



The Engage–Study–Activate Approach in EFL Education: A Literature Review of Its Principles, Applications, and Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract

The Engage–Study–Activate (ESA) approach has emerged as a flexible framework for organizing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction around learner engagement, focused language study, and meaningful language activation. This literature review examines the principles, applications, pedagogical advantages, challenges, and implications of the ESA approach in EFL education. The review highlights how the Engage stage can stimulate learners' interest and motivation, the Study stage can develop knowledge of linguistic forms and functions, and the Activate stage can provide opportunities for purposeful communication. The literature indicates that ESA can be applied to grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, writing, pronunciation, and integrated language skills. Its major pedagogical advantages include promoting learner participation, communicative competence, confidence, collaboration, contextualized learning, and learner autonomy. At the same time, implementation may be constrained by large class sizes, limited instructional time, mixed proficiency levels, insufficient teacher preparation, limited resources, examination-oriented systems, and difficulties in assessing communicative outcomes. The review further identifies gaps concerning longitudinal research, diverse EFL contexts, comparisons of ESA lesson patterns, learner individual differences, teacher perspectives, and technology- and artificial-intelligence-supported instruction. Overall, ESA provides a practical and adaptable framework for balancing linguistic accuracy with communicative fluency and for creating learner-centered EFL classrooms. Its effectiveness, however, depends on contextual adaptation, purposeful lesson design, teacher expertise, and alignment among learning objectives, instructional activities, and assessment.

Keywords: Engage–Study–Activate, EFL education, communicative language teaching, learner engagement, language pedagogy.

1. Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has undergone significant changes in response to evolving perspectives on language learning, learner needs, and effective classroom practices. Traditional teacher-centered approaches, which often emphasize the memorization of grammatical rules and vocabulary, have increasingly been supplemented by communicative and learner-centered approaches that encourage students to participate actively in the learning process. Contemporary EFL instruction therefore seeks to achieve a balance between linguistic accuracy and communicative fluency while maintaining learners' motivation and engagement. Within this context, the Engage–Study–Activate (ESA) approach has emerged as a practical framework for organizing language lessons in ways that combine emotional involvement, focused language instruction, and meaningful language use.

The approach consists of three interconnected stages. The Engage stage aims to arouse learners' interest, curiosity, and emotional involvement through motivating activities and meaningful

contexts. The Study stage focuses on conscious attention to language features, including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and discourse. Finally, the Activate stage provides learners with opportunities to use the target language freely and communicatively in situations that encourage creativity, interaction, and fluency. Rather than treating language learning as a linear process based solely on explanation and practice, ESA recognizes the importance of combining attention to linguistic form with opportunities for meaningful communication.

The importance of ESA in EFL education is closely connected to broader developments in communicative and learner-centered pedagogy. Effective language instruction requires learners not only to understand linguistic structures but also to use language appropriately and confidently in authentic or meaningful contexts. The ESA framework attempts to address this need by integrating motivational, cognitive, and communicative dimensions of language learning. The Engage stage supports learners' emotional readiness and willingness to participate, the Study stage promotes attention to linguistic accuracy, and the Activate stage emphasizes purposeful communication and language production. In this respect, ESA reflects the wider goal of EFL education to develop communicative competence while recognizing the continuing importance of explicit language knowledge.

Despite its widespread recognition in teacher training and English language teaching methodology, the ESA approach requires continued examination in relation to contemporary EFL contexts. Changes in educational technologies, online and blended learning environments, learner diversity, and the growing emphasis on student-centered instruction have created new possibilities and challenges for implementing ESA-based teaching. Furthermore, teachers may encounter practical difficulties related to large class sizes, limited instructional time, varying levels of student proficiency, insufficient resources, and institutional constraints.

Accordingly, this literature review examines the Engage–Study–Activate approach in EFL education by exploring its theoretical and pedagogical foundations, major principles, classroom applications, and implications for language teaching and learning. The review discusses the three central components of the approach and considers different models of ESA lesson organization. It also examines the application of ESA across different language skills and areas, including grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations of the ESA Approach

The ESA approach represents a flexible pedagogical framework for organizing English language instruction. The approach is primarily associated with Jeremy Harmer, who introduced ESA as a practical model for structuring language lessons around three essential elements: engaging learners emotionally and cognitively, directing their attention to language, and providing opportunities for meaningful language use. Harmer (2007) argued that effective language lessons should generally incorporate these three elements, although they do not necessarily have to occur in the same order.

2.1 Communicative Language Teaching as a Foundation

One of the principal conceptual foundations of the ESA approach is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Communicative approaches emphasize that language learning should extend beyond the acquisition of grammatical structures and include the ability to use language meaningfully in authentic or purposeful situations (Taylor, 1983). From this perspective, successful language learning requires learners to participate actively in interaction, negotiate meaning, and develop the confidence to communicate using available linguistic resources. The Activate component of ESA particularly reflects the principles of communicative language teaching. During this stage, learners are encouraged to use language relatively freely rather than simply reproduce predetermined grammatical patterns. Activities such as role plays, discussions,

debates, storytelling, problem-solving tasks, and communicative games allow students to apply their linguistic knowledge to meaningful purposes. Harmer (2007) described activation as a stage in which learners use all or any of the language available to them, particularly through meaning-focused activities.

2.2 Learner-Centered Pedagogy

The ESA approach is also conceptually grounded in learner-centered pedagogy. Traditional approaches to language instruction often position the teacher as the primary source of knowledge and learners as relatively passive recipients of information. In contrast, learner-centered approaches emphasize active participation, individual needs, interaction, and learner involvement in the educational process. Tudor (1992) noted that learner-centered language teaching is characterized by active learner participation and greater attention to learners' preferences, developmental needs, and learning contexts. ESA reflects this orientation by assigning learners an active role throughout the lesson. During the Engage stage, learners' interests, experiences, emotions, and prior knowledge can be used as starting points for learning. During the Study stage, learners are encouraged to notice and examine linguistic features rather than merely memorize rules.

