Cognitive engagement and academic performance among EFL/ESL learners in conflict-affected zones

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Abstract

English language learning for students in conflict zones is highly important not only for acquiring a new language and finding a job, but also for their survival, growth, access to educational resources, emergency information and support systems that are crucial in challenging conditions. English can be a powerful tool for ESL/EFL students in order to equip essential communication, critical thinking and emotional coping skills. However, there are many factors associated with ESL/EFL students' poor language performance, one of which is the students' poor cognitive engagement "thoughtfulness and willingness to master difficult skills" in English classroom. This study tries to investigate the level of cognitive engagement among EFL/ESL learners in conflict-affected zones. It also tries to analyze the type of relationship between cognitive engagement and academic performance and attempts to investigate the impact of cognitive engagement on academic performance among university students of English affected by conflict in their areas. It is a quantitative-qualitative study in which a total of 300 undergraduate EFL/ESL learners from Yemen and Kashmir, JK, India responded to a cognitive engagement survey, followed by interviewing 20 volunteers among the same sample and calculating the cumulative average of the total of the academic years of the selected sample to assess their academic performance. Applying descriptive, correlation and regression analysis, findings reveal that the level of cognitive engagement by EFL/ESL students in English learning contexts in conflict zones is low. It is also found out that there is a positive relationship between cognitive engagement and academic performance among the EFL/ESL students in conflict zones. Results also indicate that cognitive engagement is a good predictor of academic performance of EFL/ESL students in such regions. The study recommends to adapt an educational program and a dialogue-skills training course for university students for finding out the factors leading to a deep cognitive engagement in class and a positive academic performance. It is also recommended that non-formal education approaches should be provided and restored by digitalizing curriculum to carry on the educational process during the shutdowns or conflict times.

Keywords: cognitive engagement, academic performance, conflict-affected zones, EFL/ESL students, digitalizing curriculum

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1. Introduction

English language learning for students in conflict zones is highly important not only for acquiring a new language, but also for their survival, growth, connection to the broader world. It also empowers them to access to online educational resources during conflicts, emergency information and support systems that are crucial in challenging conditions. English can be a powerful tool for ESL/EFL students in order to equip essential communication, critical thinking and emotional coping skills while providing access to a vast array of resources and opportunities (Kennet, 2011; Hunter, 2022; Coleman, 2011; Huang et al., 2017). Kennett argued that English language classroom could provide an unbiased space where students had the freedom to express new ideas in the safety of a foreign language. Learning English and being able to speak it can prevent the nuances of nationalism or racism through one or the other national language, as cited in Coleman (2011). Hunter asserted that English literature education fostered the development of self-growth skills which were necessary for the continuation of bi-communal reconciliation activities. Hunter added that the enclosure of English-language media in lessons promoted peace education through the passage of humanistic values (2020). Rybinska, Sarnovska, Kholmakova et al (2023) stated that a foreign language had certain specific features during the war and the process of learning a foreign language itself had a positive effect on the psychological state of students in English language learning contexts in Ukraine. Yet, most of English language learners across the globe, specifically in conflict areas, show low academic performance in English language learning. To understand the factors affecting academic performance in conflict-affected zones, the EFL/ESL learners' willingness and cognitive engagement need to be investigated (Coates, 2007). Assessment of engagement, Coates asserts, is potentially useful when evaluating the quality of student learning experiences and making decisions about resource provision, course content and teaching (2007). Many researchers focus on the dimensions of effective, behavioral and cognitive aspects of engagement. Behavioral engagement refers to student's participation in academic and extracurricular activities. Emotional engagement refers to student's positive and negative reaction to peers, teachers and school. Cognitive engagement refers to students' thoughtfulness and willingness to master difficult skills (Fredricks, 2011). This study focuses on students' cognitive engagement in English language learning contexts in conflict zones. Cognitive engagement in relation to academic performance has been defined by (Greene et al., 2004) as *"Psychological effort exerted by learners in an attempt to understand and master learning skills, which is provided by academic environment"*. In other words, cognitive engagement refers to the mental effort, concentration and dynamic participation learners put into the learning process which deals with the inner psychological qualities of the students which promote their understanding, studying, and mastering the knowledge shown in their academic work (Nguyen, Kannata & Miller, 2016). It is found that positive academic outcomes are associated with indicators of cognitive engagement, such as self-regulation, motivation, effort regulation and persistence

(Reschly et al., 2014). Huang, Liu, Wang, Tsai, & Lin (2017) concluded in their study that the students' proficiency level was found to be an influencing factor of their engagement patterns along with the use of learning strategies and pair performance. Liu, Noordin, Ismail & Abdrahim (2023) found out that there was substantial and positive correlations between the three dimensions of student engagement (emotional, behavioral & cognitive) and English achievement among the Chinese EFL learners of English. However, Liu et al. (2023) indicated that cognitive engagement in their study emerged as the weakest predictor of English achievement. This contrasts with other studies (Torto, 2022) conducted in different contexts where cognitive engagement emerged as the most effective predictor of academic achievement.

