EVALUATION OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THROUGH QUALITATIVE PRESCRIPTIVE STUDY: A PAKISTANI ELT CLASSROOM CONTEXT

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Abstract

Transformational leadership inspires and transforms individuals towards collective learning goals and it can prove effective in ELT classrooms for fostering learner engagement and motivation. This qualitative study employs a multiple case-study design to explore the effectiveness of transformational leadership practices in ELT classrooms context. For this purpose, five university English language instructors, who were implementing transformational leadership practices in their classrooms, were purposively sampled. The date was collected by conducting ten hours of non-participant classroom observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews with the objective to investigate the diverse leadership strategies and approaches those educational leaders adopt. The data were examined through systematic coding and thematic analysis, and interpreted using social constructivist theory which offers a foundational framework for understanding transformational leadership. The study identified four key transformational leadership practices in ELT classrooms: experimentation, adaptability to change, intellectual stimulation, and linking theory with real life. These practices enhance student engagement and motivation. Also, transformational leadership positively influence both classroom climate and learning outcomes. This research can help educators inculcate transformational leadership practices in their classrooms and improve student engagement and motivation.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, ELT Classrooms, Learner Engagement, Student Motivation, Multiple Case-Study Design, Social Constructivist Theory

Introduction

There are various leadership theories in practice but transformational leadership has surfaced as the most prominent one (Pennell, 2023). The concept was initially introduced by James V. Downton (Cherry, 2023) and since then it has been used and extended in its conception by various researchers including Bruce J. Avolio, Bernard M. Bass and James MacGregor Burns (Jovanovic & Ciric, 2016). The fundamental theme of transformational teadership intends on its audience to feel inspired and motivated to the extent that they develop skills which they had not even imagined they could (Gill, 2011). The intended outcome of this style of Leadership is to develop an innovative and collaborative work environment within an organization both at individual and collective level. Based on its practicality and effectiveness for educational institutes, educational leaders have been practicing it in their classrooms for learning and improvement (Pannell, 2023). This research paper focuses on the transformational leadership practices used in English Language Teaching classrooms, through non- participant observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The aim of the study is to explore the transformational leadership practices in ELT classrooms context and their effectiveness in the classroom. The study is anchored on the following two research questions:

1. What transformational leadership practices are employed by English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers in classroom settings?
2. How effective are transformational leadership practices in enhancing student engagement and motivation?

Transformational Leadership

Jovanovic and Ciric (2016) state that transformational leadership is a most distinctive leadership technique and it is evident in various studies related to education. Transformational leadership has also been associated to a significant increase in student performance, employee job embeddedness and overall environment of the institution. (Jovanovic & Ciric, 2016). It has been observed that transformational leadership can be applied and adapted quite effectively. It has the ability to steer through the novice educational arena because its main focus is upon steady growth, innovative approach and team building efforts. (Lancefield & Rangen, 2021). Transformational leadership becomes an ideal choice for educational leaders because it has the applicability and flexibility to adjust to the changing needs of students and teachers. The overall success of an organization depends on how effectively transformational leadership strategies are used within the organization. Educators need to learn these strategies in order to achieve excellence and help students achieve it as well. Transformational leadership activates an idealized influence, inspirational motivation, development-oriented support and life-changing intrinsic stimulation. (Korejan, M, M & Shahbazi, H 2016).

Beverborg et al. (2015) discusses that transformational leaders are capable of great problem-solving mechanisms because it inculcates critical thinking. It was also mentioned that transformational leadership has a direct and indirect impact upon the quality of learning which takes place under the supervision of transformational leaders. Research shows that Transformational leadership significantly uplifts the sense of achievement from a learner perspective and accomplishment from an instructor's perspective, creating a successful work environment in the process. (Jovanovic & Ciric, 2016).