2.3 Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Language Learning

Another important foundation of the ESA approach lies in the recognition that language learning involves both cognitive and affective processes. Contemporary perspectives on learner engagement similarly recognize that engagement is multidimensional and involves behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions. Learners are more likely to participate actively when they understand the purpose of learning activities, perceive them as meaningful, and experience an environment that supports participation (Chong, 2023). The Engage stage of ESA can therefore be understood as an attempt to establish the psychological and motivational conditions necessary for effective language learning. The Study stage, in contrast, addresses the cognitive dimension of learning by focusing learners' attention on language. This may involve examining grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, meaning, or discourse features. Conscious attention to linguistic form can help learners develop greater awareness of how the target language operates. However, ESA does not treat explicit instruction as an end in itself.

2.4 The Integration of Accuracy and Fluency

A central conceptual principle underlying ESA is the integration of linguistic accuracy and communicative fluency. Accuracy refers to the appropriate use of grammatical structures, vocabulary, pronunciation, and other linguistic features, whereas fluency involves the ability to communicate ideas with relative ease and effectiveness. Traditional form-focused approaches may prioritize accuracy at the expense of spontaneous communication, while exclusively communicative approaches may provide insufficient attention to linguistic development. The Study stage primarily supports accuracy by directing learners' attention to specific aspects of language. Teachers may explain grammatical patterns, clarify vocabulary, model pronunciation, or provide corrective feedback. The Activate stage, however, encourages learners to move beyond controlled practice and use language for meaningful purposes (Harmer, 2007). This relationship between study and activation allows learners to connect explicit knowledge with practical communication.

2.5 Flexibility and Principled Eclecticism

A further conceptual characteristic of ESA is pedagogical flexibility. Unlike rigid teaching models that prescribe a single sequence of instructional stages, ESA allows teachers to organize lessons according to learning objectives, student proficiency, classroom conditions, and the nature of the

language being taught (Harmer, 2007). Harmer identifies several possible lesson organizations, including the Straight Arrow, Boomerang, and Patchwork models (Vokhidova, 2026). The Straight Arrow sequence follows a relatively linear Engage–Study–Activate progression, whereas the Boomerang model allows learners to attempt a communicative task before focusing on language difficulties that emerge from performance. This flexibility can be understood through the broader concept of principled eclecticism, which recognizes that no single teaching method is universally appropriate for every learner, classroom, or instructional objective.

3. The Three Components of the ESA Approach

The ESA approach is organized around three fundamental components: Engage, Study, and Activate. Developed and popularized by Jeremy Harmer, the framework provides teachers with a flexible structure for designing language lessons that address learners' emotional involvement, linguistic knowledge, and communicative ability (Cabrera-Solano et al., 2023; Vokhidova, 2026). Together, they seek to create a balance between learner motivation, attention to language form, and meaningful language use.

3.1 Engage

The first component of the ESA approach is Engage, which aims to arouse learners' interest, curiosity, attention, and emotional involvement in the lesson. At this stage, the teacher attempts to create a positive and motivating learning environment before introducing intensive language instruction. According to Harmer (2007), learners are more likely to learn effectively when they are emotionally engaged and interested in classroom activities. Therefore, Cabrera-Solano et al. (2023) found that the Engage stage focuses on encouraging students to participate actively and become psychologically prepared for the learning process. The Engage stage is particularly important in EFL classrooms because motivation and confidence can significantly influence learners' willingness to participate in English. Students who feel anxious or uninterested may hesitate to communicate, whereas engaging activities can create a more relaxed and supportive classroom atmosphere.

3.2 Study

The second component of the ESA approach is Study, which focuses on learners' conscious attention to language features. During this stage, students examine how the English language works, including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, discourse, and other linguistic elements (Harmer, 2007). The Study component provides opportunities for learners to develop greater awareness and understanding of the forms and patterns of the target language. Teachers may employ different instructional techniques during the Study stage. Cabrera-Solano et al. (2023) showed that these may include presenting grammatical explanations, analyzing examples, introducing vocabulary, practicing pronunciation, completing controlled exercises, identifying language patterns, and correcting errors (Aprilia et al., 2023; Hairunniza et al., 2022). For instance, after an engaging discussion about past experiences, the teacher may direct students' attention to the use of the simple past tense and explain the grammatical structures that appeared during the discussion.

3.3 Activate

The third component, Activate, provides learners with opportunities to use English freely and communicatively. Unlike the Study stage, which focuses primarily on analyzing and practicing particular language features, the Activate stage encourages students to use whatever language resources they possess to communicate meaningfully. Harmer (2007) emphasizes that activation involves enabling learners to use language spontaneously and creatively rather than simply reproducing previously presented forms. Cabrera-Solano et al. (2023) found that the Activate

component is closely related to the development of communicative competence and fluency. Learners often require opportunities to move beyond controlled practice and experiment with language in less predictable situations (Hairunniza et al., 2022; Aprilia et al., 2023). Through communicative activities, students can develop confidence, improve their ability to express ideas, and learn to respond spontaneously during interaction.

3.4 The Interrelationship Among Engage, Study, and Activate

Although the three components of ESA have different functions, they should not be viewed as completely separate stages. Their effectiveness depends largely on their relationship and integration within the overall lesson. The Engage stage creates interest and emotional readiness, the Study stage develops awareness of linguistic forms, and the Activate stage provides opportunities to apply language knowledge in meaningful communication. Together, these components address important affective, cognitive, and communicative dimensions of language learning. One of the most important characteristics of ESA is that teachers are not required to follow a fixed linear sequence in every lesson. Harmer (2007) proposed several lesson structures, allowing teachers to adapt the relationship among the three elements according to students' needs and instructional objectives. Consequently, learners may sometimes engage with a communicative activity before receiving focused language instruction, while more complex lessons may move repeatedly between engagement, study, and activation (Vokhidova, 2026). The Engage component provides the motivational foundation that encourages learners to participate actively in both processes.

4. Models and Patterns of ESA Lesson Organization

One of the defining characteristics of the ESA approach is its flexibility in organizing language lessons. Unlike traditional instructional models that require teachers to follow a fixed sequence of presentation, practice, and production, ESA allows teachers to arrange the three components: Engage, Study, and Activate, according to lesson objectives, learner needs, language content, and classroom circumstances.

