Revisiting Teaching Methodology in the Age of AI: AI and Textbooks Alone Don't Teach; Teachers Do

Dr. Brahim Khartite

Associate Professor of ESP Business English and Soft skills, University of Moulay Ismail - ENSAM Meknes

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ABSTRACT

It is stating the obvious to note that easy access to open AI and the quality of any new curriculum cannot exceed the quality of its teachers and classroom practitioners. Educational reform initiatives often place strong emphasis on textbook design and curriculum innovation at the expense of teacher training and teacher continuous professional development. While textbooks are still relevant as they provide roadmaps and structure, AI has accentuated the ease and the swiftness of access to authentic and varied material both in terms of quantity and quality. While students oftentimes acknowledge the inspiration and lasting impact of their teachers, expressions of appreciation toward textbooks or curricula are notably rare. This highlights a critical dimension of textbooks and AI but they remain simple instruments that function as pedagogical tool rather than autonomous agents of learning and/or teaching. Drawing on the piloting and implementation of the new *Spotlight* textbook in middle school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts in Morocco and the new wave towards adopting AI in education, this article argues that effective curriculum reform depends not only on well-designed materials and cutting age technology but also on redefining methodological practices, teachers' pre/in-service training and continuous professional development. Although *Spotlight series* represents a significant step toward upgrading EFL instruction for beginner learners and AI provides promising opportunities as mediator of instruction, their success or failure hinges heavily on teachers' capacity to mediate content, enact curriculum intentions, and align classroom practices with the reform's pedagogical philosophy and long-term goals. This paper further contends that persistent student disengagement will not be fixed with AI alone; it will persist as a byproduct of traditional, teacher-centered implementation (this is especially true in an era that is increasingly predominant with social media and easy access to more engaging and stimulating stuff with Open AI). As a broad implication, sustainable curriculum reform, therefore, emerges from, a dynamic interaction between an optimal use of AI and a continuously innovative textbook design and reflective, engaging and stimulating learner-centered teaching pedagogy.

Keywords: Open AI. curriculum innovation/reform, textbook design; students' engagement; methodology issues; teacher vs. learner-centered pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Learners are more likely to remember influential teachers than the textbooks used. Over the years, many teachers—including the author—have received messages from former students expressing gratitude for the inspiration, support, and personal impact their teachers had on their lives, often in ways the teachers themselves had not consciously perceived. Notably absent, however, are expressions of appreciation directed at specific textbooks or instructional materials. This observation underscores a fundamental reality of education: learners remember teachers, not textbooks. What students tend to cherish most are authentic classroom interactions and meaningful conversations fostered by teachers who succeed in transforming the classroom into a supportive and engaging learning space.

Textbooks, regardless of their quality, provide tools rather than rules. Teachers act as mediators of pedagogical content and are therefore the primary agents who determine the effectiveness of any curriculum. While the development of appropriate teaching materials and the design of engaging learning opportunities fall within the

responsibilities of textbook writers and syllabus designers, the success or failure of the new middle school English curriculum depends largely on teachers' willingness to critically revisit their classroom practices and align their instructional methodologies with the pedagogical philosophy underpinning the reform. Ultimately, teachers exercise decisive agency in their classrooms: they can foster motivation or disengagement, empowerment or frustration.

The central argument of this article is that *Spotlight*- the new textbook designed for middle school lower level in Morocco- not unlike any other textbook—no matter how well designed—cannot teach itself. The newly designed textbook represents an important step toward the long-anticipated reform of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction for beginner learners at the middle school level. However, teachers and teacher supervisors, as the only stakeholders with sustained and direct access to classroom realities, are the ones who ultimately make the difference. Teaching methodology and instructional practices therefore occupy a pivotal role in the effective implementation of the new curriculum.

