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DECOLONIAL AND SITUATED APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	4
 Part I. DECOLONIAL AND SITUATED APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND EDUCATION	
1. Madhurima Chakraborty - Decolonizing language education: integrating linguistic and cultural knowledge to revitalize indigenous voices and foster intercultural competence	6
2. Evelyn Kee Mew Wan Khin , Shameem Oozeerally - Designing curriculum at the intersection of language, culture, and coloniality: reflections from primary French textbooks in Mauritius	17
3. Rosa Ascención Espinoza Cid - Literature from a critical intercultural lens: toward a decolonial perspective in the English language classroom	33
4. Maribeth A. Bante - They and Siya: gender-fair language and the Filipinization of English – a report	45
 Part. II. EXPANDING PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND LEARNING	
5. Carlos Andres Giraldo Montealegre - The transformative power of tales: fostering language, empathy, and decolonial praxis in education	50
6. Jinhua Wang , Socorro G. Herrera , Kendra Herrera - Translanguaging in action: a single case study of pedagogical acts in a newcomer classroom	60
7. Oussama Ahmed Gaid - The catalyst effect: cultural scaffolding in literary-based intercultural communicative language education	75
8. Kate Heath - Exploring the roles of English and Arabic in English-medium higher education programs in Saudi Arabia	94
 List of Special Volume 2026-2(3) Authors.....	113
List of Special Volume 2026-2(3) Reviewers.....	115
ERL Journal – Scope Major.....	116
ERL Journal – Scope Minor.....	117

INTRODUCTION

Framing the Conversation: Language, Culture, and Education in the Global South

Across the Global South, language education has become an increasingly vibrant space for rethinking how languages, cultures, and pedagogies are understood in relation to the lived realities of diverse communities. Contemporary scholarship from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and other historically marginalized contexts draws on a wide constellation of experiences, epistemologies, and educational aspirations that continue to enrich the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). This Special Issue is conceived from and for the Global South, bringing together contributions that invite readers into an ongoing conversation about how language education can be imagined through locally grounded yet globally connected perspectives.

This conversation emerges at a moment when educational research increasingly recognizes that meaningful pedagogical innovation is inseparable from the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which it takes place. Across diverse educational settings, researchers are examining language as a dynamic space where communication, identity, culture, knowledge systems, and educational practices are continually shaped in relation to one another. In doing so, they contribute to a broader scholarly movement that seeks to expand the horizons of ELT by embracing plurality, contextual responsiveness, and dialogue across different traditions of knowledge.

The conversation reflected throughout this Special Issue is not an isolated one. It grows from a broader intellectual journey in which scholars from different regions have gradually invited us to imagine language, education, and knowledge through more open, dialogical, and plural horizons. These conversations have encouraged scholars to explore educational realities through encounters among histories, cultures, and ways of knowing that illuminate one another while preserving their own particularities. Enrique Dussel's (2013) reflections on *transmodernity*, Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2018) ecology of knowledges, Walter Mignolo's (2011) call to broaden the horizons of knowledge production, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (2012) notion of *globalectics* all contribute, in different ways, to this shared invitation: to think with others rather than merely about others. For English Language Teaching, this means recognizing that meaningful educational innovation flourishes through dialogue among communities, languages, and educational experiences, where diversity becomes a source of shared learning and pedagogical renewal.

This Special Issue also contributes to the evolving trajectory of the *Educational Role of Language (ERL) Journal*, whose interdisciplinary mission has consistently emphasized the transformative role of language in education across diverse cultural, social, and institutional contexts. Grounded in the understanding that language shapes both educational practice and the ways in which learners engage with the world, ERL has established itself as a forum where linguists, teacher educators, educational researchers, and practitioners exchange ideas that foster meaningful educational change across disciplines and geographical settings. As the journal enters a new phase with an increased emphasis on language methodology and educational innovation, this volume reflects its continued commitment to promoting context-responsive scholarship capable of enriching contemporary educational practice.

Within this broader vision, the present volume responds to the Special Issue strand, *Decolonial and Situated Approaches to Language and Culture in Higher Education: Implications for Teaching and Learning*. Bringing together scholars working across diverse geographical, cultural, and disciplinary contexts, the volume offers a multifaceted exploration of how language, culture, and education continue to be reimagined through locally grounded experiences, multilingual realities, and context-sensitive educational practices. The studies presented here reflect the vitality of contemporary scholarship emerging from the Global South while contributing to ERL's ongoing commitment to fostering dialogue, innovation, and educational transformation.

To accompany readers through this conversation, the volume has been organized into two complementary sections. The first, **Decolonial and Situated Approaches to Language, Culture, and Education**,

foregrounds studies that examine the broader educational conditions shaping language teaching and learning, including curriculum design, teacher education, language policy, multilingualism, and institutional practices. The second, **Expanding Perspectives on Language, Culture, and Learning**, brings the conversation closer to pedagogical experience by exploring diverse pathways through which language education continues to evolve across the Global South. This section demonstrates how innovative educational practices emerge through sustained dialogue between local realities and wider scholarly conversations in relation to studies on literature, storytelling, translanguageing, intercultural education, learner autonomy, gender-inclusive language, pragmatics, and student learning,

Ultimately, this Special Issue invites readers to view language education as a shared intellectual praxis sustained by dialogue among diverse communities, epistemologies, and educational voices. In this spirit, the volume welcomes the globalectical vision proposed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, where knowledge emerges through reciprocal encounters among multiple voices, each contributing to a more plural, equitable, and contextually responsive understanding of English language teaching. The conversations initiated throughout these pages remain open, inviting readers to continue shaping new understandings of language, culture, and education from, and with, the Global South.

Angelica Maria Rojas Isaza

Educational Role of Language – 4 Fundamental Premises



Decolonizing language education: integrating linguistic and cultural knowledge to revitalize indigenous voices and foster intercultural competence

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Abstract

In an era defined by globalization, technological convergence, and cultural homogenization, the preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity has become a critical educational and sociolinguistic concern. Language operates not merely as a communicative tool but as a dynamic repository of epistemologies, worldviews, and collective identities. As one of the most linguistically plural nations in the world, India embodies complex intersections of language, identity, and power. Therefore, this paper undertakes a critical, literature-based exploration of the interconnections among language, culture, and identity, with a particular focus on Indian Indigenous linguistic traditions and their pedagogical implications. It interrogates the historical processes of Westernization and Sanskritization that have entrenched linguistic hierarchies and contributed to the epistemic marginalization of Indigenous voices. Drawing upon contemporary frameworks in applied linguistics, intercultural education, and decolonial theory, the study argues that the integration of linguistic and cultural knowledge within formal education systems can serve as a transformative approach to learner engagement and intercultural competence. Such integration not only revitalizes endangered linguistic traditions but also challenges hegemonic knowledge structures by fostering dialogic, inclusive, and pluralistic learning spaces. The analysis highlights that language simultaneously functions as a constructor, carrier, and mirror of culture—rendering its pedagogical incorporation indispensable for cultivating critical cultural awareness and global citizenship. This paper ultimately calls for a re-envisioning of language education as a decolonial, identity-affirming, and socially responsive practice that bridges tradition and modernity. By centring Indigenous epistemologies within educational discourse, it underscores the potential of language education to serve as a site of cultural resurgence, cognitive justice, and intercultural dialogue.

Keywords: *Linguistic integration, cultural knowledge, Indigenous languages, learner engagement, intercultural competence, decolonial pedagogy, identity*

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed novel cross-cultural exchanges, sweeping technological changes and significant socio-political shifts. These developments have also amplified the drivers of cultural homogenization, linguistic displacement, and epistemic erasure (Dutta, 2014). Across the world, the linguistic diversity that once flourished and was acknowledged in localized ecologies has been seen to erode and is increasingly threatened by the dominance of global languages, forming a hierarchy and resulting in the marginalization of Indigenous linguistic traditions (Crystal, 2010; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021; Nettle & Romaine, 2000). Indigenous communities at present are struggling to preserve their languages, cultural traditions and rights within national contexts shaped by colonial dominance and hegemonic cultural frameworks. Traditional and indigenous forms of knowledge constitute “major assets for local response strategies,” particularly in an era marked by ecological uncertainties and cultural fragmentation. The resilience of

Indigenous epistemologies therefore becomes essential not only for community survival but also for sustaining cultural diversity, cognitive justice and alternative ways of knowing. In multilingual nations such as India, this process manifests in complex linguistic hierarchies shaped by historical, economic, and political narratives (Annamalai, 2005).

India is a treasure trove of language and culture, yet it has lost around 220 languages in the last 50 decades and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has declared 197 Indian languages as endangered. Even the 22 languages enlisted in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution is facing serious issues as they are not integrated at all level with school as well as higher education. Language is not just a mere tool for communication but serves as a repository of cultural memory and indigenous knowledge systems; embodying worldviews, values, cognitive structures, and modes of meaning-making (Kramsch, 1998 ; Agar, 1994). With the devaluation of a language, the epistemologies embedded within it often diminish, resulting in what de Sousa Santos terms “epistemicide” (2014, 92) - death of the knowledge that is tied to the language. Therefore, preserving linguistic diversity is not only a project to preserve culture but also a concern of epistemic justice and identity affirmation. Every language has a unique past that captures the unique characteristics of a particular culture and the nuances of a nation. It is a potent tool that manifests the human mind and the culture through social interaction in all areas of life like; beliefs, values, ethos, habits and traditions. It is a dynamic mirror that reflects the individual as well as collective identities and becomes a catalyst for the transmission of cultural heritage, collective memory and social norms. In India, Indigenous languages which primarily belong to Adivasi (indigenous) communities are bearer of distinct cosmologies, social systems, oral traditions and ecological knowledge (Mahapatra, 2018). Yet many of these languages are losing their ground due to colonial language policies, mainstream schooling, sanskritization, and the inclination towards privileging dominant languages like Hindi and English (Mohanty, 2010). These linguistic hierarchies have penetrated the educational system, creating a huge crevice between ‘home’ and ‘school’ languages, marginalized Indigenous learners and created barriers to cultural participation and academic engagement (Mohanty, 2019).

Based on this backdrop the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 cries out for a decisive shift toward decolonizing education by integrating Indian languages, art, knowledge and culture into curricular spaces. Such a shift aligns its aim with contemporary scholarship on decolonizing the education system as well as language, arguing that language is not merely a communicative tool but a repository of epistemologies, cultural memory and identity. Language constructs, carries and mirrors culture—mediating one’s perception of reality and shaping social belonging. Therefore, revitalizing Indigenous linguistic traditions within the present education system is not only a pedagogical imperative but also a socio-cultural and political urgency (King, 2001).

Across the world researches, educationists and scholars have increasingly turned towards embracing decolonial frameworks, intercultural pedagogy, and culturally sustaining language education to reform curricula and empower marginalized communities (Paris, 2012; Smith, 2012; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Decolonizing language education entails challenging the hegemonic linguistic ideologies (that accepts the superiority of one language with the other) and integrating Indigenous linguistic and cultural knowledge in ways that foster inclusivity, identity affirmation, and intercultural competence (García & Wei, 2014).

This study aims to have a literature-based comprehensive analysis of the relation among language, culture, and identity, strengthening the argument that integrating knowledge of Indigenous languages and cultural into language education can serve as a transformative pedagogical strategy. It takes on a decolonial and intercultural perspective to examine the way linguistic hierarchies existed since ages. It also critiques dominant educational approaches, and proposes a framework for culturally sustaining language teaching that supports linguistic revitalization and fosters global citizenship. Therefore, with the incorporation of Indigenous voices and knowledge into the present education system, language education can transform into a decolonial, identity-affirming and socially responsive practice, that can enable a complex cultural treasure trove like India to embrace its pluralistic heritage. It will also help in preparing learners for meaningful participation and contribution to a globalized world.

This reimagining language education reckons it as a powerful site for cognitive justice, cultural revival, and intercultural dialogue, connecting the wisdom of tradition with the demands of modernity.

The study was undertaken in response to the multicultural and multilingual realities of the Indian context, where linguistic diversity coexists with persistent hierarchies that have historically marginalized Indigenous and minority languages. The researcher recognized the urgent need to critically examine the way language education moves beyond colonial legacies to become more inclusive and culturally sustaining. The observations and experience of India's rich yet uneven linguistic landscape motivated her to pursue this research. At the same time, the growing discourse on decolonizing education shaped the choice of this topic and the literature-based decolonial and intercultural approach. This background positions the researcher well to undertake this study and contribute to ongoing conversations on linguistic justice, Indigenous knowledge systems and identity affirming pedagogies within India and beyond.

Theoretical background

Language is functional as a system in various ways; be it related to cultural, epistemological, or identity-formation. Several scholars highlighted that language shapes habitual worldviews and mediates how individuals interpret and structure reality (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956; Kramsch, 1998). Contemporary linguistic anthropology where language plays a vital role in creating identity, meaning and social worlds, affirms this interdependence, viewing language as a constructor, carrier, and a mirror of culture (Duranti, 1997). Consequently, the erosion of any language therefore entails the loss of cultural memory, oral traditions, and epistemic diversity (Harrison, 2007).

The linguistic landscape of India spanning over 121 major languages having numerous dialects show this interconnection between language, identity, and knowledge. The Indigenous languages, rooted in Dravidian, Austroasiatic and Tibeto-Burman families are rich in social, spiritual and ecological knowledge yet the colonial language policies and internal hierarchies such as Sanskritization, in post-independent India privileged English and dominant regional languages. This privilege has led towards marginalization of many Indigenous languages, leading to a weakened intergenerational transmission of culture and widespread endangerment of existence (UNESCO, 2021; Ramanathan, 2005; Srinivas, 1956). These interplays serve as the producers of external and internal linguistic hegemonies.

In the educational contexts language serves as not only a medium of instruction and interaction, but also a catalyst of identity formation. Schools emphasizing on the 'other tongue' (p.145–149) rather than 'mother tongue' (p. 66-68) often results in cultural discontinuity and identity conflict among the learners (Fishman, 1991; Mohanty, 2010). Research on linguistic diversity shows a great contribution to cognitive flexibility and conceptual richness (Slobin, 2003), where mother-tongue-based classroom promoting multilingual education (MT-MLE) showcases enhancement of literacy, cognitive development, and cultural grounding (UNESCO, 2021; Cummins, 2001).

Intercultural competence frameworks (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006) that emphasize on learning skills, knowledge and attitudes for effective and meaningful interaction across cultures call for pedagogies that promote respect and acceptance for cultural difference. Unfortunately, these models tend to remain rooted in Eurocentric paradigms (Kubota, 2004) and the decolonial theories (Mignolo, 2011; Smith, 2012) contend for inclusion and recentralization of marginalized epistemologies, giving recognition to linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1995), and promoting cognitive justice (de Sousa Santos, 2014). This decolonized paradigm calls for a Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) (Paris, 2012) that might offer a dynamic framework affirming indigenous languages, integrating community knowledge, and promoting multilingual identities.

The pedagogical strategies that align with decolonial theories and principles of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (CSP) like Mother-tongue based Multilingual Education, Indigenous oral traditions integration in classroom, translanguaging practices, community-led revitalization, and more, highlights the pathways in which education can encourage linguistic and cultural diversity while enhancing learners' intercultural competence. These

theoretical insights emphasizes that decolonizing language education and Indigenous linguistic ecologies are essential for fostering cognitive diversity, cultural continuity and justified equitable educational outcomes.

Objectives of the study

1. To critically examine the relationship between language, culture and identity with reference to Indigenous linguistic traditions
2. To explore decolonial, intercultural, and culturally sustaining pedagogical frameworks within contemporary language education
3. To demonstrate how decolonized language education can foster learner engagement, cognitive justice, and intercultural competence

Methodology of the study

This study is descriptive in nature and undergoes a critical literature-based exploration with a qualitative approach. The research critically engages with the existing linguistic policies and theories to synthesize data. A critical discourse analysis was followed to identify the recurring patterns of themes and arguments in the literature.

Results and discussion

1. *Relationship between Language, Culture and Identity with reference to Indigenous linguistic traditions*

Tylor defines culture as a complex whole which include customs, laws, habits, knowledge, morals, arts, beliefs and any other attributes acquired by man as a member of society (Sibiri, 2014). Therefore, studying culture becomes an act of studying laws of human thoughts and action. To be an active member of the society with a sense of belongingness, a person needs to follow and internalize all those attributes that Tylor has stated. Peter Berger was of the opinion that culture is the product of a fundamental human predicament (1967). Unlike other animals, humans are incapable of living on their own. They are in one way or the other dependent on each other. The fabric of culture helps in providing a protective shield against the harsh impositions of nature. It also facilitates the transmission of knowledge and stability that computes human survival. It guides human to do what is right, to choose what is productive, to eat what is edible, etc. Therefore, the world humans live in is defined by culture. According to Hall (1997) culture can be perceived as “the best that has been thought and said” (p.2) in a society (Hall, 1997). It is a collective form of best ideas, classic literature, painting, music, and way of life of a community or a group.

While mentioning the “cultural turn” (p. 2) Hall argues that culture is not a set of things but practices (Hall, 1997). It comprises of exchanges between groups that similarly interprets a particular subject. He explains culture in five steps; production, consumption, representation, regulation, and identity. These steps help in producing meaning to a culture. In the first step, people vouchsafe certain meaning to an object and share that meaning among their group and regulate the right uses of the meaning to its context. Later the meaning is introduced to others by the participants after consumption, and it also renders a special identity. The representation by language is predominant to the process of producing meaningful conversations, as languages construct meanings of different objects. The representation is served through the constructional components such as words, colours, physical gestures and sounds. Through these constructional components ideas of objects are delivered, which introduces the cultural differences. For example, the National Anthem of any nation introduces the language that presents their culture and that indicates to whom they belong, and their identity in the sense that they are different from the fans of other teams. The representational function of language can also be visual. For example, the attire of a particular culture may introduce a part of the history of that culture or may give idea to construct a new beginning. It also reflects the identity of people who wear the attire and those who see the attire. The meaning of a language offers us a true sense of individual identity as well as cultural identity. Meaning produced

is exchanged in every social and personal interaction by the members of the same culture who shares the same cultural codes; concepts, ideas, and images that helps them perceive, think, feel and interpret the world similarly.

Whenever a new language is learnt it gives an individual, access to a new culture and also the opportunity to identify oneself with a culture different from one's own. Zalakoro, (2016) underlined this view point by stating that language becomes the most viable and available expression of a culture as it expedites communication among the members of a particular habitat. Therefore, second language learning becomes an acquisition of second identity. An individual can truly become a speaker of the second language when he or she is capable of taking on the 'frame of mind' of the speakers of the target language without any reservations consistent with their own mindsets (Richards and Lawrence, 2013). It is not transliteration but translation of the thoughts and essence with which the second language is spoken by the natives. One needs to think in the 'other tongue' to be a true speaker of it. The relationship between language and culture is neither simple nor complex. Though learning a new language enables one to express oneself in an alien language and learn a new culture, it also challenges one understand the intricacies of enculturation, acculturation, cultural shock, attitudes, alienation and cultural stereotypes (Adebayo, 2014). For example, a native of West Bengal trying to learn American English, needs to understand the culture of America and the cultural differences between Bengal and America. Married couple staying with their parents in the same house might arise as a cultural shock for the American people, whereas laying down too much emphasis on materialism and being hostile to life might arise as a cultural shock for the Bengalees. In the first instance the meaning of 'family' differs for both the cultures, and in the second the meaning of 'freedom of life'.

Language also renders us a cultural identity. It marks the cultural heritage of a particular community or nation. With speaking one's indigenous language, one connects himself or herself with their community and people, thereby sharing the beliefs, values, morals and reinforcing their cultural capital and cultural identity. It helps them to project themselves as unique and deserving recognition. For example, the *Santhals* speaking *Mundari language* projects proudly their cultural identity rather than projecting themselves as a part of the nation.

The analysis therefore views that language functions as an epistemic system through which social relations, cultural meanings and collective identities are produced and sustained. Conceptualization of reality by communities through encoding of culturally specific ontologies and worldviews has been emphasized by Linguistic anthropological and sociolinguistic scholarship (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956; Duranti, 1997; Kramsch, 1998). The findings further hints at the decline of Indigenous languages resulting in epistemic erosion, aligning with de Sousa Santos' (2014) notion of *epistemicide*, where the loss of language triggers the ebbing of embedded knowledge systems. Moreover, linguistic marginalization also extends beyond communication loss to identity destabilization and cultural dislocation (Mohanty, 2010; UNESCO, 2021).

Table 1: Recurring themes in discourse on relationship between language, culture and identity with reference to indigenous linguistic traditions

Themes in discourse	Key arguments and focus
Culture as a social framework	Rules, norms, values, and local knowledge is embedded in every culture which is essential for social belonging and human survival
Culture as meaning-making	Every aspect of any culture produces meaning through production, consumption, representation, regulation, and identity
Language as a representative	Meaning is produced using linguistic and symbolic systems whether verbal or non-verbal
Language and identity formation	Speaking a shared or common language affirms cultural belonging and community hood thereby differentiating groups

Language and identity negotiation	With every new language learnt cultural realignment, possible cognitive and identity shifts occur
Cultural shock and meaning conflict	Differences in perceiving concepts such as family, freedom, and social norms across cultures create cultural dissonance
Indigenous language serving as cultural capital and epistemic system	Indigenous languages structure culturally specific ontologies and ways of knowing thereby sustaining community values, traditions, and distinct cultural identity
Linguistic marginalization and identity loss	Language loss create chaos, destabilizes identity and weakens cultural continuity

2. Decolonial, intercultural, and culturally sustaining pedagogical frameworks within contemporary language education

An examination of contemporary literature related to language education reveals that decolonial pedagogical frameworks have gained significant importance in language education as a response to the continuous influence of colonial epistemologies and linguistic hierarchies. Decolonial language education challenges the stereotypically perceived superiority of dominant global languages, particularly English, by exposing their historical role in knowledge domination and cultural marginalization (Mignolo, 2011; Smith, 2012; Pennycook, 2017). This framework sees language as not a mere tool for communication but as a space of power, identity negotiation, and epistemic struggle. The findings indicate that decolonial pedagogy foregrounds the legitimacy of Indigenous and marginalized languages as bearers of complex knowledge systems and advises for their integration within formal curricula. By disrupting the Eurocentric paradigm following the standards of linguistic competence and curricular canonization, decolonial approaches aim to restore epistemic equity and promote cognitive justice through the coexistence of multiple knowledge traditions (de Sousa Santos, 2014).

Intercultural pedagogical frameworks to teach language have advanced beyond mere functional models of communicative competence and brought in a more critical and reflexive acclimatization. Early research suggested intercultural models dealt in developing skills, attitudes, and knowledge for effective cross-cultural interaction (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006), but recent scholarship analyses the tendency of intercultural models to remain embedded within Eurocentric cultural assumptions (Kubota, 2004). The findings further suggest that contemporary intercultural pedagogy increasingly incorporates decolonial insights by emphasizing critical cultural awareness, reflexivity, and the examination of power play between languages and cultures. It was found that when Indigenous linguistic knowledge is integrated into intercultural curricula, learners engage better with cultural difference ethically and dialogically rather than through streamlined or hierarchical representations of culture.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) serves as a pivotal framework that integrates decolonial strategies and intercultural principles within classroom teaching learning. Unlike the initially prevalent multicultural or culturally responsive approaches, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy explicitly solicits to develop learners' existing linguistic and cultural repertoires through a sustainable lens rather than thwarting them toward dominant norms (Paris, 2012). The findings indicate that pedagogical practices such as Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education, translanguaging, and the incorporation of Indigenous oral traditions and knowledge to support learner engagement, identity affirmation, and cognitive development (Cummins, 2001; UNESCO, 2021). These practices regard the 'home languages' of learners as epistemic resources, thereby reducing linguistic alienation and fostering a sense of belonging within educational premise.