In conflict zones, students have very different experiences which are brought with them to class. These experiences might make them distracted or disengaged in class. The students face two crossroads of learning a foreign language for their future career and confronting violence or insecurity in their country. Although in recent years an ample of research has focused on student engagement in learning in general, no focus has been given to the engagement of undergraduate students in the EFL/ESL learners in conflict zones context, as far as the researcher knows. More insights and information on the engagement and outcomes of students studying at the conflict learning contexts are required in order to better understanding the status quo of engagement in the context of EFL/ESL instruction under conflict. They can also help identify areas where improvements can be made in learning a second or a foreign language in emergencies. On the other hand, academic performance can be investigated as many factors affect it in learning language settings. One of these factors is cognitive engagement which might have any role or impact on English learners' academic performance at university under the mediator factor, conflict. The current study tries to explore the level of cognitive engagement among EFL/ESL learners in the conflict zones, Kashmir India and Yemen and whether it has any relationship with academic performance and if there is any impact of cognitive engagement on academic performance among EFL/ESL learners in Kashmir India and Yemen as conflict zones.

1.1.   Literature Review

Previous studies have mainly discussed the impact of student engagement on different aspects of the academic contexts. Most of those studies conducted in the area on the relationship between the three forms of engagement and student achievement. Research shows that engagement positively affects student motivation and academic performance. In a study conducted in EFL learners in Saudi Arabia, Mohammed (2023) explained that a number of challenges might affect negatively on student engagement including issues related to promoting the learning environment, a lack of involving students in making decisions about their learning and the lack of a systematic introduction to various university activities. Students' low proficiency level and a lack of English learning supporting resources and environment are major factors that led to obstacles in using English as the

medium of instruction. Farouqa (2021) found out that promoting interactive conversation, building of knowledge and active learning were perceived as successful in enhancing student engagement. Siwa (2023) revealed five factors affecting students' optimal engagement in EFL large classes; teaching strategies, individual motivation, student-teacher relationship, students' English proficiency, and teaching facilities. Yuan (2020) examined the effect of affective factors and cognitive engagement on students' language proficiency. He concluded that positive cognitive engagement could upgrade students' language proficiency based on their variable affective factors. Maru & Pajow (2019) implemented a semi-structured interview on high-average EFL students who scored high in TOEFL or ELTS tests in order to measure the learners' engagement upon the success of language acquisition. It was found that the three forms of engagement (emotional, behavioral and cognitive) shaped the success of the learners' language acquisition. It is further found out that the three models of engagement have to be constantly enhanced and mastered to ensure the success of language acquisition. Mekki, Ismail & Hamdan (2022) stated that EFL students suffered from sever aspects of disengagement, namely, cognitive, affective, behavioral and social in English language classroom activities. They added that EFL students were unwilling to participate in class discussions, repeatedly look bored, tune out, divert others, give up easily on tasks, talk out of turn, arrive late to class, interrupt the flow of classes and have poor performance (Mekki et al., 2022). Mohammed (2023) noted that students' low proficiency level and a lack of English learning supporting resources and environment were key factors that lead to challenges in using English as the Medium of Instruction. He proposed a model to boost student engagement in order to contribute to facilitating student engagement through English learning in the Saudi preparatory year program and similar educational programmes. Archambault, Janosz, Moriszot & Pagani (2009) revealed that behavioral engagement (students' devotion to school and classroom rules) and emotional engagement (learners' attitudes, feelings, and perceptions regarding school) were related and each serves as a starting point and an outcome of the other. Most importantly, it was found that the behavioral engagement impacted cognitive engagement, mainly when activities were either social or academic. Disengagement might have a relation with boredom in English learning classrooms. El Deen & Mohammed (2023) investigated the causes of students' boredom in English classes in the Saudi context and the changeability of boredom experienced by students while taking language skill courses among EFL Saudi university students. They revealed seven factors, one of which was demotivation which caused disengagement particularly in grammar and writing skills.

In conflict-affected zone, cognitive engagement can be more challengeable due to disruption in education systems, students' experiencing trauma, limited resources provided and security concerns. Muthanna, Almahfali & Haider (2022) explored the experiences of school teachers and leaders regarding the impacts of war on education. They figured out a number of negative effects on students and teachers and the whole educational systems. These negative impacts were; the increase of displacement rate and discrimination, the raise of young students as future

fighters, the conflict of identities among students, the destruction of students' physical and mental health, the exploitation of education for financial benefits, the normalization of negative behaviors, and the destruction of unpaid teacher's dignity (Muthanna et al., 2022). Al-Hroub (2016) asserted that 79% of refugee students had experienced a death in the family; 45% displayed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Therefore, students in war zones need not only to learn a new language or other subjects, but also to deal with any bad outcomes of what they have experienced. The instability caused due to war could hinder consistent language learning and cognitive engagement in classes. In Colombia, Ariza & Saldarriaga (2023) studied the occurrence of the Colombian armed conflict on the academic performance of secondary students at the urban level over two periods of time 2003 and 2017. They found out that the Colombian armed conflict had a significant negative impact on the academic performance of secondary students between 2003 and 2017 with different direct and indirect effects. Jones et al (2022) explored the experiences of young people during and after war and the effects of this war on their educational pathways. Findings pinpointed that schooling had been repeatedly interrupted by: recruitment into the armed forces or organized youth movements, destruction of school infrastructure, disengagement in classes on account of trauma and stress and a loss of educational ambitions given fears of extended insecurity in war-torn in Ethiopia. Cervantes-Duarte & Fernández-Can examined the short and long-term impact of armed conflicts on education and educational agents (students, teachers and students' parents). Findings indicated several impacts of merciless war on education such as; students' refusal and impediments to return to education; damaged of educational infrastructure, sub-optimal expenditure on education, loss of the educational and protective functions of the family, loss of the academic community, less or non-qualified teaching staff, drastic loss of skills, abandoning school, population movements, destruction of networks and social environment, behavioural problems such as traumas, pedagogical roles and self-victimization (2016).