4.1 Straight Arrow ESA

The Straight Arrow ESA model represents the most direct and linear pattern of lesson organization. In this model, the lesson progresses from Engage to Study and finally to Activate. The teacher initially introduces an interesting activity or context to attract learners' attention and stimulate their interest (Harmer, 2007). This is followed by focused instruction in which students examine relevant language features. Finally, learners participate in communicative activities that allow them to use the language more freely and meaningfully. The principal advantage of the Straight Arrow model is its clarity and simplicity. Both teachers and learners can easily follow the progression from motivation to language analysis and communicative use (Harmer, 2015). This pattern can be particularly appropriate for lower-level learners who may need structured support before using unfamiliar language independently.

4.2 Boomerang ESA

The Boomerang ESA model follows a less traditional sequence. Instead of beginning with explicit language study, the teacher first engages learners and then asks them to participate in an Activate activity. During this initial communicative task, learners attempt to use the language available to them (Harmer, 2007). The teacher observes their performance and identifies linguistic difficulties, gaps, or areas that require attention. The lesson then moves to the Study stage, where relevant language features are examined and practiced (Harmer, 2015). Finally, learners return to another Activate activity in which they apply their improved understanding of the language. The

Boomerang model is consistent with learner-centered and communicative approaches because it gives learners an opportunity to experiment with language before receiving explicit instruction.

4.3 Patchwork ESA

The Patchwork ESA model is the most flexible and complex pattern of lesson organization. Unlike the Straight Arrow and Boomerang models, Patchwork lessons involve repeated movement between Engage, Study, and Activate elements. A lesson may therefore contain several engagement activities, periods of focused language study, and communicative tasks arranged in different sequences. However, the sequence can vary considerably depending on the objectives and activities of the lesson. Harmer (2007) described Patchwork lessons as being composed of different learning episodes that are connected to create a coherent instructional experience. This structure is particularly suitable for longer lessons, integrated-skills instruction, and lessons involving multiple language objectives (Harmer, 2007). This model therefore allows teachers to respond to emerging learner needs and create more dynamic and varied classroom experiences.

4.4 Comparing the Three ESA Models

The three major ESA patterns differ primarily in the order and frequency with which the components are used. The Straight Arrow model follows a linear progression and is appropriate for structured lessons involving the introduction of new language. The Boomerang model begins with communication, allowing teachers to identify learners' needs before providing focused instruction. The Patchwork model involves multiple movements among engagement, study, and activation and is particularly suitable for complex or extended lessons.

ESA Model	Typical Sequence	Main Characteristic	Suitable Context
Straight Arrow	Engage → Study → Activate	Linear and structured	Introducing new language; lower-level learners
Boomerang	Engage → Activate → Study → Activate	Language study emerges from communicative performance	Intermediate and advanced learners; communicative lessons
Patchwork	Flexible combinations of E, S, and A	Dynamic and non-linear	Integrated skills; complex and extended lessons

Table 1: ESA Model: Multiple movements and Dynamic nature

Although these models provide useful organizational patterns, they should not be interpreted as rigid formulas. The effectiveness of each model depends on factors such as learners' proficiency levels, instructional objectives, classroom size, available time, and the type of language skill being developed. Teachers should therefore select and adapt ESA patterns according to the specific demands of their teaching contexts rather than applying a single model mechanically.

4.5 Flexibility in ESA Lesson Planning

Flexibility is one of the most important pedagogical principles underlying ESA lesson organization. Harmer (2007) argued that teachers should not assume that all language lessons must follow the same instructional sequence. Different lessons require different forms of organization, and teachers need the ability to adapt activities according to learners' responses and emerging needs. This perspective is particularly relevant in EFL classrooms, where students may have diverse levels of proficiency and varying degrees of motivation and communicative confidence. The flexibility of ESA is also compatible with contemporary approaches that emphasize differentiated instruction and learner-centered education.

5. Applications of ESA in EFL Education

The Engage–Study–Activate (ESA) approach can be applied across a wide range of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching contexts because of its flexibility and emphasis on learner engagement, focused language study, and meaningful communication. The approach can therefore be adapted to grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, writing, pronunciation, and integrated-skills instruction. Harmer (2007, 2015) emphasizes that the value of ESA lies in its ability to combine learners' emotional involvement with attention to language features and opportunities for communicative use.

5.1 Application of ESA in Grammar Teaching

Grammar instruction is one of the most common areas in which the ESA approach can be applied. Traditional grammar teaching has often been associated with explicit explanation, memorization of rules, and mechanical exercises. Although explicit knowledge remains important, effective grammar instruction also requires learners to understand how grammatical structures function in meaningful communication. ESA provides a framework for connecting grammatical knowledge with practical language use. This integration of form-focused instruction and communicative practice is consistent with research suggesting that attention to linguistic form can be beneficial when it is connected to meaningful language use (Ellis, 2006; Spada & Lightbown, 2008). Therefore, ESA can support grammar teaching by avoiding an exclusive emphasis on either grammatical accuracy or free communication.

5.2 Application of ESA in Vocabulary Development

ESA can also be effectively applied to vocabulary teaching. Vocabulary learning requires more than memorizing isolated word lists; learners need opportunities to encounter words in meaningful contexts, understand their meanings and forms, and use them actively. The three components of ESA provide a useful structure for achieving these objectives (Nation, 2013). Learners may also complete matching tasks, classification activities, and contextual exercises. During the Activate stage, students can use newly learned vocabulary in communicative tasks such as presentations, role plays, storytelling, or collaborative projects. The application of ESA to vocabulary instruction is particularly valuable because meaningful use can strengthen learners' ability to retrieve and apply lexical knowledge. Nation (2013) argued that vocabulary learning benefits from repeated encounters with words and opportunities for meaningful use.

5.3 Application of ESA in Speaking Instruction

Speaking is one of the language skills most closely associated with the ESA approach because the Activate stage emphasizes communicative language use. Speaking instruction requires learners to develop not only knowledge of grammar and vocabulary but also fluency, confidence, interactional ability, and the capacity to express ideas spontaneously. Research examining ESA-based speaking instruction has reported positive outcomes. Hairunniza et al. (2022) found that the ESA method contributed to improvements in students' English-speaking ability. Similarly, Aprilia et al. (2023) reported that the ESA method had a positive effect on students' speaking performance. These findings suggest that the integration of engagement, focused instruction, and communicative practice can support the development of speaking skills.