Learners' Engagement and Motivation

Transformational leadership has the tendency to influence learners with its visionary and empowering dimension, as pointed out by Hackman and Johnson (2004). It revolutionizes motivation when students get positively inspired by their teacher. As stated by Fredericks and McColskey (2012), behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects of learner's engagement and motivation are crucial when transformational leadership is discussed. It is clearly evident that the research related to transformational leadership culminates into inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration and eventually, students' engagement dimensions which are emotional engagement, behavioural engagement, and cognitive engagement, influences the performance of learners. It also enables students to demonstrate transformational leadership skills and student engagement increases significantly, causing the students to achieve higher grades in their study (Bomrez & Rahman, 2018). The combined impact of transformational leadership on student engagement and student motivation leads to improved academic performance. Engaged and motivated learners participate more meaningfully in the learning process. This dynamic interaction creates a positive cycle where motivation enhances engagement, and engagement further reinforces motivation. Ultimately, transformational leadership plays a crucial role in cultivating both student engagement and student motivation, which are essential for sustained academic success. It is emphasized that the behavioural involvement of a transformational leader in classroom encourages extremely positive student engagement in the learning process (Balwant et al., 2018). Furthermore, emotional connection of the teacher-leader develops deep motivation into the learner's brain (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

In view of the themes discussed above, the research questions have been framed considering the need to develop a link between English language teaching and transformational leadership. This link need to be explored and observed. This research study can provide an insight into the transformational practices used in ELT classrooms and their effectiveness. Similarly, the study explores the role of effective transformational leadership practices in enhancing student

engagement and motivation. This study will be beneficial for future researchers to develop the foundational link of English language teaching and transformational leadership.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed a multiple case study design to explore transformational leadership practices in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms at a private university. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' lived experiences, classroom behaviors, and leadership orientations within their natural instructional settings. According to Creswell (1998), a case study enables an in-depth and holistic interpretation of a bounded system, allowing the researcher to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Similarly, Palys (2008) argues that case studies support context-sensitive generalizations that offer plausible and analytically grounded explanations. Guided by these perspectives, the present study examined five English language instructors who were identified as practicing transformational leadership in their classrooms.

The participants were selected through purposive and opportunity sampling techniques. Purposive sampling ensured that individuals included in the study possessed characteristics relevant to the research focus, particularly demonstrable leadership practices within ELT classrooms. Opportunity sampling was adopted due to practical considerations, including accessibility, time constraints, and participants' willingness to take part in the study. Since qualitative inquiry depends heavily on depth rather than breadth, careful background checks were conducted to confirm the suitability and relevance of each participant. The selected instructors represented diverse teaching experiences and instructional styles, thereby enriching the depth and variability of the data.

Data collection was conducted in two systematic phases. In the first phase, each participant was observed for two hours in their respective classrooms through non-participant observation. The researcher adopted a passive role, remaining seated in a non-intrusive position to minimize disruption and observer influence. These observations were followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to capture participants' reflections on their teaching practices, leadership strategies, and classroom decision-making processes. In the second phase, a subsequent two-hour observation session was conducted for each participant after the interviews. This sequential design allowed the researcher to verify emerging insights from interviews and to observe whether articulated leadership beliefs were reflected in classroom practice. In total, ten hours of non-participant classroom observation were completed across the five cases.

A context-specific observation rubric was developed by the researcher to guide systematic data recording during classroom visits. The rubric focused on indicators aligned with transformational leadership practices, such as inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence. Field notes were documented carefully to capture instructional interactions, verbal and non-verbal communication, classroom climate, student engagement, and leadership-related behaviors. For the interview component, ten open-ended questions were designed to encourage reflective and elaborate responses. Probing questions were incorporated when necessary to gain clarification or deeper insight into specific classroom incidents or pedagogical decisions. The semi-structured format ensured consistency across cases while allowing flexibility for participants to express unique perspectives.

For both research questions, classroom observations and interviews served as complementary data sources, enabling triangulation and enhancing credibility. Observations provided direct evidence of enacted leadership behaviors, whereas interviews revealed underlying intentions, beliefs, and self-perceptions. With prior informed consent, all five participants allowed the researcher to observe their classes and record detailed field notes. The combination of

observational and interview data strengthened the validity of interpretations and supported a more nuanced understanding of transformational leadership within ELT contexts.