This article addresses the widespread issue of student disengagement and argues that it is largely a byproduct of the teaching methodologies that currently dominate EFL classrooms across proficiency levels. While teachers frequently attribute disengagement to learners' lack of effort or motivation, students themselves often report frustration with monotonous, lecture-dominated classes characterized by excessive teacher talk time. A closer examination reveals that although educational theories, curricula, and materials have evolved considerably, classroom practices have remained largely unchanged. Meaningful reform, therefore, does not simply enter the classroom from policy documents or textbooks; rather, it emerges from within the classroom through the adoption of more interactive, innovative, and learner-centered teaching methodologies.

Even parents increasingly express concern that schools are no longer as attractive or as stimulating as they ought to be. When student disengagement is described in this article as a byproduct of prevailing teaching methodologies, this broader dissatisfaction provides important context for such a claim. From a historical perspective, nearly every aspect of education has undergone significant transformation—curricula, assessment practices, technologies, and learning resources—yet classroom interaction patterns have remained largely unchanged.

A visit to classrooms across schools and proficiency levels reveals a recurring pattern. In almost every class, there are learners who actively shape learning events, others who observe learning as it unfolds, and some who remain uncertain about how learning occurs. More concerning, however, is the presence of a growing group of learners who are persistently and entirely disengaged. While educational discourse often focuses on dropout rates, far less attention is paid to what may be termed *"drop-in" students*: learners who are physically present in classrooms yet cognitively, emotionally, and academically absent, often relegated to the back rows of learning spaces.

The primary aim of this article is to propose six practical ways in which middle school teachers can revisit and hone their teaching methodologies in order to enhance learner engagement and motivation. This approach aligns with what is sometimes referred to as *edutainment*—the integration of meaningful learning with elements that stimulate interest and enjoyment—without reducing instruction to mere entertainment.

As the metaphor aptly suggests, teaching that engages only the eyes and ears is akin to a meal consumed in a dream. Effective teaching therefore requires a willingness to go beyond content delivery and to explore pedagogical practices that actively involve learners, sustain motivation, and create emotionally and cognitively rich learning experiences. While having clear and well-defined instructional objectives is undoubtedly essential, it represents only part of the pedagogical equation. Instructional materials alone do not generate engagement; it is teachers—through their methodological choices, interactional styles, and classroom presence—who ultimately bring learning to life.

Two types of Objectives

One of the most enduring insights from educational psychology is Edutainment, Incidental Learning, and the Design of Engaging Learning Experiences. It is said that "we learn most when we least expect to be taught." This

idea aligns with notions of incidental learning and learning by doing, in which knowledge emerges naturally through participation in meaningful activity rather than through direct instruction alone. Such forms of learning are particularly relevant for contemporary digital-age learners, whose cognitive habits and motivational profiles differ markedly from those of previous generations.

In recent years, the concept of "edutainment"—a portmanteau combining *education* and *entertainment*—has gained currency as a response to these shifting learner needs. Edutainment seeks to make learning more meaningful, enjoyable, and memorable by integrating academic content with elements such as games, storytelling, humor, multimedia, and interactivity. Far from trivializing learning, this approach reduces anxiety, enhances memory retention, makes complex ideas more accessible, and increases learner motivation. For many students shaped by digital culture, these qualities are not luxuries but prerequisites for sustained engagement.

However, edutainment should not be misunderstood as superficial amusement. At its core, it reflects a deeper pedagogical principle: learners need to do something meaningful with content—not merely receive it. John Dewey's maxim captures this well: *"Give the students something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results."* In experiential or task-based instruction, learning is not simply transmitted; it is constructed through action, reflection, and interaction. The success of such approaches depends on how teachers devise their instructional goals and learning opportunities to attain them. Most teachers mistakenly assume that if they have a clear understanding of what they want to teach, learning it will inevitably follow. While clear and precise content objectives—which define the knowledge or skills to be taught—are essential, they represent only part of the instructional equation. Materials alone do not engage students; teachers do. Effective educators therefore distinguish between two types of preparation:

1. Content Objectives – specifying *what* is to be taught (e.g., linguistic forms, academic concepts, skills), and

2. Involvement or Engagement Objectives – specifying *how* students will learn through participation in cognitively and socially rich tasks.

