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Teachers' Educational Psychology Knowledge and English Language Teaching Practices in Malawian Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Educational psychology equips teachers with knowledge of learner cognition, motivation, emotional development, and behavior management, thereby supporting effective instructional delivery and learner-centered pedagogy. Despite national reforms promoting active learning in Malawi, many primary classrooms remain constrained by overcrowding, inadequate teaching and learning materials, and persistent teacher-centered practices that limit learner engagement and classroom effectiveness. This study investigated how teachers' educational psychology knowledge shapes English language pedagogy, learner engagement, and classroom effectiveness in Malawi's primary education context. A descriptive cross-sectional design with a convergent mixed-methods approach was employed, combining structured questionnaires and systematic classroom observations. All twenty (20) English language teachers teaching Standards 1 to 4 at Dzenza Primary School, Lilongwe District, participated via census sampling. Quantitative data were analyzed using frequencies and percentages; qualitative data were analyzed thematically. Teachers reported strong awareness of educational psychology principles and their positive influence on the use of Teaching and Learning Materials (TLMs) (100%), varied instructional methods (100%), understanding of individual learner differences (100%), reinforcement techniques (100%), and guidance and counseling (100%). Implementation was significantly constrained by inadequate TLMs (80%), limited lesson time (75%), overcrowded classrooms, and learner misbehavior (85%). Classroom observations confirmed use of learner-centered strategies when resources permitted, alongside persistent teacher-centered approaches in overcrowded conditions. Teachers possess considerable educational psychology knowledge, but a structural mediation effect was identified: systemic barriers including overcrowding, resource scarcity, and insufficient professional development systematically constrain the translation of psychological competence into sustained learner-centered practice. The study advances the argument that educational psychology knowledge functions as a necessary but insufficient condition for effective ELT in low-resource African contexts. Continuous professional development, TLM provision, reduced class sizes, and stronger integration of multilingual and structural dimensions into teacher training are recommended.

INTRODUCTION

Educational psychology provides teachers with foundational knowledge of learner cognition, emotional development, social behavior, and motivation, enabling them to design developmentally appropriate instruction, manage classrooms effectively, and promote meaningful participation (Woolfolk, 2021; Slavin, 2020). In primary education, this knowledge is particularly critical because early-stage learners require instructional approaches attuned to their cognitive growth, language development, and socio-emotional needs. Teachers who apply educational psychology principles are better positioned to create psychologically supportive environments that enhance comprehension, participation, and academic achievement (Hagenauer *et al.*, 2015; Reyes *et al.*, 2012). Globally, educational reforms increasingly emphasize learner-centered approaches promoting active participation, collaboration, and meaningful teacher-learner interaction (Weimer, 2013; McCombs & Miller, 2007). These approaches are deeply rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which underscores social interaction and scaffolding as drivers of cognitive

development, and Piaget's (1972) Cognitive Development Theory, which positions active knowledge construction as central to learning. Both frameworks continue to shape modern English language pedagogy, particularly in multilingual and resource-limited classroom settings.

In English language teaching (ELT), educational psychology knowledge helps teachers understand language acquisition, learner motivation, communication anxiety, and the role of classroom climate in shaping learner confidence and interaction (Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Tu, 2021). Research consistently demonstrates that psychologically supportive classroom environments improve learner engagement and academic performance (Reyes *et al.*, 2012; Hagenauer *et al.*, 2015), while differentiated and active learning strategies enhance language acquisition outcomes (Armbruster *et al.*, 2009; Zhou *et al.*, 2019). Crucially, in Sub-Saharan African multilingual classrooms, language-supportive pedagogies are not merely instructional preferences but structural necessities: learners who cannot engage cognitively and emotionally through familiar linguistic resources are effectively excluded from meaningful participation

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(Erling *et al.*, 2021; Barrett *et al.*, 2025). This renders educational psychology knowledge doubly significant in multilingual African contexts, where teachers must simultaneously address cognitive diversity, linguistic heterogeneity, and the emotional dimensions of second-language instruction.

In many African educational systems, however, structural barriers significantly impede the effective application of educational psychology principles. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate TLMs, insufficient teacher training, and limited continuous professional development opportunities negatively affect learner participation, classroom management, and the implementation of learner-centered pedagogies (Popova *et al.*, 2022; Orina *et al.*, 2021; Osaí *et al.*, 2021). In multilingual contexts, teachers face additional challenges related to managing language diversity and varying learner abilities (Chimbutane, 2021).

In Malawi, national education policy, including the Education Sector Plan 2020-2030 (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2020) and the National Curriculum and Assessment Policy (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2017), explicitly promotes learner-centered instruction at primary level. Despite these reforms, persistent reliance on teacher-centered practices remains widespread, driven by resource constraints, overcrowding, and limited pedagogical support (Kumwamba, 2023; Mtika & Gates, 2011). English is particularly affected: as the language of instruction from Standard 5 upward and a compulsory subject from Standard 1, weaknesses in foundational ELT directly constrain learners' broader academic progress. National Reading Programme assessments have documented persistent deficits in learner literacy and communication skills at lower primary level (USAID, 2017).