Data analysis was conducted through systematic coding and thematic analysis. Initially, each case was analyzed independently to preserve its contextual integrity. Coding involved identifying recurring words, phrases, actions, and patterns that represented meaningful units of analysis. As noted by Stake (2005), coding facilitates the organization of qualitative data into conceptual categories, thereby enabling interpretation and explanation. Through iterative reading and constant comparison, preliminary codes were refined into broader themes representing leadership practices, instructional strategies, and teacher–student interactions. Once within-case themes were generated, cross-case analysis was conducted to identify similarities, contrasts, and variations among participants. This comparative process led to a comprehensive and integrated understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The interpretation of findings was informed by social constructivist theory, which emphasizes knowledge construction through interaction, dialogue, and collaborative engagement. Social constructivism provides an appropriate conceptual foundation for examining transformational leadership in classroom settings, as both perspectives highlight the importance of shared meaning-making and relational influence. Within this theoretical framework, leadership is viewed not merely as positional authority but as a dynamic and socially negotiated process. Judge and Bono (2000) suggest that transformational leaders tend to be adaptable, open to experience, emotionally stable, responsible, and inclined toward innovation and experimentation. These attributes resonate strongly with effective ELT practices, where instructors are expected to motivate learners, foster critical thinking, and create supportive learning environments. By integrating social constructivist insights with transformational leadership theory, the study aimed to interpret classroom practices within a broader conceptual lens.

Ethical considerations were addressed rigorously throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation and awareness of the study's objectives. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and pseudonyms were used in documentation and reporting to protect their identities. After data collection and preliminary thematic analysis, summaries of interpretations were shared with participants for member checking. This step helped minimize misrepresentation, reduce researcher bias, and enhance the trustworthiness of findings.

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the range and diversity of leadership practices and techniques employed by individual instructors in ELT classrooms. By examining multiple cases in depth, the research sought to identify patterns that could inform emerging leaders and contribute to professional development initiatives. Although the study is context-bound to a private university, its findings have the potential to offer transferable insights into effective transformational leadership practices within similar educational environments. Overall, the methodological design—combining purposive sampling, systematic observation, in-depth interviewing, thematic analysis, and theoretical grounding—ensured a comprehensive, credible, and contextually rich exploration of transformational leadership in English Language Teaching.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Below is the data analysis and discussion based on both classroom observation and in-depth interviews.

Observation Data

The class of first instructor started with the roll call and a warm up activity. The instructor asked his students about their day and engaged them in small talk. He then moved to his main activity which was teaching paragraph writing for academic purposes. He used an innovative technique

to break the structure into sentences and teach them separately. Those sentences would ultimately result into an organized paragraph. He named it as jigsaw puzzle activity. This activity involved jumbled up sentences and students were supposed to put sentences into order and make an organized paragraph. While doing this activity, increased interest was observed from the students. None of the students was using phone or was distracted. Second instructor was extremely active and energetic. She acted like a fireball and injected her energy into her class. She used her personality as a mirror to reflect best learning practices in class. There was one student in her class who kept interrupting her activities and asked irrelevant questions but she handled him with great patience and perseverance. She led through example and kept treating him with respect. It was observed that by the end of the class, the student felt ashamed and stopped interrupting her class. She used another technique where she started solving all the activities with the students and considered herself as part of the group activity. She also confessed when she could not get an answer right. This encouraged the students to be more confidant and reach out for help. Her class was truly transformational in all respects. Third instructor created an air of charisma in his class. This teacher did not teach by standing behind the podium but chose to move freely to reach the students sitting at the back. He tried to understand non-verbal behaviors of his students and built a rapport with them. He noticed that a student was constantly yawning in his class so he went to him and asked him why he could not get enough sleep during the night. The student explained that he had been travelling last night and could not rest. The instructor suggested that the student could splash some water on his face and take a walk to refresh himself. The student came back refreshed after five minutes. Fourth instructor used technology in his classroom and it turned out to be really effective. His strategy was to observe and improvise in order to make the classroom interesting and interactive. He started by using Kahoot and Balderdash in his class. Students were extremely excited to participate and learn through technology. This teacher ignited their interest through activities which resonate with the interests of Gen Z. The reaction of students showed that the teacher was quite popular amongst his students. He also used feedback and appreciation as a tool to bring the best out of his students. Fifth instructor brought creativity to the forefronts of his classroom practices. He assigned a problem solving task to the class and asked them to propose creative solutions. He was teaching business students and asked them to sell a product using creating marketing approaches. The class worked in groups and proposed unique ideas by thinking outside the box. This technique provided them with the opportunity to use creativity in their learning.