Whereas mediocre instruction may focus exclusively on content objectives, effective instruction integrates both. Engagement objectives describe the learning opportunities, interactions, and cognitive challenges that enable students to discover new knowledge rather than receive it passively. They require teachers to ask: *How do I want to structure instruction at each stage of the lesson to ensure that all students are actively constructing their own learning?* This question reframes lesson planning around learner activity rather than teacher exposition. Engaging tasks—whether collaborative projects, problem-based scenarios, simulations, or interactive discussions—position students as agents rather than recipients. In such settings, learning is not only more enjoyable but also deeper, more transferable, and more durable.

The process of effective teaching requires more than the transmission of content; it demands the deliberate orchestration of learning experiences that actively engage students in constructing their own knowledge. As John Dewey notably argued, meaningful learning occurs when students are given "something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking." From this perspective, learning emerges naturally from purposeful activity rather than passive reception.

One instructional model that embodies these principles is Kagan Cooperative Learning, which employs structured interactional formats to maximize student participation. These structures serve as "empty containers" that teachers can adapt to various content areas. Within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, for example, such structures ensure that learners are consistently engaged in meaningful communication rather than passive listening. They rest on the belief that all students possess valuable ideas and that the teacher's role is to facilitate opportunities for learners to express, elaborate, and refine their thinking. Within this paradigm, the classroom becomes a community of thinkers and contributors, each offering unique insights and perspectives.

Beyond cooperative structures, a wide range of engagement-based methodologies aligns with Dewey's conception of learning through doing. These include:

- Problem-Based Learning, where learners tackle authentic, inquiry-driven problems.
- Project-Based Learning, which integrates long-term, interdisciplinary tasks culminating in tangible products.
- Cooperative Learning, encompassing peer-oriented interaction types such as quiz–quiz or information and opinion gaps.
- Task-Based Instruction and Hands-on Activities, emphasizing real-life communication and performance.
- Learning by Doing, which grounds language and content acquisition in experiential practice.

Combined together, all these approaches transform the classroom from a site of information transmission to an environment where students engage in purposeful hands-on activities by negotiating meaning, collaborating with peers, and building conceptual understanding. Put in a nutshell, defining both content objectives and engagement objectives is fundamental to effective instruction. While content objectives ensure clarity of subject matter, engagement objectives ensure that learners are cognitively, socially, and emotionally invested in the learning process. When both dimensions are intentionally designed, learning becomes active, meaningful, and sustainable—fully aligned with Dewey's vision of education as thoughtful action.

Customization, Differentiation, and the Safe Learning Environment

In addition to balancing engagement and content objectives, effective teaching involves thoughtful decisions about the nature of instructional content itself. Broadly, instructional content may be viewed through two complementary lenses: (1) the relevance and customization of learning content and opportunities, and (2) the use of differentiated instructional and assessment strategies within a safe and supportive learning environment.

First, learning content must be relevant, customized, and differentiated. This involves aligning instructional materials with students' needs, interests, and preferred learning styles. As many educators recognize, materials alone do not engage learners; teachers do. Establishing meaningful connections with students enables teachers to understand who their learners are, what motivates them, and how they learn best. Since "one size does not fit all," differentiated approaches are essential for supporting diverse learners and ensuring that instruction remains responsive rather than prescriptive.

Second, differentiation must extend beyond content to encompass both instructional and assessment strategies. Skilled educators operate from the belief that if students do not learn the way we teach, then teaching should adapt to the way they learn. Differentiated strategies may include varied task types, multiple assessment pathways, flexible grouping, scaffolded learning sequences, or adjustments to pacing and modality. These strategies not only enhance accessibility but also communicate respect for learner diversity.