5.4 Application of ESA in Listening Instruction

The ESA framework can also support the teaching of listening comprehension. Listening lessons can begin with an Engage activity designed to activate learners' background knowledge and generate interest in the topic. Teachers may use pictures, predictions, discussion questions, or short videos before learners listen to an audio text. The integration of background knowledge, focused language attention, and follow-up communication is consistent with interactive approaches to

listening instruction, which emphasize the importance of combining bottom-up and top-down processing (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). ESA can therefore provide a structured yet flexible framework for connecting listening comprehension with broader language development.

5.5 Application of ESA in Reading Instruction

Reading instruction can also benefit from the ESA framework. During the Engage stage, teachers can activate learners' prior knowledge and create interest in the reading topic through questions, pictures, predictions, titles, or short discussions. Such activities help students establish a purpose for reading and connect new information with existing knowledge. This application is compatible with interactive models of reading, which view comprehension as involving interaction among the reader, the text, and prior knowledge (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). ESA can therefore help teachers organize reading lessons that move beyond comprehension questions toward meaningful engagement and communicative response.

5.6 Application of ESA in Writing Instruction

The ESA approach can be applied to writing instruction by integrating motivation, explicit language study, and purposeful written production. During the Engage stage, teachers can introduce a writing topic through images, questions, model texts, brainstorming, or discussions. These activities can stimulate ideas and reduce learners' difficulty in beginning the writing process. This approach supports the view that writing instruction should combine explicit attention to language and genre conventions with opportunities for meaningful written expression (Hyland, 2019). ESA can therefore help teachers connect writing knowledge with authentic or purposeful production.

5.7 Application of ESA in Pronunciation Teaching

Pronunciation can also be taught effectively through ESA. The Engage stage may introduce a pronunciation feature through listening activities, songs, short dialogues, or humorous examples. The Study stage can then focus explicitly on the articulation and production of specific sounds, stress patterns, rhythm, or intonation. Teachers may provide demonstrations and corrective feedback, while learners practice through controlled and guided activities. Research in pronunciation pedagogy emphasizes that effective instruction should combine attention to specific phonological features with opportunities for meaningful communication (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). The ESA framework provides a useful organizational structure for achieving this balance.

5.8 Application of ESA in Integrated Language Skills Instruction

One of the major strengths of ESA is its suitability for integrated-skills instruction. In authentic communication, listening, speaking, reading, and writing are rarely used in complete isolation. Learners may read information and discuss it, listen to a presentation and write a response, or participate in discussions that require multiple language skills. Harmer (2015) emphasizes the importance of integrating different aspects of language learning rather than treating skills as entirely separate. Similarly, Oxford (2001) argues that integrated-skills instruction reflects the interconnected nature of language use and can provide learners with richer and more meaningful learning experiences.

5.9 Application of ESA in Technology-Enhanced EFL Learning

The flexibility of ESA also makes it applicable to technology-enhanced, online, and blended learning environments. Digital tools can support each of the three components in different ways. During the Engage stage, teachers may use videos, interactive games, images, and online discussion platforms to attract learners' attention. During the Study stage, digital resources can provide interactive exercises, multimedia explanations, and immediate feedback. The Activate stage can involve collaborative documents, online presentations, discussion forums, video

communication, and project-based activities. Cabrera-Solano et al. (2023) demonstrated the potential of combining the ESA approach with technological tools in higher education. Their findings indicated that technology can support learner engagement, collaboration, and active participation across the different stages of the ESA framework.

6. Benefits and Pedagogical Advantages of the ESA Approach

The Engage–Study–Activate (ESA) approach offers several pedagogical advantages for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Its principal strength lies in its ability to combine learner motivation, focused attention to language, and meaningful communication within a flexible instructional framework (Harmer, 2007, 2015). Rather than treating language learning as a process based exclusively on either grammatical instruction or free communication, ESA attempts to create a balance between affective engagement, linguistic accuracy, and communicative fluency.

6.1 Promoting Learner Motivation and Engagement

One of the most important advantages of ESA is its emphasis on learner engagement. The Engage stage is designed to attract students' attention, stimulate curiosity, and create emotional involvement before more focused instruction begins. Activities such as games, pictures, videos, music, discussions, and problem-solving tasks can make language lessons more interesting and encourage students to participate actively. Motivation plays a significant role in second language learning because motivated learners are generally more willing to invest effort and persist in challenging learning tasks (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). By creating an engaging and supportive classroom atmosphere, the ESA approach can encourage students to develop positive attitudes toward English learning. Cabrera-Solano et al. (2023) similarly found that the implementation of ESA with technological tools contributed to learner motivation, participation, and positive learning experiences.

6.2 Balancing Accuracy and Fluency

Another major pedagogical advantage of ESA is its ability to balance linguistic accuracy and communicative fluency. Effective language learning requires students to develop knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and other linguistic features while also gaining the ability to use language spontaneously and meaningfully (Harmer, 2007). The Study stage provides opportunities for focused attention to linguistic forms, whereas the Activate stage encourages learners to apply their knowledge in communicative situations. This balance is important because an excessive emphasis on grammatical accuracy may limit students' willingness to communicate, while exclusive attention to fluency may result in insufficient awareness of linguistic forms (Ellis, 2006; Spada & Lightbown, 2008).

6.3 Encouraging Active Learner Participation

Active participation is consistent with learner-centered approaches to language teaching, which emphasize learners' involvement in constructing and applying knowledge (Tudor, 1996). The ESA framework provides practical opportunities for learner-centered instruction because each component can incorporate interactive and collaborative activities. For example, students may engage in group discussions, role plays, debates, interviews, information-gap tasks, and collaborative projects. Such activities require learners to make linguistic choices and respond to others rather than simply reproduce memorized answers. Cabrera-Solano et al. (2023) reported that ESA-based instruction supported interaction and collaboration, particularly when combined with digital learning tools.

6.4 Supporting Communicative Competence

The development of communicative competence is another important advantage of the ESA approach. Communicative competence involves more than grammatical knowledge; it includes the

ability to use language appropriately and effectively in different contexts (Aprilia et al., 2023; Hairunniza et al., 2022). The Activate stage provides opportunities for learners to develop this ability through meaningful interaction. Communicative language teaching emphasizes that learners should have opportunities to use language for authentic or purposeful communication (Richards, 2006). ESA supports this principle by encouraging teachers to move beyond controlled exercises and provide activities that require learners to communicate ideas, opinions, and information.