Although previous Malawian studies have examined classroom culture, play-based learning, inclusive education, and discussion methods (Chataika, 2016; Maonga, 2018; Kumwamba, 2023), limited research specifically investigates how teachers' educational psychology knowledge shapes ELT practices, learner engagement, and classroom effectiveness at lower primary level. Furthermore, much of the international literature on educational psychology derives from Western or higher education contexts, limiting its direct applicability to multilingual, resource-constrained African primary schools (Wolff, 2006; Erling *et al.*, 2021). This study addresses both gaps by providing context-specific empirical evidence on how educational psychology knowledge is applied, adapted, and constrained within Malawi's structurally challenging lower primary classrooms. Its original contribution lies in demonstrating that the relationship between psychological pedagogical knowledge and classroom effectiveness is not linear or context-free: in low-resource multilingual settings, structural conditions function as powerful mediators that reshape, constrain, and sometimes invert expected relationships between teacher knowledge and learner outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Educational psychology knowledge enables teachers to respond to learners' cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social needs, forming a critical foundation for effective instruction (Woolfolk, 2021). In ELT, this knowledge is especially important because language acquisition depends on motivation, emotional safety, scaffolded interaction, and appropriate instructional strategies (Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Reyes *et al.*, 2012).

Despite national reforms promoting learner-centered and competency-based instruction, Malawian primary classrooms continue to face overcrowding, inadequate TLMs, multilingual complexity, and insufficient professional development (Kumwamba, 2023; Likuru & Mwila, 2022; Popova *et al.*, 2022). Evidence from African contexts indicates persistent reliance on teacher-centered approaches, low learner engagement, and difficulties in implementing psychologically informed pedagogies (Osaí *et al.*, 2021; Orina *et al.*, 2021). However, limited empirical evidence exists on how Malawian lower primary teachers specifically apply educational psychology principles in English language classrooms and how this shapes learner engagement and classroom effectiveness. This gap constrains teacher educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to strengthen ELT quality and improve learner outcomes.

Research Gap

Existing Malawian studies have largely examined classroom culture, play-based learning, literacy development, and inclusive practice without critically investigating how teachers' educational psychology knowledge shapes ELT pedagogy, learner motivation, classroom interaction, and participation (Kumwamba, 2023; Maonga, 2018; Chataika, 2016). Much of the international literature on educational psychology and learner-centered teaching derives from Western or higher education contexts, limiting its direct applicability to resource-constrained Malawian primary schools (Wolff, 2006). The literature on multilingual education in Sub-Saharan Africa (Erling *et al.*, 2021; Barrett *et al.*, 2025; Chimbutane, 2021) consistently highlights linguistic diversity as a pedagogical challenge requiring adaptive instructional strategies, yet its intersection with educational psychology knowledge among Malawian primary teachers remains empirically unexplored. Similarly, the growing body of literature on teacher innovation in multilingual African classrooms (Omidire, 2025) emphasizes that teachers develop adaptive pedagogical strategies under structural constraint, a phenomenon not yet examined within Malawian ELT. Furthermore, while national reforms promote active learning and learner-centered instruction, no published empirical study has examined whether lower primary English teachers possess sufficient educational psychology competencies to implement these approaches effectively in Malawi's multilingual, overcrowded classroom environments. This study

addresses this gap by providing context-specific evidence on the relationship between teachers' educational psychology knowledge, ELT practices, learner engagement, and classroom effectiveness at Dzenza Primary School.

Research Objectives

General Objective

To investigate how teachers' educational psychology knowledge shapes English language pedagogy, learner engagement, and classroom effectiveness in Malawi's primary education context.

Specific Objectives

1. To examine primary school teachers' understanding of educational psychology principles in English language teaching.
2. To investigate how teachers apply educational psychology knowledge in English language pedagogy and classroom instructional practices.
3. To assess the influence of teachers' educational psychology knowledge on learner engagement, participation, and motivation.
4. To explore the relationship between educational psychology knowledge and classroom effectiveness, including management, interaction, and classroom climate.
5. To identify challenges teachers face in applying educational psychology principles in English language teaching in Malawian primary schools

Research Questions

1. What is the level of teachers' understanding of educational psychology principles when teaching English?
2. How do teachers apply educational psychology knowledge in their English language teaching practices?
3. How does teachers' educational psychology knowledge influence learner engagement, participation, and motivation?
4. What is the relationship between educational psychology knowledge and classroom effectiveness?
5. What challenges do teachers encounter when implementing educational psychology principles in English language classrooms?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Three complementary theoretical frameworks anchor this study, collectively explaining how teachers' educational psychology knowledge shapes instructional practices, learner engagement, and classroom effectiveness.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978)

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory posits that cognitive development is fundamentally social and culturally

mediated. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) captures the gap between what a learner can accomplish independently and what becomes possible with knowledgeable guidance, making scaffolded instruction and peer collaboration central pedagogical tools. In Malawian ELT contexts, Vygotskian principles support collaborative learning, storytelling, group discussion, and structured teacher-learner interaction as mechanisms for promoting language acquisition and engagement (Kumwamba, 2023; Zhou *et al.*, 2019). Critically, ZPD application in overcrowded Malawian classrooms demands low-resource adaptations such as peer facilitation and cooperative group structures that maximize interaction while minimizing material dependency (Likuru & Mwila, 2022).

Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory (1972)

Piaget conceptualizes learning as an active constructive process through which learners integrate new information into existing cognitive schemas via assimilation and accommodation. The theory emphasizes developmental readiness, discovery learning, and active engagement. Within ELT at lower primary level, Piagetian principles support inquiry-based activities, role-play, storytelling, and hands-on language tasks that align with learners' cognitive stages and promote meaningful language development. Teachers who apply this framework differentiate instruction according to developmental levels, thereby supporting more effective and inclusive language pedagogy (Armbruster *et al.*, 2009).

Constructivist Theory

Constructivism holds that learners build knowledge actively through interaction, reflection, and collaborative engagement rather than through passive reception of transmitted content (Hmelo-Silver *et al.*, 2007). Constructivist classrooms therefore emphasize learner-centered pedagogy, collaborative tasks, experiential learning, and reflective participation. In ELT, constructivist approaches underpin communicative teaching methods, project-based learning, peer interaction, and discussion-based activities that encourage active classroom participation. Weimer (2013) argues that learner-centered teaching promotes learner autonomy, cooperation, and motivation; Tang (2023) similarly demonstrates that student-centered feedback and participatory learning improve engagement and language competence.

Conceptual Framework

Drawing on these three frameworks, the study proposes the following conceptual pathway:

Contextual moderating factors, including overcrowding, resource scarcity, limited lesson time, and professional development gaps, mediate these relationships (Popova *et al.*, 2022; Orina *et al.*, 2021).

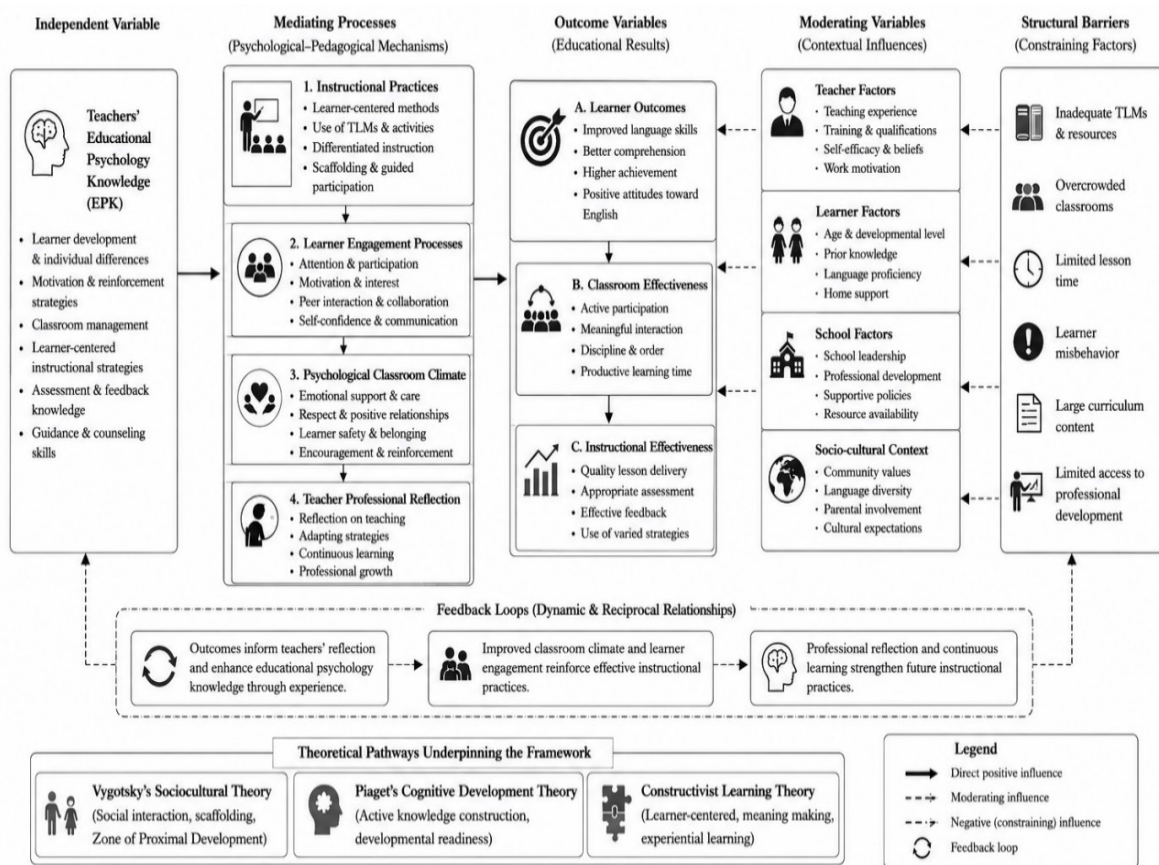


Figure 1: Enhanced Conceptual Framework: Pathways from Teachers' Educational Psychology Knowledge to Classroom Effectiveness in English Language Teaching in Malawian Primary Schools
Note: The framework illustrates hypothesized relationships. Arrows indicate the direction of influence among variables.

Educational Psychology and English Language Teaching

Educational psychology is a recognized foundation for effective teaching, equipping teachers with understanding of learner development, motivation, behavioral management, and differentiated instruction (Woolfolk, 2021; Slavin, 2020). In ELT, these competencies are especially critical because language acquisition is mediated by learner participation, emotional safety, scaffolded interaction, and communicative engagement (Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012).