1.2.   Statement of the problem

The current study attempts to investigate the level of cognitive engagement among EFL/ESL learners in the selected conflict-affected zones, Yemen and Kashmir, JK, India. It also seeks to find if there is any relationship between cognitive engagement and academic performance and if there is any impact of cognitive engagement on academic performance among EFL/ESL learners in those conflict zones. There are three perspectives which have opened a new gap in the literature related to the theme of the current study. First, after going through a good number of previous studies, it is noticed that there is a lack of empirical and statistical evidence based on quantitative analysis on the ongoing scenario of higher education in these two areas, Yemen and Kashmir, JK India where instability due to conflict has been growing for ages. Second, it has presently

found that no research has been done in relation to civil conflict and level of cognitive engagement among EFL and ESL learners at the tertiary level. Third, the relationship between cognitive engagement and educational performance is an area of research that has been understudied, opening an important gap in the literature.

1.3.   Questions of the study:

1. What is the level of cognitive engagement among the EFL/ESL learners in the selected conflict zones; Yemen and Kashmir, India?
2. Is there a relationship between cognitive engagement and academic performance among the EFL/ESL learners in the selected conflict zones; Yemen and Kashmir, India?
3. Is there any impact of cognitive engagement on the academic performance among the EFL/ESL learners in the selected conflict zones; Yemen and Kashmir, India?

2. Methodology

The current study is a mixed-method one that utilized quantitative-qualitative approach.

2.1.   Population and Sampling

The population of this study is the students of the English departments in two universities, (2800 students) at two conflict-affected zones, Sana'a University and Hajjah University in Yemen and Kashmir University and Cluster University in Kashmir, JK, India. The sample consists of 300 EFL learners who are selected on the basis of judgmental sampling with criteria based on three parameters (relevant to the objectives of the current study; that include educational level (Undergraduates), residence (in a conflict zone) and educational specialization (English Language). The first tool to collect data is a structured-questionnaire administered to the sample followed by an item analysis using 5-point likert scale and a three-point scale. The second tool for assessing academic performance is calculating the average score of the total academic years which the sample obtained in the end of their graduation year attained from the secondary data provided by the respective academic authorities. The third tool is a structured-interview conducted to 20 respondents randomly selected from the sample so that in-depth information can be collected.

2.2   Data Collection and Processing:
2.2.1 Primary Data:
2.2.1.1   Survey Development

The study implements a quantitative-qualitative method. The data were collected using a Likert scale questionnaire and close-ended questions. A structured questionnaire, composed of (13) questions, was developed and administered to the respondents using Google forms. The questionnaire is emailed to the students' group at one time. Subsequently, the data was collected, and then analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), correlation and regression analysis.

2.2.1.2   Reliability & validity of the survey

To check reliability and validity of the items used in questionnaire analyzed on a five point scale continuum, a pilot study was carried out beforehand on 30 students selected from the same sample. A reliability test was conducted in order to ensure the reliability and internal consistency of the scale. The initial Cronbach alpha value was found to be 0.75 for 15 items. Three items were removed based on a formidable variation in standard deviation. Finally, 13 items were considered for analysis for which the revised Cronbach alpha was computed as 0.84. Second, the tool was refined depending on the results of the item analysis done. Third, the statements were reviewed by some linguists and specialists to make sure they are all related to the area of the study and each one independently focuses on what it claims to measure. Finally, the validators' comments were taken into account while finalizing the tool for administration.

2.2.1.3 Structured Interview

To enhance validity and create a more in-depth picture and understanding to the study problem, data triangulation method was used. A total of "20" Yemeni and Kashmiri students from the sample were selected for interview. The first 10 Yemeni students were selected by ticking every third name in the students' attendance list. A call was made to each student which lasted for around 5-8 minutes. The other 10 students are Kashmiri who volunteered to cooperate after responding to the survey. The sample was given three questions related to the objectives of the study to be discussed in a way of conversation. It was basically an exchange between the one interviewer and one respondent. Notes and recordings were taken after taking the participants' permission for further review for the sake of research.

2.2.2 Secondary data

In order to assess the academic performance of the sample; the average score of the given sample of respondents for all academic years in university have been obtained from the secondary data provided by the respective academic authorities.

