performance (Asterhan & Lefstein, [2020](#)). Teachers are not equipped with well-rounded training. Large class sizes and examination culture hinder teachers' ability to implement student centered learning and task based activities in the classroom (Sun, [2024](#)). For MPhil programmes old theories and content taught in lecture rooms is also a big concern (Siddiqui et al., [2021](#)). These circumstances result in weak teachers support, leading to a gap in theory and practice. Student centered learning may equip graduates with theories but the classroom realities put them in a difficult situation because student educators didnt come across these realities during training programmes (Akhtar et al., [2020](#); Asif et al., [2025](#)). Because of this, there is a need to explore what causes a void between university learning and workplace realities. The empirical research to explore or investigate university learning and practical challenges of school reality are still understudied.

On the micro level the trainings do not work for teachers who are facing a different set of problems on a daily basis (Tomas & Tiquia, [2022](#)). This management problem pushes teachers to think of ways that can help their kids to be more focused, as well as be able to construct knowledge and learn better. In practice, teachers often apply intuitive scaffolding techniques without realizing that these methods align with formal theoretical frameworks currently taught in university teacher-education programmes (Siddiqui et al., [2021](#)). Henceforth, this study acquired TNA (Training Needs Assessment) to explore what students feel about their programmes

and how much these programmes can help them be ready for the real classrooms and to what extent they think they are ready to lead and help students (Stefaniak, [2020](#)). TNA (Training Needs Assessment), applied to MPhil ELM students, provides a structured diagnostic framework for evaluating specific skill deficits. This study will explore differentiated instruction, collaborative facilitation, instructional coaching, and inquiry based and reflective practices. This lens will help to understand if postgraduate students are ready to operate in the work field.

Research Objectives

This study will explore the Student-Centered Learning methods preferred by MPhil TESOL students and MPhil ELM students, and how relative training shapes their understanding of building student-centered school cultures. By conducting a Training Needs Assessment (TNA) with MPhil ELM students to find specific skill gaps, this study will explore the SCL strategies used by in-service school teachers in Lahore and how they adjust learner-centered teaching and what problems they face in using these practices. This study will map the theory-practice gap and give evidence-based recommendations that connect MPhil program design with the real needs of schools in the context of teaching and learning practices in Pakistan.

Research Questions

- What are the prioritized SCL approaches among MPhil TESOL students in relation to communicative and task-based frameworks, and what gaps do they perceive in their preparation?
- What are the preferred SCL methodologies and pedagogical expectations among MPhil ELM students regarding their future professional roles?
- How do in-service school teachers adapt SCL strategies in their classrooms?
- What institutional or contextual barriers constrain their practices?

Significance of the Study

This study will explore how students enrolled in MPhil programmes envision their courses. Moreover, this study identifies structural shortcomings within MPhil curricula and incorporates student

recommendations for syllabus reform. This study also explores how practicing teachers adapt instructional frameworks to cultivate student centered and engaging classrooms in resource constrained environments.

Ultimately, this study advances knowledge by diagnosing structural causes at the institution level. By pairing constructivist theory and training needs assessment framework, this study explores the theory practice gap through the voices of postgraduate students and in service school teachers. This study will also explore the expectations of post graduate students; whether they align with real world practices or diverge at some point. This study is significant because it highlights the dimensions of theory-practice divide, teachers' adaptive practices and propose evidence-based recommendations for curriculum reform, needs-based professional development and stronger university-school partnerships in Lahore.

Literature Review

This literature review analyses key scholarly work on the theory-practice gap in Student-Centered Learning (SCL). Constructivist theory frames learning as an active and meaningful process. Piaget's cognitive constructivism explains that learners build knowledge by building new experiences with existing mental frameworks (Efgivia et al., [2021](#)). Vygotsky's social constructivism adds that knowledge is co-created through social interaction and cultural tools, these tools scaffold knowledge within the Zone of Proximal Development (Saleem et al., [2021](#)). Together, these theories shift the teacher's role from information transmitter to facilitator who scaffold their environments for active learning and reflection as explained by Efgivia et al. ([2021](#)) and Saleem et al. ([2021](#)).