6.5 Providing Flexibility in Lesson Planning

Flexibility is one of the most distinctive pedagogical strengths of ESA. Harmer (2007) explained that the three components do not have to follow a fixed sequence. Teachers can use different lesson patterns, including the Straight Arrow, Boomerang, and Patchwork models, depending on instructional objectives and learners' needs. This flexibility enables teachers to adapt ESA to different proficiency levels, language skills, classroom conditions, and lesson durations. For example, beginners may benefit from a more structured Straight Arrow sequence, whereas advanced learners may respond well to Boomerang lessons in which communicative performance precedes focused language study.

6.6 Facilitating Meaningful and Contextualized Learning

ESA encourages teachers to present language within meaningful contexts rather than as isolated linguistic forms. During the Engage stage, learners are introduced to topics through familiar experiences, real-life situations, visual materials, stories, or questions. The Study stage then examines language features within or related to these contexts, while the Activate stage enables learners to use language for purposeful communication (Klella & Al Garaghoolee, 2026). Contextualized learning can help students understand not only the form of a language item but also its meaning and communicative function. Nation and Macalister (2010) emphasize the importance of connecting language learning with meaningful contexts and purposeful use. Similarly, Harmer (2015) argues that language activities should provide learners with opportunities to understand and use language beyond mechanical repetition.

6.7 Increasing Learner Confidence and Reducing Anxiety

Another important advantage of ESA is its potential to increase learners' confidence. The gradual structure of the approach can provide students with preparation before they are expected to communicate independently (Cabrera-Solano et al., 2023). The Engage stage creates a supportive atmosphere, while the Study stage provides learners with linguistic resources that can help them feel more prepared (Horwitz et al., 1986). The Activate stage then allows them to use these resources in communicative situations. This progression may be particularly useful for learners who experience anxiety when speaking English. Foreign language anxiety can negatively affect learners' willingness to communicate and classroom performance.

6.8 Promoting Learner Autonomy

The ESA approach can also contribute to the development of learner autonomy. During Activate activities, learners are expected to make independent linguistic choices and use available language resources to communicate their intended meanings. Instead of relying exclusively on the teacher for every response, students assume greater responsibility for interaction and language production. Learner autonomy is an important objective in language education because effective learners need to develop the ability to manage and extend their learning beyond formal instruction (Benson, 2011). ESA supports this process by providing opportunities for learners to experiment with language, collaborate with peers, and solve communicative problems independently.

6.9 Supporting Collaboration and Social Interaction

Collaborative learning can provide learners with opportunities to develop both linguistic and interpersonal skills. According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspective, learning is supported through interaction with others and participation in socially mediated activities. The Activate component of ESA is compatible with this perspective because learners often develop language through communication and collaborative problem-solving. Technology can further extend opportunities for interaction. Cabrera-Solano et al. (2023) demonstrated that technological tools integrated into ESA-based instruction can support communication, collaboration, and learner participation. Thus, ESA can be adapted to both traditional face-to-face classrooms and technology-enhanced learning environments.

6.10 Supporting Different Learning Styles and Classroom Contexts

Another advantage of ESA is its ability to accommodate a variety of learning preferences and instructional contexts. The Engage stage can incorporate visual, auditory, and interactive materials (Harmer, 2015). The Study stage can provide analytical and structured learning activities; and the Activate stage can involve creative, communicative, and collaborative tasks. Although contemporary research generally cautions against rigid interpretations of fixed “learning styles,” differentiated instruction remains important because learners vary in their backgrounds, proficiency levels, interests, and learning experiences. Cabrera-Solano et al. (2023) demonstrated that ESA provides teachers with multiple ways to present and practice language, thereby allowing greater variation in classroom activities.

7. Challenges and Limitations of ESA Implementation

Despite its flexibility and pedagogical advantages, the Engage–Study–Activate (ESA) approach is not without challenges and limitations. The successful implementation of ESA depends on several contextual factors, including teacher expertise, learner characteristics, class size, available instructional time, institutional expectations, and access to educational resources.

7.1 Teacher Preparation and Pedagogical Expertise

One major challenge in implementing ESA concerns teachers' understanding of its principles and their ability to design effective lessons. The ESA framework may appear straightforward because it consists of three recognizable components; however, effective implementation requires teachers to make informed decisions about the selection, sequencing, and integration of activities. Teachers must understand when to emphasize engagement, when to provide explicit language instruction, and how to create meaningful opportunities for activation. Research on teacher professional development has consistently demonstrated that successful instructional innovation requires sustained training, practical support, and opportunities for reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Consequently, the effective implementation of ESA requires more than familiarity with its three stages.

7.2 Large Class Sizes and Classroom Management

Large class sizes represent another significant challenge for ESA implementation. The approach frequently involves pair work, group discussions, role plays, games, and communicative tasks, particularly during the Engage and Activate stages (Hayes, 1997). Managing these activities can be difficult when classrooms contain a large number of students. These challenges may reduce the effectiveness of the Activate stage, which depends heavily on learner interaction and meaningful language use. Teachers may therefore need to adapt ESA activities by using structured group roles, clear instructions, time limits, peer feedback, and carefully designed tasks.

7.3 Limited Instructional Time

Time constraints can also affect the implementation of ESA. A complete ESA lesson may require sufficient time for engaging learners, providing focused language instruction, and allowing

students to participate in meaningful communicative activities. In many EFL contexts, however, teachers have limited classroom time and extensive curricular requirements. Harmer (2015) stresses the importance of balancing lesson components according to learning objectives rather than treating one stage as automatically more important than another. Nevertheless, practical time limitations may make it difficult for teachers to provide sufficient opportunities for communicative practice.

7.4 Diverse Learner Proficiency Levels

EFL classrooms often contain learners with different levels of linguistic proficiency, learning experiences, and communicative confidence. This diversity can make ESA implementation challenging because the same Engage, Study, or Activate activity may not be equally appropriate for all students. Differentiated instruction can help address this challenge by allowing teachers to modify tasks according to learners' abilities and needs (Tomlinson, 2017). However, differentiation requires additional preparation and pedagogical expertise. Teachers must design activities that provide appropriate support without reducing opportunities for meaningful communication.