This gradual growing convergence among decolonial, intercultural, and culturally sustaining pedagogical frameworks share a commitment towards promotion of linguistic plurality, building sense of identity, and co-construction of knowledge. Here, decolonial pedagogy examines historical and structural inequities, intercultural pedagogy offers relational tools for navigating cultural difference, and culturally sustaining pedagogy supplies

practical strategies for classroom implementation. In unison, these frameworks form an integrated pedagogical orientation that transforms language education into a socially responsive and inclusive practice capable of addressing both local linguistic realities and global intercultural demands. Moreover, it also posits questions to the present curriculum standardization, level of teacher preparedness, and extent of institutional resilience. The recurrent themes serve as evidences that holds these frameworks as the crux for rethinking language education as a space of cultural resurgence, epistemic justice, and global cosmopolite.

Table 2: Recurring themes in discourse on decolonial, intercultural, and culturally sustaining pedagogical frameworks within contemporary language education

Theme	Key arguments and focus
Decolonial language pedagogy and legitimization of indigenous languages	Decolonial language pedagogy challenges the superiority of dominant languages (like English, Hindi in Indian context) and epistemic and cultural hierarchies; thereby restoring epistemic equity. It highlights the Indigenous languages that carries complex epistemologies and needs to be integrated into formal curricula to promote cognitive justice
Critical intercultural pedagogy	Ethical and dialogic engagement with cultural difference requires critical awareness of power relations between languages and cultures
Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP)	Pedagogy should aid development and not replacement of learners' home languages and cultures, resisting assimilation into dominant norms
Culturally sustaining classroom practices	Instruction in mother tongue, translanguaging, and Indigenous knowledge enhance engagement, identity affirmation, and learning outcomes
Convergence of pedagogical frameworks	These frameworks promote linguistic plurality, identity formation, and co-construction of knowledge
Institutional and curricular constraints	Standardized curricula, limited teacher preparation, weak institutional support hinder transformative language education
Transformative role of language education	Language education can function as a space for cultural resurgence, epistemic justice, and globally oriented yet locally grounded learning

3. *Decolonized language education can foster learner engagement, cognitive justice, and intercultural competence*

The findings also showcase the significant role played by the act of decolonizing language education through the validation of linguistic identities and cultural experiences of the learners within the classroom and educational setup. A recurrent pattern was observed in the literature studied, that revealed if learners experience their home languages, narratives, and cultural knowledge represented in instructional practices, their participation increases, with increased motivation, and academic confidence (Cummins, 2001; Mohanty, 2010; UNESCO, 2021). For example, an Indian learner can relate well to 'joint family', Mexican to 'avacados', Bhutanese to 'happiness', etc. Viewing the marginalized and indigenous languages from a deficit-based view point is challenged by the decolonized pedagogical approaches that resituates it as cognitive and creative resource rather than barriers to learning. This recognition helps in reducing the cultural and linguistic void often experienced by Indigenous learners in a school or classroom setting where dominant languages prevail in the garb of 'Standardized language', thus fostering a sense of belonging and active engagement in educational spaces.

The findings further reveal that decolonized language education is a substantial contributor in the realization of cognitive justice by making multiple epistemologies coexist within formal education. For example, knowledge of 'ecosystem' can be learned by studying carbon cycles, food webs, biodiversity (western means of gaining knowledge) and also through community observation (Indigenous means of gaining knowledge). A frequent adherence to Eurocentric knowledge systems by conventional language education models often witnessed, which marginalizes the Indigenous ways of knowing and reinforcing epistemic hierarchies (Mignolo, 2011; Smith, 2012; Viswanathan, 1989). For example, the Indian Story telling tradition that was the primary way of transmission of Indigenous knowledge has eroded with time (People's Linguistic Survey of India [PLSI], 2013). These oral traditions have been repeatedly emphasized on by the National Curriculum Framework, 2023 as well as National Policy of Education, 2020 in reference to the pedagogical approach towards language education. Decolonized approaches advocate for the inclusion of these traditions as well as Indigenous languages as they serve as legitimate vehicles of knowledge production, thus challenging monolithic curricular structures. Through integration of Indigenous oral traditions, ecological knowledge, and culturally embedded meaning-making practices, decolonized language education counters *epistemicide* (de Sousa Santos, 2014) and affirms the cognitive legitimacy of marginalized knowledge systems. Therefore, the findings suggest that such kind of epistemic inclusion does not just democratize knowledge system but also enhance the critical awareness learners in terms of knowledge construction and valuation.

In addition to the findings discussed above, decolonized language education also fosters intercultural competence by encouraging and accepting pluralistic worldviews and dialogic engagement across cultural boundaries. Unlike the conventional intercultural models that tends to emphasize on the significance of functional communication and cultural adaptation, decolonized approaches long with those also foreground ethical interaction, reflexivity, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997; Kubota, 2004). Umpteen exposure to Indigenous languages and plural epistemologies enables learners to identify cultural difference as relational (cultural background influencing individual identity and communication) rather than hierarchical, thereby inculcating skills to understand differences, respect and accept other cultures, show empathy, and ability to interpret cultural codes, within learners for a meaningful intercultural dialogue. The findings also indicate that these multilingual and multicultural classrooms inherently begin functioning as intercultural dynamic spaces where learners negotiate meaning and identity across diverse linguistic and cultural frames.

Therefore, the study suggests that within the system of decolonized language education a significant relationship between learner engagement, cognitive justice, and intercultural competence exists. In a classroom driven by decolonized language education learners are found to engage actively as their linguistic identities are affirmed and cognitive justice is advanced through epistemic plurality. Even the intercultural competence of learners also gets cultivated through sustained interaction with polyolith knowledge systems. Instead of treating these outcomes in isolation, the findings establishes that decolonized language education integrates learner engagement, cognitive justice, and intercultural competence into a cohesive pedagogical orientation where language education takes on transformative role capable of addressing and challenging the historical inequalities.

Table 3: Recurring themes in decolonized language education, learner engagement, cognitive justice, and intercultural competence

Theme	Key arguments and focus
Decolonial language education and learner engagement	Representation of culturally familiar concepts and acceptance of linguistic identities, home narratives, and cultural experiences of learners enhances participation, motivation, and academic performance.

Affirmation of linguistic and cultural identities	Decolonized approaches reduce the void created by dominant “standardized” languages with recognition of Indigenous languages and cultures that strengthens learners’ sense of identity and inclusion within educational spaces.
Cognitive justice and epistemic plurality	Knowledge can be acquired through scientific frameworks (e.g., carbon cycles) as well as Indigenous methods such as community observation. This plurality challenges Eurocentric dominance and epistemic hierarchies in conventional education systems.
Validation of indigenous knowledge system	Indigenous oral traditions, ecology and languages are considered as valid forms of knowledge that challenges epistemicide.
Policy and curricular alignment	Decolonized language education aligns with national policies on education, thereby promoting inclusive curricula and culturally responsive pedagogical practices.
Multilingual classrooms and intercultural competence	Multilingual classrooms help in developing empathy, respect, and interpretive skills among learners for meaningful intercultural dialogue.
Integrated pedagogical outcomes	Learner engagement, cognitive justice, and intercultural competence are outcomes of decolonized language education, situating language education as medium of transformation and capable of addressing historical and epistemic inequalities.

Conclusion

Decolonizing language education is imperative for preserving linguistic diversity, fostering cultural identity, intercultural competence, and advancing cognitive justice in multilingual and postcolonial contexts, where the indigenous languages has gained importance over years and has become a part of mainstream linguistic repertoire. This study endorses that language operates as an epistemic and ontological system through which knowledge, identities, and social relations are constructed, conserved, preserved and transmitted. Hence, the decline of any Indigenous language will entail not only communicative loss but also cultural discontinuity, epistemic loss and disruption of collective identities. The integration of Indigenous linguistic and cultural knowledge into language education becomes crucial here, as educators requires to challenge dominant epistemic and linguistic hierarchies, and practice inclusive classroom environments that appreciates plurality of human experiences. The convergent result of decolonial, intercultural, and culturally sustaining pedagogical frameworks unfolds as a powerful seamless approach that restructures the classroom environment and classroom communication in reference to epistemic plurality, enhanced learner engagement, and intercultural dialogue. This even promotes cognitive justice and inculcates intercultural competence, transforming language education into a socially responsive and culturally grounded ethical practice.

In the Indian context, the study not only bring forth the country’s rich linguistic heritage but also the hierarchical challenges that hinders the survival, sustenance and transmission of Indigenous languages across generations. The age-old concept of Sanskritization, the globalized linguistic hierarchies deciding the functional ability of a particular language, prevalence of ‘standardized languages’ in schools, limited constitutional recognition of indigenous languages, and insufficient administrative as well as pedagogical support from educational institutions, contribute towards marginalization Indigenous languages and knowledge systems. Therefore, addressing these challenges require sustained policy commitment, curricular reform, teacher preparedness, socio-cultural responsive teaching, and meaningful collaboration with Indigenous communities. Though the National Policies had identified and addressed the crisis, the veritable transformation of theory into practice is yet to be delivered.

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Designing curriculum at the intersection of language, culture, and coloniality: reflections from primary French textbooks in Mauritius

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Abstract

Curriculum development, specifically textbook conception, in postcolonial contexts like Mauritius is neither a neutral nor a primarily technical undertaking; it remains a deeply situated process shaped by linguistic and cultural diversity, tacit colonial language hierarchies, and underlying ethnic tensions. This paper explores these dynamics as they manifested during the conception of Grades 5 and 6 Primary French textbooks within the Nine Year Continuous Basic Education reform. This study adopts an ecolinguistics-decolonial lens, interweaving autoethnography as decolonial praxis with document analysis, and examines both authors' autoethnographic accounts and the textbook materials as artefacts. Indeed, as panel coordinator and panel member involved in the writing of these textbooks, the authors analyse their own experiences of navigating the theoretical, ideological, and affective tensions embedded in the design process, as they resist the "epistemic violence" (Mignolo, 2011), i.e. the silencing of non-dominant modes of knowing through absorption by dominant Western research paradigms and practices. Using an eco-critical textbook research (Stibbe, 2015; Oozeerally & Hookoomsing, 2017), to understand how decolonial and situated approaches inform curricular choices in a predominantly Creole-speaking environment and a postcolonial context, the findings discuss how the textbooks negotiate epistemological presence and ecological framing, tensions between linguistic ecology and pluriversality, insularity as epistemic centre, as well as Ecological Social Justice. This study thus puts forth how the curriculum design circumvents layers of tensions between learners' plurilingual and pluricultural realities and policy frameworks that continue to privilege colonial epistemologies.

Keywords: decolonial curriculum design, plurilingualism, pluriculturalism, Mauritius, textbook development, ecolinguistics

Introduction

In postcolonial contexts like Mauritius, polyglossic dynamics are still prevalent (Bosquet-Ballah, 2017; Oozeerally & Hookoomsing, 2024). English and French, the languages of the island's past colonial powers, continue to be perceived as being prestigious, while Mauritian Creole, henceforth Kreol Morisien the most widely spoken local language (Statistics Mauritius, 2022; Oozeerally & Hookoomsing, 2024) is still relatively devalued and marginalised, despite its considerable socio-institutional progress over the past decades. English being the formal medium of instruction as per the Education Ordinance (1957), textbooks in Mauritius are monolingual and written in English for all core subjects (such as Mathematics, History and Geography for example) while the French textbook remains in French. Indeed, Mauritian pupils learn to read in English and French which are compulsory subjects up to the Cambridge School Certificate for French and the Cambridge Higher School Certificate for English. Introduced as early as 1955 during colonial times, ancestral languages (e.g., Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, etc.) are offered as optional languages from primary up to secondary and have been maintained to this day for ethnic identity reasons. Kreol Morisien was also introduced as an optional language in 2012. In 2026, the recent announcement of the Government that Kreol Morisien would be henceforth offered as main subject at Higher School Certificate sparked a wide range of reactions, notably on social media where the discourses of perceived uselessness and devaluing have been largely replicated. Combined with the dual nature of the term 'Creole' (Carpooran, 2010) as an ethnonym (name of an ethnic group) and a glossonym (name of a language), along with Kreol Morisien being classified as an 'ancestral language' in the Mauritian schooling system, as opposed to its 'national' nature, its

explicit use in the curriculum, including textbook production, is itself subjected to tensions. This has also been noted in the poor reception of the 'Foundation Year Project' which was introduced in 2014 and proposed a bilingual textbook *Let's learn with Timatou and friends* (Rughoonundun-Chellapermal, 2018; Oozeerally & Hookoomsing, 2021b) which was finally replaced in 2016 by separate monolingual and subject specific textbooks as was the case previously. Another example is the reluctance to use the term 'Creole language' in key policy documents like the National Curriculum Framework Pre-primary, with discursive devices like circumlocutions being used instead, within fundamentally conflictual dynamics (Oozeerally & Hookoomsing, 2024). Indeed, it seems that the more the country seems to develop at different levels, the more it seems reluctant to let go of its colonial legacy, with the language issue ending up being evaded in the most recent education policy documents (Kee Mew Wan Khin, 2023).

This contribution discusses these dynamics and the choices operated in designing the latest Grades 5 and 6 Primary French textbooks "*J'apprends le français*" in 2016 and 2017 (as part of the 2015 Nine Year Continuous Basic Education reform in Mauritius) from an ecolinguistics-decolonial lens, and through a hybrid approach mobilising autoethnography – the coauthors being the coordinator and panel member of the French textbook writing panel for Grades 5 and 6 – and document analysis of the textbook materials. The first part of the paper positions ecolinguistics as a decolonial lens, and the second part discusses the methodological dimension. Finally, the third part is articulated around the findings and discussion.

Theoretical background: ecolinguistics as a decolonial lens

This contribution positions ecolinguistics as a decolonial lens, arguing that the core epistemic foundations of the former encompass elements of decolonial theories, notably in terms of delinking, recentering local ontologies, ideology, and the issue of linguistic and epistemological diversity.

Ecolinguistics as epistemic delinking and revaluation

In critiquing dominant linguistic frames and actively valorising indigenous languages as well as Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as forms of ecological wisdom, ecolinguistics can be closely linked to Mignolo's (2011) 'epistemic disobedience'. This concept is centred around delinking from what Mignolo calls the colonial matrix of power and the rehabilitation of dominated and subaltern epistemic frames. Stibbe's concept of "stories-we-live-by" (2015) positions indigenous languages as legitimate and valuable systems holding historical, cultural and environmental knowledge, which not only challenges what Mignolo identifies as the "rhetoric of modernity" that relegates indigenous knowledge to shallow superstitions, and the prevailing capitalist praxis associated thereto (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000; Steffensen 2007), but also aligns with Mühlhäusler's (2003) view that indigenous languages represent linguistic adaptations to ecological niches. This scholarship also questions what Pennycook and Makoni (2020) refer to as 'linguicism', which is an ideological stance favouring certain languages at the expense of others, while resonating with Meighan's (2023: 146-147) critique of *coloniallingualism* that "covertly or overtly upholds colonial legacies, imperial mindsets, and inequitable practices [...] detrimental to multilingual, multicultural learners' identities and heritages; endangered, Indigenous languages and knowledges; minoritized communities; and our environment". However, it must be highlighted that the decolonial framework is not language-centric. Davidson (2024: 470), citing Okoth (2021), argues that Mignolo's decolonial theory may be viewed as a form of idealism, "since it sees colonial relations as ultimately propelled by a prior epistemic framework associated with Enlightenment reason rather than by material practices such as resource extraction, land dispossession, ecological destruction, labour exploitation, slavery, and so on". The historical dimension is thus as important as the epistemic one, expanding the scope of decolonial theory to incorporate diachronically situated events. This is relevant to Mauritius as the country does not have an indigenous population per se. The social tapestry is woven around slavery, indenture and massive land exploitation, which explains the ecological devastation of the island (Florens 2013). Therefore, delinking must necessarily be read against sociohistorical and

ecological dynamics when it comes to reflections around education, and more specifically, textbook conception, as discussed in the sections below. This notably concerns strategic decisions taken for textual and discursive choices operated in textbook writing.

Rehabilitating and recentering local linguistic ontologies

Beyond the epistemic dimension, ecolinguistics also provide methodological pathways to Mignolo's (2011: 132) "border thinking", which provides a frame of thought from the perspective of colonial difference: "border thinking is the epistemic singularity of any decolonial project. Why? Because border epistemology is the epistemology of the anthropoi, who do not want to submit to humanitas, but at the same time cannot avoid". This statement is particularly compatible with the ecolinguistics perspective. First, it acknowledges a form of default anthropocentrism (Mühlhäusler 2001; Stibbe 2015) where the human necessarily perceives the world from its vantage point. This does not normalise anthropocentrism; rather, it makes visible the conditions under which anthropocentric frames become hegemonic and therefore open to critique. Second, it critiques human exceptionalism, re-establishing the natural, mutually inclusive link between the anthroposphere and the biosphere. Additionally, in being "a politics of knowledge that is both ingrained in the body and in local histories" (Mignolo, 2011: 132), the decolonial perspective of border thinking aligns with the core principle of ecolinguistics to value local knowledge systems, as well as embodiment as a means of perceiving and living phenomena (see also Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology). For the purpose of this contribution, we retain two aspects that are relevant to how ecolinguistics was mobilised as a decolonial lens for textbook production: ideology, metaphors relating to and framing of the more-than-human world, on the one hand, and the recognition of linguistic diversity as epistemological diversity.

Ideology, metaphors and framing

Whilst the core premises and principles of ecolinguistics were applied to the textbook conception process as a whole (see Oozeerally & Hookoomsing, 2021a), the stories we intend to discuss in relation to our choices are ideology, framing and metaphors. The table below, adapted from Hookoomsing and Oozeerally (2020) briefly situates the three forms of stories as explained by Stibbe (2015).

Table 1: Three forms of stories

Form of story (cognitive, i.e. in people's minds)	Description	Manifestation in language
Ideology	A story about how the world is and should be which is shared among members of a group	Discourses, i.e. clusters of linguistic features characteristically used by the group
Framing	A story that uses a frame (a packet of knowledge about an area of life) to structure another area of life	Trigger words which bring a frame to mind
Metaphor (a type of framing)	A story that uses a frame to structure a distinct and clearly different area of life	Trigger words which bring a specific and distinct frame to mind

Everyday language may contain patterns that are anthropocentric (Heuberger, 2007; Oozeerally & Hookoomsing, 2017; Stibbe, 2021) in nature (i.e. nature existing for the benefit of humans), and are often in the category of destructive discourse, the other two being ambivalent and positive discourse (Stibbe 2014; 2018).

Taking into consideration the potential impact of language and discourse on children's knowledge construction process (Foucault, 1972; Hookoomsing & Oozeerally, 2020; Hookoomsing, 2021), our strategic discursive and textual choices were informed by ecolinguistics in two ways: first, Stibbe's framework (2015) enabled us to avoid destructive discourse while striving to incorporate as much positive discourse as possible, and second, we attempted to give salience and visibility to local and regional knowledge, while at the same time considering the areas of learning as per Vygotsky's zone of proximal development.

Recognition of linguistic diversity as epistemological diversity

Another layer of compatibility between decolonial perspectives and ecolinguistics concerns the importance of language preservation. In line with scholars like Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), Maffi (2001) and Crystal (2003), to name a few, Mignolo, through his pluriversal project, argues that language loss represents knowledge loss. Pluriverse is a critique of the "Eurocentric commitment to replacing multiple realities with a single Western world" (Wilson, 2022: 153). Phillipson (2009) describes this phenomenon as 'linguistic imperialism', by analysing the spread of English, which is the de facto official language of Mauritius, across the world, notably in postcolonial contexts including former British colonies. Anchored in this rejection of European universality, pluriverse is a notion that foregrounds the coexistence and flourishing of diverse indigenous cultures. From this perspective, the eurocentric project of instating monolingualism as the norm is considered as a form of homogenisation (Robillard 2008), which ontologically negates diversity. A shift towards a pluriversal stance hence considers linguistic diversity as an inestimable trove of different knowledges, and more importantly as an asset. Maffi's (2001) reflections on biocultural diversity, for instance, establishes meaningful interconnections between linguistic, cultural and biological diversity, positioning language maintenance as an environmental justice issue. This is particularly pertinent in postcolonial insular contexts like Mauritius, where hierarchical representations of languages, notably through polyglossia (Carpooran, 2007) are prevalent.

Ecolinguistics as a decolonial framework

Beyond epistemological resistance through the challenge of universalism and capitalistic paradigms and concomitant valorisation of indigenous and local knowledge, ecolinguistics also advocates ontological plurality. This manifests in the preservation of linguistic diversity, which is considered as an asset instead of a liability. Moreover, ecolinguistics protects place-based knowledge encoded in local toponymy, seasonal vocabulary and semantic classifications that differ from Western taxonomies. As far as textbook production is concerned, this has direct impacts on the overall decisions, in relation to and in tension with prevalent ideologies as well as policy discourses, and the sources for texts and discourses to include in the books themselves. Additionally, Stibbe's (2015) concept of "stories-we-live-by" becomes decolonial with the acknowledgement that local and indigenous languages carry different stories about human-environment relationships. Ecolinguistics therefore becomes a valuable framework for curriculum design and development (Hookoomsing, 2021) while also allowing the respect of key policy frameworks like ESD, through what Oozeerally and Hookoomsing (2021a) call 'ecological social justice' (ESJ).

Methodology

As researchers who have been involved in the curriculum design process, we chose to adopt a decolonial methodological approach combining autoethnography with document analysis to examine the choices operated in the conception of the Grades 5 and 6 Primary French textbooks, arguing that the interweaving of autoethnography and document analysis represents a means to valorise local researcher voices and experiences in restituting the cartography of research-informed decisions that were taken during the textbook conception process. Our stance is further rooted in the understanding that "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring

to them" (Denzin & Lincoln 2000: 3). More specifically, our inquiry aligns with what Reed-Danahay (1997: 3-4) identifies as critical autoethnography, i.e., a form of research that interrogates power relations and seeks to challenge dominant structures while giving voice to marginalised perspectives.

Autoethnography as decolonial praxis

Autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 739). This study adopts "a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience" (Ellis, 2007: 14). This stance is compatible with our decolonial lens, as autoethnography represents a valuable means for highlighting experienced truth in an authentic manner (Méndez, 2013). As panel coordinator and panel member respectively, who were actively involved in the curriculum development process, we have an identity of "complete member researchers" (Anderson, 2006), with a fundamentally reflexive and altero-reflexive (Robillard 2008; 2017) outlook on the experiences and process. Multiple data sources complement our autoethnographic accounts: reflexive journals (notes and reflections documented throughout the curriculum development process); email correspondence and meeting notes (records of discussions with the textbook panel members); critical incident reflections (documented moments of tension and negotiation in the development process).

One of the reasons we opted for autoethnography is its capacity to align with emancipatory discourses (Richardson, 2000), in the sense that those who are "emancipated are representing themselves instead of being colonised by others and subjected to their agendas" (Méndez 2013: 282). This further links to the altero-reflexive nature of autoethnography as by focusing on our voices as curriculum developers incorporating ecolinguistics and decolonial frameworks, we resist what Mignolo (2011) calls "epistemic violence", i.e. the silencing of non-dominant modes of knowing through absorption by dominant Western research paradigms and practices. This methodological choice also corresponds to Ellis et al.'s (2011) reflections on how autoethnography contributes to make complex lived experiences accessible to readers (Denzin, 1989) while establishing meaningful links with larger social structures. In our case, these structures include colonial legacies in education, institutional constraints on curriculum development, and the navigation of the multiple embedded layers of tensions that govern textbook development, including the issues of local and regional epistemologies, as well as the incorporation of ecological perspectives in education.

Document analysis from a decolonial-ecolinguistics lens

To complement the autoethnographic dimension, we also chose to use document analysis, whereby we examine the Grades 5 and 6 French textbook materials as artefacts, in light of our decolonial ecolinguistics perspective. Document analysis was found to be appropriate for this study as it allows a systematic examination of "materials generated for reasons other than the research at hand" (Bowen, 2009: 27); textbooks are thus treated as "discursive formations" (Foucault, 1972) that reveal underlying power relations and epistemological assumptions. McCulloch (2004: 4) further adds that it is important to know how and why these documents were produced and received, and therefore to interpret them "in the light of specific factors involved in their production and context, such as personal, social, political and historical relationships."