Central to both relevance and differentiation is the recognition that students' needs cannot be addressed if teachers fail to remove barriers to relational connection. Students must perceive that their teachers genuinely care before they care about what teachers know. Building such relationships models the empathy, cooperation, and respect that students are expected to extend to others in future academic or professional settings.

A crucial component of this relational foundation Is the creation of a safe learning environment—one that is not only physically safe, but also intellectually and emotionally secure. In such an environment, students feel free to ask questions, voice uncertainties, make mistakes, and take academic risks without fear of judgment. A safe environment normalizes error as a natural part of learning rather than a sign of deficiency. This climate is particularly essential in language classrooms, where communication inherently involves experimenting with new forms and meanings.

Safety is further reinforced when students are granted both voice and choice. Allowing learners to express their ideas, preferences, and opinions transforms the classroom from a unidirectional system of knowledge transmission into a dialogic space where students participate actively in shaping the learning process. Student

voice facilitates ownership, accountability, and intrinsic motivation. In English for General Purposes (EGP) contexts, instruction often centers on learning about language. In English for Specific Purposes (ESP), by contrast, learners use language as a means to an end, engaging with communicative tasks that mirror authentic academic or professional functions. In such environments, voice and agency become indispensable components of communicative competence.

Finally, relevance, differentiation, and safety collectively create conditions conducive to incidental learning, a concept closely aligned with Dewey's principle of learning through doing. Incidental learning occurs when students acquire knowledge or skills organically while engaged in meaningful activity rather than through overt, teacher-driven instruction. This form of learning underscores the idea that learners often internalize most deeply when they are least consciously aware of being taught.

Two Types of Interaction: Cognitive and Social Dimensions

Effective instructional design is grounded in the understanding that learning is not passive but emerges through interaction—both within the learner's cognitive structures and within social contexts. Two complementary forms of interaction are central to this process. The first involves the interaction between students' prior knowledge and new learning, a principle rooted in Piaget's theory of cognitive constructivism. The second concerns the interaction among learners themselves, reflecting Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism and his influential concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

From a cognitive perspective, learning occurs as individuals integrate new information with existing mental schemas. Cognitive learning theory emphasizes the internal processes through which information is perceived, encoded, stored, and retrieved. In this framework, instruction must activate learners' prior knowledge to facilitate meaning-making and retention. Strategies such as brainstorming, eliciting background knowledge, or connecting new content to learners' past experiences serve this purpose. When teachers fail to activate prior knowledge, they risk presenting information that learners already possess or that lacks meaningful context, thereby diminishing engagement and cognitive investment. Without a perceived cognitive "gap" to be bridged, students may remain unmotivated, since no authentic purpose for learning has been established.

Conversely, when instruction is structured to reveal what learners know and what they need to know, motivation increases because the mind detects a discrepancy that requires resolution. Brain-based learning research reinforces the importance of such strategies, demonstrating that the brain is more likely to encode information that is personally meaningful and connected to existing neural pathways.

The second dimension of interaction is inherently social. Vygotskian theory posits that learning is mediated through social interaction in which knowledge is jointly constructed. The social cognitive perspective further asserts that learning takes place within dynamic, reciprocal exchanges between individuals, their behavior, and the surrounding environment. Within this paradigm, language functions as both a cognitive tool and a social medium through which learning is negotiated.

In classroom practice—particularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts—these theories underscore the importance of creating opportunities for collaborative meaning-making. Effective instruction therefore integrates structured peer interactions such as *Think–Pair–Share*, cooperative problem-solving, peer tutoring, and movement-based pairing strategies (e.g., "find someone who..."). Activities like Rally Coach, Rally Robin, and similar cooperative structures allow learners to articulate understanding, negotiate meaning, and scaffold one another's learning within their respective ZPDs. These interactions position students not merely as recipients of knowledge but as contributors, recognizing that each learner holds valuable expertise, perspectives, and experiences to share.

Together, cognitive and social approaches illustrate that learning is simultaneously internal and interpersonal. Instruction that activates prior knowledge while leveraging peer interaction fosters deeper understanding, sustained engagement, and greater learner autonomy.