Evidence consistently shows that psychologically informed instruction enhances teaching effectiveness and learner outcomes. Reyes *et al.* (2012) established that emotionally supportive classroom climates significantly improve learner engagement and academic achievement. Tu (2021) similarly found that psychological safety and positive classroom culture reduce anxiety and enhance interaction among EFL learners. Tuckman and Monetti (2011) argue that psychological knowledge helps teachers understand learning processes, developmental differences, and behavioral management strategies essential for effective teaching. In African educational contexts, teachers who apply psychological principles manage diverse classrooms more effectively and sustain

learner motivation despite structural challenges (Osai *et al.*, 2021; Orina *et al.*, 2021).

Learner Engagement in English Language Classrooms

Learner engagement encompasses learners' emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and social involvement in classroom activities. Educational psychology contributes to engagement by equipping teachers with strategies for understanding learner motivation, participation barriers, confidence, and emotional safety (Hagenauer *et al.*, 2015; Reyes *et al.*, 2012).

Hagenauer *et al.* (2015) demonstrated that supportive teacher-student relationships improve classroom discipline, engagement, and instructional effectiveness. Zhou *et al.* (2019) found that collaborative learning enhanced participation, communication, and active learning capabilities. Freeman *et al.* (2014) reported that active learning strategies significantly improved learner involvement and interaction across a meta-analysis of 225 studies. Tu (2021) established that psychological safety enhanced EFL learner engagement by reducing anxiety and encouraging communicative participation. Teachers with strong educational psychology knowledge are therefore better positioned to create motivating, emotionally supportive classroom environments that promote active learner participation.

Classroom Emotional Climate and Classroom Effectiveness

Classroom emotional climate refers to the emotional atmosphere shaped by teacher-learner relationships, instructional support, and classroom management. Positive emotional climates are associated with improved learner confidence, participation, and academic achievement. Reyes *et al.* (2012) established that emotionally supportive climates positively affect engagement and performance. Tu (2021) found that psychological safety enhanced EFL learner engagement by reducing anxiety. These findings demonstrate that emotional support and respectful teacher-learner relationships are critical components of effective ELT pedagogy.

Educational psychology equips teachers with understanding of learner motivation, emotional development, and interpersonal relationships. Teachers who understand these dimensions are more likely to reduce learner anxiety, encourage participation, and create emotionally supportive environments that improve instructional effectiveness.

Overcrowded Classrooms and Classroom Effectiveness

Overcrowded classrooms remain a major structural barrier to educational quality across Sub-Saharan Africa, including Malawi (Likuru & Mwila, 2022; Osaí *et al.*, 2021; Orina *et al.*, 2021). Overcrowding negatively affects classroom management, individualized instruction, learner participation, emotional support, and overall instructional effectiveness.

Likuru and Mwila (2022) found that overcrowded classrooms in Tanzania reduced learner participation and impeded implementation of learner-centered pedagogies because teachers struggled to provide individualized support and effective classroom interaction. Orina *et al.* (2021) similarly reported that overcrowding undermined teachers' capacity to implement the competency-based curriculum in Kenya, with class management consuming time that would otherwise support active learning. Osaí *et al.* (2021) documented how overcrowded Ghanaian classrooms limited individualized feedback, classroom participation, and learner engagement. Within ELT, overcrowding restricts opportunities for speaking practice, communicative activities, and scaffolded interaction that support language acquisition. Psychologically informed teachers, however, may mitigate these effects through group work, cooperative learning, and differentiated strategies adapted to resource-limited environments.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Teacher preparation and continuous professional development are critical determinants of instructional quality. Popova *et al.* (2022) found that many teachers in low- and middle-income countries lack sufficient instructional competencies due to inadequate professional development and weak pre-service preparation systems. Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2017) demonstrate that

sustained, coherent professional development significantly improves instructional quality, learner engagement, and implementation of active learning. Avalos (2011) argues that continuous professional development enhances pedagogical competence and reflective practice, ultimately improving classroom effectiveness. In multilingual Sub-Saharan African contexts specifically, Erling *et al.* (2021) and Wolff (2006) emphasize that teacher education systems have historically lacked specialist preparation for multilingual instruction, resulting in systemic difficulties implementing linguistically responsive, psychologically supportive pedagogies. This curricular gap is particularly consequential for Malawian lower primary teachers, who navigate daily Chichewa-English transitions without institutional frameworks that integrate multilingual pedagogy with educational psychology principles.

Inclusive Education and Differentiated Instruction

Inclusive education promotes equitable participation for all learners regardless of ability, language background, or learning needs. Educational psychology contributes to inclusive practice by helping teachers understand learner diversity, developmental differences, and barriers to learning (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2003). Tomlinson *et al.* (2003) argue that differentiated instruction creates learner-centered environments that improve engagement and motivation among diverse learners. Rusconi and Squillaci (2023) found that differentiated instructional practices strengthened teachers' capacity to accommodate learner diversity. In Malawian ELT classrooms, inclusive practice requires adapting methods, providing scaffolding, and supporting learners with varying language abilities.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate positive relationships between educational psychology knowledge, learner-centered pedagogy, and academic achievement. Reyes *et al.* (2012) established that positive classroom emotional climates improved learner engagement and performance. Armbruster *et al.* (2009) found that active and learner-centered pedagogies improved learner attitudes and academic outcomes. Zhou *et al.* (2019) reported that collaborative learning enhanced communication, teamwork, and participation. These findings collectively support the argument that psychologically informed instruction positively influences learner engagement and classroom effectiveness.