Analytical framework

Document analysis, in this work, is approached not as an "objective" or "distanced" examination, but through what we term a "decolonial-ecolinguistics analytical lens" that integrates Stibbe's (2015) ecolinguistics framework. This framework examines how language patterns in educational materials reinforce or challenge destructive stories about human relationships with the more-than-human world. Stibbe (2015) identifies three categories of discourse: **destructive discourse** (patterns that contribute to ecological and social harm), **ambivalent discourse**

(mixed messages), and **positive discourse** (patterns that promote ecological sustainability and social justice). Furthermore, Stibbe's framework attends specifically to three forms of "stories-we-live-by" that are particularly relevant to curriculum analysis:

1. **Ideologies:** Underlying belief systems about the relationship between humans and nature
2. **Metaphors:** Conceptual frames that shape how we understand environmental relationships
3. **Framing:** How linguistic choices foreground certain aspects of reality while backgrounding others

When viewed from a decolonial lens, these analytical tools reveal how colonial epistemologies become insidiously embedded in seemingly neutral curriculum content, as evidenced by an analysis of pre-reform curriculum material (Oozeerally & Hookoomsing, 2017). Based on this ecolinguistics foundation, our analytical framework positions us as critically engaged interpreters who focus on:

1. **Epistemological presence and ecological framing:** Whose knowledge systems are validated, foregrounded or marginalised in textbook content? How are human-nature relationships framed through ideologies, metaphors and linguistic choices? What discourses do the materials perpetuate?
2. **Linguistic ecology and pluriversity:** How is the French language material positioned in relation to other languages in student's learning ecosystem? How far does the curriculum honour linguistic diversity as epistemological diversity? (Mignolo, 2011; Maffi, 2001)
3. **Place-based knowledge:** Which landscapes and ways of being are being made visible and invisible? Are local and regional toponymy, vocabulary and local semantic classifications being honoured, or are they displaced by Western taxonomies? As Basso (1996) demonstrates, place-based names can encode moral geographies and historical narratives; how far does the curriculum recognise such landscape-language relationships?
4. **Pedagogical assumptions and ecological social justice:** What models of learning, knowing, and being are embedded in the activities and sequencing? Do pedagogical choices support what we term "ecological social justice" (ESJ) by connecting environmental sustainability with social equity, or do they reproduce extractive, hierarchical relationships?

Following Bowen's (2009) framework for document analysis, we engage in the following analytical procedures: **skimming** (superficial examination), **reading** (thorough examination), and **interpretation** (making meaning through a decolonial-ecolinguistics lens). However, we extend beyond conventional document analysis by integrating our autoethnographic knowledge of the documents' production contexts and by applying Stibbe's ecolinguistics analysis. This integrated approach allows us to trace what Hookoomsing and Oozeerally (2020) describe as strategic discursive and textual choices that examine the final curriculum artefacts as well as research-informed decisions taken during the design process within specific socio-political and institutional constraints. Indeed, as panel coordinator and panel member of the Grades 5 and 6 French textbooks writing, we had to function within the key policy documents (such as the National Curriculum Framework and the French Teaching and Learning Syllabus) requirements and the ever-present pressure to engage with content given that the Mauritian educational system is exam-oriented.

Interweaving autoethnography and document analysis

One of the particularities of this study lies in the interweaving of autoethnographic narrative with document analysis. This approach aligns with Ellis and Bochner's (2006: 433) observation that "autoethnography can allow scholars to investigate social phenomena that have personal significance by re-imagining and then analysing mundane and epiphanic moments". The meshing of autoethnography and document analysis also creates what Ronai (1995) describes as a "layered account" that provides multiple ways of approaching data, from both the experiential and material lenses. Our analysis is therefore structured around key curricular decisions, with each section including:

1. **Autoethnographic context:** Our narrative account of the development process, deliberations, and constraints
2. **Document evidence:** Specific examples from textbook materials
3. **Decolonial-ecolinguistics analysis:** Interpretation through our theoretical framework
4. **Critical reflection:** Examination of what was achieved and what tensions remain

This structure corresponds to what Charmaz and Mitchell (1996) call ‘collaborative reflexivity’, i.e. generating “theoretical insight into the role and significance of material practice in identity work” (Cherry, Ellis & DeSoucey, 2011: 233) while maintaining the integrity of multiple voices and forms of knowing.

Ethical considerations and positionality

We acknowledge our dual positioning as both curriculum developers and researchers analysing our own work. This creates what Wall (2008) identifies as a complex ethical terrain requiring ongoing reflexivity about whose interests are served by our analysis. Following Ellis's (2007: 26) principle that "autoethnography itself is an ethical practice", we adopt what Medford (2006: 862) terms an "ethic of accountability", i.e., writing our truth while remaining cognizant that our representation of shared experiences may be sources of disagreement. This also includes acknowledging:

- Our own positioning within colonial structures as academics working in institutions shaped by past colonial historical legacies
- The limitations of our perspectives despite our commitments to decolonial praxis
- The potential gaps between our intentions and the realised curriculum
- The voices of other stakeholders (students, teachers, community members) who are not directly represented in this autoethnographic account.

Though autoethnography may give way to limitations such as potential bias, incorporating the voices of other stakeholders as highlighted above, was not within the scope of this study.

De-colonial ecolinguistics coding matrix

The matrix below selectively foregrounds some pertinent elements emerging from our analysis of the Grades 5 and 6 French textbooks¹ “*J’apprends le français*” (each grade textbook is split into Part 1 and Part 2), based on:

1. Stibbe’s (2015) ecolinguistics framework (ideology, framing, metaphor; destructive/ambivalent/positive discourse),
2. Mignolo’s (2011) decolonial concepts of epistemic delinking and pluriversality,
3. Maffi’s (2001) biocultural diversity,
4. Basso’s (1996) place-based moral geographies,
5. The ecological social justice (ESJ) construct articulated in Oozeerally & Hookoomsing (2021a).

The matrix (as outlined in Tables 2-5) is structured according to the four analytical dimensions mentioned previously.

Table 2. Epistemological presence and ecological framing

Book	Traceable evidence	Author coding notes	Analytical interpretation

¹ The 2021 reprints of the Grades 5 (2016) and 6 (2017) French textbooks are available on <https://web.mie.ac.mu/primary-curriculum/>

Grade 5 – Part 1	“Dossier 2 – <i>Protégeons notre environnement</i> ” (Rodrigues reserve; extinction; habitat destruction; reforestation; protection discourse)	Environmental lexicon: <i>lagon, récif, forêt, vallée</i> . Culinary ecology in “ <i>Je découvre des plats</i> .” Foregrounding of local and regional culinary culture	Explicit appearance of ecology through conservation-forward discourse. Naming of anthropogenic responsibility (exploitation; habitat destruction). Framing remains restorative.
Grade 5 – Part 2	Narrative genres (fables; sports texts)	Football alongside Sepak Takraw; dragon boat festival; horse racing (Mauritius); capoeira; sumo; handisport in “ <i>Le sport</i> ”	Framing of social justice through interpersonal ethics (courage, fairness, solidarity). Pluriversal cultural representation and exposure to cultural knowledge that challenge Eurocentric knowledge sources.
Grade 6 – Part 1	“ <i>Les abeilles : une merveille de notre écosystème</i> ”; “ <i>La légende de Bassin Blanc</i> ”; global “ <i>Les merveilles du monde</i> ” structure	Wonders cluster: Taj Mahal; Lake Retba; Machu Picchu; Petra; Everest; Pyramids; Table Mountain; etc.	Dual decentering layers. First layer decentres the notion of ‘ <i>merveilles du monde</i> ’ away from anthropocentric/man-made artifacts, re-positioning and framing bees as a ‘wonder of our ecosystem’. Second layer of decentering involves exposure to worldwide cultural heritage sites. Global South visibly co-present.
Grade 6 – Part 2	“ <i>Balades dans les îles de l’océan Indien</i> ”; “ <i>Le cyclone Veranda</i> ” (risk bulletin genre); marine regulation discourse	Local wonders (pp. 52–53); turtle conservation; octopus fishing regulation	Framing of ecology through governance and danger management. Environmental responsibility institutionalised. Less relational embeddedness.

Cross-grade movement

- From scenic description to conservation (Grade 5) to governance (Grade 6)
- Progressive visibility of ecological themes
- Anthropocentric epistemic core remains structurally intact

Table 3. Linguistic ecology and pluriversality

Book	Traceable evidence	Author coding notes	Analytical interpretation
Grade 5 – Part 1	Ecological lexicon explicitly taught (<i>indigène; endémique; extinction</i>)	<i>chatini; cari; brèdes; pomme d’amour</i> as foregrounding of local knowledge via selected lexical entries	French exhibits adaptation traits, also functioning as a host language to integrate local ontologies lexically. Evidence of hybridisation, while epistemic medium remains French for curricular purposes and objectives.
Grade 5 – Part 2	“Dossier 3 - <i>Contes d’ici et d’ailleurs</i> ”	Local tales (<i>Tizan ar so 8 frer; Baissac</i>); Perrault; Chinese; German; Vietnamese; Australian; Egyptian tales	Narrative enactment of pluriversality. Co-existence of multiple mythic epistemologies. French mediates instead of suppresses plurality.

Grade 6 – Part 1	Structural thematics: myths; islands; wonders; ecosystem	Japanese myth; Abenaki myth; Mont Ida comparison (Mauritius/Crete/Turkey)	Enactment of border thinking through comparative toponymy. Integration of pluriversal imagination.
Grade 6 – Part 2	Indian Ocean dossier; Seychelles investigation	Regional South–South orientation	Positioning of French as a bridge language embedded in regional ecosystems, rather than the metropolitan norm.

Linguistic ecology pattern

- French remains the epistemic medium of instruction due to curriculum and syllabus-related constraints.
- Lexical choices and hybridity indicate a decolonial frame
- Pluriversality appears thematically instead of structurally (negotiation between what is possible as curriculum developers, and what is required at the level of the policy and programme execution)
- Kreol Morisien present ontologically but not instructionally (negotiation in light of constraints)

Table 4. Place-based knowledge

Book	Traceable evidence	Author coding notes	Analytical interpretation
Grade 5 – Part 1	Rodrigues reserve; named sites (Anse Quitor; Canyon Tiyel; Grande Caverne)	Island micro-toponymy	Explicit naming of place, with territorial anchoring. Ecological taxonomy locally situated.
Grade 5 – Part 2	Mauritian urban and sporting references	Curepipe; local racing culture; festivals	National locations foregrounded
Grade 6 – Part 1	Bassin Blanc legend linked to toponymic naming	Local wonders (pp. 52–53); Mont Ida (Mauritius/Crete/Turkey)	Moral-geographic potential (Basso). Narrative encoding of place. Destabilisation of singular ownership of landscape meaning through comparative toponymy.
Grade 6 – Part 2	Cyclone bulletin anchored in Mauritius; Indian Ocean islands dossier	Mauritius; Rodrigues; Réunion; Madagascar; Comoros; Seychelles	Repositioning and reframing of insularity as an epistemic centre; foregrounding of regional interconnectedness.

Place-based pattern

- Strong insular and regional recentering.
- Indian Ocean constructed as knowledge-space.
- Limited explicit engagement with local semantic classification systems.

Table 5. Pedagogical assumptions and ecological social justice (ESJ)

Book	Traceable evidence	Author coding notes	Analytical interpretation
Grade 5 – Part 1	Teacher prompts encourage personal experience; cross-	Role-play; grammar scaffolding	Scope for altero-reflexive ecological engagement. However, embedded in

	curricular linking (history-geography; protected species)		linear competency-based progression [curricular constraint].
Grade 6 – Part 1	Ecological reading (“abeilles”); mythic sequencing	Wonders juxtapose South and North deliberately	ESJ seeds present at thematic level. Not structurally reorganising pedagogy.
Grade 6 – Part 2	Cyclone bulletin; compliance discourse (alert levels; prudence)	Marine regulation; conservation authority framing	Environmental literacy framed institutionally. Governance logic > reciprocity paradigm.

Table 6. Longitudinal epistemic trajectory (grade 5 to grade 6)

Dimension	Evolutionary pattern
Ecology	Scenic → Conservation → Governance
Geography	National → Regional → Pluriversal Global
Justice	Interpersonal ethics → Environmental compliance
Language	Standard French → Lexical hybridisation
Epistemology	Anthropocentric core with decolonial representational inflections

The systematic coding across the four manuals indicates:

1. Intentional recentering of insular and Indian Ocean identities.
2. Redistribution of epistemic visibility beyond Eurocentric axes.
3. Lexical decolonisation through incorporation of local ontology.
4. Progressive integration of ecological themes.
5. Persistence of anthropocentric and governance-oriented framing.
6. Ecological social justice emerging at the level of representation rather than as organising epistemology.

Findings and discussion

Whilst the corpus of Grades 5 and 6 French textbooks does not seem to enact an unambiguous ‘decolonial turn’, it does not replicate previous textbook templates, seeking to question instead the frames used previously. It thus stages a negotiated form of repositioning, where ecological discourse is progressively made visible, albeit in a largely managerial form. The enactment of pluriversality is through representation and curricular selection, mediated mostly monolingually through French, as a means to negotiate the complex terrain of curricular prescriptions and stakeholder expectations. One of the more robust facets of the textbooks remains place-based anchoring, while ecological social justice (ESJ) emerges as an aspirational horizon rather than a structuring pedagogical framework.

It is, however, important to note that this does not represent a contradiction to be solved, but an empirical manifestation of how textbook production is negotiated within polyglossic dynamics, in a politically sensitive terrain marked by history of successive colonisations. As argued above, Mauritius is characterised by entrenched polyglossic hierarchies (Bosquet-Ballah, 2017; Oozeerally & Hookoomsing, 2024), where English and French retain prestige and Kreol Morisien remains a site of tension and contestation, entangled in the dual ethnonym/glossonym ambiguity of “Creole” (Carpooran 2010) and in the administrative classification of Kreol Morisien as an “ancestral language” in the educational landscape. Such a context implies that curricular delinking cannot be read from an exclusively epistemic stance (Mignolo, 2011), as it is necessarily mediated by multilayered

institutional constraints, political prescriptions, reception dynamics and the material histories that Davidson (2024), drawing on Okoth (2021), reminds us should not be displaced by idealist accounts of epistemic change.

Epistemological presence and ecological framing: ecology as staged insertion

The distribution of ecological discourse across the corpus represents a first facet of our findings. The analysis indicates that ecology is not necessarily the curriculum's organising ontology, as it is strategically inserted through the dossiers, the genres, as well as the textual and discursive choices of the curriculum developers. From the autoethnographic perspective, these choices were also informed by our own ideological positioning as we are sensitive to the environmental question, in light of major ecological disruptions that the planet is facing.

For instance, in Grade 5 Part 1 French textbook, ecological discourse becomes explicit through the dossier "*Protégeons notre environnement*", centred on the *Réserve François Leguat* in Rodrigues. We also chose to weave together ecological discourse and place-based knowledge, foregrounding the local spaces to illustrate conservation attempts, as a form of recentering the epistemic dimension around the local. The text foregrounds autropogenic causality patterns, with the explicit naming of habitat destruction and exploitation, hereby aligning with what Stibbe (2015) would classify as a move away from destructive stories. The human agent is thus not erased or dissociated from ecological harm. However, the narrative remains restorative, with repair being framed through protection and reforestation. No lexical, textual or grammatical evidence of reciprocity, where the more-than-human world is not merely protected but co-constitutive of human life-worlds, were detected. While the material avoids extractive frames, it does not fully reconfigure the human-nature relation into an ontologically anthroparmonic (Oozeerally & Hookoomsing, 2021a) frame.

In terms of progression, Grade 6 French textbook intensifies ecological shifting, through a shift in ecological grammar. For example, "*Les abeilles: une merveille de notre écosystème*" signals a deliberate discursive move towards interdependence as the lexical choice of *notre écosystème* suggests shared belonging, potentially repositioning the learner within a collective ecology. Our choice of presenting this lesson in this manner was also informed by our stance of viewing the biosphere and anthroposphere (Morin, 2008) as mutually inclusive and nourishing, instead of the pervasive dualist views of human exceptionalism, where the environment is considered as separate (*res extensa*) from the human-thinker (*res cogitans*). At the same time, it can be observed that Grade 6 Part 2 French textbook's cyclone bulletin ("*Le cyclone Veranda*") inserts ecology through the institutional genre of risk management. The environment, here, is framed in terms of vulnerability, which itself implies governance, through the logics of monitoring, warning and compliance.

Across the Grades 5 and 6 French textbooks, we therefore observe a movement from scenic and lexical ecology, to conservation discourse re-establishing human responsibility in an explicit manner, to regulation and framing. Whilst the progression is pedagogically sound, its epistemic consequence is the relative softening of anthropocentrism, where humans are framed as observers, protectors and managers. The more-than-human world concomitantly appears as an object of stewardship or a source of hazard, instead of a co-agentive subject. This resonates with Mühlhäusler's (2001) and Stibbe's (2015) observation that anthropocentrism is not merely a theme but a deep default frame, often reproduced even within sustainability-oriented discourse.

Linguistic ecology and pluriversity: a pluriversal imaginary mediated monolingually

The tensions between pluriversity and linguistic ecology appear as a second important finding of the study. Whilst the corpus indicates a strong pluriversal redistribution of knowledge, this is largely mediated through monolingual epistemic authority. On the one hand, the Grade 6 French textbook architecture ("*Les merveilles du monde*", myths and legends, Indian Ocean islands) questions and disrupts a North-centric civilisational references in a deliberate manner. The recurring juxtaposition of Global South and Global North sites (e.g., Taj Mahal, Lake Retba, Machu Picchu, Petra, Everest, Table Mountain alongside European referents) performs a form of representational delinking, decentering Europe instead of erasing it. Grade 6 Part 2 French textbook's dossier logic

also reconstitutes Mauritius and the Indian Ocean (Mauritius, Rodrigues, Réunion, Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles) as a coherent epistemic region. In this sense, “border thinking” (Mignolo, 2011) becomes curricular: the learner’s world is articulated through regional relationality and insular connectedness, making the pluriverse not only global but regionally grounded. As curriculum developers, this was also a decision made from the locus of our own representations, where we deemed it ethical to disengage with insular subalternity by giving a form of ‘epistemic voice’ to the local and regional.

On the other hand, the presence of French as the sole epistemic medium may legitimately open interrogations. However, this must be situated within the multiple tensions that exist between the curricular prescription of French being the medium, and stakeholder expectations of how the material should be. The textbook is not dissociated from the Mauritian context where language is a site of polyglossic tension and political sensitivity. The poor reception of the Foundation Year bilingual initiative in 2014, as discussed previously, and the circumlocutory avoidance of “Creole” in policy documents are not external to textbook production: they are part of the ecology of constraints within which curricular decisions are made. In this sense, the absence of Kreol Morisien as an instructional epistemology should not be read as a simple deficit, but as evidence of negotiated decoloniality: a pluriversal project constrained by the sociopolitical economy of language.

At the same time, it is also worth noting that the corpus performs a more subtle form of linguistic decolonisation through lexical hybridity and permeability. Following previous episodes of resistance to innovative multilingual pedagogies, when tasked with another textbook writing for Grades 5 and 6 for French, we opted to navigate the dominant monolingualism in textbook writing by decolonising the lexicon. So doing we chose to acknowledge the Mauritian pupil’s linguistic diversity and the other languages in the latter’s learning ecosystem. Local culinary and ecological terms (e.g., *chatini*, *cari*, *brèdes*, *pomme d’amour*) have been deliberately used, without recourse to metropolitan French substitutes. These examples refer to some sort of tomato chutney though “*pomme d’amour*” seems to be a variety of tomatoes which are sour, curry which may not necessarily be spicy as per its usual definition and leafy vegetables which are very common in Mauritian cuisine. Choosing to normalise these loanwords is a means to develop children’s metacultural awareness and ability to see themselves in their own textbooks. One timid example may be found in a previous Grade 6 French textbook (2005) where recipes of semolina cake and fried split peas were given. However, while the first one was given in its Mauritian name “*Oundé*”, the second fried cake was not named in the textbook and translations juxtaposed were as follows: “*mantèque*” as “*graisse végétale*” (vegetable fat) and “*dholl*” as “*petits pois cassés*” (split peas). In this sense, in our Grades 5 and 6 French textbooks, French becomes porous, hosting local ontologies. This refusal of lexical erasure corresponds to Maffi’s (2001) biocultural diversity argument: linguistic forms carry ecological and cultural knowledge; maintaining them within curricular discourse, even as borrowings within French, functions as a small but meaningful form of epistemic preservation.

Place-based knowledge: insularity as epistemic centre and moral geography potential

A third finding concerns place-based knowledge, which emerges as one of the corpus’ most robust achievements, positioning insularity as an organising principle rather than a deficit. Indeed, the Grades 5 and 6 French textbooks “*J’apprends le français*” aimed to expand the universes of references from the normalised dominant lenses to the marginalised ones closer to the insular Mauritian pupils. There has been a deliberate attempt in the choice of thematic chapters to move the lens from the dominant North (with overtones of colonial legacies) to promote the underexplored South as well as develop an awareness and valorisation of one’s insular and regional identity.

The Indian Ocean is thus constructed as a knowledge space. In a postcolonial insular context marked by displacement, exploitation of land for plantation and ecological devastation (Florens, 2013), this recentring is epistemologically significant. Additionally, the corpus goes beyond mentioning places and instead, linguistically inhabits them. For example, the Rodrigues dossier mobilises micro-toponymy, anchoring ecological learning in a

territorially situated landscape. Likewise, the Bassin Blanc legend performs what Basso (1996) terms moral geography, where place bears stories. Even if the textbooks do not explicitly theorise this, they create the conditions for learners to acknowledge that landscapes are not neutral but represent repositories of meaning. From an autoethnographic perspective, this decision was also taken as we deliberately chose to foreground Mauritian and regional legends to strengthen place-based recentring. As Mauritians, we considered the textbook conception process as an opportunity to foreground what emerges from our land, instead of systematically relying on exogenous sources of stories.

Pedagogical assumptions and ESJ

A fourth finding concerns pedagogy. The analysis suggests that ecological and decolonial themes are embedded within the structure of the textbooks. From an ESJ perspective (Oozeerally & Hookoomsing, 2021a), social justice appears to be present through values discourse (respect, solidarity, fairness). Ecological justice emerges through the conservation and hazard discourse (extinction, habitat destruction, protection, cyclone risk). However, ecological social justice as an integrated paradigm, where environmental sustainability is explicitly linked to social equity, vulnerability and historical-material conditions, is not systematically foregrounded in task design. Environmental responsibility is often framed as prudence, protection, and compliance.

The deeper problematisation of vulnerability or structural causes of ecological harm is largely absent unless approached by teacher mediation. In this sense, Davidson's (2024) critique becomes relevant: without sufficient consideration given to material practices and histories, decoloniality risks remaining idealist. Whilst the textbooks do converge toward materiality (exploitation/habitat destruction; cyclone vulnerability), they do not systematically connect these to social stratification or historical political economy. ESJ thus remains emergent rather than structurally foundational, indicating that curriculum development exists at the threshold between reform and transformation.

Conclusion

Building on a decentred, altero-reflexive epistemology, this study establishes a dynamic equilibrium between the experiential, the multilingual and policy constraints. So doing, it suggests that decolonial pathways in curriculum and textbook design require confronting these multifaceted epistemic remnants of colonialism rather than bypassing them. By recognising how affect, culture, plurilingualism and ideology shape material development, curriculum designers can create pedagogical resources that more authentically reflect local plurilingual and pluricultural competencies and support culturally and linguistically contextualised learning. This situated, decolonial stance hence offers valuable insights for textbook development across Global South educational settings. In contexts like Mauritius where primary class teachers (also known as General Purpose teachers) in local public schools are responsible to teach both English and French among the other core and non-core subjects, teachers may mobilise their range of competencies and experiences in the teaching process, while also having the means to scaffold among the languages of the pupils' plurilingual repertoire.