Interview Data

In the second phase, all five transformational leaders were interviewed using an in-depth semi-structured interview structure. From the interviews, several interrelated themes emerged. Below is the detail:

The first interviewee highlighted hope, newness, openness, and stimulation, suggesting an emphasis on optimism and receptiveness to fresh ideas. He mentioned that students feel overwhelmed by the amount of competition and pressure in education sector and it is extremely essential that teachers use transformational leadership practices more than they did in the past. Similarly, it is of great importance that education sector works on newness and novelty. He further strengthened that teacher needs to be more open because students are going to apply the same knowledge into a world which is rapidly changing and the knowledge has to be adapted to changing needs.

The second interviewee emphasized transformation, leading by example, motivation, and enlightenment, indicating a focus on personal growth and inspirational leadership. She responded to the question regarding the definition of transformational leadership by saying that she believes transformational leadership should be able to transform lives. According to her, a transformational leader holds the power to alter human behavior for better. She went on and shared an example.

She said that she had a very rowdy student in her class who was being mischievous during the lectures. The teacher used to ignore him and still be nice to him. She also requested her fellow students to stay polite even in response to his bad behavior. By the end of the semester, the student not only apologized to the teacher but also to the entire class. Her transformational leadership practice transformed the life of the student. In her response to what sort of leadership practices she uses in her classroom, she said that her most important strategy is leading by example. She said that students follow what their teacher represents, more than what their teacher says. She said that she teaches discipline by always being on time. When students observe that punctuality is a fundamental merit for their teacher, they start following it automatically. She added further by saying that effective transformational leadership practices involve inspiring, motivating and enlightening the students.

The third interviewee identified charisma, rapport, motivation, and influence as central themes, reflecting the importance of interpersonal relationships and the ability to inspire others. He brought the perspective of charisma into classroom. He believed that charisma is an immensely powerful force of motivation. Teachers exercise great influence upon their students and if their personality is charismatic, student's motivation grows. He asserted that teachers who have a charismatic personality, establish better relationship with their students. They are able to build a rapport with their students which results in enhanced student motivation. He elaborated that student participate more in the classes where transformational leadership practices are endorsed.

The fourth interviewee pointed to high expectations, openness to experimentation, the integration of technology and experience, and the value of feedback, underscoring a forward-looking and reflective approach. He established that he uses transformational leadership techniques in his class which enables him to be a popular teacher. He feels that students admire a teacher who is open to experimentation. Novel methods of teaching inspire the mindset of Generation Z. Students can connect easily with the teachers who treat them on a humane basis and try to inculcate technology in the classroom. He said that he uses online learning games like Kahoot and balderdash. Such activities enhance the learner's interest in the class and helps build a strong foundation of interdependence. The interviewee said that he produces an amalgamation of his experiences and technology to conquer the young minds and tries to transform their lives for the better. He mentioned that Generation Z has issues related to attention span so he breaks his lecture into multiple chunks so whenever he observes that the students are losing focus, he changes the activity. This strategy keeps students involved and ensures maximum learning outcome. He also believes in providing constructive and timely feedback, based on sandwich approach. He stated that he always starts with an encouraging comment and does not use negatives in his comments at all. Further, he wraps it up with a positive comment as well. He explained his stance with an example. He said that he gave such feedback to one of his students and it turned out that the student showed visible signs of improvement. He also mentioned that teachers should appreciate the students only over legitimate points of achievement so that they can make their compliments appear natural and honest. This ensures success of the constructive usage of feedback in class. He said that he uses another transformational leadership technique in his classroom which is setting high expectations for students. He said that students respond very well to the standards set by the teacher and they try to outperform. This pushes them outside their comfort zone and their confidence gets a boost. Two main features of transformational leadership e:g inspire and motivate, get addressed by this transformational leadership practice. High expectations inspire students to make more effort and get better results in the long run. Also, it enables them to take ownership of their learning.