However, research also identifies contextual barriers constraining implementation. Likuru and Mwila (2022), Osaí *et al.* (2021), and Popova *et al.* (2022) found that overcrowded classrooms, insufficient resources, inadequate teacher preparation, and limited professional development negatively affected instructional quality and learner participation. The literature thus confirms that educational psychology knowledge positively influences ELT pedagogy, learner engagement, and classroom effectiveness, while implementation remains substantially constrained by structural and contextual challenges.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional design with a convergent mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The descriptive design enabled systematic examination and description of existing classroom practices, teachers' instructional experiences, and learner engagement patterns within a natural school environment without variable manipulation. The convergent mixed-methods approach combined quantitative data from structured questionnaires with qualitative data from classroom observations and open-ended responses, enabling triangulation and a more comprehensive understanding of classroom realities (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2014). This design is appropriate for applied educational research in resource-constrained settings requiring both breadth of coverage and depth of contextual understanding (Bryman, 2016). The term 'descriptive narrative' used in earlier versions of this work has been corrected. The study does not employ narrative inquiry, which involves life-story or biographical data collection; rather, it uses structured quantitative and qualitative instruments within a cross-sectional descriptive framework.

Site of the Study

The study was conducted at Dzenza Primary School in Lilongwe District, Central Region of Malawi. The school was purposively selected because it provides an accessible and contextually appropriate setting for examining ELT practices and learner engagement within Malawi's public primary education system. Dzenza Primary School operates under conditions typical of many government primary schools in Malawi, including overcrowded classes and limited TLMs, ensuring contextual relevance to the research objectives.

Target Population and Sampling

The target population comprised all teachers responsible for teaching English language from Standard 1 to Standard 4 at Dzenza Primary School. A census approach was adopted: all twenty (20) eligible English language teachers participated, ensuring comprehensive coverage of perspectives and eliminating within-school sampling bias (Kothari, 2014). Purposive sampling criteria required participants to have direct experience teaching English at lower primary level, ensuring relevance and informed responses.

Research Instruments

Data were collected using two instruments: a structured questionnaire and a systematic classroom observation checklist. The structured questionnaire contained closed-ended items and open-ended questions addressing teachers' educational psychology knowledge, instructional strategies, classroom management, learner participation, feedback provision, and perceived classroom effectiveness. Twelve English language lessons across Standards 1 to 4

were systematically observed using a validated checklist assessing the frequency and quality of learner-centered versus teacher-centered behaviors, classroom interaction, TLM usage, reinforcement, and emotional climate.

Pilot Study, Validity, and Reliability

Both instruments were piloted with five English teachers from a comparable primary school in Lilongwe District not included in the main study. Expert review by two educational psychology specialists confirmed content validity. Following piloting, ambiguous items were refined for clarity. Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire was $\alpha = 0.82$, indicating good internal consistency (George & Mallery, 2019). Inter-rater reliability for classroom observations was es Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = 0.78$), reflecting substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Triangulation of questionnaire data with observation data further enhanced trustworthiness.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Emmanuel University Research Ethics Committee. Written permission was sought from the Lilongwe District Education Manager and the head teacher of Dzenza Primary School prior to data collection. Informed written consent was secured from all participants, who were assured that participation was entirely voluntary, that withdrawal at any time would incur no penalty, and that all data would be stored securely and used solely for academic purposes. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed throughout.

Data Collection and Analysis

Questionnaires were administered in a single session following institutional permissions. Twelve English language lessons were observed using the validated checklist. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, presented in tables. Qualitative data from open-ended items and observation field notes were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase framework, involving data familiarization, code generation, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Quantitative and qualitative findings were triangulated at the interpretation stage to strengthen credibility and comprehensiveness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (RQ Background)

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the twenty participating English language teachers. The sample was predominantly female (65%), reflecting national trends in lower primary teacher demographics in Malawi (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2020). The majority held teaching certificates (60%), with smaller proportions holding diplomas (30%) and degrees (10%). The distribution of teaching experience, ranging from

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 20)

Variable	Category	n (%)
Gender	Female	13 (65%)
	Male	7 (35%)
Teaching Experience	0-5 years	7 (35%)
	6-10 years	8 (40%)
	11+ years	5 (25%)
Highest Qualification	MSCE + Teaching Certificate	12 (60%)
	Diploma in Education	6 (30%)
	Bachelor of Education	2 (10%)
Standard Currently Teaching	Standard 1-2	10 (50%)
	Standard 3-4	10 (50%)

Note. Demographic data collected through Section A of the structured questionnaire.

novice to experienced practitioners, provided a diverse range of pedagogical perspectives relevant to the study objectives.

Influence of Educational Psychology Knowledge on Instructional Practices (RQ1 and RQ2)

Table 2 presents teachers' self-reported application of educational psychology knowledge in their English language teaching practices.