3. Findings

3.1   Analysis and interpretation of data

In order to analyze the level of students' cognitive engagement in English language classes at university level in the conflict zones, Yemen and Kashmir, a survey consisting of (13) items is adapted. Alongside each statement, five alternative responses namely, strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree and strongly agree are scored 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 respectively. Frequency distribution (F) and percentage (%) are the statistical tools to analyze the options (5-1) from SD to SA. The survey is divided into two subscales; deep engagement (1-8) and shallow engagement (9-13). Deep engagement in English learning involves profound understanding and meaningful connection with the material. Shallow engagement; on the other hand, is more surface-level without a strong grasp of the content.

3.1.1 Descriptive analysis

The first question:
What is the level of cognitive engagement among EFL/ESL learners in conflict zones?

Table 1
Statistical Summary of Cognitive Engagement based on Frequency Distribution & Percentage

Statements		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Deep Engagement							
1. I find that at times studying in English class gives me a feeling of deep personal satisfaction.	F	137	36	60	47	20	300
	%	45.7	12	20	15.6	6.7	100
2. I feel that almost any topic in English class can be highly interesting once I get into it.	F	133	63	39	33	32	300
	%	44.3	21	13	11	10.7	100
3. I find that reading my English books at home can at times be as exciting as a good novel or movie.	F	135	48	38	49	30	300
	%	45	16	12.7	16.3	10	100
4. Use of an electronic medium and get connected to internet to discuss or complete an assignment in English is frequent.	F	136	77	28	40	19	300
	%	45.3	25.6	9.4	13.3	6.4	100
5. No restrictions on discussing ideas from readings or classes with faculty members outside of class.	F	138	45	51	46	20	300
	%	46	15	17	15.3	6.7	100
6. Team work with other students on projects during class is encouraged.	F	122	43	44	49	42	300
	%	40.7	14.3	14.7	16.3	14	100
7. I spend a lot of my free time finding out more about interesting topics which have been discussed in the English class.	F	122	66	38	44	30	300
	%	40.6	22	12.7	14.7	10	100
8. I come to English class with questions in mind that I want answers for.	F	127	66	38	39	30	300
	%	42.3	22	12.7	13	10	100
Shallow Engagement							
9. Course materials provided has real life applicability in the workplace.	F	122	54	49	43	32	300
	%	40.7	14.3	16.3	14.3	10.7	100
10. My aim is to pass English subject while doing as little work as possible.	F	15	55	28	44	158	300
	%	5	18.3	9.3	14.7	52.7	100

11.	I do not find English subject very interesting, so I keep my work to the minimum.	F	42	46	46	44	122	300
		%	14	15.3	15.3	14.7	40.7	100
12.	I generally restrict my study to what is specifically set, as I think it is unnecessary to do anything extra.	F	20	38	57	65	120	300
		%	6.7	12.6	19	21.7	40	100
13.	I make a point of looking at most of the suggested readings that go with the teachers.	F	30	49	38	52	131	300
		%	10	16.3	12.7	17.4	43.6	100
Overall Level of Cognitive Engagement on 5-point Scale		F	125	96	29	49	1	300
		%	41.7	32	9.7	16.3	0.3	100

Table 1 displays the level of cognitive engagement by the respondents in their English learning classes, the first 8 items assessing the deep cognitive engagement by the respondents.

The initial item asked the respondents if they feel personal satisfaction while studying English in class. Out of 300 respondents, 137 (45.7%) and 36 (12%) express disagreement, 60 (20%) express uncertain, 47 (15.6%) and 20 (6.7%) express agreement. The highest percentage of disagreement (57.7%) indicates that majority of the respondents feel dissatisfaction while studying English in class.

The second item seeks if the respondents are ready to get into any topic brought up in English class. Out of 300 respondents, 133 (44.3%) and 63 (21%), and 39 (13%) feel undecided while those who express agreement are 33 (11%) and 32 (10.7%). The highest percentage (65.3%) is shown by those who disagree which indicates to the respondents' unwillingness in getting into the topics discussed in English class.

The third item tries to find out about the respondents' level of excitement when reading their English textbooks. Out of 300 respondents, 135 (45%) and 48 (16%) show their disagreement, 38 (12.7%) are unsure, 49 (16.3%) and 30 (10%) express their agreement. The highest percentage (61%) of disagreement reveals the monotony the respondents feel while reading their English textbooks at home.

The fourth item attempts to elicit if the respondents have the access to use technology and internet to complete their assignments. Out of 300 respondents, 136 (45.3%) and 77 (25.6%) express disagreement, 28 (9.4%) feel uncertain, 40 (13.3%) and 19 (6.4%) express agreement. The highest value (70.9%) of disagreement shows the lack of technology use in English class for facilitating their tasks' performance.

The fifth item tries to check the occurrence of receiving feedback from faculty members or teachers outside of class. Out of 300 respondents, 138 (46%) and 45 (15%) of the respondents disagree, 51 (17%) do not decide and 46 (15.3%) and 20 (6.7%) agree. The total percentage of those who disagree is (61%) which indicates that some restrictions might be encountered by the respondents for getting feedback out of class.

The sixth item asks if team or group work activity is motivated on projects during class. Out of 300 respondents, 122 (40.7%) and 43 (14.3%) show disagreement, 44 (14.7%) feel unsure, 49 (16.3%) and 42 (14%) express agreement. The total percentage (55%) of disagreement which is the highest percentage indicates to the absence of team work activity in class.