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Literature from a critical intercultural lens: toward a decolonial perspective in the English language classroom

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Abstract

This study examines the pedagogical potential of a literary corpus selected for a Literature course in an undergraduate English Language Teaching program at a public university in northwest Mexico. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study employed close reading informed by a critical intercultural lens to analyze the texts' potential to contribute to a decolonial perspective in English language education. The literary texts were purposively selected according to criteria addressing linguistic and pedagogical suitability, critical intercultural potential, decolonial relevance, and connections with students' social realities and broader contexts. This analysis focused on three dimensions: cultural representations, social tensions, and symbolic elements. Findings revealed recurring issues related to identity, inequality, social class, racialization, migration, historical memory, and power across the corpus. Collectively, the selected works diversify cultural representation, destabilize hegemonic interpretations of literature, and provide a basis for moving beyond linguistic decoding toward critical interpretation and reflection. These findings subsequently informed the design of a didactic sequence for the intended educational context. However, the present study is limited to corpus selection and textual analysis and does not evaluate classroom implementation or its effects on students. The study highlights the pedagogical and political significance of deliberate literary selection and the potential of examining literature through a critical intercultural lens as a means of contributing to a decolonial perspective in English Language Teaching.

Keywords: *critical interculturality, decolonial perspective, literature, English Language Teaching (ELT), close reading*

Introduction

Literature has long been recognized as a valuable medium to teach culture in the foreign language classroom (Babae & Wan, 2014). Nevertheless, from a critical intercultural perspective, it is necessary to recognize that literature can also reproduce dominant ideologies, reinforce stereotypes, and perpetuate colonial views of culture (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010). For this reason, promoting critical intercultural practices becomes essential to fostering equity and justice within the English language classroom (Gutiérrez, 2022).

Iddings and associates (2025) provide empirical support for the relevance of critical interculturality in teacher education. Their study with migrant families and teachers in the United States and Chile found that engaging with families' knowledge and experiences fostered critical thinking among teachers, strengthened their respect for diverse values and aspirations, and contributed to the recognition of knowledge and educational resources within immigrant households. From a critical intercultural perspective, their work further emphasizes the need to move beyond superficial understandings of cultural diversity by questioning the structural, colonial, and racial dynamics that perpetuate inequalities and marginalize alternative forms of knowledge and worldviews. Applied to the teaching of literature, this perspective provides a basis for moving beyond traditional comprehension tasks and approaching literary texts as spaces for dialogue and critical reflection on cultural assumptions, power relations, and alternative worldviews.

Building on these perspectives, the present study examines the pedagogical potential of a selected corpus of literary texts for integrating critical intercultural and decolonial perspectives into an undergraduate Literature course for pre-service English teachers. The corpus was compiled according to the texts' potential to engage with

cultural difference, inequality, resistance, and other issues relevant to critical interculturality and decoloniality. Through a close reading of the selected works, the study examines how cultural representations, social tensions, and symbolic elements provide opportunities for critical engagement with issues of identity, inequality, and power. The findings from this analysis subsequently informed the design of a didactic sequence incorporating reading comprehension activities oriented toward critical questioning, comparative analysis, and reflection. However, the present study is limited to the selection and textual analysis of the literary corpus and does not examine the classroom implementation or evaluation of the didactic sequence.

Ultimately, the contribution of the study lies in centering literary selection itself as a pedagogical and political decision in English language education. Instead of treating literature entirely as a linguistic resource or as a vehicle for transmitting fixed cultural representations, the study approaches literary narratives as cultural and political texts whose meanings can be interrogated from multiple perspectives. By bringing canonical and non-canonical works into dialogue, the selected corpus illustrates how literary selection can broaden the range of voices, experiences, and social issues represented in the Literature classroom and create possibilities for questioning dominant narratives and relations of power.

Theoretical background

Critical interculturality in foreign language education

Interculturality has often been presented as a progressive and inclusive project associated with modernity; however, this discourse also conceals its colonial foundations. The use of interculturality in the name of modernity reveals “its darkest side in the form of colonialism” (Aman, 2014: 7); particularly through what it is described as the appropriation of the other by assimilation (Aman, 2014). Under this logic, the other is not recognized as a legitimate subject of knowledge, language, or history, but is instead reduced to a condition of non-existence, justified by the promise of integration into a supposedly superior cultural order. Such an understanding of interculturality operates as a mechanism of symbolic and epistemic domination, limiting the possibility of genuine dialogue.

From this perspective, a critical interculturality “from below” becomes necessary to challenge the colonial matrix of power, being, and knowledge. Maldonado, Reyes & del Valle (2015) explain that mainstream approaches to interculturality have promoted integration projects that ignore internal conflicts, historical relations of domination, and the coloniality embedded in socio-cultural structures. As a consequence, hierarchical classifications are reproduced, positioning the other as inferior or invisible within their own territories. Therefore, a merely relational view of interculturality is insufficient to address these deeply rooted inequalities.

In this respect, Walsh (2010) warns that interculturality can function as a tool of colonization when minority groups are forced to assimilate dominant customs, values, and behaviors in order to be accepted. This process is sustained by institutional systems of rules and beliefs that legitimize functional inclusion while simultaneously demanding cultural renunciation. In this sense, individuals abandon their own cultural frameworks to adopt those imposed by hegemonic projects of modernity disguised as inclusion.

Critical interculturality, in contrast, must address cultural processes as inherently intersubjective and dialogical, where interactions are potentially enriching for all participants. Byram (2021) states that intercultural competence involves the ability to combine communicative and social skills with empathy, particularly in situations of conflict. Within this framework, he refers to the intercultural speaker as a 'cultural mediator,' arguing that they are not a passive tourist, but an active agent who utilizes these communicative and empathetic skills to mediate conflicts and value misunderstandings. In line with this view, Byram, Holmes & Savvides (2013) emphasize that language teachers play a fundamental role in developing linguistic skills and in fostering intercultural values, awareness, and attitudes among language learners.

Foreign language teaching, therefore, cannot be separated from its cultural and social dimensions. Language and culture are inseparable, and their relationship contributes to the construction of community and identity. Communication extends beyond grammar and vocabulary to include meanings, worldviews, and power relations. Consequently, language learning must be approached holistically and from a transdisciplinary perspective that incorporates decolonial thinking as a guiding curricular principle (Meighan, 2023).

From this standpoint, the decolonial approach should not be considered an optional addition, but a fundamental ingredient of the curriculum. Integrating decoloniality into intercultural education allows language teaching to move beyond functional communication and toward the critical examination of cultural representations, epistemic hierarchies, and historical inequalities. In this way, critical interculturality becomes a pedagogical pathway for questioning colonial legacies and for constructing more just, plural, and situated forms of knowledge in the English language classroom.

In the present study, therefore, critical interculturality is understood as the pedagogical and analytical lens through which literary texts are selected and examined, to examine their potential to contribute to the development of a decolonial perspective in English language education.

Decolonial perspective in language teaching

The relevance of developing didactic processes grounded in a decolonial perspective lies in their potential to foster critical reflection and learner autonomy in relation to social and cultural diversity. From this view, education is not limited to the transmission of dominant knowledge, but becomes a space for recognizing silenced voices and for constructing alternative ways of understanding the world. Decoloniality promotes what have been termed “other epistemologies” (SEP, 2024), which challenge the colonial logic that seeks to preserve asymmetrical and vertical relations of power and knowledge.

This colonial logic is sustained by what Quijano (2001) conceptualized as the colonial matrix, a structure that organizes social classifications and legitimizes hierarchical relations through race, culture, language, and knowledge. Mignolo (2014) expands this notion by explaining that the colonial matrix operates as a network of beliefs that guides actions, allowing individuals to rationalize their privileges or marginalization within the system. From a decolonial perspective, questioning this matrix becomes essential in order to destabilize the epistemic and cultural hierarchies that continue to shape educational practices. A decolonial pedagogy, implies valuing diverse cultural expressions and pedagogical practices, recognizing the necessity of intercultural exchange in knowledge production. Education is conceived as a privileged space for encounters among beings and knowledges, where dialogue is not only possible but necessary. Such dialogue, however, must be understood from a critical intercultural stance that acknowledges colonial wounds as starting points for generating alternative epistemic practices. In this sense, decoloniality does not seek to erase difference, it also promotes to transform it into a source of epistemic and cultural richness.

Teaching from a decolonial perspective requires addressing the intrinsic relationship between language and culture. Language is not a neutral instrument; it is a social and historical construction that shapes how reality is named, interpreted, and experienced. Consequently, foreign language education must go beyond instrumental communication and incorporate critical reflections on how words, narratives, and discourses contextualize social realities. Although global markets and transnational exchanges are undeniable, these dynamics should be approached as opportunities for dialogue between the Global North and the Global South, not as mechanisms for reinforcing epistemic domination. Within this framework, foreign language teaching seeks to break with “the dynamics imposed on teaching practices, in both feeling and action, where educators display colonial behaviors, turning students into mere recipients of knowledge, memorized words, and pronunciation patterns determined by external interests” (Sarmiento & Perales, 2022: 31). Instead, a decolonial approach positions students as active subjects capable of questioning, interpreting, and resignifying linguistic and cultural content. In this sense, the

decolonial approach becomes a fundamental component of a critical intercultural curriculum aimed at fostering more just, plural, and situated forms of knowledge in the English language classroom.

The pedagogical potential of literature for decolonial reflection

Literature plays a central role in processes of cultural and epistemic decolonization since it enables the critical examination of the narratives through which colonial domination has historically been legitimized. Postcolonial literary theory seeks to unveil how Western literary traditions have often masked colonial violence under apparently humanistic and civilizing discourses. Bartiza & Zrizi (2022) explain that colonial literature functioned as a symbolic mechanism that represented colonized peoples as passive, inferior, and dependent; thus, justifying imperial power relations. From this perspective, colonialism extends beyond the territorial and political spheres to the literary and discursive domains since it systematically excluded the voices, experiences, and worldviews of colonized subjects.

In response to this silencing, postcolonial and decolonial literatures emerge as spaces of resistance and identity reconstruction. Literary texts written from formerly colonized contexts operate as alternative histories that challenge Eurocentric narratives and recover stories erased from official historiography (Bartiza & Zrizi, 2022). Through the act of “writing back,” authors transform literature into a political and cultural tool that questions Western epistemologies while affirming the value of local knowledges, memories, and identities (Bartiza & Zrizi, 2022). In this sense, literature allows writers and readers to move from being objects of colonial discourse to becoming subjects who generate their own narratives, meanings, and forms of resistance. Such processes are fundamental for the construction of a decolonial identity grounded in agency, dignity, and epistemic autonomy.

From a pedagogical standpoint, critical decolonial interculturality offers a framework for integrating literature into curricula in ways that challenge Eurocentric canons and educational inequalities. Walsh, Oliveira, and Candau (2018, as cited in da Silva, 2025) argue that educational practices must confront the structures that reproduce discrimination and exclusion within dominant curricular models. This implies recognizing cultural diversity and actively questioning and transforming the power relations that sustain inequality between peoples and cultures (Candau, 2008, as cited in da Silva, 2025). Consequently, curricular designs should include authors and works that represent traditionally marginalized knowledges and experiences, fostering inclusive spaces for intercultural dialogue and critical reflection (da Silva, 2025). Through literature, education can contribute to a radical reconfiguration of social, cultural, and institutional relationships oriented toward equity and democratic coexistence.

In the context of English language teaching, the decolonization of materials becomes a key strategy to counter cultural imposition and learner alienation. Charry et al. (2024) observe that EFL instruction has frequently prioritized foreign cultural models while neglecting students’ local realities, interests, and life experiences. In contrast with this, a decolonial approach advocates for materials that reflect diverse cultural perspectives, recover marginalized pedagogies, and incorporate local narratives, histories, and artistic expressions into the learning process (Charry et al., 2024). When literature is selected and used from this standpoint, it enables an intercultural interaction that allows students to learn English and to value, share, and legitimize their own cultural identities (Charry et al., 2024). In this way, literature becomes a powerful pedagogical tool for fostering a decolonial identity in the English language classroom.

Methodology

Research design

This study was conducted from a qualitative research perspective, given its focus on the interpretation of literary texts as opposed to the numerical measurement of variables or learning outcomes. Hernández Sampieri, Fernández Collado and Baptista Lucio (2014) explain that qualitative research involves the collection and interpretation of non-numerical data and allows research questions and interpretations to be refined throughout

the research process. This approach was suitable for this study because it allowed for an examination of how meanings related to culture, identity, inequality, and power are represented and developed in literary works. Accordingly, the selected literary texts constituted the primary objects of analysis.

Close reading served as the central analytical method. This well-established practice has a long disciplinary tradition in literary studies and involves sustained attention to the textual features through which meaning is constructed. Guillory (2025) describes close reading as a reading practice that transformed literary studies and helped define literary criticism as a distinct field. Although there have been attempts to formulate specific procedures characterizing close reading, the method does not follow a fixed standardized sequence of steps, which allows for flexibility in its application to literary research (Guillory, 2025). This flexibility suited the present study because the analysis was guided by critical intercultural lens, without a predetermined coding procedure.

From a methodological perspective, close reading offers a disciplined research practice that structures the examination of texts to develop systematic and theoretically informed interpretations (Brummett, 2019). It can be used deductively when examining a text through an existing theoretical framework, or inductively when interpretations are developed from detailed observations of textual features (Brummett, 2019). In this study, close reading was primarily informed by critical interculturality, which provided the theoretical lens for examining the literary texts and their potential to contribute to a decolonial perspective in English language education. The criteria used to select the texts, along with the specific analytical dimensions employed in the close reading process, are described in the following sections.

Intended educational context

The literary texts were chosen for the development of a didactic sequence for a Literature course offered in the third semester of a bachelor's program in English Language Teaching at a public university in northwest Mexico. The main purpose of the course is to develop students' reading comprehension skills through literary texts; however, the program offers enough curricular autonomy to integrate additional pedagogical perspectives. Therefore, critical interculturality was incorporated as a lens for selecting texts with the potential to contribute to a decolonial perspective, expanding the course beyond linguistic and literary comprehension toward critical engagement with issues of culture, identity, inequality, and power.

At the stage of text selection, the course was expected to include a group of ten students who would take the course during the fall semester of 2025. Information available from previous courses indicated that the students had a strong command of English in both comprehension and production. Although Spanish was their first language, their English proficiency was considered when assessing the linguistic accessibility and pedagogical suitability of potential literary texts.

Approximately 18 effective 100-minute class sessions were anticipated after accounting for teaching practicum periods and other interruptions in the academic calendar. The available instructional time therefore influenced the number and length of texts to be included in the corpus. For longer canonical works, graded-reader adaptations were chosen because they were more suitable than the original unabridged versions, considering the time available.

Corpus selection criteria

Five criteria derived from the critical intercultural lens underpinning the study and its orientation toward a decolonial perspective in English language education and from the characteristics of the educational context. Although all texts included in the final corpus met these criteria, their relevance to each criterion varied across the literary works.

The first criterion was linguistic accessibility and suitability, based on the learner's English proficiency and their ability to engage with the texts in an undergraduate Literature course. For longer canonical works, graded-reader

adaptations were selected when original texts were considered too complex or extensive for the students' level and the time available in the course. This was the case for *Les Misérables* (The Miserables), *Frankenstein*, and *A Christmas Carol*. The second criterion was critical intercultural potential, conceptualized as the capacity of the texts to provide opportunities for questioning cultural representations and engaging with different cultural and social perspectives. The third criterion was decolonial relevance, focusing on whether the texts addressed inequality, power relations, hegemonic representations, resistance, and historically marginalized perspectives. The fourth criterion pertained to the relevance of the themes to students' social realities, including issues such as inequality, identity, migration, social class, social injustice, and intercultural understanding. The fifth criterion considered the potential to connect literary narratives with students' lived experiences, local contexts, and broader global issues. This last criterion was important for relating the social and cultural issues represented in the texts to contexts beyond the literary narratives themselves.

These criteria were applied in relation to the educational context, with consideration of how each literary work would function within that context. Consequently, the resulting corpus brought together texts from different geographical, cultural, social, and historical contexts. Alecia McKenzie's "Private School" was chosen for its engagement with social class, inequality, discrimination, aspiration, merit, privilege, and access to educational opportunities. Yukio Tsuchiya's *Faithful Elephants* approaches different perspectives through its representation of war, suffering, ethical responsibility, and the consequences of human conflict. Hao Jingfang's *Folding Beijing* presents a speculative representation of social inequality and class stratification, providing opportunities to question ideas of meritocracy and connect fictional social divisions with contemporary inequalities.

These texts also incorporated works that address experiences of racialization, linguistic heterogeneity, migration, and border identities. Gloria Anzaldúa's "La Prieta" (The Dark One) and *Borderlands* were included for their exploration with identity, cultural heritage, racism, belonging, language, and border epistemologies. Their multilingual writing and engagement with border identities were particularly relevant to the critical intercultural lens guiding the selection of the corpus because they highlight the connections among language, identity, culture, racialization, and power and provide opportunities for examining these relationships from a decolonial perspective. The presence of Spanish alongside English was considered an important aspect of the texts' linguistic diversity and critical value, not a limitation within an English language classroom. Bao Phi's "Revolution Shuffle" addressed similar concerns through its engagement with migration, displacement, historical memory, and experiences shaped by broader social and political forces.

Canonical literary works were also deliberately included in the corpus. Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* allowed for the examination of class struggle, oppression, inequality, and collective resistance, whereas Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was considered in relation to gender and the patriarchal historical context surrounding Shelley's life and writing. Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* offered a different perspective on social class and inequality through its critique of wealth, poverty, and social responsibility. As noted above, complete graded-reader adaptations of these three works were used instead of the original unabridged versions. The inclusion of canonical literature was not meant to reproduce an exclusively traditional literary canon, but to explore the possibilities of rereading these works through a critical intercultural lens that incorporates attention to gender, social class, historical context, and relations of power.

Finally, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's "Aschenputtel" (Cinderella) was chosen to introduce a comparative dimension into the corpus. The tale offers opportunities to examine how cultural narratives are transformed, adapted, and potentially sanitized as they circulate across historical and cultural contexts, particularly through dominant cultural industries. This inclusion complements the other texts by focusing on the processes through which cultural representations themselves are constructed, modified, and transmitted.

Table 1 extends information on the specific editions and sources used for the textual analysis, including relevant information concerning language, translation, and adaptation. All texts were analyzed in their entirety as presented in the editions used for this study.

Table 1: Texts information.

Author	Literary work	Edition/source used	Publisher/source	Language/translation or adaptation
Alecia McKenzie	Private School	The Oxford Book of Caribbean Short Stories, edited by Stewart Brown and John Wickham (2001), pp. 442–446	Oxford University Press	English
Yukio Tsuchiya	Faithful Elephants	English-language edition (1988)	Houghton Mifflin	Translated from Japanese into English by Tomoko Tsuchiya Dykes
Hao Jingfang	Folding Beijing	English edition (2016)	Tor Books	Translated from Chinese into English by Ken Liu
Gloria Anzaldúa	La Prieta (The Dark One)	This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, 2nd ed. (1983), pp. 198-209	Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press	Multilingual writing (predominantly English, with Spanish)
Gloria Anzaldúa	Borderlands	4th ed. (2012)	Aunt Lute Books	Multilingual writing (predominantly English, with Spanish)
Victor Hugo	Les Misérables (The Miserables)	Penguin Readers, Level 6 (2008)	Penguin	Graded-reader adaptation; retold in English by Chris Rice
Mary Shelley	Frankenstein	Macmillan Readers, Elementary Level (2005)	Macmillan Heinemann ELT	Graded-reader adaptation; retold in English by Margaret Tarner
Charles Dickens	A Christmas Carol	Oxford Bookworms Library (2000)	Oxford University Press	Graded-reader adaptation; retold in English by Clare West
Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm	“Aschenputtel” (Cinderella)	Jack Zipes translation in The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm (1987), pp. 121-126	Bantam	Translated from German into English by Jack Zipes
Bao Phi	“Revolution Shuffle”	Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements, edited by Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown (2015), pp. 7-14	AK Press	English

In general terms, the selected works met the five criteria through different literary, cultural, historical, and linguistic configurations. The purpose of constructing a diverse selection of texts was therefore not to identify a single type of “decolonial literature”, but to bring together works that could be examined through a critical

intercultural lens to explore their potential to contribute to a decolonial perspective in different ways. The manifestations of this potential were then examined through the close reading method described in the following section.

Analytical procedure

Once the literary works meeting the five selection criteria had been identified, the selected texts were analyzed using a qualitative close reading process informed by critical interculturality and oriented toward examining the texts' potential to contribute to a decolonial perspective. All texts were examined in their entirety as presented in the editions and adaptations listed in Table 1. The analysis did not aim to determine whether the texts met the selection criteria, but rather to examine how their critical intercultural potential was manifested within the literary works and how it could contribute to a decolonial perspective.

The analysis focused on three dimensions: cultural representations, social tensions, and symbolic elements. Cultural representations focused on the ways identities, social groups, cultural experiences, and differences were portrayed within the narratives. Social tensions were identified through representations of inequality, exclusion, discrimination, class relations, migration, racialization, gender, conflict, social injustice, and other manifestations of unequal power relations. Symbolic elements were examined according to how particular images, spaces, characters, events, or narrative elements conveyed meanings related to identity, oppression, resistance, belonging, and social justice.

The close reading also examined how these dimensions intersected within and across the selected texts. Attention was paid to recurring issues such as inequality, identity, migration, social class, racialization, historical memory, cultural difference, and relations of power. This cross-textual examination helped identify both recurring patterns and differences in how the literary works engaged with critical intercultural concerns, particularly those related to cultural representation, inequality, identity, and power.

The findings from this analytical process were used to design the reading activities and exercises for the didactic sequence. However, the pedagogical activities themselves, their classroom implementation, and their evaluation fall outside the scope of this manuscript. Therefore, the following results concern the textual analysis of the selected literary works and do not address students' engagement with or responses to the subsequent didactic sequence.

Results

As mention previously, the analysis of the selected literary texts showed diverse possibilities for critical intercultural reflection from a decolonial perspective. The close reading focused on three dimensions: cultural representations, social tensions, and symbolic elements. Across these dimensions, recurring issues such as identity, inequality, class, racialization, migration, historical memory, and power. These issues were manifested in different ways across the literary works.

Regarding cultural representations, the corpus brought together different cultural, social, geographical, and historical perspectives. Gloria Anzaldúa's *La Prieta* and *Borderlands*, for example, addressed racialized identities, heritage, belonging, and border epistemologies. *Private School* represents experiences of social class, discrimination, and aspiration, whereas *Aschenputtel* allows for comparison for examining how traditional narratives may be transformed or sanitized through their adaptations by dominant cultural industries. Therefore, the selected texts show different ways in which identities and cultural experiences are represented and negotiated across literary contexts.

In relation to social tensions, *Private School* and *Folding Beijing* both address social class and meritocracy, questioning ideas that attribute poverty and social position primarily to individual responsibility. *Faithful Elephants* and *Revolution Shuffle* expand these issues to include collective suffering, historical memory, war, migration, and displacement. Anzaldúa's *La Prieta* and *Borderlands* introduce racialization and conflict

surrounding Chicano heritage and belonging. Social tensions are also present in canonical works. *Les Misérables* focuses on class struggle, oppression, and collective resistance; *Frankenstein* can be read in relation to gender and the patriarchal conditions surrounding its production; and *A Christmas Carol* presents class inequality and social critique. In general, these findings indicate that the selected texts approach interculturality beyond cultural difference, incorporating issues of unequal social relations, conflict, and power.

Symbolic elements also help express the articulation of these cultural representations and social tensions. In *Private School*, for example, the tombstone associated with safety creates a contradiction between common ideas of security and the protagonist's lived reality. In *Folding Beijing*, the spatial division of the city serves as an allegory for social stratification and unequal access to resources. Similarly, the border in Anzaldúa's work goes beyond a geographical boundary and raises similar questions about identity, belonging, cultural conflict, and power. These elements offer additional layers through which social inequalities and cultural experiences can be critically interpreted.