All twenty respondents (100%) reported applying educational psychology knowledge in the use of TLMs, varied instructional methods, understanding individual learner differences, and reinforcement techniques. These findings align with Woolfolk (2021) and Slavin (2020), who argue that psychologically informed teachers demonstrate greater instructional repertoire and flexibility. Yet the uniformity of affirmative responses warrants analytical scrutiny: when every respondent in a structurally constrained context endorses every psychological

Table 2: Teachers' Perceptions of the Influence of Educational Psychology Knowledge on English Language Teaching (N = 20)

Teaching Practice
Use of Teaching and Learning Materials (TLMs)
Use of varied instructional methods
Understanding individual learner differences
Provision of feedback to learners
Use of reinforcement techniques
Guidance and counseling integration
Appropriate use of discipline strategies

Note. Data represent self-reported perceptions. Findings should be interpreted as perceived application rather than objective knowledge assessment.

competency, the more compelling interpretive question becomes not whether teachers possess psychological awareness, but how that awareness is operationalized under conditions that systematically resist its full expression. The near-universal endorsement of guidance and counseling integration (100%) reflects awareness of the emotional and social dimensions of teaching, consistent with Reyes *et al.* (2012) and Hagenauer *et al.* (2015), who emphasize that teacher-learner relational quality is central to effective classroom climate. Critically, however, relational quality itself is structurally compromised in overcrowded classrooms: where teacher-learner ratios exceed 90:1, the individualized attunement that educational psychology prescribes becomes materially impossible, not merely pedagogically challenging. This points to a fundamental tension in the policy discourse

on learner-centered pedagogy in Malawi: psychological knowledge is promoted as the lever for change, yet structural conditions may systematically prevent that knowledge from functioning as intended.

Classroom observations (12 lessons) confirmed that when TLMs were available, teachers frequently employed learner-centered strategies including songs, storytelling, group work, and visual aids, corroborating findings by Kumwamba (2023) on play-based English learning in Malawian primary classrooms. However, self-reported awareness must be distinguished from consistent behavioral implementation (Bryman, 2016): observations also revealed that in heavily overcrowded lessons, teacher-centered lecturing remained dominant, suggesting a performance gap between stated psychological awareness and enacted pedagogy. This gap is theoretically

significant. It implies that in resource-constrained African classrooms, educational psychology knowledge does not function as a straightforward predictor of pedagogical behavior; instead, it is filtered through what might be conceptualized as structural pragmatism, whereby teachers default to teacher-centered approaches not from ignorance of learner-centered alternatives, but as a rational adaptive response to conditions that make those alternatives unsustainable. This finding extends Popova *et al.* (2022) on the evidence-practice gap in low-income country teacher development, and resonates with Omidire's (2025) observation that teachers in multilingual African classrooms develop innovative but structurally constrained pedagogical strategies as survival mechanisms rather than deliberate instructional choices. It also challenges the implicit assumption in Malawian education policy that enhanced psychological competence alone will shift classroom practice: without concurrent structural investment, teacher psychological knowledge risks becoming declarative rather than transformative.

Representative teacher perspectives obtained during observations included:

"When learners see pictures, charts, and reading materials during English lessons, they become more interested and participate more actively."

"Using songs, storytelling, and group discussions helps learners express themselves confidently during English lessons."

"Some learners understand quickly while others need more support, so teachers must use different approaches when teaching English."

These perspectives are consistent with constructivist and Vygotskian pedagogical principles, supporting the use of differentiated, interactive, and scaffolded instruction in ELT (Weimer, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978).

Influence on Learner Engagement and Motivation (RQ3)

Teachers reported that their application of educational psychology principles positively influenced learner engagement and motivation. Specifically, varied instructional methods, reinforcement strategies, positive feedback, and group activities were identified as the primary mechanisms through which psychological knowledge was translated into participatory classroom behavior. These perceptions are consistent with Zhou *et al.* (2019) on collaborative learning and Freeman *et al.* (2014), whose meta-analysis demonstrated that active learning strategies significantly enhanced learner involvement. Yet a more analytically productive question is why reinforcement and varied methods emerged as the most frequently reported mechanisms, to the relative exclusion of scaffolded dialogue, differentiated assessment, and individualized cognitive support. The explanation appears to reside in resource logic rather than pedagogical preference: reinforcement and group activities are low-material strategies that can be deployed even within overcrowded, resource-scarce classrooms, whereas scaffolded individual support, communicative pair work at scale, and differentiated materials require

resources and spatial conditions that the study site cannot consistently provide. This suggests that teachers' reported psychological engagement practices may have been selectively shaped by feasibility rather than representing the full range of educational psychology competencies they nominally possess. Such selective application constitutes a form of constrained pedagogical agency, a concept that deserves greater attention in Sub-Saharan African educational research on the translation of teacher knowledge into classroom practice (Erling *et al.*, 2021; Trudell *et al.*, 2023).

Classroom observations supported these claims: learner participation was visibly higher during group work and storytelling than during teacher-led lecture segments, an observation consistent with the documented cognitive and affective benefits of active instructional modes (Freeman *et al.*, 2014; Erling *et al.*, 2021). However, in classes exceeding 60 learners, individual participation opportunities were markedly reduced, with a large proportion of learners functioning as observers rather than active participants during communicative activities. This is analytically significant beyond the quantitative reduction in participation rates: it represents the structural compression of learner engagement from a distributed, multi-directional classroom process into a narrow, teacher-mediated event. When overcrowding prevents iterative teacher-learner dialogue, the psychological mechanisms through which ELT is theorized to operate, including formative feedback, anxiety reduction, scaffolded interaction, and learner identity affirmation, are disrupted at their functional root. This finding extends Likuru and Mwila (2022) and Osaí *et al.* (2021) and aligns with Barrett *et al.*'s (2025) argument that structural exclusion in African classrooms operates not only through language policy but through the spatial and material conditions of instruction itself.