Student-Centered Learning (SCL) shifts agency to learners. According to Mat and Jamaludin ([2024](#)), core elements include active participation, autonomy, personalization, peer collaboration, and ongoing formative feedback. Teaching and learning methodologies such as project-based learning, problem-based learning, flipped classrooms, and cooperative inquiry exemplify SCL in practice (Goodwin, [2024](#)). These studies link these methods to improved critical thinking and motivation, but still success depends on the quality of implementation (Sorensen et al., [2023](#)). However, Boon et al. ([2022](#)) and Sorensen et al. ([2023](#)) warn that constructivist pedagogy is often adopted without corresponding epistemological change and this especially happens in professional education. In Pakistan, formal

endorsements of SCL translate the problem when it coexists with traditional classroom practices and the practices are teacher-centered (Siddiqui et al., [2021](#)). Tang ([2023](#)) agrees that curriculum policy documents advocate SCL approaches, yet traditional lecture-based and rote-learning for exams scores continue to dominate higher education classrooms. In the literature, initial structural contradiction is evident where postgraduate programs advocate for learner autonomy while relying heavily on passive delivery of content in the lecture halls.

Student-centered learning (SCL) is an important part of leadership education because it helps students to adjust to new situations (Sorensen et al., [2023](#)). Task based learning in TESOL helps students to design activities and tasks that can help them become strong in communication (Basireddi et al., [2025](#); Lu, [2024](#)). These interactive course designs are a core example of student-centered learning strategy (Rinantanti et al., [2024](#)). Literature reviewed for this study also reveals that English language teaching courses focus on grammar translation methods even though the official curriculum stresses upon communicative skills to improve speaking and understanding of the English language (Ali & Ibrahim, [2021](#)).

In the universities, ELM (Educational leadership and management) programmes encourage inquiry, discussions, and making plans around the real educational problems that help graduates to develop improvement programmes. These programmes enable student centered learning (Bravo et al., [2023](#)). Ngema and Lekhetho ([2019](#)) and Ukwigize et al. ([2025](#)) argue over the same point that leadership programmes really help in improving quality of education in schools and the impact should go beyond scoring grades. Literature reveals older systems of rote learning. Moreover, practitioners have not been able to eradicate these old strategies from education (Sain et al., [2024](#)). Asif et al. ([2025](#)) exemplify this by pointing out that lecture halls still echo with lectures and power point presentations.

Students from higher education programmes learn and develop plans to train teachers and help students construct knowledge meaningfully through student centered learning approaches (Ghafar, [2024](#)). However; Butnaru ([2020](#)) and Vogt et al. ([2020](#)) shed light on the complication of designing ineffective professional development programmes without knowing what teachers need to work on efficiently after the training. Training in this perspective becomes superficial and useless because it does not call into action the real problems and needs of the specific school and teachers

(Butnaru, [2020](#)). Sorensen et al. ([2023](#)) finds through his study that teachers who got training to use Students Centered Learning strategies feel more confident in the work field but they find those strategies difficult to implement in a resource constrained classroom where another challenge awaits them, i.e., having students from diverse cultures and regional languages. But the ground realities which are evident from the literature unfold another concern that is related to hiring teachers with no professional training prior to becoming full time teachers in the school (Siddiqui et al., [2021](#)).

Akhtar et al. ([2020](#)) and Khan and Ahmad ([2021](#)) observe that a theory-practice divide prevails across Pakistani schools due to a lack of field-integrated training and weak quality assurance mechanisms. Asif et al. ([2025](#)) and Ali and Ibrahim ([2021](#)) agree that despite national policy emphasis on communicative and student-centered teaching, actual school classrooms remain constrained by large class sizes, rigid examination schedules, and resource limitations. Yet, Oo et al. ([2023](#)) and Mat and Jamaludin ([2024](#)) complicate the narrative by asserting that school classrooms are purely passive sites of traditional rote learning. Training needs assessment frameworks to help educators figure out the gaps resulting in poor skill development and this assessment makes it easier to design workable solutions (Rustiyana et al., [2022](#); Tomas & Tiquia, [2022](#)). The literature on implementing educational strategies in developing contexts reveals a distinct tension between university-based expectations and school-based realities. Hence, knowing these gaps will help leaders design professional training for teachers who may believe in student centered learning and real learning outcomes depending on how well these methods are actually put into practice (Barbazette, [2006](#); Stefaniak, [2020](#)). Teachers may believe in SCL, but real learning outcomes depend on how well these methods are actually put into practice.