Two Types of Questions/Questioning Techniques Promote Higher-Order Thinking Skills

Questioning is one of the most powerful instructional tools available to teachers. The types of questions educators pose not only reveal their pedagogical priorities but also shape the cognitive demands placed on learners. Broadly speaking, classroom questioning can be categorized into two types: Lower-Order Thinking (LOT) questions and Higher-Order Thinking (HOT) questions.

Lower-Order Thinking questions—often referred to as *display questions*—are typically closed questions that elicit factual, predictable, or short responses. They frequently require a single correct answer, a brief phrase, or even a simple "yes" or "no." While such questions may serve a role in checking recall or comprehension, their overuse tends to increase teacher talk time (TTT), encourage passive participation, and diminish learner engagement. When classroom discourse is dominated by closed questioning, students are positioned mainly as responders rather than thinkers, with limited opportunity for elaboration, interpretation, or creativity.

By contrast, Higher-Order Thinking questions are inferential, open-ended, and cognitively demanding. These questions cannot be answered with isolated facts; instead, they require students to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and apply information. They may incorporate information gaps or opinion gaps, allowing for multiple valid responses depending on learners' perspectives, prior experiences, and reasoning processes. Because there is no single predetermined answer, HOT questions generate authentic curiosity and stimulate richer academic dialogue.

Teachers generally ask questions for three primary purposes: a) to check for understanding, b) to create active engagement, and c) to promote thinking. While (LOTs) questioning may satisfy the first purpose, it rarely achieves the latter two. Effective teachers therefore minimize reliance on display questions and instead cultivate a classroom culture where inquiry, exploration, and intellectual risk-taking are encouraged. Students are particularly motivated when teachers pose thought-provoking questions for which the teacher does not hold ready-made answers, or when students' lived experiences and viewpoints become central to the conversation. Such questions often spark lively discussion, debate, and sustained attention—conditions that support deeper learning and long-term retention.

Two Types of Wait-Time

Wait time and Its role in enhancing classroom discourse is crucially relevant in more ways than one. In addition to the types of questions teachers pose, the management of wait time plays a crucial role in shaping the quality of classroom interactions. Wait time refers to the intentional pauses teachers allow after asking a question or after a student begins speaking. Research has consistently shown that increasing wait time leads to more thoughtful responses, deeper processing, and greater student participation. Two distinct types of wait time are particularly relevant in effective instruction.

The first type of wait time occurs after the teacher poses a question, especially a higher-order one. When teachers ask inferential or thought-provoking questions, learners need time to process the question, access prior knowledge, formulate ideas, and prepare a meaningful response. However, many teachers are uncomfortable with the silence that follows such questions. As a result, they may ask multiple questions in quick succession, rephrase prematurely, or provide the answer themselves. These behaviors deny students the cognitive space needed for independent thinking and often lead to disengagement or apathy.

Structured pedagogical strategies such as Think–Pair–Share (TPS) address this challenge by institutionalizing wait time and redistributing ownership of the question to learners. Increased wait time has been found to reduce off-task behavior, minimize distraction, and foster higher levels of participation. Silence, therefore, should not be interpreted as a lack of understanding, but rather as a necessary phase in the cognitive process.

The second type of wait time occurs after a student begins speaking. In many classrooms, teachers unintentionally undermine student contribution by interrupting early, accepting the first answer as final, or moving on too quickly. Frequent interruptions discourage elaboration, suppress divergent thinking, and reinforce the idea that learning revolves around producing the "correct" response rather than exploring ideas. Similarly,

when a teacher praises the first speaker excessively or treats their answer as definitive, other students may feel discouraged from offering alternative or creative perspectives.

Effective teachers manage this second type of wait time by withholding immediate evaluation, allowing students to express their reasoning fully, and inviting additional responses. Instead of validating a single answer, they encourage others to contribute, question, expand, or challenge. This approach not only supports more inclusive dialogue but also reinforces the message that multiple perspectives are valued and that knowledge is constructed collectively.