The seventh item checks if respondents are really interested in topics discussed in English class to recall and think about in their free time. Out of the 300 respondents, 122 (40.6%) and 66 (22%) disagree, 38 (12.7%) are unsure, 44 (14.7%) and 30 (10%) agree. It can be concluded from the highest percentage (62.6%) of those who show disagreement that majority of the respondents do not spend extra time on the topics brought up in their English class.

The eighth item asks if respondents have questions to be answered regarding what they study in English class. 127 (42.3%) and 66 (22%) express disagreement, 38 (12.7%) feel undecided, 39 (13%) and 30 (10%) express agreement. It can be concluded that majority of the respondents who show disagreement (64.3%) do not come to their English class with questions which need to be answered in class.

After examining the deep engagement, the findings reveal that majority of the respondents do not have deep engagement as regard to their English classes.

The shallow engagement is assessed using last 4 items as presented in table (1). The frequency and percentage in each of the item statement was computed and presented.

The ninth item explores whether respondents think that course materials are applicable in future workplace. Out of 300 respondents, 122 (40.7%) and 54 (14.3%) show disagreement, 49 (16.3%) are unsure, 43 (14.3%) and 32 (10.7%) show agreement. It is indicated from the findings and the highest percentage of those who disagree (55%) that a significant proportion of the respondents do not think that the materials of their English course match with real life workplace.

Item (10) tries to find out whether the respondents' aim of studying English is only to pass and study less or not. Out of 300 respondents, 15 (5%) and 55 (18.3%) disagree, 28 (9.3%) undecided and 44 (14.7%) and 158 (52.7%) agree. It is apparent from the highest percentage (67.4%) for those who show agreement that a substantial number of the respondents' aim of studying English is just to pass.

Item 11 checks if the respondents feel interested in English subject and work hard. Out of 300 respondents, 42 (14%) and 46 (15.3%) disagree, 46 (15.3%) are uncertain, 44 (14.7%) and 122 (40.7%) agree. It can be concluded from the descriptive statistics and the highest percentage (55.4%) for those who agree with the item that majority of the respondents work or study less as they do not think English subject is interesting.

Item 12 seeks if the respondents restrict their study and do not exert more efforts. Out the 300 respondents, 20 (6.7%) and 38 (12.6%) disagree, 57 (19%) are uncertain, 65 (21.7) and 120 (40%) agree. It reveals that majority of the respondents (61.7%) who show agreement prefer to stick to what is already set and do not think of performing extra activities to improve their English learning.

The last item 13 seeks if the students only focus on the suggested readings which the teachers select and work more on their own. Out of 300 respondents, 30 (10%) and 49 (16.3%) are on disagreement with the statement, 38 (12.7%) are not sure, while 52 (17.4%) and 131 (43.6%) are on agreement with it. This indicates that a greater part of the respondents (61%) just make an effort on reading excerpts only which are suggested by the teacher and nothing more.

The results of the last five statements indicate that the students show high shallow engagement which means they are not engaged with the content thoroughly.

At last and as shown in table (1) above, 125 (41.7%), 96 (32%), 29 (9.7%), 49 (16.3%) & 1 (0.3%) of the respondents strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree and strongly agree respectively. The big proportion 221 (73.7%) out of 300 (100%) who show disagreement indicates that majority of the respondents reveal low cognitive engagement in English learning in conflict zones as shown in figure 1 below.
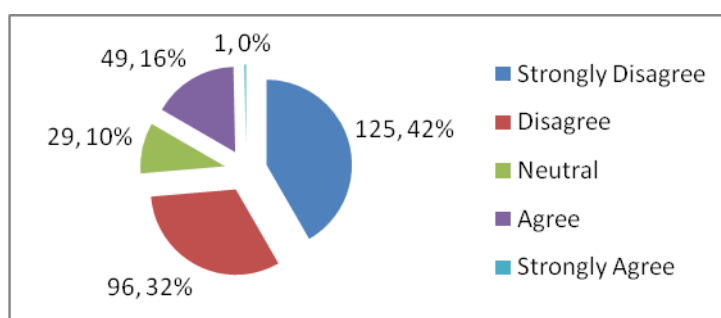

Figure 1. Diagrammatic illustration of Overall Level of Cognitive Engagement based on 5-point Scale

The five likert scale is reduced to a three-point scale continuum based on quartile deviation (which is developed in order to understand the overall level of cognitive engagement). As shown in table (2) below, **122 (40.7%), 103 (34.3%) & 75 (25%)** of the students fall in first, second, third quartiles, that is **low, medium, high respectively.**