MPhil graduates may be intellectually committed but they lack practical skills to navigate institutional barriers. Few local studies have examined MPhil students' expectations and in-service teacher adaptations. That is why the present study will try to explore this underexplored space.

Most research on SCL is from Western and East/Southeast Asian contexts and reveals geographic and contextual gaps (Siddiqui et al., [2021](#)). Pakistani studies often use quantitative surveys that capture perceptions but not the mechanisms or adaptations underlying the theory-practice divide.

By engaging MPhil ELM and TESOL students alongside in-service school teachers, this study offers a perspective on how important it is to prepare students for real classroom challenges (Khan & Ahmad, [2021](#)). Employing the TNA framework with ELM students contributes to specific insights into improvement plans that Pakistani educational leadership programmes need in Pakistan (Barbazette, [2006](#); Ngema & Leketho, [2019](#); Oo et al., [2023](#)). Hence, this study not only focuses on diagnosing the factors intersecting or diverging from theory but also explores the proficiency gaps stated by the participants. This study helps to propose the practical reform plans for both MPhil programmes and in-service school teachers' professional growth.

Methodology

A qualitative design was selected to explore how theoretical knowledge of SCL is translated into practice and what gaps exist between university preparation and school realities (Ghafar, [2024](#)).

Rather than a single-site case study, this research used a multi-group comparative design involving three participant groups. That allowed systematic comparison between university-based learners and in-service teachers to identify similarities and differences in the understanding and application of SCL. The study was guided by four research questions focusing on:

- Prioritized SCL approaches among TESOL students in relation to communicative and task-based frameworks
- Preferred SCL methodologies and perceived preparation gaps among MPhil ELM students
- Training needs and skill gaps identified through TNA in ELM students
- Classroom adaptation of SCL strategies and barriers faced by in-service teachers

This study employs a qualitative multi-group comparative design grounded in an interpretive paradigm. A total of 33 participants were selected via purposive sampling across three distinct groups. MPhil TESOL students ($n = 7$) were purposively selected to provide insights into language teaching methodologies, communicative frameworks, and practical entry-level challenges. Data were collected using an online semi-structured questionnaire adapted from Jain et al. ([2016](#)) to systematically capture

student perspectives on curriculum effectiveness. MPhil ELM students ($n = 15$) were selected to explain leadership preparation and specific competency gaps via a TNA framework to explore the competency domains like differentiated instructions, coaching and mentoring, collaborative facilitation, and inquiry based or reflective practices (Butnaru, [2020](#); Stefaniak, [2020](#)). It was conducted via focus group discussions, and 15 participants were divided into two groups. In-service school teachers ($n = 11$) were selected from a local private school in Lahore to provide grounded data on daily classroom execution of SCL strategies and institutional challenges. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's ([2006](#)) thematic analysis framework alongside a comparative matrix to explore institutional alignment and identify gaps between university training and school realities.

Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants relevant to the research objectives (Tongco, [2007](#)). The study includes 33 participants in total: MPhil ELM students ($n = 15$) from second-semester with sufficient exposure to theoretical frameworks participated in two focused group discussion to reflect on SCL and identify preparation gap. They are represented as ELM(A) P1 to ELM (A) P7 from first focus group discussion and ELM(B) P8 to ELM (B) P15 from the second focus group discussion. MPhil TESOL students ($n = 7$) were selected to represent language teaching perspectives, particularly Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) for open ended questionnaire (Jain et al., [2016](#)). They are represented as TESOL P1 to TESOL P7. In-service teachers of one school ($n = 11$) participated from varied teaching levels and subjects to provide grounded classroom perspectives in their school. They are given the names as T1 to T11 in data representation (Merriam & Tisdell, [2016](#)).