Across these three analytical dimensions, the corpus serves three broader purposes. First, it broadens cultural representation by incorporating voices and experiences from different geopolitical, social, and historical contexts. Second, it destabilizes hegemonic interpretations of literature by highlighting marginalized perspectives and allowing canonical works to be reconsidered through a critical intercultural lens that incorporates attention to gender, social class, historical context, and relations of power. Third, the textual features identified through the analysis support a shift for moving beyond linguistic decoding toward critical interpretation and ethical reflection. These findings were later used to inform the design of reading comprehension activities for the didactic sequence; however, the activities themselves and their classroom implementation are not analyzed in the present study. The pedagogical potential of the corpus extends beyond the individual themes addressed by each literary work to the possibilities that emerge from their deliberate combination within a critical intercultural framework, particularly for questioning dominant representations, inequalities, and relations of power.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the selection of literary texts is not a neutral curricular decision since it carries pedagogical and political implications. The cultural representations, social tensions, and symbolic elements identified across the corpus illustrate how literary selection can influence which identities, experiences, conflicts, and relations of power become visible within the English language classroom. From a critical intercultural perspective, this becomes relevant because engaging with cultural difference requires moving beyond the representation of diversity toward the examination of the structural conditions through which difference, inequality, and exclusion are produced. In this sense, the findings are consistent with perspectives on critical interculturality that emphasize the need to question colonial and racial structures, hegemonic knowledge, and unequal relations of power, moving beyond the view of interculturality as the mere coexistence of different cultures. (Iddings, Lamas, Rojas & Vasquez, 2025; Walsh, 2010).

The analysis suggests as well that critical interculturality can be approached through the tensions and contradictions represented in literary narratives. Across the texts, issues of class, racialization, migration, gender, historical memory, belonging, and cultural representation intersect with broader relations of privilege and marginalization. Consequently, intercultural engagement is not presented as a harmonious encounter among cultures, but as a space in which identities and cultural meanings are formed through conflict, negotiation, and resistance. This interpretation resonates with the decolonial orientation of the study, particularly with the understanding that language and education are shaped by historical and epistemic structures of power. From this perspective, literary texts can provide opportunities to make visible experiences and forms of knowledge that have traditionally been marginalized within dominant educational narratives.

One important implication of the findings is that reading literature through a critical intercultural lens to contribute to a decolonial perspective does not have to be limited to contemporary, postcolonial, or explicitly marginalized works. The inclusion of *Frankenstein*, *Les Misérables*, and *A Christmas Carol* indicates that canonical texts can also be read through a critical intercultural lens, with attention to gender, social class, historical context, and relations of power that may receive less attention in traditional literary instruction. At the same time, the inclusion of works such as Anzaldúa's "La Prieta" and *Borderlands* broadens the selection by incorporating perspectives associated with racialization, border identities, linguistic heterogeneity, and historically marginalized experiences. Thus, the decolonial orientation of the corpus is reflected both in the texts included and in how they are selected, brought together, and interpreted. This orientation is consistent with decolonial perspectives that call for questioning dominant epistemologies and creating space for alternative ways of knowing and representing experience (Mignolo, 2014; Quijano, 2001; Walsh, 2010).

Considered collectively, the three broader functions, diversifying cultural representation, destabilizing hegemonic interpretations, and providing a basis for moving beyond linguistic decoding toward critical interpretation, highlight the pedagogical value of carefully selecting literary texts in English Language Teaching. The analysis suggests moving beyond the use of literary texts primarily as resources for language practice or cultural transmission and approaching them as cultural and political texts through which questions of identity, inequality, representation, and power can be examined. This does not imply that the selected works automatically produce critical or decolonial learning. Their pedagogical value also depends on how the works are framed, contextualized, and discussed through questioning and reflection.

The findings from the close reading were soon after used to design pedagogical activities focused on critical questioning, comparative analysis, and reflection. These activities were designed to encourage discussion of cultural representations and relations of power without imposing predetermined interpretations of literary texts. Although the resulting didactic sequence was later implemented, its classroom implementation and students' responses to the activities are not examined in this study and are therefore not presented as evidence of pedagogical effectiveness. For this reason, the study addresses only the critical intercultural potential identified through the textual analysis of the selected works and its possible contribution to a decolonial perspective.

Conclusions

This study examined the pedagogical potential of selecting and analyzing literary texts through a critical intercultural lens for an undergraduate Literature course in English language teacher education, with particular attention to their potential to contribute to a decolonial perspective. The close reading showed that the selected works provide multiple opportunities to critically engage with questions of identity, inequality, and power across diverse literary, cultural, and historical contexts. Taken together, the corpus broadens cultural representations, challenges hegemonic interpretations of literature, and provides a basis for moving beyond linguistic decoding toward critical interpretation and reflection.

The main contribution of the study is to highlight the pedagogical and political significance of literary text selection in English language education. Instead of treating literature solely as a resource for language development or cultural transmission, the analysis suggests that a carefully selected group of texts can provide a foundation for pedagogical practices that address questions of representation, inequality, and power. This potential is not limited to texts explicitly associated with marginalized or decolonial perspectives, canonical literary works may also be revisited critically through different interpretive lenses. In this sense, the study emphasizes that a decolonial orientation involves attention to both the texts included in the curriculum and the ways in which they are selected, contextualized, combined, and interpreted.

This study is limited to the selection and textual analysis of the literary corpus and the pedagogical possibilities identified through the analysis. Although the findings subsequently were later used in the design and classroom implementation of a didactic sequence, the implementation itself and students' responses to the activities are not

analyzed or reported in this manuscript. Therefore, the study does not make claims about the effectiveness of the sequence or its effects on students' decolonial learning, perspective transformation, or other learning outcomes. Future research could examine how a critical intercultural approach to literature may contribute to the development of a decolonial perspective among pre-service English teachers, including how they engage with the selected texts, interpret questions of identity and power, and respond to the possibilities and tensions that emerge from these pedagogical practices.

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They and Siya: gender-fair language and the Filipinization of English – a report

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Abstract

The singular *they* in English has been the subject of debate in discussions of gender-fair language. However, Global Englishes have no problems in breaking away from linguistic norms maintained by native speakers of English, such as the case of the Philippines. As the national language, Filipino can be described to be gender neutral—supplemented by its pre-colonial treatment of non-heteronormative people—compared to English, a language uses masculine and feminine pronouns to refer to persons. Since colonial independence, English has evolved into a distinct variety whose defining characteristics have been influenced by Filipino. From this, a possibility of integrating a historically indigenous perspective on gender opens up an opportunity to accept gender-fair language in English. The genderlessness of Filipino places Filipino English speakers in a position to accept gender-fair English into everyday use, both positive directions to decolonization and gender mainstreaming in the country.

Keywords:

Introduction

In recent years, the use of the singular *they* in English has been the subject of multidisciplinary debate as one of the many components of global gender mainstreaming efforts. The generic *he* for referents with unknown or ambiguous genders implied a prevailing male bias when spoken, a problem that they would resolve as a neutral pronoun (Mooney & Evans, 2023). However, despite recognition from English language authorities, there is a present opposition of its use from a prescriptivist point of view. Grammatical inconsistencies, for example, break the established rules and precepts of proper English usage with *they's* status as a plural pronoun (Konnolly et al., 2024). This, nevertheless, can be observed as a problem of the native-speaking population with a history of preferring the generic male pronoun. From the point of view of a speaker of English as a second language (ESL), breaking these norms is as easy as varietizing the language itself; English in the Philippines would be no exception to this challenge.

In this regard of nativizing a formerly subjugating language, the increasing attention towards gender sensitivity in language can strengthen the ownership of English by Filipinos. Aside from sociocultural implications, a perspective that integrates the discussion of gender allows for deeper insight in achieving global ideals for gender equality through a culturally relevant approach. Perhaps, the singular *they* may find better acceptance from speakers who live with the gender-neutral *siya*, alongside other gender-fair reformulations that may already exist in their linguistic repertoire. Gender-fair English can build a bridge towards the further indigenization of the language as it parallels the already genderless Filipino to a greater extent.

Genderless Filipino

Austronesian languages mostly have no gender systems, with the exception of Tagalog solely because of significant Spanish influence in vocabulary (Corbett, 2013). Under the Austronesian language family is the Philippine languages, which themselves have no pronominal gender systems (Dela Cruz, 2023). Aside from the Tagalog *siya*, a third-person epicene singular pronoun, ungendered pronominals can also be found in Bikolano,

Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Ilokano, Kapampangan, and Pangasinense. The absence of significant gender systems in these languages can be adapted into Filipino, a relatively young language initially based off of Tagalog; the Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino (Añonuevo, n.d.) would trace this to former Pres. Manuel Luis Quezon's Executive Order no. 134, s. 1937 as a result of a nationwide survey of Philippine languages for an indigenous basis of the national language. In its current definition since the 1987 Constitution, it is now recognized to be a dynamic language that actively adopts elements of non-Tagalog regional languages and assimilates foreign languages once dominant in the archipelago (Lacsamana, 2021). As the amalgamation of the Philippine languages, Filipino can be described to reflect its general gender neutrality.

Alongside the linguistic context, a diverse sociocultural concept of gender in the Philippines can be traced back to before the Spanish imposition of Catholic heteronormativity. Other than gender classifications of men and women, pre-colonial ethnolinguistic societies had in their vocabularies a wide array of gender-queer terms, most notable are the nominal terms for a male *babaylan* or religious priestess—*bayog*, *bayoguin*, *bayok*, *agi-ngin*, *asog*, *bido*, *binabae*, *balian*, *balean*, *babay*, and *balayan* (Kimuell-Gabriel, 2017). Whether they counted as transgender or just effeminate men, Spanish chroniclers described them as “non-conformist” to strict binary standards of the colonizers (Yarcia et al., 2019). Aside from that specific occupation, other queer indigenous terms include *mentefuwelay libun/lagey* (Teduray equivalents of transgender women and men, respectively) and *lakin-on* and *kuragkuragang* (Visayan for a masculine woman and their partner) (Ildefonso, 2022).

Gender-Fair English

Fast forward to the end of Spanish rule and the aftermath of the Philippine-American War in the early 1900s, American colonizers successfully instilled Western values in the archipelago through introducing English as the medium of instruction. A feature of this new prevalent language was the presence of natural gender. In English, there is a roughly equal partition of masculine and feminine role nouns with equivalent gender-neutral alternatives like ‘husband’, ‘wife’, and ‘spouse’, giving an impression of gender equality at least in the vocabulary (Mooney & Evans, 2023). The alternate pronouns, on the other hand, show a clear division of gender with *he/him/his* pronouns for male referents and *she/her/hers* pronouns for female referents, remnants of the previously grammatically gendered Anglo-Saxon or Old English (Ryan, 2017). Other pronouns are gender-neutral with *it* referring to a singular unsexed inanimate object and *they* for a plural and general pronoun for a group, regardless of gender.

In education, law, economy, and many other disciplines, English planted itself in the Filipino psyche, for better or for worse. As Constantino (2008) observed, in exchange for democracy, modernization, and globalization, the Filipino lost their “soul”. A foreign language became systematically preferred over the pre-colonial languages, something that the Spanish was unable to achieve. In addition to that supplantation, English speakers carried over a reinforcement of an already existing gender disparity as English maintained an image of social inequality and privilege. Filipinos hold a subconscious preference for non-indigenous cultural products and standards of language practice (Gonzales, 2017) while gender-based discrimination also acts as a barrier to this ideal in that the defiance of gender norms invites objectification, shame, guilt, and the justification of violence that lessens openness to gender-based solutions (Valdez et al., 2022). Until recent times, male biases or preferences for masculine nouns and pronouns to refer to ungendered or non-binary referents still exist in English-oriented curricula and textbooks, modernizing gender issues within the classroom between teacher and student (Aguilar-Delavin, 2022; Delavin & Buayan, 2020; Flores & Arandique, 2022). More work needs to be done to resolve enduring societal gender biases and colonial mentality.

Bridge to Indigenization

There is hope for a different direction regarding these issues. Now that Filipino speakers of English are left alone in the presence of native Philippine languages, a persistent indigenization of the English language began in

the country after post-World War II independence. American English drifted into Philippine English, a variety that can be differentiated through phonological, syntactic, and lexical errors that evolved into defining features or Filipinisms (Bautista, 2000). This Filipinized English, like other World Englishes, demonstrate linguistic developments in grammatical construction, accent and pronunciation, and integration of indigenous vocabulary reminiscent of post-colonial language drift (Esquivel, 2019). The consistent indigenization suggests the formation of nativized thought in a once foreign language, rooted in learning a language amidst local cultures and traditions. English became ingrained in Filipino society as yet another tongue to reflect the nuances of the Filipino identity (Lamanilao & Agdana, 2024). So implanted is English that emerging Philippine Englishes are identified, representing diversifications across social and ethnic strata like *conyo* English of well-off urbanites and *yaya* English of working-class maids that reflect separate Filipino realities (Borlongan, 2023). Furthermore, English is frequently paired with Filipino or other regional languages in informal speech, bringing about different -lishes like Taglish (Tagalog and English), Bislish (Bisaya and English), Ilocanglish (Ilokano and English), Ilonglish (Ilonggo and English), and many more (Lambert, 2017). Despite “losing the soul”, local manifestations of culture and tradition persisted and even shaped a foreign language into something distinctly Filipino.

From the possibility of Filipinizing English comes the feasibility of synthesis into an indigenized gender-fair reformulation and acceptance of English. As part of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, achieving gender equality at least in the official languages while enriching the cultural wealth of the country through decolonizing a global language is a massive advantage for the Philippines. There is already a fair amount of gender-fair language research that expresses support in ESL application with advocacies (Montano et al., 2024), study guides (Cabuotan & Lincod, 2025), and pre-service teacher education in general (Cantalejo et al., 2024). The Filipino language side also expresses interest in reforming gender-biased literature and learning materials to better enhance gender education (Dela Peña, 2023) and in indigenizing Western theories on gender and education such as queer theory, childhood studies, critical studies, and critical pedagogy to analyze those materials (Sarce, 2022). Nevertheless, a lack of recognition hovers around the role of the country’s gender-diverse pre-colonial experience which are then not noticed in gender-fair language studies. Maybe, introducing gender as a possible factor in embracing a truly Filipino English can bring into discussion the forgotten past into gender mainstreaming efforts of a language used in various aspects of modern life. This opens opportunities for a real Filipino convergence that keeps up with the rapid pace of gender-sensitive demands brought by modernity.

To a greater extent

The Philippines has ample opportunity to adopt a gender-fair formulation of the English language. Linguistically, Philippine languages do not have gendered pronouns as exemplified in the Filipino *siya* that cannot be translated into the he/she pronoun dichotomy of English. Historically, pre-colonial societies had a very diverse understanding of gender that only disappeared once Western ideas of gender became the prevailing perspective, whether from a Spanish Catholic framework or an American secular viewpoint. The genderless attributes of Filipino that it inherited from its gender-neutral Philippine linguistic ancestors, coupled with a pre-colonial history of recognizing gender diversity, places Filipino English speakers in a position to seamlessly integrate gender-fair English into everyday use that reflects both modern values and indigenous traditions.

However, alongside the direction that Filipinos can take regarding gender and language, certain challenges appear to inhibit this development. Traditional values of heteronormative ideals hold a tight grip in gender-related discourse, influencing any attempts to deviate from what is socially acceptable for the past hundred years. Inferiority towards former colonial masters also reflect in the overt preference of foreign standards and morals instead of looking first into what indigenous knowledge may offer. When these two are resolved, the Philippines can take a significant step towards cultural decolonization and, at the same time, gender equality—through a conquest of the English language and a strong Filipino determination to shape it according to native gender

realities. This shift would ultimately contribute to a more equitable Philippine society with a deep-rooted identity that walks along the forceful currents of rapid globalization.

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The transformative power of tales: fostering language, empathy, and decolonial praxis in education

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Abstract

Storytelling is more than just entertainment; it is a basic cognitive and social process that helps people create meaning and develop critical abilities. This study makes the case that narrative-based practices ought to be acknowledged as a fundamental pedagogical engine that is important for many aspects of human development, including cognitive, social-emotional, and sociopolitical domains. The paper first examines how the brain's innate propensity for narrative promotes causality, critical thinking, and advanced language acquisition, making stories a powerful medium for literacy and self-expression. It draws on research from developmental psychology, literary theory, and educational practice. Second, it explores how narrative fosters empathy and social skills, showing how the mental modeling of characters' experiences serves as a "moral laboratory" for the development of Theory of Mind (ToM). Importantly, the analysis includes a section that makes the case that storytelling is both an act of epistemic justice and a decolonial praxis. The Eurocentric canon and the "danger of a single story" are challenged when marginalized voices and local knowledge systems are prioritized. This makes narrative a potent tool for resistance, identity formation, and systemic change in educational settings. Finally, the paper discusses how the practical implementation of these theoretical insights can be applied practically using evidence-based models, such as the Storytelling/Story-Acting (STSA) practice, mental state-focused reading, and Digital Storytelling (DST). These tactics show how teachers can incorporate narrative to support students' overall development and develop the intercultural competency required for a fair, post-colonial society.

Keywords: *storytelling, decolonial pedagogy, epistemic justice, language acquisition, empathy, narrative cognition, educational practice, intercultural competence*

Introduction

The capacity of stories to unite individuals is significant. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that humanity has always told stories to give meaning to life, culture, and even itself, from cave paintings to current Netflix series. We have been telling stories for ages, and it comes naturally to us. It is the process by which we transmit to the following generations our values, beliefs, and knowledge (O'Byrne et al., 2018; Sartipa et al., 2025). Stories help us feel connected to others and are, in many ways, a part of what makes us human.

Today's schools appear to be a little different. Most of the time, the focus is on tasks that are simple to test, such as math or grammar problems. As a result, we occasionally overlook more imaginative and enjoyable learning methods, such as playing, storytelling, and imagining. In the classroom, teachers also face actual difficulties. Some students, for instance, simply no longer enjoy reading, and some may even be cruel to others (Nurhidayati & Yasmin, 2024). According to one study, bullying by a child may indicate that they have trouble empathizing with others (Rusli et al., 2025, 1).

This study argues that storytelling—whether through books, traditional tales, or digital apps—is far more than just entertainment. It is a powerful and enjoyable way to support the whole child. Stories shape how students think, learn, and interact with the world. When teachers bring storytelling into their lessons, they do not simply teach a subject; they help students develop language, critical thinking, and emotional skills that are useful for both

school and life. As Kucirkova (2019) points out, storytelling is one of the main ways we organize our very thoughts. This is not just about reading and writing; evidence shows that combining stories with inquiry-based learning can even help young children develop scientific skills (Nhase & Dube, 2023).

Therefore, this study will explore how stories build a foundation for language, foster empathy and creativity, and can even be used to include more diverse voices and perspectives in the classroom. Finally, it will present several practical, evidence-based strategies that teachers can use to harness the transformative power of storytelling with their students.

Theoretical background

The cognitive foundation: why narrative is a fundamental mode of human thought

To fully understand the educational benefits of storytelling, we must first look at how the human brain functions. Stories are ingrained in the brain, not just because it enjoys them. Narrative is more than just entertainment; it is one of the fundamental ways we think and try to understand the world around us. One influential idea in narrative theory is the distinction between narrative and computational thinking. Fletcher (2021) argues that computational thinking uses logic and mathematics in a timeless present (e.g., $1 + 1 = 2$), while narrative thinking is grounded in causation—the relationship that unfolds over time between a cause and its effects. This is a basic difference. Narratives are also fundamental because they help us with social cognition; they structure our understanding of the world by developing skills like empathy as we engage with the characters and their stories (Eekhof et al., 2022).

Fletcher and Benveniste (2022) hypothesize that, unlike data-driven computation, the brain's narrative capacity evolved as a survival strategy for coming up with novel solutions and actions in unfamiliar circumstances. In their view, this ability helps the mind envision new futures and look beyond the past. They formulate the contrast with computation as follows:

“Computation operates via mathematical and logical equations that exist in an eternal present tense (e.g., $1 + 1 = 2$ and ‘Bob is that man over there’). The present tense cannot comprehend narrative because (a) narrative is composed of causes and their effects and (b) a cause must temporally precede its effect. If the cause is rendered in the present tense, the effect thus must be rendered in the future; if the effect is rendered in the present, the cause must be rendered in the past.” (p. 32)

Imagination and play

This view of the brain as a storyteller fits with the theories of psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky said that imagination is a crucial function that is necessary for life (Vygotsky, 2004, 13). Smolucha and Smolucha (1986) explain that, according to Vygotsky, imagination begins in children's play and evolves into a uniquely human form of consciousness that emerges from social interactions (p. 3).

The shift from physical play to mental thinking is clear in Vygotsky's famous quote about older children: “Imagination in adolescents and school children is play without action” (Vygotsky, 1933, as cited in Smolucha & Smolucha, 1986, 93). This means that imagination is not just simple fantasy; it is a developed and conscious thought process. Stories and tales give the mind the rich, real-world materials it needs to practice problem-solving and generate new ideas (Vygotsky, 1930/2004, 14, as cited in Tsai, 2012, 16). Narrative is a particularly effective tool for developing particular academic skills, beginning with language and literacy, since it appears to be a natural way for our brains to make sense of experience.

Building the tools for communication: how storytelling boosts language and literacy

The extent to which stories aid students in developing their language skills is among the most obvious and significant benefits of using them in the classroom. Learning to speak and structure ideas more skillfully and

strongly is just as important as learning to read and write. Research suggests that storytelling can have a positive impact on students' language development (Maureen et al., 2022).

1. Giving a boost to speaking skills

According to some experts, stories are excellent for establishing a "rich language environment" (Nurgiantoro, 2018, 89). In essence, it refers to an area where kids can converse and practice language in a relaxed and organic manner. Students have a genuine topic to discuss when they have a story to tell. This gives them more confidence and comfort when they talk. One student said, "I feel more at ease speaking in front of people when we discuss the stories because I know what the story is about" (Nurhidayati & Yasmin, 2024, 265). It is just easier to talk about things you understand.

According to studies, structured storytelling can help improve a child's vocabulary, story comprehension, and speaking skills (Chikamadu et al., 2022; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). In one project, for example, students used scrapbooks to tell their stories, which increased their confidence and clarity (Fellasufah & Mustadi, 2021, 200). Additionally, story-based activities assist students in converting passive vocabulary—words they have only read—into conversational terms. One excellent example is when students create digital stories. To tell it correctly, they need to remember and use certain words, which helps them move from just "knowing them" to actually using them in normal conversation (Gutor et al., 2023).

2. Fostering an early love of reading

Involving children in stories from a young age is a simple and natural way to lay the groundwork for their future reading. For instance, children can use the Storytelling/Story-Acting (STSA) model to write their own stories and then act them out with their peers. It is like a fun game, and they can see the connections between written and spoken words (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). In other words, storytelling helps children communicate more effectively when they read and speak. However, the benefits go beyond oral language. Studies suggest that storytelling activities can improve reading skills. For example, elementary school students who participated in storytelling lessons showed quantifiable improvements in their reading abilities (Chikamadu et al., 2022). But perhaps one of its greatest qualities is that it encourages children to read. It turns reading into something they enjoy rather than a chore. One enthusiastic student said, "...now, I look forward to it because the stories are so fun" (Nurhidayati & Yasmin, 2024, 263).

3. Finding their voice: storytelling as a guide for writing

Another great advantage of stories is that they act as a kind of writing manual. As they analyze different facets of a story, including the plot, the characters, and their problems, students start to learn how to organize their own thoughts. This facilitates others' comprehension of their writing. Digital storytelling tools, which require students to arrange their ideas, make connections between them, and plan their writing before they start, can help to strengthen this process (Sartipa et al., 2025). But writing is more than just grammar and vocabulary. Students learn how to communicate their own ideas and feelings as they follow the thoughts, feelings, and actions of a character. They also start to comprehend other people's emotions more fully. Thus, storytelling enhances students' academic and emotional development by teaching them to write well and bridging the gap between writing and understanding others.