7.5 Balancing Engagement with Learning Objectives

The Engage stage should create interest while also establishing a meaningful context for subsequent language study and communication. Harmer (2007) emphasized that activities should contribute to the overall coherence of the lesson. Teachers must therefore ensure that engagement is pedagogically relevant and connected to the language objectives of the Study and Activate stages. Similarly, the Activate stage may become an activity-focused experience if communicative tasks are not clearly linked to the language learners have studied. Students may enjoy role plays or discussions without necessarily using the intended linguistic features.

7.6 Difficulties in Integrating Accuracy and Fluency

ESA attempts to balance attention to linguistic accuracy with opportunities for communicative fluency. However, achieving this balance can be difficult in practice. Teachers may struggle to determine the appropriate amount of correction during communicative activities. Excessive correction may interrupt learners and reduce confidence, whereas insufficient feedback may allow persistent linguistic errors to remain unaddressed. Research on form-focused instruction suggests that attention to linguistic form is most effective when integrated meaningfully with communicative activities (Spada & Lightbown, 2008). However, the practical implementation of this principle requires teachers to make complex decisions about when and how to provide feedback. During the Activate stage, teachers must often decide whether to interrupt communication to correct errors or postpone feedback until the activity has finished.

7.7 Cultural and Institutional Constraints

The implementation of ESA may also be influenced by cultural and institutional factors. In some educational contexts, students are accustomed to teacher-centered instruction and may initially feel uncomfortable participating in discussions, role plays, or independent group activities. Learners may expect teachers to provide direct explanations and may view communicative activities as less academically serious than traditional instruction. Institutional assessment systems can also influence teaching practices. When examinations focus primarily on grammatical knowledge, vocabulary recall, or written accuracy, teachers may feel pressure to prioritize the Study stage and reduce communicative activities. Research on language teaching methodologies has shown that the adoption of communicative approaches is often influenced by local educational traditions, examination systems, and institutional expectations (Li, 1998). Therefore, ESA cannot always be transferred directly from one educational context to another. Teachers may need to adapt its

principles to local conditions while maintaining its central emphasis on engagement, language awareness, and meaningful use.

7.8 Limited Resources and Technological Access

The successful implementation of engaging and communicative activities may require instructional resources that are not always available. Although ESA does not depend exclusively on technology, teachers may benefit from access to visual materials, audio resources, flexible classroom spaces, and digital tools. Limited resources can restrict the variety of activities used during the Engage and Activate stages. Technology-enhanced ESA implementation may present additional challenges related to internet connectivity, access to devices, teachers' digital competence, and students' technological skills. Cabrera-Solano et al. (2023) demonstrated the potential benefits of integrating technological tools into ESA-based instruction, but successful technology integration also requires appropriate infrastructure and teacher preparation. Ertmer (1999) distinguished between first-order barriers, such as limited resources and access to technology, and second-order barriers, such as teachers' beliefs and attitudes.

7.9 Risk of Mechanical or Superficial Implementation

A final limitation is the risk that teachers may apply ESA mechanically. Because the framework is often presented through recognizable stages, teachers may feel required to include one Engage activity, one Study activity, and one Activate activity in every lesson without considering whether these elements are pedagogically connected. Such superficial implementation can reduce ESA to a lesson-planning formula rather than a flexible framework. Harmer (2007) emphasized that ESA elements can appear in different sequences and combinations. The purpose is not simply to complete three stages but to create coherent learning experiences that address learners' affective, cognitive, and communicative needs. Effective ESA teaching therefore requires reflective practice. Teachers should evaluate whether learners are genuinely engaged, whether language study addresses meaningful needs, and whether activation activities provide authentic opportunities for communication.

8. Pedagogical Implications for EFL Teachers and Learners

The ESA approach has important pedagogical implications for both EFL teachers and learners. As a flexible framework that integrates learner engagement, focused language study, and meaningful communication, ESA encourages a shift away from exclusively teacher-centered instruction toward more interactive and learner-centered classroom practices (Harmer, 2007, 2015). Its implications extend beyond lesson organization to include teacher roles, learner responsibilities, classroom interaction, curriculum planning, assessment, and the integration of educational technologies.

8.1 Implications for EFL Teachers' Lesson Planning

One of the primary implications of ESA for EFL teachers concerns lesson planning. Teachers need to design lessons that establish a meaningful connection among engagement, language study, and communicative application (Harmer, 2007). Rather than treating classroom activities as isolated events, teachers should ensure that each stage contributes to clearly defined learning objectives. Effective ESA lesson planning also requires flexibility. Teachers should select appropriate organizational patterns according to the nature of the lesson and the needs of learners. The Straight Arrow model may be suitable for introducing unfamiliar language, whereas the Boomerang model can help teachers identify learners' communicative difficulties before providing focused instruction.

8.2 Implications for the Role of the EFL Teacher

The ESA framework has significant implications for the role of the teacher. In traditional teacher-centered classrooms, the teacher often functions primarily as the transmitter of knowledge. In ESA-based instruction, however, the teacher performs multiple roles, including facilitator, organizer, language resource, motivator, observer, and feedback provider. This flexible teacher role is consistent with learner-centered pedagogy, which emphasizes the importance of facilitating rather than simply transmitting knowledge (Tudor, 1996). Teachers therefore need to develop the ability to move between direct instruction and facilitation depending on the objectives and requirements of different learning activities.

8.3 Implications for Teacher Professional Development

The successful implementation of ESA requires appropriate teacher knowledge and professional preparation. Teachers need to understand not only the three components of ESA but also the principles underlying effective engagement, explicit language instruction, communicative task design, classroom management, and feedback.

Professional development programs can therefore support teachers by providing practical training in lesson planning, activity sequencing, task-based instruction, technology integration, and learner-centered methodologies. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) argue that effective professional development should be sustained, collaborative, content-focused, and connected to teachers' classroom practices. For ESA implementation, teacher training should include opportunities to design ESA-based lessons, observe classroom applications, evaluate teaching practices, and reflect on learners' responses. Teachers should also be encouraged to adapt the approach to local educational conditions rather than applying it as a fixed formula.