Three qualitative tools were used to ensure depth and triangulation of data. Focused group discussion and open-ended questionnaires (Jain et al., [2016](#)) were administered to 7 MPhil TESOL students to explore their preferred SCL methods and perceived gaps in university preparation. Open-ended formats were chosen to allow detailed and contextual responses rather than restricted survey answers (Ranganathan & Caduff, [2023](#)). 15 ELM students were given TNA framework adapted from Butnaru ([2020](#)) and Stefaniak ([2020](#)) to guide two structured focus groups discussion. This tool evaluated self-assessed competencies against desired leadership functions across four core domains: differentiated instruction,

coaching/mentoring, collaborative facilitation, and inquiry based / reflective practices (Butnaru, [2020](#)). 11 in-service teachers from a local school participated in semi structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, [2016](#)). These tools explored classroom practices, adaptation of SCL strategies, and challenges faced in resource-constrained environments. Focused group discussions were 15 to 20 minutes long each. Interviews were 20 to 30 minutes. Both focused group discussions and interviews were conducted bilingually (English and Urdu) the way participants preferred (Merriam & Tisdell, [2016](#)) and transcribed in English later on data compilation stage. Supervisor and one member from ELM faculty confirmed clarity and relevance of the tools for the content validity analysis.

Thematic analysis was used to develop codes and themes. Then themes were grouped according to the requirement of each research question (Braun & Clarke's, [2006](#)). The analysis was focused on identifying patterns related to SCL understanding. Data scored triangulation across three distinct participant cohorts and credible use of focused group discussions, open ended questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews supported the credibility of this research. The supervisor independently selected 20% subset of data to ensure strong coding. Minor coding discrepancies were resolved through mutual discussion. Audit trail of raw data, codebooks, and analytic note keeping helped maintained the confirmability to refer back to data. It helped minimizing the researcher bias. A detailed description of the research context and data collection procedures provided transferability so that readers can apply findings in comparable contexts.

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board with a formal committee approval letter. Formal administrative permission was secured from the school prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. It was clearly mentioned to them that their participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured through coded identifiers. All records were securely stored and would be destroyed after completion of this study. A comparative analytical approach was used to examine differences between university expectations and school realities. Theoretical expectations were compared with classroom practices. Then training needs were matched with actual school challenges. Institutional alignment was assessed between universities and schools.

Results

Six themes were generated inductively from the 2 ELM focus groups transcripts, the semi structured interview transcript for in service school teachers, and the TESOL open-ended questionnaire. The generated themes were cross-examined against the four research questions to ensure comprehensive thematic coverage and alignment across all research objectives. The themes included (1) theory-to-practice translation, (2) differentiated instruction, (3) collaboration and peer learning, (4) mentoring, feedback and reflective practice, (5) technology and contemporary professional skills and (6) structural and resource-based barriers to implementation. This analytical framework allowed for a systematic comparison of convergence and divergence across all three participant cohorts: MPhil ELM students, MPhil TESOL students and in-service school teachers. Special emphasis was placed on establishing the four core dimensions of the Training Needs Assessment (TNA) framework (differentiated instruction, coaching and mentoring, collaborative facilitation, and inquiry-based reflective practice). These dimensions highlighted the skill gaps identified by future educational leaders. Each theme is discussed below with representative evidence from the relevant participant group(s).

Theme 1: Theory-to-Practice Translation through Real-World Application

All three participant groups expected that university and professional-development instruction should be organized around real-world examples and tasks rather than lecture-based delivery of theory. Among ELM students, this was expressed as a preference for case studies and project-based work: “Theories should always be connected with case studies and real classroom examples. Reading educational theories will make more sense when we can see how they are applied in our context in school situations.” (ELM (A) P6)

“I would like more classroom observations and opportunities to read research papers gradually...to become a facilitator and educational leader who understands both theory and classroom practice”. (ELM (A) P7)

TESOL students expressed their preference for task-based and project-based methodologies: “Project based learning... so students should be able to practically apply the knowledge.” (TESOL P1)

“I prefer a student-centered and task-based teaching methodology that emphasizes ... real-world application, practical skill development prepares students for real-life teaching scenarios.” (TESOL P6)