Cultivating empathy and social competence: seeing the world through others' eyes

Stories serve as a safe haven where students can learn about emotions and social life in addition to teaching language. By engaging with narratives, students can examine difficult social situations and envision how various people might feel or respond. This process is key to developing empathy and social-emotional competence (SEL), which are crucial for success both in school and in daily life (Li, 2025). The core of this connection is what

psychologists call cognitive empathy, or the ability to see things from another person's perspective—closely related to Theory of Mind (ToM) (Kucirkova, 2019). When children immerse themselves in a story, they naturally infer what the characters believe, feel, and decide, even when those inner worlds are very different from their own (Wang & Shao, 2025).

For this reason, it is essential for teachers to design activities that allow students to understand and practice empathy. A practical way to do this is through pedagogical approaches like thematic learning, where different subjects are connected through a single, meaningful topic. Studies show that this can be an effective strategy for helping elementary school students develop these critical social abilities (Manda & Arifin, 2024).

This process is especially powerful because it encourages children to care about people who are different from—what researchers call “out-group” characters—those who may come from other cultures or have different experiences (Kucirkova, 2019). Moreover, other studies suggest that reading literary fiction, in particular, helps people strengthen their Theory of Mind (Rusli et al., 2025). By mentally connecting with the inner worlds of story characters, children practice the same skills they need to understand and relate to real people in their daily lives.

Practices and evidence

Educators can use a simple practice called “mental state talk”—openly discussing characters' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs during story time—which has been shown to improve children's Theory of Mind (Wang & Shao, 2025). A growing body of research supports the positive effects of narrative on SEL:

Emotional understanding: Interventions using digital storytelling have improved young learners' ability to correctly identify primary emotions (Khan et al., 2025).

The moral teachings of tales: Children can learn a lot about life and proper conduct from old traditional stories, such as Indonesian folktales. Children learn from these stories why characters behave in particular ways, which encourages them to consider their own behavior. Children can learn and put into practice virtues like responsibility, honesty, and respect through these stories (Kusmana et al., 2020, 104).

Better behavior and social skills: In addition to teaching children language, storytelling also helps them learn how to control their emotions. Storytelling can help children remain calm and play more peacefully with others, according to structured programs like the Storytelling/Story-Acting (STSA) method (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). This suggests that storytelling can help kids learn how to cooperate and get along with their peers.

Developing friendship and confidence: The way that storytelling fosters relationships between kids is perhaps one of its best features. They establish a welcoming and secure environment where anyone can talk and listen when they share stories in a group setting. Students who are shy will benefit the most from this as their confidence grows. “I used to be afraid to talk to the other kids, but after we talk about the stories together, I'm not scared anymore,” one student remarked (Nurhidayati & Yasmin, 2024, 267). Making friends seems simpler these days.

Children learn empathy and social awareness through stories that ask them to view the world through the eyes of a character. Being able to imagine how someone else feels can support both creativity and kindness. In the end, these skills help them not only in the classroom but also prepare them to bravely and creatively face the outside world.

Sparkling the imagination: how stories fuel creativity

Imagination and creativity are not “nice-to-have” or extra skills; they are essential for the mind. Like an exercise, telling stories helps to strengthen these abilities. Participating in stories gives students two important benefits: new ideas and a way to organize their own unique thoughts. Students can try out different situations, think of new solutions to problems, and even use stories to build mental worlds.

Simply imagining a story is creative in many ways. According to Fletcher and Benveniste (2022), narrative cognition helps the brain conceive original actions, which may be especially useful when navigating new or uncertain situations. Vygotsky's theory, which maintained that imagination is much more than daydreaming, is

related to this idea. He claims that it is actually a sophisticated way of thinking that develops through play and evolves as children learn (Smolucha & Smolucha, 1986). Imagination is a mental skill that can be developed and strengthened with the right experiences and activities, according to Vygotsky (1931, 10, as cited in Smolucha & Smolucha, 1986, 4). It is not just a “great fantasy” that people are born with.

Putting it into practice: creative techniques for the classroom

Stories can be a valuable resource for encouraging creativity. Fletcher and Benveniste (2022) propose narrative techniques for training creativity, such as world-building, where learners imagine new settings and the possibilities they open, and action-generating, where they speculate about what might happen when a new character enters a familiar situation. Their program has so far been piloted mainly with adults (military officers, executives, and graduate students), and the authors report expert endorsements rather than experimental data, so its effectiveness remains to be confirmed. Even so, these exercises may support creative thinking beyond writing, and teachers could adapt them for younger students. The settings and characters in stories provide children with the “bricks” they need to build their imaginations. After all, a castle cannot be built without materials, and Vygotsky believed that “imagination builds upon materials supplied by reality” (Vygotsky, 1930/2004, 14, as cited in Tsai, 2012). The following examples illustrate how storytelling can encourage creativity in modern classrooms:

Creative expression: Through pretend play, role-playing, and puppetry, kids can freely explore. They can express their feelings, try out different roles, and solve problems in an enjoyable and secure setting (Li, 2025). For example, it has been shown that the Storytelling/Story-Acting (STSA) approach helps young children to imagine and pretend in new situations (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Even though it might seem like simple play, this is crucial because a child’s early pretend play skills are often linked to their future creativity (Russ, 1998, as cited in Tsai, 2012).

Active creation: Using digital storytelling transforms students from mere listeners into creators. They use their own voices, sounds, and images to construct personal narratives. According to Robin (2008), as cited in O’Byrne et al. (2018) and Sartipa et al. (2025), this process helps them organize their thoughts and express themselves independently and artistically—skills that are essential in today’s world.

Visual imagination: Storytelling stimulates creativity that goes beyond words. “After listening to the stories, I started drawing pictures of the characters and places. I like to imagine what they look like in my head,” one student said (Nurhidayati & Yasmin, 2024, 268). This natural link between drawing and listening enhances students’ imaginations as well as their understanding and recall of the stories.

Taken together, these examples suggest that storytelling can be an effective tool for children’s development, supporting the growth of their minds, language, emotions, and creativity. They are not only theoretical ideas; educators can apply them in practical ways to help students learn and grow in a thorough and balanced way.

Methodology

In order to integrate current pedagogical and psychological research (mainly from 2015–2025) with fundamental theories of cognitive development and creativity, this study uses a qualitative documentary analysis and a narrative literature review. To create a theoretical framework for narrative-based education, the methodology focuses on combining data from developmental psychology, decolonial studies, and applied linguistics. This paper assesses the effectiveness of storytelling as a fundamental pedagogical tool in various educational settings by examining both contemporary evidence-based models (STSA, DST, etc.) and traditional theoretical perspectives on imagination, such as those established by Vygotsky.

Results and discussion

Storytelling as epistemic justice and decolonial practice

Storytelling has the power to change how knowledge and power work in education. It goes beyond just teaching language or creativity. Mafile’o et al. (2022) argue that storytelling is a key tool for decolonizing teaching.

It appears as a necessary response to the discomfort caused by the unquestioning search for scientific “evidence,” which often dehumanizes communities and distances them from their own knowledge. Wiebe (2019) adds that stories are never “just stories.” They are radical tools for social and environmental change, allowing us to intervene in dominant narratives. Decoloniality invites teachers to question the influence of Western thought that still shapes schools today. It opens spaces for perspectives that move away from Eurocentric rationality as the only way of understanding the world.

Challenging the canon

Conventional educational programs usually follow a Western or Eurocentric canon. Bradley (2023) defines this canon as a power-hungry “assemblage” made up of authors, prestigious institutions, and citation metrics that together create academic prestige. This system repeatedly leaves out local or Indigenous perspectives. Bradley and other authors capitalize “Indigenous” to recognize these views as legitimate and specific onto-epistemic frames (ways of being and knowing). Flores et al. (2025) emphasize that, even after political independence, higher education structures remain mostly Western. This invisibilizes the contributions of Indigenous peoples and local heroes.

Decolonial education demands a real change that goes beyond simply adding diverse books to a list. Bradley warns that simple “diversification” can become an administrative task that “tokenizes” or appropriates Indigenous literature without changing the colonial logic underneath. Therefore, we need a systemic reimagination of curriculum design and epistemic authority. This means moving from Eurocentric models toward localized and culturally respectful frameworks.

Stories as counter-narratives and the “art of refusal”

Stories can also serve as counter-narratives that challenge the dominant accounts of power and history (Cruz & Miranda, 2022). By sharing local stories, teachers and students can celebrate their cultures, expose historical injustices, and express different viewpoints (Flores et al., 2025). In this process, Nisa-Waller and Piercy (2024) propose using critical autoethnography to bring identity and “positionality” into the classroom. This allows teachers and students to share their vulnerability and recognize the power structures that have shaped their lives. It helps students understand their place in society and challenge unfair systems.

A powerful concept from Alormele (2025) is “Black joy” and the “art of refusal”—which involves generating happiness and hope in reaction to oppression. These are strategies of survival and radical resistance against institutional indifference and exclusion. This practice is not just an emotional state. It is a political framework that affirms the presence and creativity of marginalized communities. It allows them to refuse colonial norms while imagining more equitable futures.

Stories, place, and belonging

Many decolonial educators use storytelling to reconnect learning with the environment. Sutton et al. (2023) propose a “Place” pedagogy, where the environment is understood as an active teacher, alive and capable of teaching. The connection to the land, rivers, and ancestors builds a sense of community and belonging. It allows students to see education as something that comes from their own reality, not just from books written by others. This approach requires “deep listening” and being attuned to the “shimmer” of life in all its forms, recognizing that place and knowledge cannot be separated.

Storytelling as epistemic justice

From a decolonial perspective, telling stories restores the value of knowledge that has been suppressed or marginalized. It becomes an act of epistemic justice. Sharing cultural and personal stories is a political act that challenges who has the right to speak and be heard, as explained by Denzin (2018, 4, as cited in Nisa-Waller &

Piercy, 2024, 1145). Flores et al. (2025) point out that integrating Indigenous knowledge is not a symbolic act. It is a pedagogical imperative that promotes national identity and cognitive justice. Additionally, storytelling helps dispel “the danger of a single story,” as defined by Adichie (2009, 13m16s, as cited in Cruz & Miranda, 2022, 297), by providing a platform for a variety of voices.

Techniques like “storywork” and community immersion allow us to co-produce knowledge with culture holders. They validate orality and traditions as legitimate research frameworks. Finally, contemporary techniques like digital storytelling allow students to combine voice, image, and memory to share their own truths (Mafille’o et al., 2022). This facilitates intercultural dialogue in postcolonial societies. By reclaiming epistemic space, education becomes a vehicle for liberation and community dignity. It demands that institutions stop seeing the Western way as the universal norm and begin to value the many ways of knowing and being (Flores et al., 2025).

From theory to the classroom: real-world storytelling strategies

After talking about the value of storytelling, let us look at some real-world examples. Research suggests that incorporating stories into the classroom can support learning and development in several areas.

The following four instructional strategies have shown promising results in the studies reviewed:

1. Tell it, then act it out (STSA method)

Vivian Paley developed this well-known method, which blends writing, creativity, and teamwork into a single enjoyable exercise (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). This is how it works: a child tells a story they made up, and the teacher records it exactly as they say it. The young author then selects the actors for each role as the class performs the story together (Maureen et al., 2022). According to research, this activity is beneficial in two key ways. In addition to teaching kids to cooperate, control their emotions, and exercise self-control, it enhances early reading abilities like word recognition and story comprehension (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015).

2. Reading picture books with a focus on feelings

This method makes use of picture books, such as the Elephant and Piggie series, that depict the thoughts and emotions of characters. In order to encourage students to reflect deeply on the characters’ feelings or decisions, the teacher poses questions about them while they are reading (Wang & Shao, 2025). By imagining what it is like to be someone else, children can safely explore empathy and moral understanding during reading time, turning it into a “feelings lab” (Gasser et al., 2022). According to studies, this helps kids develop emotionally and socially in addition to improving their reading comprehension (Wang & Shao, 2025).

3. Learning from other students

Other students can be the best teachers at times. Everyone benefits when older children read to or narrate stories to younger ones. While the younger ones feel inspired and supported by a role model, the older ones acquire self-assurance and leadership skills (Waddington, 2020). In addition to improving literacy, this approach creates a more inclusive and cooperative classroom where students can share and benefit from each other’s knowledge (Waddington, 2020).

4. Digital storytelling (DST)

Storytelling enters the digital era with this method. Students create multimedia stories using text, music, images, and their own voices (Sartipa et al., 2025). Studies report several benefits:

- Greater engagement and motivation (O’Byrne et al., 2018).
- Improved writing quality, including idea organization and vocabulary use (Sartipa et al., 2025).
- It encourages collaboration and understanding between students from different backgrounds (Budiarti & Adar, 2023).
- It improves early literacy and helps students identify and express emotions (Khan et al., 2025; Maureen et al., 2022). Furthermore, DST can also contribute to decolonizing pedagogy by allowing marginalized students to create and share their own narratives and knowledge systems.

Together, these four strategies show that storytelling is much more than just a fun teaching tool. In addition to helping children become better students, they also show how stories can be integrated into the educational process and help them grow into thoughtful, creative, and caring adults.

Conclusion

The research reviewed suggests that telling stories to students can be an important part of their growth and education, not just an extracurricular activity. Because storytelling fits with the way our brains naturally work, it can be a comprehensive way to develop critical skills that support our success in life.

This study argues that narrative plays a central role in human thought and world-making. Stories help us understand cause and effect and encourage us to think of new ideas. From word recognition to the natural application of new vocabulary, the studies reviewed suggest that reading and listening to stories can improve language and reading skills. Because they provide a safe environment for children to observe and comprehend the emotions and viewpoints of others, stories also aid in the development of empathy and social skills. In addition, storytelling awakens imagination and creativity, which are very important for solving problems and creating new things.

Evidence-based approaches like the Storytelling/Story-Acting (STSA) practice, mental state-focused reading, and Digital Storytelling suggest that these benefits are achievable in the classroom. They indicate that when teachers use stories, they can teach the child as a whole person, both emotionally and intellectually. As Nicolopoulou et al. (2015) mention:

“To borrow a formulation used by Lewis (1995) to sum up her study of Japanese preschools, early childhood education is most valuable when it educates both hearts and minds—that is, when it simultaneously promotes the development of socioemotional and intellectual abilities—in effective and mutually reinforcing ways. The findings of the present study indicate that the STSA can help to do this, and therefore can contribute to enhancing school readiness in young children from low-income and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds.” (p. 27).

In today’s fast-changing world, the abilities developed through storytelling such as understanding others, communicating ideas clearly, and thinking creatively are more valuable than ever. When teachers bring narratives into their lessons, they are not only teaching academic content; they are preparing students with the skills and values they need to face and transform the challenges of the future.

Albert Einstein, whose words serve as a final reminder of the crucial connection between human progress and imagination, may have best captured the ultimate value of this endeavor:

“I am enough of the artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.” (Viereck, 1929, 117)

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Translanguaging in action: a single case study of pedagogical acts in a newcomer classroom

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Abstract

In response to the growing need for equity in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, this single-case study investigates how a middle school ESL teacher in a rural Midwestern setting enacted decolonial and situated language approaches — specifically pedagogical translanguaging and Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI) — to support newcomer students in diverse classrooms, fostering equity, inclusiveness, engagement and intercultural competence. Centering students’ biopsychosocial histories, the teacher integrated dynamic, contextual translanguaging and BDI strategies to challenge monolingual, deficit-based paradigms, legitimize students’ cultural backgrounds and full linguistic repertoires, and cultivate equitable, inclusive learning spaces where language, identity, and academic content converge. Three central themes emerge: (1) navigating ideological tensions between prescribed curricular structures and asset-based, humanizing education; (2) reimagining instructional patterns through intentional and strategic translanguaging as decolonial and identity-affirming praxis; and (3) transforming BDI-informed translanguaging practices to empower student voices and choices while promoting engagement, academic rigor, and learner agency. Findings demonstrate how strategic, intentional translanguaging affirms learner identities, fosters engagement and academic rigor, enhances linguistic development, and promotes social-emotional wellbeing. The study also highlights tensions between curriculum expectations and culturally responsive teaching, and the complexities of implementing translanguaging and BDI within monolingual ideologies and limited institutional support. This study offers practical insights into culturally responsive instruction and curriculum design that weave language, content and social-emotional learning, positioning translanguaging as both a curricular stance and a transformative tool for reimagining newcomer education through decolonial, asset-oriented, biography-informed, and humanizing practices.

Keywords: *translanguaging, Biography-Driven Instruction, pedagogical translanguaging, strategic translanguaging, newcomers, cultural responsiveness, relevance of instruction*

Introduction

The increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in K-12 public schools across the United States necessitates comprehensive teacher preparation, ongoing professional development and responsive instructional approaches to meet the multifaceted needs of Emergent Multilingual Learners (EMLs), especially newcomer students who are simultaneously navigating linguistic, academic and sociocultural transitions. Newcomer students arrive with complex biographies shaped by migration experiences, multilingual repertoires, and diverse educational trajectories. Despite these rich resources, newcomer programs in the U.S. have historically operated under deficit-oriented paradigms, positioning EMLs as linguistically and academically disadvantaged due to limited English proficiency (Elshafie & Zhang, 2024). These programs often prioritize rapid English acquisition and expedited program exit, overlooking the rich linguistic, cultural, and cognitive assets that multilingual learners bring to the classroom.

Traditional English as a Second Language (ESL) programs frequently emphasize monolingual English development and standardized curricular expectations, leaving limited space for students’ lived linguistic practices and sociocultural knowledge. As a result, recent arrivals are mainly placed in classrooms that lack the scaffolding necessary to support meaningful access to grade-level curriculum (Kalocsányiová, 2017). Consequently, these

students are likely to experience marginalization, reduced access to rigorous instruction, and diminished opportunities for identity affirmation, and a weakened sense of belonging within the school context.

Such educational conditions are not incidental but are deeply rooted in historical ideologies of language and schooling. Monolingualism has long functioned as both an educational norm and a political project, particularly within school systems shaped by colonial language hierarchies and assimilationist ideologies (Li, 2023). Traditional models of bilingual education have often conceptualized language learning through additive frameworks that view languages as separate and bounded systems to be acquired alongside one another (Cummins, 2000). However, recent sociolinguistic scholarship challenges these assumptions by arguing that multilingual individuals draw upon integrated and dynamic linguistic repertoires to make meaning across contexts (García & Li, 2014; Li & García, 2022). From this perspective, languages are not discrete and autonomous systems but interconnected resources that multilingual learners use fluidly in communication and learning.

Translanguaging theory emerges from this reconceptualization of multilingual language practices. Translanguaging refers to the dynamic and strategic use of a learner's full linguistic repertoire to communicate, construct meaning, and engage in learning (García & Li, 2014; García et al., 2017). Rather than viewing multilingualism as interference or deficiency, translanguaging recognizes multilingual language practices as valuable semiotic resources that enable learners to cognitively engage with academic content and social interaction. Within ESL and newcomer classrooms, translanguaging pedagogies have been shown to enhance comprehension, facilitate content learning and foster collaborative, humanizing learning environments in which students' linguistic knowledge becomes a shared resource rather than a barrier (García et al., 2017).

While translanguaging provides a powerful theoretical lens for reframing multilingual language education, its pedagogical potential is further strengthened when incorporated with instructional frameworks that center students' lived experiences. Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI) (Herrera, 2010, 2016, 2022) offers such a framework by foregrounding learners' biopsychosocial histories as central to instructional planning and classroom practice. Rooted in the concepts of funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018), BDI situates students' identities, languages, cultural experiences, and migration histories as essential resources and as a springboard for teaching and learning. Rather than treating these experiences as supplemental to academic instruction, BDI encourages teachers to intentionally connect academic content to students' biopsychosocial histories in order to support rigorous learning and meaningful classroom participation. Through strategies that leverage students' linguistic and cultural assets, BDI promotes instructional practices that foster engagement, belonging, and agency among multilingual learners.

Although translanguaging and biography-driven frameworks have been widely discussed in multilingual education scholarship, limited studies have closely examined how these frameworks are enacted through everyday pedagogical practices in newcomer classrooms. Understanding how teachers intentionally and strategically leverage students' full linguistic repertoires and biopsychosocial histories in real classrooms therefore remains an important inquiry. This study addresses this gap through a qualitative single-case study that examines how biography-informed translanguaging practices function as pedagogical acts within a newcomer ESL classroom. Specifically, this study explores how these translanguaging practices support students' access to comprehension and academic mastery while affirming their linguistic and cultural identities and sustaining their engagement in learning.

Research purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to examine how one middle school newcomer teacher strategically and purposefully enacts pedagogical translanguaging and BDI to support her students. Pedagogical translanguaging and BDI serve as both pedagogical approaches and theoretical frameworks that guide this study, providing a lens for the analysis of the teacher's decision-making. Specifically, the study explores how translanguaging, informed

by students' biopsychosocial histories, shape instructional patterns, student engagement, and academic rigor. The following research questions guide this study:

1. What translanguaging practices are enacted by the teacher when designing and delivering instruction for newcomer students?
2. How do these translanguaging practices reflect the biopsychosocial histories of the newcomer students?
3. What functions do these translanguaging moments serve in fostering an inclusive classroom ecology?

Theoretical background

Translanguaging, both as a theoretical framework and pedagogical approach, offers a compelling alternative for opening inclusive learning spaces by acknowledging learners' full linguistic repertoires and leveraging their prior experiences and identities regardless of educational context (García & Li, 2014). The concept 'translanguaging' originated in the context of Welsh language revitalization (Williams, 1994) where it was initially used to describe pedagogical practices that encouraged students to use multiple languages for learning and communication in daily life. Later, informed by related concepts such as *linguaging* (Swain, 2006) and *multicompetence* (Cook & Wei, 2016), translanguaging evolved into a practical theory of communication and cognition that transcends disciplinary and linguistic boundaries (Li, 2018).

Over the past decade, translanguaging has become one of the most influential concepts in applied and sociolinguistics with focus on its pedagogical applications, theoretical foundations and/or associated classroom practices (García & Li, 2014; Li, 2018). Importantly, translanguaging is more than just code-switching; it refers to "the dynamic and functionally integrated use of different languages and language varieties, but more importantly a process of knowledge construction that goes beyond language(s)" (Li, 2018, 15). Translanguaging recognizes meaning-making occurs as multilingual individuals orchestrate multiple linguistic and semiotic systems—multisensory and multimodal—toward the fluid integration of diverse skills and resources within a single communicative event (Li, 2018; Zhu et al., 2020). During communication, a translanguaging space is "created by and for translanguaging practices" (Li, 2011, 1223), where learners' histories, identities, ideologies, experiences and cognitive capacities converge. This space enables language users to integrate various dimensions of their personal histories, lived experiences, environments, beliefs, ideologies, linguistic resources, and cognitive capacities into coherent and purposeful communication. Therefore, translanguaging practices embody identity construction, knowledge representation, subjectivity expression while also fostering spontaneous acts of creativity and criticality in meaning-making processes (Li, 2018, 2022).

García's foundational work on 'translanguaging' (2009) underscores the importance of incorporating students' first languages (L1) into classroom instruction (García & Li, 2014). Extensive research has since documented the pedagogical benefits of translanguaging ranging from leveraging learners' full linguistic repertoires to support academic learning (García et al., 2017) to increasing multilingual students' engagement and improving learning outcomes (Uddling & Warren, 2023). Translanguaging practices have also been shown to enhance meaning-making processes and affirm students' linguistic and cultural identities (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022), while also expanding peer interaction and collaboration in multilingual classrooms (Tai & Dai, 2023).

Pedagogical translanguaging is a theoretical and instructional approach that aims to improve language and content competences in school contexts by drawing on resources from the learner's whole linguistic repertoire. Studies across multiple disciplines have documented its effectiveness in supporting students' academic development in science (Fine & Braaten, 2024; Uddling & Warren, 2023), social studies (Schlepppegrell et al., 2024), English language arts (González & Machado, 2022; Hansen-Thomas et al., 2020), and social-emotional learning (Song et al., 2022). Collectively, these studies illustrate the power of pedagogical translanguaging to increase student engagement and promote learners' social-emotional wellbeing, language development and academic outcomes. Although researchers advocate the inclusion of students' L1 in classroom learning (Cummins, 2017), questions remain about how teachers can best enact translanguaging practice within classroom interaction and

instructional decision-making (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2020). Further research is also needed on how translanguaging functions in social and relational dimensions of classroom community (Poza, 2019).