Table 2
Overall Level of Cognitive Engagement based on 3 point Scale

	F	%
Low	122	40.7
Medium	103	34.3
High	75	25
Total	300	100

On the basis of descriptive statistics and the three-point scale continuum, it can be concluded that the overall level of cognitive of engagement among the EFL/ESL undergraduate students in conflict zones is low, as illustrated in figures (1 & 2).
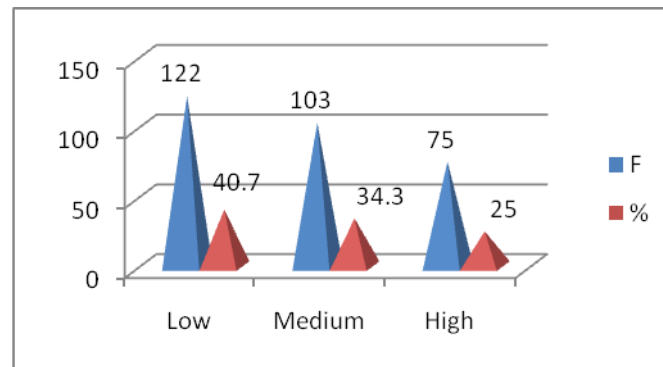
Figure 2. Diagrammatic illustration of Overall Level of Cognitive Engagement
based on 3-point Scale

3.1.2 Correlation and Regression Analysis

The Second Question
Is there a relationship between cognitive engagement and academic
performance among the EFL/ESL learners in conflict zones?

To assess the relationship between cognitive engagement and academic
performance among the EFL/ESL learners, a correlation analysis has been
conducted after assessing the academic performance of the students by
calculating the average score of the total of the academic years of the given
sample. The correlation analysis has been carried out and the results are
presented below in Table 3.

Table 3
The Coefficient of Correlation between Cognitive Engagement and Academic
Performance

		X (Cognitive Engagement)
Academic Performance	**Correlation matrix (Pearson)**	0.97**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.05

It is evident from table (3) that the value of Pearson Correlation between
cognitive engagement and academic performance is 0.97** with p-value = 0
i.e. < α (@significance level of 0.05). Therefore, it can be concluded that
cognitive student engagement and academic performance among EFL/ESL
learners in conflict zones are positively correlated. The result manifests a
statistically significant and positive strength of relationship between
cognitive engagement and academic performance which means that once
EFL/ESL learners' cognitive engagement is enhanced, their academic
performance will be increased accordingly.

The Third Question
Is there any impact of cognitive engagement on the academic
performance among the EFL/ESL learners in conflict zones?

To assess the impact of cognitive engagement on the academic
performance of EFL/ESL learners, a regression analysis has been conducted

after assessing the academic performance of the students by calculating the average score of the total of the academic years of the given sample. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
The Regression Coefficient of Cognitive Engagement on Academic Performance among EFL/ESL learners (Model Summary)

		R²	p-value
b	-9	0.36	<0.01

Y = -9 + 0.36 (X Cognitive Engagement)

Table (4) above indicates that the effect of cognitive engagement was found to be positive and significant on academic performance among EFL/ESL learners (Regression co-efficient=0.36, p=0.01) at 0.01 level of significance. It means that cognitive engagement (X1) is a significant predictor of academic performance among the EFL/ESL learners in conflict zones.

4. Discussion

This study intended to assess the level of cognitive engagement among EFL/ESL undergraduate students in English learning situations in conflict-affected zones and its relationship (with) and impact (on) their academic performance. The findings reveal that the level of cognitive engagement among the respondents is low. On the other hand, the findings demonstrate that there is a significant relationship between cognitive engagement and academic performance. Furthermore, the outcomes show that there is an impact of cognitive engagement on the academic performance of EFL/ESL tertiary learners in English learning contexts in crisis zones.

Regarding the first question, findings indicate that there is a low cognitive engagement by ESL/EFL students in conflict zones (40.7%). Learners can be categorized as having deep and shallow engagement due to different reasons. English learners with shallow engagement seem to be hesitant to study harder as their aim is only to pass the subject. These students might face other challenges to show shallow engagement in English class. It can be some internal or external factors. The internal factors can be tension and frustration, while the external can be political and insecurity issues occurring in their regions. It can result from lack of interest, uninspiring teaching approaches, external distractions or sense of insecurity. Reasons for low level of deep engagement may include low personal interest or ambition, unclear instructions, highly difficult tasks, less effective teaching methods, and a lack of stimulating and supportive learning environment. In an attempt to explore deeply in the reasons behind the low cognitive engagement of the respondents in English learning contexts, the structured interview highlighted some crucial points. The qualitative data based on interviewing the candidates reveal that majority of the respondents believe that the political conflict and economic crisis are main reasons for their low engagement in English classes. One of the interviewees interpreted that by saying *"It is very tough to focus in class when you feel insecure after watching or hearing about an encounter in your place".*