As one teacher remarked:

"Learners become excited when praised for answering correctly, and this encourages others to participate."

This observation directly reflects Skinner's (1953) reinforcement principles and aligns with evidence by Reyes *et al.* (2012) linking positive classroom climate to improved learner motivation.

Educational Psychology Knowledge and Classroom Effectiveness (RQ4)

Participants perceived educational psychology knowledge as positively related to classroom effectiveness across management, interaction quality, and emotional climate. Teachers highlighted the role of reinforcement, consistent feedback, positive behavior management, and learner-centered interaction in creating effective classroom environments. These perceptions align with Tu (2021), who established that positive classroom culture and psychological safety enhance learner interaction and reduce anxiety, and with Hagenauer *et al.* (2015), who demonstrated that supportive teacher-

student relationships improve classroom discipline and instructional quality.

Classroom observations confirmed that teachers who employed more varied reinforcement and feedback strategies tended to manage classroom behavior more effectively and sustain higher levels of learner interaction. These findings support the study's conceptual framework, proposing that educational psychology knowledge, when applied, improves instructional practices and enhances classroom effectiveness through improved emotional climate and interaction quality. This is further consistent with Bernacki *et al.* (2021), who found that personalized, learner-responsive instruction significantly improved student motivation and academic engagement.

"When teachers give feedback positively, learners become more confident and willing to participate again."

This perspective reinforces findings by Dignath and Veenman (2021) on the central role of direct, constructive feedback in activating self-regulated learning and sustaining classroom engagement.

Challenges in Applying Educational Psychology Principles (RQ5)

Table 3 presents the key implementation challenges identified by teachers. Overcrowded classrooms (90%), learner misbehavior (85%), inadequate TLMs (80%), and limited lesson time (75%) were the most frequently cited barriers. These findings are consistent with the broader literature on obstacles to psychologically informed pedagogy in African primary education (Popova *et al.*, 2022; Orina *et al.*, 2021; Osai *et al.*, 2021; Likuru & Mwila, 2022). However, what the frequency data alone cannot reveal is the cascading relational logic through which these barriers interact: overcrowding generates behavioral dysregulation; behavioral dysregulation consumes instructional time; reduced instructional time forces reliance on transmission-based pedagogies; and transmission-based pedagogies systematically displace the scaffolded, communicative, emotionally attuned interactions through which educational psychology knowledge is theorized to generate learner engagement.

Table 3 : Challenges in Implementing Educational Psychology Principles (N = 20)

Challenge
Inadequate Teaching and Learning Materials
Limited lesson time for interactive activities
Learner misbehavior and classroom management difficulties
Overcrowded classrooms limiting individualized support
Insufficient professional development on ELT and psychology
Multilingual classroom diversity

The barriers are therefore not independent constraints but an interlocking system of structural pressures that collectively prevent the conversion of declarative psychological knowledge into transformative pedagogical practice. This finding has implications that extend beyond Malawi: it challenges the prevailing logic of many Sub-Saharan African education reform agendas, which position teacher knowledge and attitude as the primary leverage points for improving classroom quality while underinvesting in the structural preconditions that determine whether enhanced knowledge can be enacted at all (Wolff, 2006; Trudell *et al.*, 2023; Falk, 2024).

The challenge of insufficient professional development (70%) aligns with Popova *et al.* (2022) and Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2017), who identify inadequate teacher preparation as a systemic barrier to instructional quality in African education systems. Multilingual classroom diversity (65%) reflects the additional complexity Malawian teachers face navigating Chichewa-English language transitions at lower primary level, echoing findings by Chimbutane (2021) on the instructional challenges teachers encounter in multilingual African primary classroom contexts. Observations confirmed that these challenges were not merely perceived but were tangibly manifested in classroom dynamics, with teachers frequently unable to sustain learner-centered activities when material and spatial constraints intensified.

Representative teacher comments included:

"Sometimes we teach without enough books or learning materials, and this makes it difficult to involve all learners."

"English lessons need enough time for interaction and participation, but large classes and short periods make this difficult."

"Managing learner behavior becomes difficult in overcrowded classrooms where learners compete for attention."

Collectively, these findings suggest that while teachers value and possess educational psychology knowledge, its effective, sustained application is substantially moderated by structural, material, and professional development constraints. This is consistent with the study's conceptual framework and confirms the theoretical argument that contextual factors mediate the relationship between psychological knowledge and classroom effectiveness.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following evidence-linked recommendations are advanced:

The Malawi Ministry of Education should institutionalize structured in-service professional development programs for lower primary English teachers, explicitly incorporating educational psychology competencies, learner-centered pedagogy, and adaptive classroom management strategies for resource-constrained settings (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017; Popova *et al.*, 2022). Delivery should occur through school-based professional learning communities

and district-level teacher support systems.