Despite the growing body of literature on pedagogical translanguaging, relatively little research has investigated how teachers enact translanguaging in newcomer ESL classrooms, particularly in rural Midwestern contexts. This study addresses that gap by exploring how a middle school newcomer ESL teacher reimagines the educational space and disrupts the traditional paradigms of language instruction by responding to students' trajectories through culturally and linguistically responsive practices grounded in students' *'biopsychosocial histories'* (Herrera, 2022). Students' biopsychosocial histories — including their identities, migration experiences, languages, and prior educational backgrounds — inform instructional decision-making that acknowledges and leverages learners' assets to advance learning. Anchored in Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI) (Herrera, 2010, 2016, 2022), the teacher intentionally deconstructs instructional models that have historically placed multilingual students at a disadvantage. Through the strategic use of pedagogical translanguaging, she fosters student engagement, supports academic development, and attends to learners' social-emotional well-being. By centering learners' full identities, lived experiences and intellectual capacities, the teacher challenges deficit-based models of language education. Translanguaging is thus utilized as a pedagogical tool to empower students to reach their academic potential while attending to the full scope of their identities, histories, and intellectual capabilities.

Through pedagogical translanguaging, the teacher reimagines newcomer students as capable and resourceful learners while orchestrating meaningful student engagement with prescribed curriculum. However, it is important to note that the theoretical frameworks adopted here are not presented as unproblematic or universally effective. Translanguaging and BDI operate within institutional structures that continue to privilege monolingual norms and high-stakes accountability. The present study therefore examines not only the affordances of these approaches but also the ideological and practical tensions that arise when a teacher attempts to enact them inside a prescribed curriculum.

Methodology

Case study

A qualitative single-case study (Yin, 2018) was designed to examine how one middle school ESL teacher enacted pedagogical translanguaging informed by Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI) in a newcomer classroom. The single-case approach was selected to allow for an in-depth, contextualized analysis of everyday pedagogical decision-making and classroom interaction within a specific institutional and demographic setting. The case was embedded within a larger longitudinal ethnographic project conducted across eight elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school in a rural Midwestern school district located near large-scale farming, ranching, and beef-packing industries. The district's student population was predominantly Hispanic (82%), followed by White (14%), African American (1.7%), and Multiracial (1.5%). Newcomer enrollment remained relatively stable each year due to ongoing migration patterns.

From the larger pool of participating educators, one teacher was purposefully selected as the focal participant because of her extensive experience working with newcomer students and her documented use of BDI strategies. The unit of analysis was the teacher's instructional practices and the classroom interactional ecology she co-constructed with her students.

Research context and participant

The focal classroom was a middle school sheltered ESL English Language Arts (ELA) class serving recently arrived newcomer students who were simultaneously navigating linguistic, academic, and sociocultural transitions. The class included 15 students in grades 7-8. The primary first languages (L1) included Spanish and Indigenous Central American Languages such as K'iche and Mam as well as African languages (including Swahili), Kichwa, and Farsi. Most students had been in the United States for less than two years. Instruction was delivered

primarily in English, with the teacher drawing strategically on Spanish and multimodal resources to support comprehension and participation. The class operated as a sheltered English setting within a larger middle school that also served longer-term multilingual students.

The teacher participant, referred to by the pseudonym Ms. Dolores, is a bilingual educator fluent in Spanish and English. Her own biopsychosocial history includes seasonal migration and multiple relocations during childhood. She began her career as a paraeducator supporting newcomer students for five to six years, later worked as a substitute teacher in newcomer settings, and subsequently completed her bachelor's degree in order to gain greater instructional autonomy. At the time of the study she has been working at the school for approximately eight to ten years in various roles and was teaching full-time in the newcomer program. Her personal and professional trajectory informed an ideological stance toward asset-based, humanizing pedagogy and a willingness to negotiate prescribed curriculum in light of students' linguistic and cultural resources—a stance examined in detail in the Results section.

Data collection

Data were collected over 16 weeks in Spring 2025 during the 2024-2025 school year through multiple complementary sources to enable triangulation: class observations, semi-structured interviews, classroom discourse transcripts and student artifacts.

Three full-class observations were conducted and each lasted approximately 80 minutes. Observations focused on instructional design, language use, teacher-student interaction, and student engagement. Detailed field notes were taken, and selected segments of classroom discourse were audio-recorded (with consent) and later transcribed, with timestamps retained to preserve sequential context. Two individual interviews were conducted with Ms. Dolores (totaling approximately 100 minutes). Interview protocols explored her pedagogical decision-making, her understanding of students' biopsychosocial histories, her enactment of BDI strategies, and the tensions she navigated between mandated curriculum and asset-oriented practice. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Verbatim transcripts of key instructional episodes (including teacher prompts, student responses in Spanish and English, and collaborative talk) were generated from the audio recordings. Additional artifacts included student-generated notes, Linking Language charts, vocabulary sheets, and other multimodal products produced during observed lessons.

Together these data sources allowed the research team to examine both the teacher's stated rationales (interview data) and the actual enactment of translanguaging practices in real time (observation and discourse data).

Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded in iterative stages. First, observation field notes and transcripts were reviewed to identify discrete instructional episodes that contained transparent instances of pedagogical translanguaging. These episodes were time-stamped and excerpted for closer examination. Second, In Vivo coding (Stringer, 2014) was applied to preserve participants' own language and perspectives. Third, pattern coding (Saldaña, 2013) was used to group recurring practices and tensions into larger categories. Fourth, focused coding (Saldaña, 2013) refined these categories into the three overarching, analytic themes presented in the Results section: (1) navigating ideological tensions, (2) reimagining instructional patterns, and (3) transforming BDI-informed translanguaging practices.

Throughout the process, analytic memos documented emerging interpretations and explicit links between data excerpts and the three research questions. Particular attention was paid to Research Question 2 (how translanguaging practices reflected students' biopsychosocial histories) by tracing concrete connections the teacher made to students' prior knowledge, cultural references, migration-related experiences, and preferred modes of expression. Small analytic vignettes were then constructed to illustrate the strategic yet organically

occurring nature of the teacher's translanguaging practices while retaining the sequential and interactional texture of classroom events.

Subjectivity of the researchers

The three authors bring diverse ethnocultural backgrounds (Asian, Caucasian, and Hispanic/Latina) and extensive professional experience supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students, including newcomers. Two authors are bilingual (Spanish and Chinese as heritage languages); the third is a native English speaker with intermediate Spanish proficiency. One author was working directly with newcomer students at the time of the study. One author has taught in ESL/EFL contexts and one holds administrative experience at the secondary level. Two researchers led primary data collection; all three participated in analysis and interpretation. The team remained reflexive about how their own linguistic and professional histories shaped both data collection and analytic decisions.

Assurance of confidentiality and ethical issues

Given that this qualitative study involved human participants, the researchers followed the established standards of ethical conduct and ensured the protection of participant's identity and well-being. Appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to the start of the study, and informed consent form was secured from the participant. The research site, all individuals, and any affiliated institutions were not revealed; a pseudonym was used for the participant to protect anonymity. The participant was informed that she could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and was encouraged to raise any questions or concerns throughout the research process. We approached the participant's lived experiences with respect and care, acknowledging the integrity of her voice and interpreting her narratives without judgement. In alignment with Creswell's (2007) guideline of "giving back to the participant for their time and efforts" (p. 44), we expressed sincere gratitude for the participant's willingness to share her experiences with BDI-informed translanguaging practices. Furthermore, we remained attentive to the participant's health, emotional well-being, and intercultural sensitivity.

Results and analysis

The findings shed light on how one middle school newcomer teacher, Ms. Dolores, enacted Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI) and pedagogical translanguaging within a newcomer classroom. Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observation field notes, and time-stamped discourse transcripts: (1) navigating ideological tensions between prescribed structures and asset-based, humanizing education; (2) reimagining instructional patterns through intentional and strategic translanguaging; and (3) transforming BDI-informed translanguaging practices: pathways to empower student voices and choices, promote engagement, rigor, and agency.

In this study, *humanizing education* refers to instructional practices that treat students as whole persons whose linguistic, cultural, emotional, and intellectual resources are recognized as central to learning rather than as deficits to be remediated (Bartolomé, 1994; Salazar, 2013; Peercy et al., 2025). Consistent with recent scholarship on humanizing pedagogies for multilingual learners, such practices center the resources of students and their families, position learners as subjects rather than objects of instruction, and challenge institutional structures that constrain educational decision-making about multilingual students (Peercy et al., 2025; Peercy et al., 2024). Humanizing practices therefore include intentional efforts to affirm identity, invite multimodal expression, connect academic content to students' lived experiences, value what students can do with the cultural and linguistic resources they bring, promote respectful and trusting teacher-student relations alongside academic

rigor, and create low-risk environments in which students can participate using the full range of their communicative resources (Salazar, 2013; Viesca & Commins, 2025).

Navigating ideological tensions: prescribed structures versus asset-based, humanizing education

One central theme was the teacher's navigation of ideological tensions between a standardized, often monolingual curriculum and her commitment to an asset-oriented, humanizing pedagogy for newcomer students. These tensions were shaped by her own biopsychosocial history and were addressed through deliberate advocacy of BDI strategies within prescribed structures.

Teacher's biopsychosocial history as ideological positioning

Field notes and interview data documented that Ms. Dolores is a bilingual educator whose personal history includes seasonal migration and multiple relocations across states. She grew up watching her parents struggle with language barriers so she wanted to make an impact — big or small — in every student that crossed her path. In an interview she explained how this history positioned her against deficit-oriented institutional norms,

I was a para for newcomers first...until I decided to become a substitute teacher with newcomers... then I decided to go back to school and get my bachelor's. I worked with newcomers and right now I'm still with the newcomers. I wanted to go back to school because as a para, you see the needs. But you are just a para. You don't get to decide what to do. You don't get to decide, like what strategies to use or how to modify that...So going back to school, I knew that I will have a curriculum, but I will get to decide how to teach them... I love newcomer students. They come to the country and they want to learn. They are open and they bring so much different variety of cultures. You know it's just... being able to help them adjust to this country.

(Interview data)

This narrative reveals an ideological stance that frames newcomer students as culturally rich, motivated, and intellectually capable — an asset-based perspective that stands in contrast to deficit-oriented, mandated curriculum. Rather than accepting a deficit view of limited English proficiency, Ms. Dolores positioned herself as an agent who would negotiate prescribed curriculum in order to acknowledge students' assets. Her earlier experiences of limited professional autonomy shaped her commitment to leveraging the resources that newcomer students bring to the classroom, informed her strategic use of translanguaging as a tool to support newcomer students in navigating unfamiliar linguistic, cultural, and educational system, and further strengthened her determination to exercise pedagogical agency once she became a certified teacher.

Advocating the use of BDI within curricular constraints

Classroom observations and interview data show that Ms. Dolores treated BDI as a purposeful, practical response to the ideological tension between fixed standards and asset-based, student-centered practice. A concrete manifestation of this tension was the pacing guide. As a relatively new classroom teacher, she initially feared falling behind,

I think, at first, I was just struggling with the pacing guide... I don't want to fall behind or not be into, especially as a new teacher. I don't want to get in trouble... But I don't find it a challenge anymore. I just like it's a necessity. It's something that I'm going to do. And if it makes me fall behind, we will find a way to get back on track... I like [the strategies], I'll implement them in anything.

(Interview data)

Instead of positioning herself opposing to the standard curriculum, she contrasted her stance with that of some longer-serving colleagues, who, in her observation, maintained more rigid, one-size-fits-all approaches,

Probably the simplest thing [is to] just get to know your students, have that willingness to change, because a lot of teachers that have been teaching for years do not have that willingness to change and to adapt to the new people coming in, you know, the new languages coming in, they feel like they don't know.

(Interview data)

Here 'a lot of teachers' refers to colleagues she observed who resisted adaption. Her 'willingness to change' reflected an ideological commitment to biography-informed instruction rather than mere curricular flexibility.

She also illustrated how BDI strategies allowed her to reconstruct prescribed content. For her, knowing students' linguistic and cultural biographies was a prerequisite for rigorous instruction. Referring to the 'Linking Language' activity during an interview, she stated,

If I was just to go off curriculum, I don't think students would learn. I have to implement something. That's why I like the [BDI strategy] ---- 'Linking Language', because it's hands on, you know, and they're moving around... and I can ask them questions. ¿Por qué piensas eso? ¿Y qué está pensando aquí? [Why do you think that? And what is he/she thinking here?] So you know and a lot of them are able to explain... and then I'll explain: ¿Recuerdas cuando viste esta foto? ¡Oh sí sí sí! [Do you remember when you saw this photo? Oh yes, yes, yes!]... it's always... it keeps their brain moving.

(Interview data)

Here the tension is not simply framed curriculum versus care, but about a deconstruction and reconstruction of prescribed curriculum through biography-informed design. Ms. Dolores described the BDI strategy 'linking the language' activity as a 'tool in the hand' to initiate conversations and inquiry, inviting students to move, ask questions and translanguage with prompts such as *¿Por qué piensas eso? Y qué está pensando aquí?* Through doing various translanguaging activities, she explained she was able to 'get more out of it than just teaching the vocabulary'. Such translanguaging practices thus made the curriculum content more interactive, cognitively engaging and relevant to their lived experiences rather than vocabulary-focused drill practice and compliance. Together, these practices expanded opportunities for meaning-making, critical thinking, and authentic participation.

Observation field notes confirmed that during Linking Language activities students physically moved, pointed to images, and responded in Spanish or mixed Spanish–English while Ms. Dolores prompted them in both languages. These moments transformed vocabulary instruction from passive reception into interactive meaning-making grounded in students' prior visual and experiential knowledge. Through BDI strategies and BDI-informed translanguaging, she further argued that investing time in students' biographies increased rather than decreased instructional efficiency,

I feel like that [Linking Language] activity in itself brings out the best in every student, you know, in different ways, but it brings out the highest level... I feel like BDI makes it easier in the end for you to teach...if you take that time to get to know the kids.

(Interview data)

Finally, Ms. Dolares extended the value of BDI beyond the newcomer classroom,

I wish everybody would do [BDI] strategies... It does not just benefit newcomers. It does not just benefit the bilinguals. It benefits all of those students... It helps everybody, it helps all of the kids.

(Interview data)

Collectively, the interview and observational data demonstrate that Ms. Dolores treated BDI not as an add-on but as a strategic means of negotiating ideological tensions while sustaining academic rigor, expanding student engagement, increasing cognitive complexity, elevating instructional effectiveness and promoting academic outcomes. By framing BDI as being beneficial to all learners, Ms. Dolores challenged the positioning of newcomer supports as a temporary intervention and repositioned biography-driven instruction as both a pedagogical approach and a practical strategy for navigating instructional constraints while sustaining a student-centered,

asset-based, and humanizing learning environment. In alignment with Herrera et al. (2017), her consistent implementation of BDI strategies addressed students' biopsychosocial realities and cultivated a classroom culture that has the transformative power to affirm identities, intensify engagement and elevate cognitive rigor. Meanwhile, this finding extends the literature by situating BDI within broader systemic power dynamics, illustrating how teachers can employ biography-driven practices as a strategic negotiation of ideological tensions between standardized curriculum and humanizing education.

Reimagining instructional patterns: intentional and strategic translanguaging as decolonial praxis and identity-affirming practices

Across observed lessons, Ms. Dolores systematically and strategically utilized both instructional translanguaging (teacher-initiated use of students' full linguistic repertoire to make content accessible) and interactional translanguaging (responsive use of Spanish and English during classroom dialogue). These practices reflected deep responsiveness to students' biopsychosocial histories and linguistic repertoires, positioning language as a resource and/or an asset rather than a barrier.

Strategic use of instructional and interactional translanguaging

In one observed lesson, newcomer students engaged with an English-language narrative text (preceded by a short video the previous day) through a blend of strategic questioning, guided discussion and purposeful translanguaging. Ms. Dolores began by activating prior knowledge. The lesson focused on comprehension of story elements and academic vocabulary. Classroom discourse transcript (5:12-7:58) shows the following sequence. Teacher asked, "*What did you understand from the video?*" Students responded primarily in Spanish; and their responses were affirmed rather than corrected. Then the teacher reformulated key ideas in English. She continued with experiential prompts, "*In what situation will you get bored? What happened when you get bored? What do you do when you get bored?*" Students offered single English words and elaborated in Spanish, demonstrating partial comprehension and meaningful participation.

When giving procedural instructions in English, brief Spanish clarifications were strategically incorporated as needed, rather than as absolute translation, when students' facial expressions or incomplete responses indicated potential misunderstanding. This intentional use of translanguaging created space for students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires to access content and engage with instruction. As the lesson progressed (8:00-10:02), Ms. Dolores used the five W's to scaffold students' recall of story details and deepen comprehension. During the subsequent reading segment (10:03-13:20), she seamlessly alternated languages while connecting story content (canned food, cooking) to students' everyday experiences. Field notes recorded that students' participation increased once these experiential links were made, and several students volunteered extended responses in Spanish that demonstrated comprehension of the English text.

By linking academic material to familiar contexts, Ms. Dolores fostered cognitive engagement and conceptual accessibility, creating a supportive learning ecology where language functioned as a bridge rather than a barrier. These patterns illustrate instructional translanguaging used to scaffold access and interactional translanguaging used to validate and extend student contributions. Her dynamic and reciprocal use of translanguaging practices affirmed the value of students' first languages (L1) and cultures as resources for building linguistic proficiency and academic competency.

Intentional and student-initiated collaborative translanguaging

Later in the same lesson (27:02 onward), Ms. Dolores prompted students to move from verbal explanation to written production, "*Remember the first time...? You explained it earlier. Now can you write it?... Today, new information*" (27:23). During small group work (27:45), students asked vocabulary-related questions in Spanish. Ms. Dolores first responded in Spanish to secure comprehension, then restated the explanation in English,

modeling purposeful bilingual mediation. From 28:03 to 29:10, students used tablets to add notes to a shared linking language chart, predominantly in Spanish, demonstrating engagement with academic tools and content. At 29:50, Ms. Dolores regrouped students and directed them to compare responses with new partners. Field notes and transcript excerpts show students moving between groups, reading one another's notes, and adding further comments—again largely in Spanish—while remaining on task. When Ms. Dolores joined groups, she posed reflective questions in English; students replied in Spanish yet completed the academic task accurately, indicating that comprehension and cognitive engagement were not dependent on English-only production.

The seamless integration of translanguaging, technology and peer collaboration created a space where student voices were honored, student agency was intensified and flexible language use was supported. These documented sequences validated students' full linguistic identities while supporting academic learning, indicating that translanguaging was both teacher-orchestrated and student-initiated, fostering a classroom ecology where flexible language use enhanced conceptual understanding and sustained participation.

Transforming BDI-Informed translanguaging practices: pathways to empower voices and choices, promote engagement, rigor and agency

Understanding students' lived experiences is essential for creating culturally responsive, equitable and empowering learning environments. When translanguaging was explicitly informed by students' biographies, it functioned as more than a linguistic scaffold; it becomes a means of amplifying student voice, increasing engagement, maintaining academic rigor, and fostering agency.

Translanguaging informed by students' biographies empowers their voices and choices

At 23:50 in an observed lesson, Ms. Dolores introduced the academic vocabulary item *"excruciatingly."* A student first offered an incorrect Spanish definition. Rather than correcting the student immediately, Ms. Dolores activated a shared cultural reference, *"Remember there was a soccer player?"* (24:22). This reference immediately captured students' attention and created an emotional connection. Students' facial expressions shifted to recognition; one student responded in Spanish. Ms. Dolores affirmed the response and clarified, *"Something that feels really bad? Yeah, like really, really bad pain! You remember it because of the picture."* She then introduced the word *"catastrophic"* (25:11). When a student volunteered *"earthquake"* in English as an example, she validated the example and supplied a brief Spanish explanation to ensure full comprehension across languages.

These moments indicate how translanguaging and familiar references can help bridge students' lived experiences with academic vocabulary, enhancing comprehension and engagement. In a subsequent interview, Ms. Dolores articulated the underlying principle,

I've learned to look at what everybody brings to the table. Like which class is capable of doing this. Which class I can push to do this extra... with the curriculum I have to hit certain targets still. But I'm able to make it my own and make it their own, you know, to where they are. Just...make them feel comfortable and using the information that they know to bring it back to the story, to relate it back to what we're learning... That's how they remember.

(Interview data)

The classroom episode and the interview reflection together show how biography-informed translanguaging positioned students' prior knowledge and cultural references as legitimate entry points into academic vocabulary, thereby expanding the range of voices that could contribute meaningfully and cultivating a classroom community where language, identity, and learning were deeply intertwined.

Translanguaging informed by students' biographies promotes engagement, rigor and agency

Interview and observation data indicate that BDI-informed translanguaging broadened student participation by acknowledging students' biographies and legitimizing multiple modes of expression. Ms. Dolores observed,

It just opens up that door for them to participate more...I feel like linking language has benefited all of my students, whether they can speak the language, whether they can draw me a picture, whether they can express themselves in whatever way they want.

(Interview data)

Ms. Dolores' practice demonstrated that when students are invited to speak, draw, and freely express themselves, communication extends beyond linguistic interaction to include all possible meaning-making forms. This asset-driven approach valued multilingual learners' full repertoires, allowing them to use various formats such as language, pictures, and other representations that made sense to them as valid pathways for constructing meaning. Providing such flexibility in knowledge production validated students' identities and significantly increased engagement. This finding resonates with Herrera's (2022) assertion that utilizing BDI along with validation of learners' first languages (L1) and lived experiences informs and enriches all forms of communication within school contexts.

Ms. Dolores further described allowing students to write in Farsi or Swahili on Linking Language charts and then asking them to explain: "Now what does this say?" —sometimes attempting to repeat the words herself, eliciting laughter and relationship-building. While students naturally transitioned between languages without worrying about being judged, academic rigor remained central to Ms. Dolores' instruction. Success was not simply confined to standardized test score or English-only production, but defined by students' comprehension and ability to apply knowledge. Ms. Dolores shared,

At the end of the day, they're language learners, English language learners, if they can understand from notes and from text that they have pictures that they've drawn, sentences that they've made, if they can understand that, comprehend that, to use it on a test, I feel like that's a win.

(Interview data)

Field notes confirmed that students frequently combined spoken Spanish or English with drawings and written notes on Linking Language charts. From her description, students were able to transfer their notes, texts, and personal representations when they were preparing for tests. Comprehension is prioritized over rote memorization. Multiple forms of student artifacts functioned as reliable scaffolding for conceptual understanding rather than multiple choices on standardized assessments. Translanguaging thus enabled access to rigorous learning without lowering the academic standards. Eventually, increased learner agency became visible both in student behavior and in the teacher's reflection on the shift from teacher-directed to student-generated meaning-making. Ms. Dolores stated,

I think it makes a big impact in moving forward with their own learning. Oh, I can produce this. So next time they want to tell me what they think, next time they want to tell me what it means... their involvement becomes a lot bigger once they're producing their own stuff... compared to when I tell them, oh pues escriben esto [oh well, write this], you know, now what do you think this means?

(Interview data)

A concrete example of agency emerged through flexible grouping. Ms. Dolores described a student (Annalise) who was highly capable yet slow in reading and writing and initially appeared withdrawn. After the teacher and a colleague observed background knowledge and participation patterns and reconfigured groups, the student assumed a leadership role,

Now she's like the leader... She will raise her hand... She understands everything I'm telling her... We've seen a big difference in the way she... in what she's producing, how much she's participated and how much help she's providing everybody else now.

(Interview data)

Shifting from teacher-centered instruction to student-generated responses redistributed teacher authority and positioned multilingual learners as active knowledge contributors. Collectively, the data show that when

translanguaging was anchored in students' biographies, the classroom ecology shifted toward greater student ownership of learning while preserving cognitive demand.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study address the three research questions by demonstrating how Biography-informed translanguaging shaped instructional practices and classroom ecology for newcomer students.