8.4 Implications for Learner Engagement and Motivation

ESA highlights the importance of considering learners' emotional and motivational needs as part of language instruction. Teachers should therefore design classroom environments in which students feel interested, supported, and willing to participate. Activities should connect with learners' experiences, interests, and prior knowledge whenever possible. Motivation is strongly associated with sustained participation in second language learning (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). The Engage component suggests that teachers should not assume that learners will automatically be motivated by language instruction. Instead, motivation can be supported through relevant topics, interactive activities, achievable challenges, and positive classroom relationships.

8.5 Implications for Learner Autonomy and Responsibility

Another important implication of ESA concerns the development of learner autonomy. The Activate stage encourages students to use language independently and make their own linguistic choices. Learners are not expected simply to reproduce teacher-provided sentences; instead, they must select vocabulary, structures, and communication strategies to express their intended meanings. This emphasis on independent language use can contribute to the development of learner autonomy. Benson (2011) described autonomy as learners' capacity to take greater control over their learning. ESA can support this capacity by encouraging learners to participate in problem-solving, collaborative projects, discussions, presentations, and other activities that require independent decision-making.

8.6 Implications for Classroom Interaction and Collaboration

ESA-based instruction emphasizes the importance of interaction in language learning. Teachers should therefore create regular opportunities for pair work, group discussions, information-gap activities, role plays, debates, and collaborative projects. Such activities allow learners to use English for meaningful purposes and develop confidence through interaction. The importance of

social interaction in learning is supported by sociocultural perspectives, which emphasize that knowledge development occurs through interaction and participation in socially mediated activities (Vygotsky, 1978). In EFL classrooms, collaboration can provide learners with opportunities to negotiate meaning, observe peer language use, receive support, and experiment with new linguistic forms.

8.7 Implications for Balancing Accuracy and Fluency

ESA has important implications for how teachers balance linguistic accuracy and communicative fluency. The Study stage emphasizes conscious attention to language features, while the Activate stage provides opportunities for relatively free language use. Teachers should therefore avoid treating grammar instruction and communication as separate or competing objectives. Research on form-focused instruction suggests that attention to linguistic form can support second language development when integrated with meaningful communication (Spada & Lightbown, 2008). Teachers can apply this principle by selecting language features that are relevant to communicative tasks and by providing feedback that supports development without unnecessarily interrupting interaction.

8.8 Implications for Curriculum and Materials Development

ESA can also influence curriculum planning and the design of teaching materials. Curriculum developers can organize learning units around meaningful topics that create opportunities for engagement, focused language study, and communicative application. Instead of presenting language structures as isolated units, materials can connect linguistic content with authentic themes and purposeful activities. Harmer (2015) emphasized the importance of creating coherent relationships among lesson objectives, activities, and learning outcomes. ESA can provide a useful framework for achieving this coherence because curriculum designers can consider how learners will first encounter a topic, study relevant language, and subsequently use it in meaningful contexts.

8.9 Implications for Assessment Practices

Performance-based assessment, presentations, role plays, portfolios, self-assessment, peer assessment, and communicative tasks can complement traditional forms of testing (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Such methods can provide information about learners' ability to apply linguistic knowledge in meaningful situations. Assessment for Learning principles are particularly relevant in this context because assessment can be used not only to measure achievement but also to support ongoing learning through feedback and reflection (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Teachers can use observations from Activate activities to identify learner difficulties and plan future Study activities.

8.10 Implications for Technology-Enhanced EFL Learning

The flexibility of ESA makes it suitable for technology-enhanced learning environments. Teachers can use digital resources to strengthen each component of the approach. Multimedia materials, online games, videos, and interactive platforms can increase learner engagement. Digital exercises, language applications, and automated feedback tools can support focused language study (Karrar et al., 2026). Online discussions, collaborative documents, video presentations, and virtual communication can provide opportunities for activation. Cabrera-Solano et al. (2023) demonstrated that technological tools can be integrated effectively into ESA-based instruction to promote participation, interaction, and collaboration.

9. Gaps in the Existing Literature and Future Research Directions

Although the ESA approach has received continued attention in English language teaching, the existing literature remains relatively limited compared with research on broader approaches such

as Communicative Language Teaching, task-based language teaching, and form-focused instruction (Vokhidova, 2026).

9.1 Limited Empirical Evidence Across Language Skills

One important gap concerns the uneven distribution of research across language skills. A considerable proportion of empirical ESA research has focused on speaking. For example, studies have investigated the effects of ESA on speaking ability among secondary-school and university-level learners (Aprilia et al., 2023; Hairunniza et al., 2022). Recent research has continued this emphasis, with Vokhidova (2026) specifically reviewing ESA in relation to EFL speaking competence. Comparative studies could examine, for example, whether the Straight Arrow model is more effective for grammar and vocabulary learning, whereas Boomerang or Patchwork sequences may be more beneficial for speaking and integrated-skills instruction. Such research could provide stronger evidence for matching particular ESA patterns with specific pedagogical objectives.

9.2 Need for More Rigorous Research Designs

A second gap concerns methodological diversity and rigor. Existing studies have used different designs, including quasi-experimental studies, classroom-based investigations, perception studies, and qualitative research. For example, Aprilia et al. (2023) employed a pre-test/post-test control-group design with 48 students, while Cabrera-Solano et al. (2023) investigated ESA with technological tools among 67 university students over a ten-week period using questionnaires, observations, and interviews. In addition, future experimental studies should distinguish between the effects of ESA itself and the effects of particular activities, technologies, or teaching strategies incorporated into ESA lessons. This would help researchers determine whether observed improvements result from the ESA framework specifically or from broader principles of active and communicative learning.

9.3 Lack of Longitudinal Evidence

Another significant gap is the limited availability of longitudinal research. Many ESA studies examine learners over relatively short periods, making it difficult to determine whether observed improvements are sustained over time. For instance, Cabrera-Solano et al. (2023) examined technology-supported ESA implementation over ten weeks. Although the study reported positive learner experiences and improvements, a longer period would be necessary to establish whether such effects persist beyond the intervention (Ibrahim et al., 2026). Future longitudinal studies should investigate learners over semesters or academic years to determine whether sustained exposure to ESA contributes to long-term development in language proficiency, motivation, learner autonomy, and communicative competence.