Finally, the fifth interviewee stressed creativity, innovation, inclusivity, and being a role model, highlighting the significance of originality and positive influence within the group. He mentioned that his major transformational practice is enhancing creativity and innovation in the learning

process. He stated that he facilitates his students by providing them enough freedom to develop their creativity. He said that he assigns class projects to his students with abundant sense of freedom to individualize the outcomes and this increases student's interest tremendously. He further established that creativity is an essential element of transformational leadership. Education sector needs to develop more creative problem-solvers, instead of automatons who are unable to apply theory into practice. He suggested that innovative approach towards learning motivates young learners to use their imagination and find ways that suit their learning needs. He also linked it with generation Z's innovative approach towards life in a holistic manner. Their potential needs to be fully cultivated by linking it with their learning pattern. He put great emphasis upon inclusivity principle where generation X, Y and Z can collaborate and benefit from each other's individual differences and similarities. He brought up the issue of generation gap between teachers and students. He said that students belong to a different generation as compared to their teachers and this creates a divide. This divide needs to be bridged, rather than being a gap. If teachers and students can meet each other halfway, the collaboration can be very fruitful for both the parties. He said that it is very important that students view their teachers as role models. This is linked with idealizing teachers and it can only happen if students and teachers have respect for what each of them represents. This can ultimately be achieved by an effective working relationship between students and teachers.

During the classroom observations and subsequent interviews, it emerged that four transformational leadership practices were most consistently enacted by instructors in ELT settings. These recurrent practices were evident across multiple cases and contexts, indicating their centrality to instructional leadership within the classroom. The diagram below visually represents these dominant practices, and the following section provides a detailed interpretation and analysis of each.