The Ministry of Education and school administrators should prioritize systematic provision of TLMs to all lower primary classrooms, including culturally relevant reading materials, visual aids, and manipulatives that enable learner-centered ELT even in overcrowded conditions. This directly addresses the 80% of teachers reporting TLM inadequacy as a primary implementation barrier

Primary school timetables should be reviewed to allocate a minimum of 45-minute uninterrupted periods for English instruction in Standards 1 to 4, enabling sufficient time for interactive, communicative, and scaffolded activities foundational to language acquisition (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2020).

The Ministry of Education should develop and enforce a policy to reduce learner-teacher ratios in lower primary classes toward internationally recognized benchmarks for effective primary instruction, thereby addressing the 90% of teachers identifying overcrowding as the most significant barrier to implementing educational psychology principles.

Teacher education programs should strengthen pre-service educational psychology curricula to include practical classroom application components, reflective teaching practicum, and simulation of resource-constrained teaching contexts, ensuring graduates enter primary schools equipped to apply psychological principles in real-world conditions (Avalos, 2011).

Schools should implement evidence-based positive behavior management frameworks, including social-emotional learning strategies, as school-wide systems supporting teachers in managing classrooms constructively, reducing misbehavior, and maintaining positive emotional climates conducive to learner engagement (Hagenauer *et al.*, 2015; Shindler, 2009).

CONCLUSION

This study has established that English language teachers at Dzenza Primary School possess considerable awareness of educational psychology principles and perceive this knowledge as positively shaping ELT pedagogy, learner engagement, and classroom effectiveness. Self-reported application of TLMs, varied instructional methods, reinforcement, feedback, and positive classroom management was consistently attributed to educational psychology knowledge, and classroom observations partially confirmed these practices when material and spatial conditions permitted. However, the study's most significant theoretical contribution lies not in affirming that teachers possess psychological knowledge, but in demonstrating the conditions under which that knowledge cannot be converted into practice. Educational psychology knowledge alone is insufficient to transform English language pedagogy in structurally constrained educational environments. Rather, the translation of psychological competence into sustained learner-centered practice depends on structural preconditions, including

manageable classroom density, adequate resource provision, sufficient instructional time, and coherent professional support, that Malawi's current primary education system does not consistently provide. This finding advances a structural mediation argument: that in low-resource multilingual contexts, the relationship between teacher psychological knowledge and classroom effectiveness is not direct or linear but is substantially moderated by material, spatial, and institutional conditions. The implication is that educational reform agendas premised primarily on enhancing teacher knowledge and attitude, without concurrent structural investment, risk producing teachers who know more but can do no more, practitioners whose declarative competence increasingly exceeds their structural capacity to enact it.

The study further contributes to the emerging literature on multilingual teacher innovation in Sub-Saharan Africa (Erling *et al.*, 2021; Omidire, 2025) by documenting how Malawian primary teachers adapt their psychological pedagogical knowledge under structural constraint, selectively prioritizing low-resource, feasible strategies such as reinforcement, group work, and storytelling over more resource-intensive psychologically grounded approaches. This constitutes constrained pedagogical agency rather than pedagogical failure: teachers demonstrate adaptive professional reasoning within impossible structural conditions, a distinction that policy discourse has too often collapsed. Addressing systemic constraints through investment in professional development, TLM provision, structural reforms to class sizes, and multilingual instructional support is therefore not merely an operational improvement but a prerequisite for unlocking the pedagogical potential that teachers demonstrably already possess.

Beyond Malawi, this study speaks to the broader theoretical challenge of applying Western-derived educational psychology frameworks within African postcolonial primary school contexts characterized by linguistic diversity, material scarcity, and institutional underfunding. Its findings suggest that the field of educational psychology must develop more structurally sensitive theoretical models capable of accounting for how systemic conditions mediate the relationship between teacher knowledge and learner outcomes in low-resource multilingual settings. Future scholarship in this tradition should move beyond establishing that psychological competence matters, toward specifying the structural thresholds below which psychological knowledge cannot be translated into classroom practice regardless of its depth or quality. This study provides empirical grounding for that theoretical agenda, and invites scholars, policymakers, and teacher educators in Malawi and across Sub-Saharan Africa to reconceptualize teacher effectiveness not as a property of individuals alone, but as a co-production of teacher knowledge and the structural environments in which that knowledge must operate.

Limitations of the Study

The study was conducted at one primary school in Lilongwe District, constraining generalizability to the broader Malawian primary education system, particularly rural or remote schools. Reliance on self-reported questionnaire data introduces social desirability bias, partially mitigated through triangulation with systematic classroom observations. The small census sample (N=20) reflects the site-specific nature of the study rather than a representative national sample. Future research should employ multi-site, multi-district designs with larger samples and objective learner outcome measures. Additionally, several policy and contextual references in this study draw on grey literature sources, specifically the Malawi Ministry of Education (2017, 2020) and USAID (2017) reports. These sources are cited solely to provide national policy and programmatic context and are not used as empirical evidence; all substantive claims are supported by peer-reviewed literature.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should employ multi-site longitudinal designs examining relationships between teachers' educational psychology knowledge and measurable learner English language achievement. Investigations incorporating learner voice and perspectives on classroom engagement would further enrich understanding. Comparative studies across urban and rural schools, and between government and private primary institutions in Malawi, are recommended to assess contextual variation in the application of educational psychology knowledge. Studies examining the effectiveness of specific professional development interventions on teachers' use of educational psychology principles in ELT would provide valuable policy-relevant evidence.

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