9.4 Insufficient Research in Diverse EFL Contexts

The existing literature is also geographically and educationally concentrated. Several empirical studies have been conducted in particular Asian and Latin American contexts, while other EFL settings remain comparatively underrepresented. The technology-supported study by Cabrera-Solano et al. (2023), for example, was conducted at a private university in southern Ecuador, while several speaking studies have been conducted in Indonesian educational settings. Future research should therefore examine ESA in a wider range of EFL contexts, including North African, Middle Eastern, African, and other underrepresented educational environments.

9.5 Limited Attention to Teachers' Perspectives and Experiences

Another research gap concerns teachers. Existing research has often concentrated on students' performance, perceptions, motivation, or speaking ability. Although teacher implementation is central to the success of ESA, relatively fewer studies have investigated teachers' beliefs,

experiences, challenges, and professional development needs (Hmouma, 2024). Future studies should investigate EFL teachers' perceptions of ESA, their experiences in implementing different ESA models, and the types of professional development they require.

9.6 Need for Research on Different ESA Lesson Patterns

Although the Straight Arrow, Boomerang, and Patchwork models are central to ESA theory, there is insufficient empirical evidence comparing their effectiveness. Much of the literature discusses these patterns conceptually, while relatively few studies directly compare them under controlled conditions (Harmer, 2007, 2015). Future research could compare different ESA sequences within the same educational context. For example, one group could receive Straight Arrow instruction, another Boomerang instruction, and a third Patchwork instruction. Measures of achievement, engagement, fluency, accuracy, motivation, and retention could then be compared.

9.7 Limited Research on Learner Autonomy and Self-Regulated Learning

ESA has considerable potential to promote learner autonomy because the Activate stage encourages learners to make independent linguistic choices and communicate with others. However, empirical research specifically examining the relationship between ESA and learner autonomy remains limited.

Future research should examine whether sustained ESA instruction contributes to learners' ability to set goals, monitor their progress, evaluate their language performance, and independently seek opportunities to use English (Benarose & Hmouma, 2026). Researchers could also investigate the relationship between ESA, self-regulated learning, and willingness to communicate.

9.8 Need for More Research on Technology-Enhanced ESA

Technology-enhanced ESA represents a particularly promising area for future research. Cabrera-Solano et al. (2023) demonstrated that tools such as Zoom, Canvas, Quizizz, Canva, and Padlet can be integrated into ESA lessons and can support interaction, collaboration, and feedback. However, the available research remains relatively limited. In addition, research should consider potential disadvantages, including digital inequality, technological dependence, teacher digital competence, learner distraction, and access to reliable internet services (Alsaeh et al., 2026). Technology should therefore be examined not simply as an additional resource but as a factor that may reshape how ESA lessons are designed and experienced.

9.9 ESA and Artificial Intelligence in EFL Education

The increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) in language education creates another emerging research direction. AI-powered tools can potentially support each component of ESA (Klella, 2024). For example, generative AI can provide engaging conversational prompts, personalized language explanations, vocabulary practice, writing feedback, and simulated communication opportunities (Klella, 2026). However, direct empirical research connecting AI with the ESA framework remains limited (Klella & Mrghem, 2024). Future research could investigate AI-supported ESA lessons in which students engage with AI-generated scenarios during the Engage stage, receive personalized language explanations during the Study stage, and participate in AI-supported conversations or collaborative tasks during the Activate stage.

9.10 Future Research Directions

Based on the gaps identified above, future ESA research should move toward broader, more rigorous, and more context-sensitive investigation. Several directions are particularly important: Conduct larger-scale and longitudinal studies to determine the sustained effects of ESA on language development and learner motivation; compare ESA with other instructional approaches, such as task-based language teaching, traditional presentation-practice-production models, and other communicative approaches; compare the Straight Arrow, Boomerang, and Patchwork

models to determine their relative effectiveness for different skills and learner levels. Expand research beyond speaking to include reading, listening, writing, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and integrated-skills development; investigate underrepresented EFL contexts.

10. Conclusion

The Engage–Study–Activate (ESA) approach represents a flexible and practical framework for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Its three interconnected components: Engage, Study, and Activate, provide a balanced structure through which learners can develop interest in the learning process, acquire focused knowledge of language forms and functions, and apply that knowledge in meaningful communicative situations. Unlike approaches that emphasize either linguistic accuracy or communication exclusively, ESA seeks to integrate both dimensions while maintaining learners' active involvement throughout the lesson.

The literature reviewed in this study indicates that ESA can be applied to a wide range of language areas, including grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, writing, pronunciation, and integrated-skills instruction. Its flexibility also allows teachers to adapt lesson organization according to learners' proficiency levels, instructional objectives, classroom conditions, and available resources. In addition, the approach can be incorporated into technology-enhanced, online, and blended learning environments, making it relevant to contemporary developments in EFL education.

Several pedagogical benefits emerge from the literature, including increased learner engagement, motivation, classroom participation, communicative competence, confidence, collaboration, and opportunities for learner autonomy. The approach can also help teachers establish a meaningful relationship between explicit language instruction and communicative practice. The Engage stage creates a foundation for interest and participation, the Study stage provides opportunities for focused linguistic development, and the Activate stage enables learners to use English more independently and purposefully.

The review also highlights several gaps in the existing literature. Research has concentrated considerably on speaking development and short-term classroom outcomes, while comparatively less attention has been given to other language skills, long-term effects, learner autonomy, individual differences, teacher perspectives, assessment, and different ESA lesson patterns. There is also a need for more research in diverse EFL contexts and for systematic investigation of technology-enhanced and artificial-intelligence-supported ESA instruction.

The ESA approach offers considerable potential for creating interactive, motivating, and communicatively oriented EFL classrooms. Its greatest strength lies in its adaptability and its capacity to connect learner engagement, systematic language learning, and meaningful language use. However, its effectiveness depends largely on thoughtful implementation, teacher expertise, contextual adaptation, and alignment among instructional objectives, classroom activities, and assessment. Future research and pedagogical practice should therefore continue to explore how ESA can be adapted and strengthened to meet the changing linguistic, technological, and educational needs of EFL learners.

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