Amongst in-service school teachers, this preference for applied learning was already visible in classroom practice rather than expressed as an unmet desire. T2 described adapting an abstract topic into a hands-on activity using locally available materials: “I use simple activities such as identifying the seeds, colours, and characteristics of fruits.” (T2)

T9 similarly reported using “experiments, project-based learning and creative classroom activities,” while noting that “some require additional support to participate fully.” Three groups expressed similar desires but at different points in time and place. Learning should be enacted not merely explained. ELM and TESOL students articulated it as something missing from their preparation, while teachers were already improvising applied methods without having been formally taught to design them.

Theme 2: Differentiated Instruction for Diverse Learners

Within the TNA framework, differentiated instruction emerged as the highest-ranked training need among MPhil ELM students, with five participants rating themselves consistently below standard on this competency. ELM (A) P1 expressed a feature of good university teaching:

“I would like university instructors to use different approaches to teaching and learning because every learner has different needs. If we observe differentiated instruction ourselves, we will be able to implement it in our own classrooms as well.” (ELM-A P1). “I want to learn how to incorporate action research effectively in the classrooms without disturbing curriculum outlines drastically”. ELM (A) P2

Participants specifically demanded training in designing learning experiences tailored to students of varying cognitive abilities and linguistic backgrounds. As ELM S7 noted in the TNA evaluation, university preparation focused heavily on the theoretical concept without providing supervised practice in its actual classroom implementation. From the semi structured interview data, differentiation appeared not as an aspiration but as an active and self-designed classroom strategy. T10 described structuring group work around ability level:

“I also organize students into ability groups and encourage peer teaching

so stronger students can support others.” (T10)

T11 reported a similar approach but she explained the difficulty of sustaining it: “Teaching students with different ability levels within the same classroom is always challenging...” (T11)

This theme showed a clear asymmetry between groups. ELM students stated differentiated instruction as a competency they aspire to be taught but on the other hand teachers were already practicing it. They merely felt unassisted. They were not formally trained and didn’t know the exact ways to plan it.

Theme 3: Collaboration and Peer-Based Learning

This theme was consistent across all three groups. The TNA data identified collaborative facilitation, like the ability to organize and sustain productive Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) within schools. Collaboration was a prominent skill gap among ELM students, with seven participants indicating that while coursework introduced the concept, they lacked practical experience in facilitating PLCs. ELM(A) P3 framed that as a professional competency that should be explicitly taught.

“Professional collaboration should receive much more attention during the course. We want to interact with teachers to understand what they need.” (ELM (A) P3)

ELM (B) P9 and P13 stated this from a slightly different angle. They linked collaborative learning to engagement and to teacher agency over their own professional growth. “Teachers should actively participate in planning their own learning because they understand their classroom needs better than anyone else.” (ELM (B) P9)

“University teaching should include more interactive classroom activities, discussions, presentations and collaborative learning...” (ELM (B) P13)

Teachers described it as something already built into classroom routines rather than a training need. T1 linked it directly to a supportive feedback style. “I encourage collaborative learning by asking students to work together and support each other. When giving feedback, I first appreciate their efforts and then guide them on how they can improve.” (T1)

T10 extended this into a “structured peer-teaching”. Collaboration for

ELM students was a course design request. Teachers used this strategy every day in the classroom.

Theme 4: Mentoring, Feedback, and Reflective Practice

ELM (A) P4 connected mentoring, feedback and reflective practices as key indicators of leadership proficiency within the TNA results. Data highlighted coaching and mentoring as the second most prominent skill gap among ELM students. Six ELM participants emphasized that while university coursework covered administrative performance management as a leadership function, it provided practically no preparation for the interpersonal and relationship-based dimensions of mentoring and structured feedback which is essential for instructional leadership: “I want instructors to model mentoring programmes and reflective practice so that we learn how to identify our strengths and weaknesses.” (ELM (A) P4)

ELM (B) P14 stated his concern about the purpose of assessment. “Feedback should be given in time so I can learn from it and improve myself...” (ELM-B P14)

ELM students expressed a dire desire for practical training in action research methodologies that would empower them to diagnose operational problems, evaluate student-centered learning (SCL) initiatives, and conduct needs assessments within their own institutional contexts. As ELM (B) P11 noted during the focus group discussions: “Professional development does not match what we really want to do in class... We want to engage...”