Another student explained *"The political situation of the country makes us feel tense which negatively affected on our cognitive engagement in class".* Majority of the interviewees clarified that the real insecurity they feel is about their lives and their future *"Though we work hard and compete for high grades, we are uncertain about future",* and *"Living under any dispute is killing for all even if we reside away from the conflicting spots".* In addition to that, some of the students are unsatisfied with the whole educational system as they think that the quality of education itself is not up to the mark due to some reasons; *"A greater part of unpaid or less paid teachers are bound to attend and deliver classes for the sake of saving their posts and not for the education itself"* a Yemeni student said. Another argued *"Different blocks at Sana'a University, are damaged/not renovated due to the negligence of the government".* A Kashmiri student complained that *"the frequent shut down in the valley prevents us from moving to our colleges".* Another added *"what is the point in going to college/university under risk when you know little to no employment is provided in the state".* Being highly engaged in EFL/ESL classrooms can be open to discussion by the students as heard from the interviewees, *"It is not easy to feel free to participate in class discussions or cross questioning as I hesitate to do so".* Another commented *"Though some teachers occasionally allow us to participate in activities and discussion or help in completing assignments, I cannot do it comfortably".* Another one explained *"Attending English classes does not seem appealing for me as I face difficulties in taking notes, reading and not receiving feedback on regular basis".* Another reason for low engagement level can be interpreted due to the deficiency of technology devices use in English labs in the department of English throughout their academic years. All of the interviewees complained about; the absence of visual-audio labs, inactivation of library, interruption or internet disconnection; and on top of that the blackouts of electricity which are essential to run labs or internet network. One added a point that *"If internet network provided, then it is exclusive for university staff or administrative work and not for us",* while another two explained *"No learning aids are provided during the whole journey of study".* The shallow engagement in learning English classes is summarized by one of the students commenting *"Due to instability of the region, we have no motive but to only complete our education whatever quality it is".* One mentioned that *"Conventional methods of teaching are another technical problem as we find no chance to practice what we have learnt".*

Referring to the second question, the findings revealed that cognitive engagement is related to English language performance 0.97** at the level 0.05 among the respondents. It can be concluded from this significance that when students actively participate and feel free to raise questions and engage with the material, it tends to positively impact their academic performance. Such active involvement in English class can contribute to improve academic performance in English in general. However, there are several factors which can act as mediators in the connection between cognitive engagement and academic performance for English students. These may include teaching methods, educational resources, student motivation and anxiety, and even socio-economic background. These factors can influence how cognitive engagement interprets into academic success. In the

context of conflict, stability and security in a country are again considered to be one of the major issues which influence cognitive engagement and academic performance. A sense of security provides students with a facilitating atmosphere for learning and reducing distractions and stress. This, in turn, can positively impact cognitive engagement and contribute to better academic outcomes for English students. In the part of qualitative research, one of the interviewees assured that *"My attention is only to obtain attendance marks and pass exams"*. Another one stated *"I find it too hard to make two or more drafts on my assignment before submitting the final copy as I cannot find brilliant ideas or information"*. One expressed a difficulty stating that *"I don't get the way to put ideas together while completing a task or participating in class discussion"*. One candidate continued saying, *"Though I downloaded many apps in my cell phone for facilitating my assignments, I don't feel like using any"*. Another student blamed teachers by commenting *"English is a boring subject especially when teachers keep lecturing and not giving us the opportunity to practice"*. When asking the students about their satisfaction with the educational resources, one commented, *"It's essential for us to receive obvious instructions and more cooperation from the teachers to be able to find the right materials that related to the syllabus"*. Majority of the students confirmed that *"We feel highly tense and have other worries which distract us from learning deeply"*. When inquiring about these issues, one explained *"They are low financial support, family problems and difficulty of learning in general"*. One student highlighted another thing *"Teachers judged us based on marks; they do not encourage us based on our learning needs and preferences"*.

There are some studies which are on agreement with the findings of this study. Wara, Aloka & Odongo (2018) explored the relationship between student cognitive engagement and academic achievement of Kenyan secondary school students. The results showed that cognitive engagement was a significant predictor of academic achievement among secondary school students. Stephen (2023) investigated the impact of security challenges on the academic performance of secondary school students in the north-central geo-political zone of Nigeria. The results equally revealed that to guarantee the safety of the students, near location of the school, border fencing with suitable gate and security personnel must be prioritized for better academic performance among students. On the contrary, a study conducted in Bangladesh examined if the three major factors; financial issues, social issues, and political issues affecting the academic performance on 429 Bangladeshi students at the tertiary level. The results showed that there was a significant relationship between financial and social issues with academic performance but the relationship between political issues and academic performance was insignificant (Sharmin & Tirno, 2020).

For the third question, the results display that cognitive engagement can play as a key predictor on academic performance for ESL/EFL learners of English in conflict zones (Regression co-efficient=0.36, p=0.01) at 0.01 level of significance. This finding can be interpreted that when students are cognitively engaged, they can overcome obstacles, adapt to disturbed learning environments, and still achieve academic progress in English. It

becomes a durable response to hardship. Cognitive engagement not only helps students focus on learning English but also fosters coping with the system. It can contribute to their emotional well-being; create a positive sequence where active participation in education becomes a source of resilience amid difficult circumstances. Despite the challenges faced by the learners, lively involvement in education helps maintain a sense of normality. Interviewees confirm that their cognitive engagement in English classes to obtain good academic performance count on many factors such as; the political state, the socio-economic status, the nature of learning environment and their relationship with their teachers. The findings of qualitative data match with the findings of quantitative data in this study in which a number of critical points were raised. Majority of the respondents replied on the question of possibility of discussion with the teacher that *"Feedback or talk to the teacher is not always permissible"*. A good number of them highlighted, *"I feel shy to go to the instructor office to review or ask a question"*. Asking them about the class nature, one commented *"The class is monotonous and not varied with interesting activities"*. When inquiring about the clarity of assignments, they answered *"Noting down briefly after the teacher is confusing, while assignments cannot be reviewed with the teacher before submitting them"*. About the applicability of course materials, one replied *"What we study is different from what is in real life"*, while another expressed *"I don't think that what I studied will help me in my career later on"*.