Making mistakes and asking questions

A final dimension of effective instruction concerns the learner's relationship with failure—understood not as an endpoint but as a necessary component of growth. Failure is success in Progress: Embracing Error and Inquiry as Pathways to Learning

In the context of language education, two practices are especially relevant: making mistakes and asking questions. First, mistakes are not obstacles to learning but indicators of progress. In language development, errors reveal the evolving nature of internalized linguistic rules and communicative strategies. The notion that "failure is success in progress" underscores that success is not the opposite of failure; it is built through it. Learners must experiment with linguistic forms and functions in order to achieve competence. This perspective shifts language instruction away from teaching *about* language and toward teaching learners how to use language to express ideas, thoughts, and emotions. From a communicative standpoint, errors signify risk-taking, autonomy, and active engagement—qualities that should be encouraged rather than suppressed.

Consequently, learners need classroom environments in which making mistakes is safe, normalized, and even valued. When errors are mocked, penalized, or avoided, students quickly disengage and resort to minimal language output in order to protect themselves. Conversely, when errors are treated as opportunities for feedback and reflection, learners participate more, experiment more, and ultimately learn more. Encouragement and supportive feedback are therefore central to fostering resilience and promoting a growth-oriented mindset in language learning.

Second, question-asking plays a crucial yet often underestimated role in developing learner autonomy. The middle school curriculum rightly emphasizes the importance of encouraging students to ask "all sorts of questions," including those sometimes labeled as trivial or "stupid." Cognitive science shows that questions reveal gaps in understanding, thereby identifying what needs to be learned next. They make visible the structure of the learner's knowledge and help teachers identify areas for scaffolding. In this sense, questions are diagnostic tools as well as catalysts for critical thinking and self-directed learning.

Yet traditional classroom practices often emphasize question-answer patterns that position students as passive respondents. For example, teachers frequently instruct students to "read the text and answer comprehension questions," but seldom ask them to "read the text and formulate meaningful questions." This asymmetry limits students' opportunities to inquire, explore, and construct understanding. Encouraging learners to generate questions transforms reading from a decoding task into an intellectual dialogue with the text and fosters deeper cognitive engagement.

Ultimately, embracing both error and inquiry reframes the classroom as a space where learning is dynamic, exploratory, and recursive. When students are encouraged to take risks, ask questions, and learn from mistakes, they develop not only linguistic competence but also the dispositions needed for lifelong learning.

CONCLUSION`

In conclusion, this paper stresses that student disengagement cannot be fully understood without considering the teaching methodologies employed across different educational levels, particularly in middle schools and in some cases across varying proficiency levels. Learners' lack of engagement is often less a reflection of their abilities or motivation, and more a response to instructional approaches that may not sufficiently activate their

participation, curiosity, or autonomy. This finding underscores the need to revisit and rethink current teaching methodologies. In response, this article has proposed six key pedagogical dimensions that can help enhance student engagement and learning effectiveness: clear learning objectives, effective questioning techniques, meaningful interaction, constructive use of mistakes, appropriate wait time, and differentiated instruction and assessment strategies. Together, these elements suggest a shift from teacher-centered transmission of knowledge to more learner-centered, interactive, and adaptive approaches. Such a shift is essential not only to improve engagement but also to better prepare students for the cognitive and soft skill demands of an increasingly AI- and ML-driven world.

About the Author

BRAHIM KHARTITE, PhD is an associate professor of ESP, Business English and soft skills at ENSAM engineering school, Moulay Ismail University- Meknes -Morocco and former ELT-supervisor. He holds a PhD. degree in Applied Linguistics and a PCELT from World Learning AMIDIST Rabat 2019. His main educational concerns and interests include, among others, soft skills/professional English, teacher training, teaching methodology and continuous professional and personal development.

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