TESOL students stated the same concern as “reflective teaching practices,” explicitly citing self-evaluation as a professional habit to be cultivated (TESOL P4, P5). In service teachers already described enacting a version of this toward their own students. T1s practice of appreciating effort before offering correction is itself a form of formative feedback. On the contrary no participant in the teacher group described receiving structured feedback on their own teaching. The theme therefore surfaced as one-directional feedback culture where teachers give feedback to students, but no group described a mechanism through which they reliably received feedback themselves.

Theme 5: Technology and Contemporary Professional Skills

ELM and TESOL groups mentioned technology integration and staying current with professional trends. ELM (B) P15 linked this to their

aspirations as a future leader: "...I want to learn how to conduct professional development workshops and how to integrate AI tools and technology into my teacher training." (ELM (B) P15)

ELM (B) P11 named a specific tool: "...learning how to use interactive platforms like Kahoot would help us make our own classrooms more engaging and student-centered." (ELM-B P11)

TESOL students raised the same concern from a slightly more general professional-currency angle: "Latest industry trends keeping us updated with new advancements, tools, and best practices in our field." (TESOL P7)

No in-service teacher raised technology integration as a want; and technology did not appear in the teacher data at all. This divergence was itself notable because technology readiness was a priority for students enrolled in MPhil programmes but functioned as an inaccessible resource for teachers already working in under-resourced classrooms.

Theme 6: Structural and Resource-Based Barriers to Implementation

The final theme presented the conditions that added constraint. T3 identified a basic resource gap: "... We often have to rely on simple classroom materials e.g. charts and models to make lessons engaging." (T3)

T7 and T8 identified behavioral and attentional barriers to sustaining student-centered methods: "Managing disruptive behaviour is one of the greatest challenges. Some students interrupt the lesson and make it difficult to manage classroom." (T7)

T10 and T11 identified time, class size and infrastructure as main constraints: "Integrating technology and innovative teaching approaches is not always possible because of limited facilities of internet and electricity." (T10)

"Individual feedback to every student is difficult, especially in large classes... we also have to complete the syllabus in limited time. (T11)

Among ELM students, a related but distinct theme emerged regarding curriculum contextualization. Participants expressed a clear demand for locally grounded case studies contextualized within domestic educational settings, rather than reliance on purely international models.

"I would also like case studies that are based on our own educational context. International examples are useful, but understanding situations

from Pakistani schools would make professional development courses much more relevant to our future careers.” (ELM (A) P7)

The thematic findings of this section revealed a clear structural pattern across the teacher education pipeline in Lahore. Rather than demonstrating a lack of motivation or a conceptual disagreement regarding Student-Centered Learning, all three participant cohorts converged on core constructivist values e.g. applied learning, differentiation, collaboration, feedback and technological integration. However, the data illustrated an institutional disconnect. MPhil TESOL and ELM students articulated pedagogical approaches as unmet training needs due to over-reliance on university lectures. In-service teachers actively improvised intuitive versions of SCL strategies without formal institutional support. The four TNA dimensions systematically identified that future leaders lacked hands-on and supervised preparation in competencies relevant to their field. The findings also showed that classroom implementation by teachers in schools remained fragmented and under severe strain due to class sizes, syllabus completion demands and an absence of formal feedback mechanisms. These thematic findings collectively demonstrated that the theory-practice divide was structural in nature rather than motivational.

Discussion

The findings of this research help us to critically examine the gap between what educators are taught to believe about learning in the university and what they are permitted to do within the schools where they work. The data uncovered the concern clearly that educators are not ready to compromise on becoming compatible professionals, they want their creativity to thrive and want to be professionally ready (Mat & Jamaludin, [2024](#)), they want to go beyond these classrooms and work according to what their degree programmes demand of them. The study by Ghafar ([2024](#)) similarly explains the fact that when students take charge of their learning, they work hand in hand with teachers to construct knowledge (Efgivia et al., [2021](#)). Here, the MPhil students were not just asking for different teaching and learning methods; they were demanding a shift in the power dynamic of teacher education. They described a vision of education that is collaborative and practical. Results stressed upon participants’ desire to have a professional agency and ownership so they could have the right to be a thinker and reflective practitioner to practice student centered learning strategies rather than being a passive recipient of mandates (Ghafar, [2024](#)).