These reasons indirectly seem to influence the students' academic performance which is reflected in their test scores or disengagement in learning classes. Majority of the interviewees repeat to mention the socio-economic and financial factors explaining that *"lack of financial support is the major hardship due to the little to no income of their families"*. They repeated the point *"Costs of learning starting from transportation fares are unaffordable"*. Three of Yemeni candidates acknowledged *"We get apart with some of our close friends because of dispute on politics"*. Accommodation seems to be given little attention properly as another candidate commented, *"I feel oppressed when I've no other option rather than paying for dormitory while they are unusable at all or pay high rent for a small room"*. One exclaimed *"When we have to think about providing ourselves food and place, how do you expect us to be engaged in class or be high achievers in education"*. One student showed a sense of inferiority complex when expressed *"It is unjust to study and work with very limited financial support when others enjoy and pass easily"*.

Reviewing some other research in the same topic, Al-Ariqi, Prasad, Mohsin (2023) explored the context of learning English by undergraduate Yemeni learners in the conflict zone, Yemen. Al-Ariqi et al. (2023) found out that Yemeni EFL learners encountered safety, psychological, technical and socio-economic challenges in their educational journey which surely would affect negatively on their academic performance. Such challenges such as; insecurity, low to no salaries paid to teachers, bad learning circumstances, electricity & internet disconnection, lack of technological devices, low income of families and society demotivation, all together would make learning process so hard to carry on. Brallier (2020) investigated the impact of a

number of variables related to each component of student engagement on the academic achievement. It was found that the variables related to cognitive engagement (i.e. goal orientation, locus of control, and metacognition) were not uniquely predict overall college students achievement, while variables related to emotional engagement (i.e. social support), and behavioral engagement (i.e. study behaviors) were found to have a considerable connection with academic achievement. Likewise, Liu et al. (2023) indicated that three aspects of engagement influence the academic performance of the students but the cognitive engagement emerged as the weakest predictor of English achievement. Dar, Pakrashi & Thakur (2021) tried to scrutinize the effects of civil conflict in Kashmir by examining how exposure to civil unrest during the school age affected the academic achievement as measured by student performance in basic literacy and numeracy tests on a national standardized exam. They found that the 2010 unrest-induced school shutdowns in Kashmir adversely affected student performance on a national standardized test particularly with girls and weaker students. In Ethiopia, Jones et al. (2022) asserted that at the school level, negative impacts could be identified in terms of teacher presence, teaching quality and the provisioning of educational activities; multifaceted by reduced education budgets as local, regional and federal government resources are diverted to the war effort in war-torn in Ethiopia.

5. Conclusion & Recommendations:

The current study is an endeavor to examine the level of cognitive engagement and its relationship with and impact on academic performance by EFL/ESL students in conflict-affected zones. The results confirm that EFL/ESL learners very often suffer from low level of cognitive engagement in English classes in unrest zones as well as there is an existed connection between cognitive engagement and academic performance and an impact of the first on the later. Based on those findings, a number of recommendations can be applied to create positive cognitive engagement and academic performance and enhance the relationship between both variables in English learning contexts in conflict-affected zones.

In English learning contexts, it is recommended that teachers should reflect on and adapt more interactive teaching methods and intriguing activities for enhancing participation and critical thinking among students. Teachers have to connect language learning to real life contexts and cultural settings in order to increase students' interest and motivation to engage cognitively in class by using technology devices even at the limited resources. Project-based learning activities can get EFL/ESL students involved in collaborative and enjoyable activities. Teachers should encourage group work among students to motivate social connections, practice language skills and complete difficult tasks together. Students have to be provided with constructive feedback by identifying areas for improvement and reflect practices. In other words, a supportive learning environment where students feel valued and respected has to be created, putting in mind, the students' interests, learning styles preferences and educational needs.

It is also recommended that policies, educational programs, curricula, and other educational materials should contribute to enhance cognitive engagement, understanding, solidarity, and tolerance between individuals in the quest for social cohesion. Policy makers have to explore conceptual frameworks that might provide strategic guidance for education interventions aimed at addressing issues related to safety and security. Curricula need to be reformed and attention needs to be drawn to building social civic skills. It is also suggested to adapt an educational approach to cast educational institutions as places where diversity, openness and engagement are encouraged. An appropriate reform of the education system should be adjusted in order to foster the appreciation of cultural and religious differences and fight against ignorance, hatred, and disputes, leading to stability and prosperity.

Governments have a critical role in providing people with the basic services of electricity, internet and all educational resources access. It is recommended to adapt an educational program and a dialogue skills training program for university students in order to find out the factors leading to a deep cognitive engagement in class and a positive academic performance. Furthermore, peace education should be built and supported as well as fundraising and training should be established for teachers. During conflicts, government should provide flexible learning opportunities; such as alternative learning models, distance and accelerated learning programs or non-formal education approaches as well as digitalizing curriculum such as using USB sticks containing pre-downloaded books and lessons in TV and radio. Governments in conflict zones should also increase their collaboration with NGOs and spread awareness on community support.

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