Fig-1
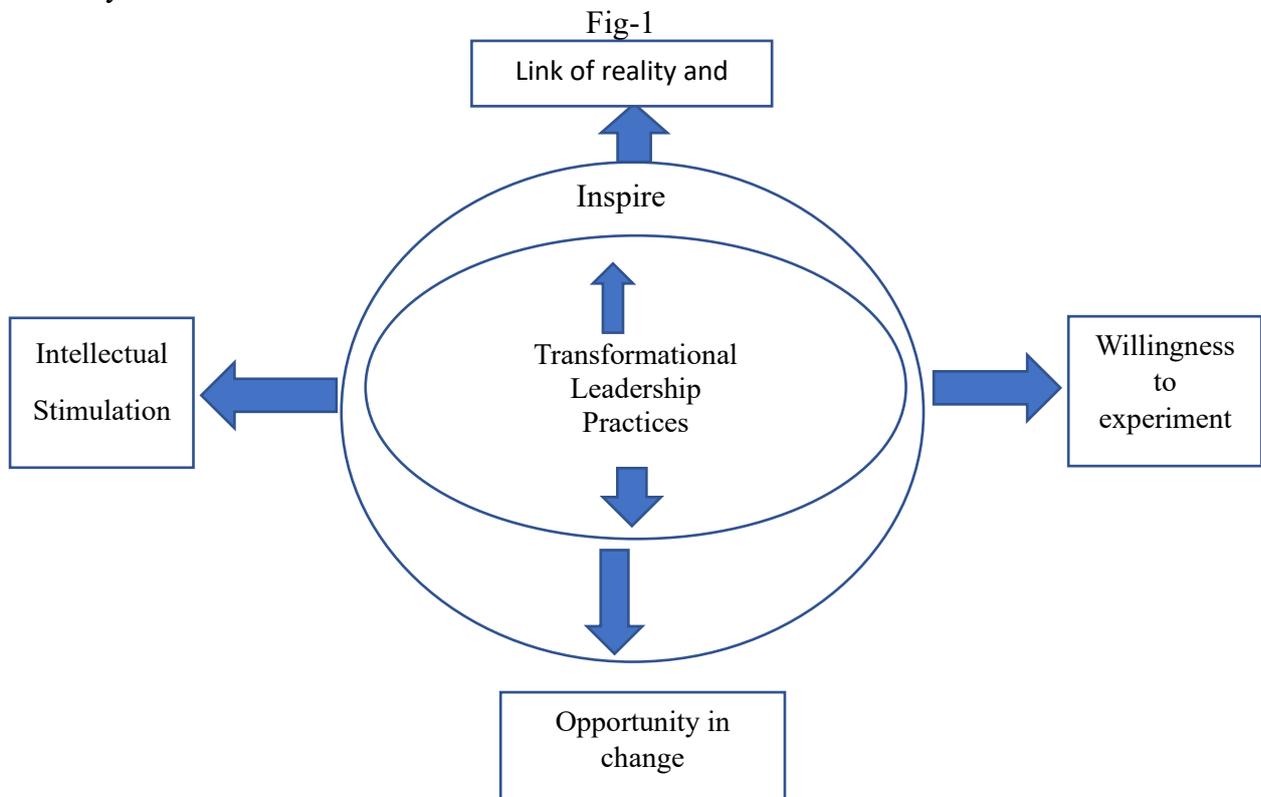
Willingness to experiment

The first transformational practice was willingness to experiment. Four out of five instructors used this practice in their classrooms. Their agenda was to use activities which were non-traditional and created more interest. One teacher who used a jigsaw puzzle technique to teach paragraph writing created an overwhelmingly enhanced interest from students. This technique involved teacher presenting jumbled up sentences to students where they had to make sense of a logical sequence. The participation of students increased and it was also observed that students wanted the class to last longer. In another classroom, the teacher drew an object on the white board and wrote some vocabulary items on the side. The task was to adjust those vocabulary items into the object and create a story out of it. This provided freedom of choice to students and the sense of accomplishment while experimenting with new structures. Students enjoy the activities more when they are not afraid of being wrong. The teacher clearly stated that there is no wrong answer to this task. This built more confidence and enthusiasm. The mystery object increased student's interest tenfold and the overall class environment became pleasant. It was observed that if teacher is willing to experiment, student feedback becomes extremely positive.

Opportunity in change

The second common transformational practice was that transformational leaders are adept at seeing opportunity in change. Majority of the transformational leaders are not afraid of change and they make best use of situations when things do not go as planned. It was observed by the researcher that when technology failed in a classroom, transformational leader treated it as an opportunity to do things differently. In one classroom, the desktop was not working and the teacher could not share power points with the class. This did not stop the instructor from having a meaningful interaction with his class. The instructor immediately turned it into a non-technology class by declaring it impromptu speech day. This helped avoid any frustration and kept students involved during the class time.

Intellectual Stimulation

Third important transformational leadership practice is intellectual stimulation. Transformational leaders create a snowball effect of intellectual stimulation which emanates from their personalities and people around them are bound to attract it. Intellectual stimulation becomes contagious around transformational leaders because they represent it through their entirety. In one classroom, it was observed by the researcher that the students were asking their teacher about ways in which they can do more than just grades and that was the impact of an intellectually stimulated teacher's personality over the students.

Link of reality and theory

Fourth most important transformational leadership practice was that human brain increases its capacity to produce when a task is real in its nature. A simple classroom activity can have an immersive effect on student's mind if it is presented to them in a tactful manner. It was observed that the teacher created links of each activity towards something vital in life and made students feel that the activities are not only for the sake of classroom, they can have a huge impact upon their performance in life. For example, while teaching precis writing, the teacher linked the art of compressing to time barred-real life encounters where students might need to practice synthesis. This showed an increased sense of interest and involvement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study identified four dominant transformational leadership practices operating within English Language Teaching classrooms: willingness to experiment, the ability to perceive opportunity in change, intellectual stimulation, and the integration of theory with real-life application. Together, these practices demonstrate that transformational leadership in ELT extends beyond instructional delivery and functions as a dynamic force that shapes classroom climate, student engagement, and academic motivation.

The findings suggest that instructors who are willing to experiment create psychologically safe learning spaces where creativity flourishes and students engage without fear of failure. Similarly, openness to change models adaptability, enabling students to develop resilience and flexibility in unpredictable situations. Intellectual stimulation emerged as a catalytic force, encouraging learners to think beyond grades and develop intrinsic motivation for growth. Furthermore, bridging theory with reality made learning meaningful and contextually relevant, aligning classroom practices with the evolving needs of contemporary learners, particularly Generation Z.

Collectively, these practices foster ownership of learning, strengthen student confidence, and enhance overall classroom participation. The study also indicates that instructors experience increased professional satisfaction when adopting transformational leadership approaches, as classroom interactions become more collaborative and purpose-driven.

Therefore, integrating leadership-oriented training within teacher development programs may significantly contribute to improved educational outcomes. Transformational leadership in ELT classrooms does not merely support academic achievement; it cultivates motivated, adaptable, and intellectually engaged learners prepared for real-world challenges. The findings of this study offer practical and theoretical insights for educators seeking to enhance student engagement and motivation through transformational leadership practices.

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