Mat and Jamaludin ([2024](#)) in their study talk about the same phenomenon that when teachers take ownership of their learning, it helps achieve a deeper understanding and implementation of learning and teaching practices.

There were similarities in methodologies expressed by MPhil students. They wanted their course to embed local case studies, group work, and hands-on learning, and the same methodologies we see constructivist learning theory lays its stress upon. According to Efgivia et al. ([2021](#)), knowledge grows when learners are active builders of their own understanding through real-world experience. This aligns closely to Vygotsky's social constructivism, where learning happens through social interaction and language (Saleem et al., [2021](#)). Moreover, the findings revealed some kind of frustration with existing teaching methodologies. Analytically these needs shared by post graduate students didn't match the concern of in service school teachers as they were trying hard to help their students experience SCL strategies without having formal knowledge of the theory. So, a gap was identified for teachers having no knowledge but intuitively applying SCL approaches. Whereas post graduates know theory and they wanted their professors to give them agency. There seemed to be a clear failure between what training could have looked like and what actual practice could be, followed by post graduate students and in service teachers respectively. There was no conceptual disagreement about what actually good teaching was. As Tang ([2023](#)) clarifies, student-centered learning (SCL) has a core idea that demands specific context and purpose to adapt learning and teaching strategies for the learners. The current instructional mode in the university was failing to respond to their professional realities.

Vogt et al. ([2020](#)) argue that training fails when it offers uniform solutions to particular problems, students presented the concern that they did not lack theoretical knowledge, but that knowledge from learning theories and then producing them back in the exams were not enough to help them become competent in the professional field. Those findings coincide with Butnaru ([2020](#)) who lays an emphasis on the importance of designing professional development courses after carefully diagnosing the actual needs of students and teachers in the schools. When professional training is meaningful and contextual as it is derived from real needs in the practical fields; this according to Tomas and Tiquia ([2022](#)), encourages professionals and trainers, and brings about real change in the professional

field of education. But the results showed a problematic picture and inconsistency describing that ongoing professional development available to student educators in MPhil programmes seemed insufficient for them. Stefaniak (2020) endorsed the same dire need of having need based training for student educators. The participants specifically called for workshops on classroom management, AI tools and conducting seminars. This translated the ELM students own sense of leadership training that they desired to be integrated into their degree programmes.

TNA data suggested operational gaps (Barbazette, 2006). TNA data strongly indicated preference for authentic performance and meaningful feedback on time. This suggests that current evaluation methods in higher education were insignificant to monitor professional competencies. Oo et al. (2023) found that needs-based professional development programs enhanced pre-service teachers assessment literacy because they were designed around what teachers actually struggled with, rather than what program designers assumed they needed. The ELM students are making the same demand. Similarly, the semi-structured interviews with eleven teachers from a local school present a community of educators who had no idea; theoretically what SCL is, because they did not receive any formal professional development support but still, they were practicing some versions of student-centered learning in a resource constrained setting. Mat and Jamaludins (2024) systematic review somehow explains the same version that student-centered teaching and learning generates higher engagement and improved academic outcomes. Goodwin (2024) endorses that active engagement during learning process is very crucial. The findings revealed an important issue that teachers failed to produce desired learning outcome as sometimes they were unable to manage behavioral problems of students on their own in limited time span. Teachers frequently express a need for targeted professional training that is currently unavailable to them (Ali & Ibrahim, 2021). Despite these systemic constraints, participants actively reflected on their classroom practices and developed adaptive instructional strategies to meet student needs. However, as Siddiqui et al. (2021) note the long-term outcome of these solitary and individual practices result in uneven and unsustainable implementation of SCL strategies as evident from the data. Not all teachers were making and planning strategies. Some were clueless about what to do. So, the very important issue emerged, i.e. absence of institutional backing. It led this study to make a successful argument for having better context specific and need based training

programmes (Butnaru, [2020](#)).

The synthesis between MPhil students perceptions and teachers practices suggests that the theory-practice gap is not a gap in motivation, but it is present in structural support. As Bravo et al. ([2023](#)) suggests, leadership training is most effective when it builds reflective practice and collaborative inquiry. To move forward, professional development programmes in Pakistan must shift from a transmission model toward a more relational and need based model (Ukwigize et al., [2025](#)) where the system recognizes teachers as partners, not just a mere instrument of implementing orders and policies (Khan & Ahmad, [2021](#)).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically this study shifts the perspectives on theory practice gap and reveals that the gap is primarily structural due to lack of systemic support. It is not a motivational disinterest. The study endorses constructivist principles in local studies (Saleem et al., 2021). This study contributes to understand the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) scaffolding (Efgivia et al., 2021). Practical implications expose how university lecture formats fail to address diverse practitioner needs in ELM and TESOL programmes. In service teachers practice intuitive SCL strategies while institutions don't provide formal support and sustainable scaffolding. This study recommends that leadership training is the most important factor for closing the theory-practice gap if it incorporates the desired practical competencies identified in the TNA. These competencies are case studies, project-based learning, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) training, and task based instructions (Lu, [2024](#); Sorensen et al., [2023](#)). The feedback system should move towards interactive and field-based assessments (Oo et al., [2023](#)). To target specific practical gaps e.g. large classes and resource constraints, need based assessments should be conducted (Tomas & Tiquia, [2022](#)). Then structured PD programmes should be planned and executed to avoid planning PDs based only on assumptions. This will help formalize intuitive adaptations (Stefaniak, [2020](#)). To drive institutional action at the school level, institutions should establish peer-learning networks, and learning communities; and resource banks should be organized. To achieve this goal, structured school-university partnerships should be built for shared knowledge and mentoring (Bravo et al., 2023). However, this will only be possible when ELM leadership training will focus on actionable coaching and mentoring procedures (Ukwigize et al.,

[2025](#)).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has following limitations. First, the research was conducted in one urban university in Lahore and involved a small sample of TESOL and ELM students. It has a limited number of local school teachers. Because of this narrow and context-specific focus, the findings cannot be easily generalized to other regions, particularly rural areas or non-English-medium institutions across Pakistan. Second, the teachers and students hope to use student centered learning strategies. The data highlights that large classroom sizes and rigid exam structures act as significant barriers. These constraints limit the scope of implementing innovative methods that participants of this study suggested in the interviews. Local school data provide a small picture of current needs and practices but may not capture the long-term sustainability of these practices once teachers face increased academic or administration related pressure.

Conclusion

The research concludes that the theory-practice gap in Pakistan is not a result of teacher's and student educators' disinterest. Instead, it is a systemic support gap. MPhil students are entering the field with high hopes and expectations for experiential and collaborative learning. They find that university models are too theoretical for the students, therefore they desire professional agency and ownership in their learning journey. Simultaneously, in-service teachers are struggling with behavior management and large-class dynamics. SCL practices remain fragmented and unsupported as teachers independently developed localized and resourceful adaptations into their classrooms. These are the areas where they feel their formal education has left them less equipped. Ultimately, to bridge this gap following recommendations are formulated in the light of collected data.

Recommendations

MPhil curriculum should integrate need-responsive content around AI tools, conflict resolution and differentiated instruction. Teaching methodologies should use localized case studies, Project-Based Learning (PBL) and task-based instructions. The assessments should adopt field observations & interactive tools. The higher education programmes should conduct structured PD after Training Needs Assessment (TNA) to fill the

targeted practical gaps. Higher education institutions should build structured and formal university-school partnerships for shared knowledge and mentoring to create a positive and learning-centered institutional culture.

Author Contribution

Sana Ammar: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, writing original draft.
Shazia Humayun: conceptualization, investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision, validation, visualization.

Conflict of Interest

The author of the manuscript has no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data of this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon formal request.

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