Firstly, the teacher strategically enacted both instructional and interactional translanguaging through flexible language use across students' first and second language (L1 and L2), bilingual explanations, multimodal resources, and opportunities for students to interact through speaking, writing, and visual representation. These practices, documented in classroom discourse transcripts and observations field notes, align with translanguaging pedagogy that perceives multilingual learners' full linguistic repertoires as valuable resources for meaning-making and engagement (García & Li, 2014; Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025).

Second, these translanguaging practices reflected students' biopsychosocial histories by integrating their first languages (L1), cultural backgrounds, prior knowledge, lived experiences and preferred forms of representation into small-group conversations, collaborative discussions, and whole-class interactions. By opening the classroom to learners' backgrounds beyond school walls, the teacher created a socially responsive environment where diverse identities and experiences could be acknowledged and leveraged (Lee & Li, 2025). These practices also resonate with Herrera's (2022) emphasis on incorporating learners' linguistic and cultural assets into instruction to support each learner's individual needs.

Third, the observed translanguaging moments functioned as a catalyst for fostering an inclusive classroom ecology in which student engagement, academic rigor and learner agency were cultivated. Through validating multilingual expression and multimodal participation, the teacher created a space in which students could contribute meaningfully to academic learning while strengthening their confidence and sense of belonging (Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025). As Li (2023) argues, translanguaging pedagogy becomes transformative not only through the intentional design of flexible translanguaging practices but also by foregrounding learners' personal trajectories, perspectives, and voices into classroom activities.

A distinctive contribution of this study is the role of the teacher's own biopsychosocial history. Ms. Dolores's experiences as a child of seasonal migration, her early work as a paraeducator with limited instructional autonomy, and her subsequent decision to become a certified teacher who could "decide how to teach" shaped her ideological stance and her willingness to negotiate prescribed curriculum. Her bilingual proficiency and personal familiarity with the challenges of linguistic and cultural transition enabled her to recognize students' assets quickly and to deploy translanguaging in ways that felt authentic rather than additive. This finding underscores that teachers' own biographies are not peripheral; they can become powerful resources for enacting decolonial, asset-based practice, particularly when educators share linguistic or migration-related experiences with their students.

Theoretically, this study contributes to translanguaging scholarship by showing how translanguaging practices become more empowering and transformative when deliberately informed by students' biopsychosocial histories through Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI). The findings extend translanguaging theory beyond the use of learners' full linguistic repertoires by emphasizing the importance of learner biographies in shaping meaning-making and fostering inclusive classroom ecologies.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that teachers can better support newcomer students by intentionally and strategically integrating flexible language use, multimodal resources, and culturally responsive connections into both lesson planning and instructional delivery. Teacher education and professional development should prepare educators to view students' biopsychosocial histories as assets and to design biography-informed activities that actively engage students in learning. Additionally, curriculum design should offer translanguaging opportunities

and multimodal pathways that allow students to demonstrate comprehension and critical thinking beyond traditional monolingual norms.

Meanwhile, the single-case nature of the study limits generalizability. Classroom organization for newcomer students varies widely across national and local contexts. In many international settings, access to bilingual teachers is limited, newcomer cohorts are highly heterogeneous in language background, and institutional policies strongly favor rapid transition to the dominant language. Under such conditions, the specific forms of translanguaging observed here—frequent, fluid use of a shared L1 by both teacher and students—may not be immediately replicable. Practical obstacles include insufficient professional development on translanguaging, high-stakes accountability systems that prioritize monolingual assessment, and lack of curricular materials designed for multilingual meaning-making. Nevertheless, the core principles illustrated in this case—centering students’ lived experiences, legitimizing their full linguistic repertoires, and treating identity affirmation as integral to academic rigor—remain transferable. Educators in monolingual or linguistically diverse settings can still draw on students’ prior knowledge, invite multimodal expressions, and create space for students to use the languages they know as resources for learning, even when the teacher does not share the same languages.

To conclude, this study underscores the potential of BDI-informed translanguaging to reimagine newcomer education through decolonial, asset-based, and humanizing perspectives. By centering students’ linguistic and cultural assets — and by recognizing that teachers’ own biographies can serve as resources for this work — educators can cultivate safe, meaningful, and inclusive classroom ecologies in which multilingual learners’ voices, identities, and agency are valued and sustained. The research findings provide a practical reference for educators seeking to use translanguaging to enhance the responsiveness and relevance of instruction for bilingual and multilingual learners and to create classroom communities where every student is recognized as a full participant.

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The catalyst effect: cultural scaffolding in literary-based intercultural communicative language education

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Abstract

The present study investigates the differential impact of two types of pre-reading support on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' engagement and intercultural competence when reading a culturally dense literary text. Traditional approaches in EFL contexts often prioritize lexico-grammatical pre-teaching (LG-SPS), potentially aiding surface-level comprehension but failing to foster deeper affective engagement or intercultural growth. The present study proposes and tests an alternative: Culturally-Scaffolded Pre-reading Support (C-SPS), which explicitly links text-specific cultural references to learners' own experiential frames. Using a within-subjects, counter-balanced design, 82 first-year undergraduate EFL students at a university in Algeria engaged with a literary excerpt under both C-SPS and LG-SPS conditions. Quantitative measures included reading dwell time, a Likert-scale engagement survey, multiple-choice inference questions, and the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS). Qualitative data were gathered from a written reflective prompt. Results from within-subjects t-tests and repeated-measures ANOVA reveal that the C-SPS condition produced significantly higher task engagement, greater inferred meaning accuracy, and more substantial gains in intercultural sensitivity compared to the LG-SPS condition. Qualitative content analysis of student reflections showed a marked increase in perspective-taking and cultural comparison markers following the C-SPS intervention. These findings suggest that cultural scaffolding is not merely an assistive tool but a catalyst that transforms linguistic accessibility into meaningful intercultural learning and sustained engagement. The study advocates for a "culture-first, language-second" pedagogical model within literary-based Intercultural Communicative Language Education (ICLE), demonstrating its efficacy even in resource-constrained, monocultural EFL settings. It should be acknowledged, however, that the design compares cultural scaffolding versus no cultural scaffolding rather than the ordering of culture versus language, and discussed in the implications of this distinction for future research.

Keywords: cultural scaffolding, intercultural competence, literary texts, EFL, task engagement, ZPD

Introduction

The integration of literary texts into the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom presents a pedagogical paradox. On one hand, literature offers a rich, authentic, and motivating source of language in use, replete with the cultural nuances that are central to developing advanced linguistic and communicative abilities (Peacock, 1997). On the other hand, the very cultural density that makes these texts valuable can render them opaque and intimidating for learners, particularly in monocultural settings where exposure to the target culture is minimal. The conventional pedagogical response has been to "prepare" students by pre-teaching vocabulary and grammatical structures, a lexico-grammatical pre-reading support (LG-SPS) approach. While well-intentioned, this method risks reducing a vibrant cultural artifact to a mere linguistic exercise, potentially improving word-level comprehension but failing to unlock the text's potential for fostering affective engagement and intercultural competence (IC).

Research on cultural schema theory has consistently demonstrated that when L2 readers encounter texts rich in culturally unfamiliar references, comprehension breakdowns occur not because of lexical opacity but because readers lack the relevant cultural schemata to construct coherent meaning (Nassaji, 2002). Empirical work on

cultural familiarity in EFL reading confirms that culturally familiar texts are comprehended significantly more effectively than culturally unfamiliar ones, even when linguistic complexity is held constant (Alptekin, 2006; Erten & Razi, 2009). One might be forgiven for thinking that, if many or most of the words and structures in a text are not understood, the cultural contents are secondary; however, this evidence suggests that for culturally dense literary texts, the primary barrier to meaningful engagement is often not linguistic but cultural. Learners may understand the words on the page but miss the cultural "knot" (that is, the specific culturally embedded reference point that gives the story its emotional weight and significance). This disconnect can lead to disengagement and a missed opportunity for the profound perspective-taking that literature can facilitate.

The central proposition is that by inverting the traditional model (adopting a "culture-first, language-second" approach), educators can more effectively bridge this gap. This approach, termed Culturally-Scaffolded Pre-reading Support (C-SPS), is designed not to simplify the text, but to activate learners' existing cultural schemas and connect them to the new cultural information embedded in the narrative. By doing so, it is hypothesized that C-SPS acts as a catalyst, transforming potential linguistic comprehension into actualized engagement and measurable intercultural growth. It should be emphasized, however, that the advocacy for a culture-first approach does not imply that language is secondary in importance. Rather, the argument is one of instructional sequencing: when the primary obstacle to deep engagement is cultural unfamiliarity, addressing that dimension first may create the conditions under which language learning itself becomes more meaningful and motivated (Schat, van der Knaap, & de Graaff, 2023a). Alternative pedagogical sequences (including simultaneous integration of language and culture, or post-reading cultural discussion) remain viable and deserve empirical attention, as discussed in the limitations section.

The theoretical underpinnings for this approach are drawn from two robust fields: sociocultural theory and intercultural communicative competence. From a Vygotskian perspective, learning is a mediated process occurring within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the space between what a learner can do alone and what they can achieve with guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding, as conceptualized by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), is the practical application of this principle, providing temporary, contingent support that enables learners to complete a task they could not manage independently. Hammond and Gibbons (2005) distinguish between "designed-in" scaffolding, which is planned in advance, and "interactional" scaffolding, which emerges responsively during instruction; the C-SPS intervention represents the former type, intentionally designed to address anticipated cultural barriers. The present study extends this concept to the cultural domain, arguing that C-SPS provides the necessary mediation to help learners navigate the cultural complexities of a literary text, thereby activating their ZPD for intercultural understanding. This aligns with contemporary models of IC, which emphasize the need for learners to actively compare cultures, reflect on their own perspectives, and develop empathy, skills that are not automatically acquired through language learning alone (Byram, 2021; Deardorff, 2006).

Despite this theoretical rationale, there is a lack of rigorous experimental evidence that isolates the specific contribution of cultural scaffolding. Much of the existing research is descriptive or conflates cultural support with general simplification (van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010). Van de Pol et al.'s (2010) comprehensive review of a decade of scaffolding research found that while scaffolding is widely advocated, the majority of studies examine scaffolding of linguistic and cognitive tasks, with cultural scaffolding remaining virtually unexplored as a distinct construct; their review thus serves as both an example of the type of research that has dominated the field and as an indictment of the gap the present study aims to fill. To address this gap, the present study employs a robust within-subjects, counter-balanced experimental design conducted with 82 first-year EFL students at a university in Algeria. This design allows the isolation of the added value of C-SPS by keeping the literary text constant and manipulating only the type of pre-reading support. By comparing the effects of C-SPS against a traditional LG-SPS on measures of engagement, comprehension, and intercultural sensitivity, the aim is to provide clear, causal evidence for the efficacy of a culture-first approach.

Specifically, the present study seeks to achieve the following general aim: to determine whether providing culturally-scaffolded pre-reading support that explicitly links text-specific cultural references to students' own frames of reference produces higher task engagement, inferred meaning accuracy, and intercultural-sensitivity gains compared to providing only lexico-grammatical pre-teaching. The concrete research question and hypotheses are formulated below, following the theoretical background that grounds them.

Theoretical background

The pedagogical intervention at the heart of the present study, culture-first scaffolding for literary texts, is situated at the confluence of three major theoretical streams: (A) models of intercultural competence in language education, (B) sociocultural learning theory, with a focus on scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and (C) empirical research on the role of authentic, culture-rich materials in fostering learner motivation and engagement. This review synthesizes these strands to build a cohesive rationale for the experimental design and hypotheses.

Intercultural Competence (IC) as a core aim of language education

Modern foreign language pedagogy has moved decisively beyond a purely linguistic focus, embracing the development of intercultural competence (IC) as a central objective. IC is not an ancillary skill but an integral component of communicative competence itself. As defined by Byram (2021) in his seminal model, IC involves a set of *savoirs* (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness) that enable an individual to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures. These include: *savoir* (knowledge of social groups and their cultural products and practices); *savoir comprendre* (the skill of interpreting and relating documents or events from another culture to one's own); *savoir apprendre/faire* (the skill of discovering and interacting in the context of another culture, including the ability to learn new cultural knowledge in real time); *savoir s'engager* (the critical cultural awareness that enables one to evaluate one's own and others' cultural perspectives on the basis of explicit criteria, this goes beyond mere "awareness" and entails a committed, evaluative stance); and *savoir être* (attitudes of curiosity, openness, and willingness to relativise one's own cultural viewpoint). This model reframes the language learner as an "intercultural speaker" who mediates between cultures, rather than a deficient imitator of a native speaker.

This shift necessitates a pedagogy that actively integrates language and culture. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) argue that culture is not just content to be learned but a "framework in which language is used" (p. 23). Their model of intercultural language teaching and learning emphasizes a dynamic cycle of noticing, comparing, reflecting, and interacting. This process requires learners to move beyond observing cultural facts to analysing how culture shapes communication and their own interpretation of it. Similarly, Crozet and Liddicoat (2000) advocate for a "language-and-culture pedagogy" where cultural understanding is developed through, not just alongside, language use. The goal is to navigate what Kramsch (2014) calls the "in-between," a third space where learners can negotiate meanings and construct their own intercultural identity without being fully assimilated into the target culture or remaining entirely within their own. Risager's (2007; 2023) transnational paradigm further extends this view, arguing that cultural learning in language education must move beyond nation-state-bound conceptualizations of culture and instead recognize the dynamic, transnational flows that shape how language and culture interrelate in learners' lived experiences.

The challenge, then, is how to foster this complex competence in the classroom. Byram and Wagner (2018) stress that language teaching must aim for "making a difference" through intercultural and international dialogue, a goal that requires more than linguistic proficiency. It demands pedagogical interventions that prompt learners to engage with difference, question assumptions, and develop empathy. Schat, van der Knaap, and de Graaff (2023a) provide key principles for an integrated intercultural literary pedagogy, demonstrating through educational design research that literary texts can serve as effective vehicles for intercultural competence

development when instruction is deliberately structured to promote intercultural reflection rather than merely literary appreciation. Their intervention study in Spanish-as-a-foreign-language classrooms (Schat, van der Knaap & de Graaff, 2023b) confirmed that such pedagogy yields measurable intercultural growth. Literary texts, with their inherent cultural specificity and capacity to evoke emotional responses, are prime resources for this work. However, their potential can only be realized if learners are guided to engage with their cultural dimensions. Assessing this growth is also crucial. The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) provides a validated instrument for measuring key affective and cognitive components of IC, such as interaction engagement and respect for cultural differences. Deardorff's (2006) process model of IC further highlights that internal outcomes like empathy and perspective-taking are prerequisites for effective external behaviour, reinforcing the need for instruction that targets these internal shifts. The present study operationalizes these principles by using a literary text as a site for intercultural exploration and employing measures like the ISS and reflective writing (Porto, 2016) to capture the development of IC.

Sociocultural theory and the role of scaffolding

If IC is the destination, sociocultural theory provides the map for how to get there. Rooted in the work of Vygotsky (1978), this framework posits that higher-order thinking is socially and culturally mediated. Learning is not a solitary act of cognitive processing but a collaborative process of meaning-making. The central concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, 86). The ZPD is the fertile ground where instruction is most effective, as it targets abilities that are in the process of maturing.

The primary mechanism for activating the ZPD is scaffolding. The term, famously coined by Wood et al. (1976), describes the temporary, adjustable support provided by an expert (e.g., a teacher) to a novice (a student) to help them accomplish a task that would otherwise be beyond their capacity. Hammond and Gibbons (2005) make an important distinction between "designed-in scaffolding" (support that is pre-planned and embedded in instructional materials) and "interactional scaffolding" (support that emerges contingently in teacher-student interaction). The C-SPS intervention is an instance of designed-in scaffolding, deliberately crafted to address anticipated cultural barriers before reading. This distinction is significant because it underscores that scaffolding need not be exclusively interactive or teacher-led; carefully designed materials can also serve a scaffolding function when they are contingent on learner needs and progressively faded. A comprehensive review by van de Pol et al. (2010) identifies three core characteristics of effective scaffolding:

Contingency: The support is tailored to the learner's current level of understanding and is adjusted in real-time based on their performance. **Fading:** The support is gradually withdrawn as the learner's competence increases. **Transfer of Responsibility:** The ultimate goal is for the learner to internalize the support and take full responsibility for the task.

In L2 learning, scaffolding has been shown to be a powerful tool. Donato (1994) demonstrated how learners can "collectively scaffold" each other's performance in peer interactions, while De Guerrero and Villamil (2000) observed mutual scaffolding during L2 peer revision tasks. These studies show that the ZPD can be activated not just by the teacher but through collaborative dialogue among peers, a finding that enriches, rather than contradicts, the emphasis on the teacher's crucial role in providing initial, expert scaffolding. The teacher's role is particularly vital in the design phase, where the pedagogical blueprint for scaffolding (such as the C-SPS packet) is conceived; once the scaffold is in place, peer interaction can amplify and extend its effects. Ohta (2005) explicitly applied the ZPD to interlanguage pragmatics, arguing that learners can develop pragmatic competence through scaffolded interaction. Gibbons (2015) provides practical models for scaffolding language and learning in mainstream classrooms, and Tajeddin and Kamali (2020) have developed a detailed typology of scaffolding strategies observed in teacher discourse. An experimental study by van de Pol et al. (2015) found that the

effectiveness of scaffolding is contingent on the degree of contingency (i.e., how well support matches learner needs), the amount of independent working time, and the level of student task effort, findings that directly informed the design of the C-SPS packet, which was crafted to be highly contingent on the specific cultural knots identified in each text and to provide just enough support to enable independent reading without over-scaffolding.

The present study extends this body of work by proposing cultural scaffolding as a specific form of mediation. It is argued that when an EFL learner encounters a culturally dense literary text, their "actual developmental level" is defined by their ability to comprehend it using only their existing linguistic and cultural knowledge. The text's cultural nuances may lie outside this level, placing them in a state of cognitive and affective frustration. C-SPS acts as the expert guidance that brings these nuances into the learner's ZPD. By explicitly connecting the unfamiliar cultural references (e.g., a quinceañera, a Latin American celebration marking a girl's fifteenth birthday and her transition to womanhood, roughly analogous to a debutante ball or a sweet sixteen party in other cultural traditions) to a familiar concept from the learner's own culture (e.g., a graduation ceremony), the scaffold makes the new knowledge accessible. This is a contingent process; the support is tailored to the specific "cultural knot", by which is meant a culturally embedded reference point in the text that is essential for deep comprehension but likely unfamiliar to the target reader, and the assumed cultural background of the learners. The goal is the transfer of responsibility: to equip learners with the strategy of making cultural comparisons so they can eventually approach new texts independently. An experimental study by van de Pol et al. (2015) found that the effectiveness of scaffolding is contingent on other classroom factors, highlighting the need for carefully designed studies like the present one to isolate the variables at play.

Culture-rich materials, motivation, and engagement

The final theoretical pillar supporting the present study is the link between the nature of instructional materials and learner motivation. A significant body of research suggests that authentic materials (those created for native speakers, not for language learners) can significantly enhance motivation. Peacock (1997), in a study on EFL learners, found that authentic materials increased motivation levels more than artificial ones. More recently, research on task engagement has provided a more nuanced, multi-dimensional framework for understanding learner involvement. Philp and Duchesne (2016) define engagement in language tasks as encompassing behavioural, cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions, arguing that engagement is not merely "time on task" but a dynamic, contextually situated process. Hiver, Al-Hoorie, Vitta, and Wu (2024), in a systematic review of 20 years of engagement research, found that behavioural and emotional engagement are the most frequently studied dimensions, while social and cognitive engagement remain underexplored, a gap the present study addresses by examining both behavioural (dwell time) and emotional (self-report) engagement alongside cognitive outcomes (inference accuracy). McNamara (2025) further proposes a research agenda for L2 task engagement that emphasizes the need for experimental designs manipulating instructional variables, precisely the approach the present study adopts. These recent developments reinforce the importance of examining how different types of pre-reading support differentially engage learners.

Literary texts are a prime example of authentic, culture-rich materials. However, their authenticity can be a double-edged sword. As Pulverness (2003) discusses, materials can be seen on a spectrum from "culture-free" to "culture-bound." While grammar exercises might be relatively culture-free, literature is inherently culture-bound, embedding the values, histories, and social practices of its context. Dypedahl and Lund (2020), in their handbook for language teachers on teaching and learning intercultural competence, emphasize that culture-bound texts require deliberate pedagogical mediation to become accessible to learners, and that the teacher's role as cultural mediator is central to enabling intercultural learning through such texts. This cultural specificity is precisely what makes literature a powerful tool for IC development, but it is also what can cause a breakdown in comprehension and engagement if not properly mediated. It is hypothesized that C-SPS may help address this challenge by pre-

emptively clarifying the most salient cultural references, thereby reducing the cognitive load associated with cultural processing and freeing up the learner's cognitive resources to engage with the text's deeper themes and stylistic features. This proposition, while theoretically grounded, requires empirical validation, which the present study provides. The process aligns with the idea of language as a tool for thinking together (Mercer, 2000) and the concept of language socialization, where learners are apprenticed into new ways of seeing the world through language (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2008). By scaffolding the cultural dimension, learners are, in effect, socialized into the cultural world of the text, making their engagement more likely and more profound.

Furthermore, this approach helps learners develop pragmatic competence, which is deeply intertwined with cultural context (Cenoz, 2007). Understanding why a character acts a certain way or why an object holds symbolic importance is a pragmatic skill. A traditional LG-SPS approach, by ignoring this dimension, leaves the development of such competence to chance. C-SPS, by contrast, makes it an explicit focus of instruction. It should be acknowledged, however, that an alternative pedagogical approach would be to explore cultural issues during or after the reading process, rather than before it. Such an approach could be equally valuable, as the process of "deciphering the cultural puzzle" collaboratively might itself constitute a meaningful intercultural learning activity. The present study does not compare pre-reading cultural scaffolding with post-reading or during-reading cultural discussion; rather, it compares pre-reading cultural scaffolding with pre-reading lexico-grammatical scaffolding. The question of when cultural scaffolding is most effectively delivered remains open and warrants future investigation.

Synthesis and hypotheses

Synthesizing these three strands, one arrives at a rationale for a "culture-first, language-second" pedagogy when using literary texts. Models of IC (Byram, Liddicoat, Kramsch, Risager) provide the why: the goal is to create intercultural speakers who can navigate the "in-between." Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, Wood, Hammond & Gibbons) provides the how: through designed-in scaffolding that activates the ZPD. Research on authentic materials and task engagement (Peacock, 1997) provides the what: culture-bound texts that are motivating but require support. The C-SPS intervention is the practical embodiment of this synthesis. It is a form of Vygotskian mediation specifically designed to scaffold the cultural load of a literary text, thereby facilitating the development of IC and enhancing affective engagement. It should be noted explicitly that the "culture-first" sequencing is itself a hypothesis under test, not a foregone conclusion. It is possible that simultaneous or post-reading cultural mediation could be equally or more effective; the design tests the specific contribution of pre-reading cultural scaffolding against a pre-reading linguistic alternative.

Based on this theoretical framework, the following research question and hypotheses are formulated for the present study conducted in the context of first-year Algerian EFL learners:

Research question: Does culturally-scaffolded pre-reading support (C-SPS) that explicitly links text-specific cultural references to students' own frames of reference produce significantly higher (i) task engagement, (ii) inferred meaning accuracy, and (iii) intercultural-sensitivity gains than the same text with only lexico-grammatical pre-teaching (LG-SPS)?

Hypothesis 1: The C-SPS condition will result in significantly higher levels of task engagement (measured by self-report and reading dwell time) and inferred meaning accuracy compared to the LG-SPS condition.

Hypothesis 2: The C-SPS condition will produce significantly greater gains in intercultural sensitivity (measured by the ISS and qualitative analysis of reflective prompts) from pre-test to post-test compared to the LG-SPS condition.

Methodology

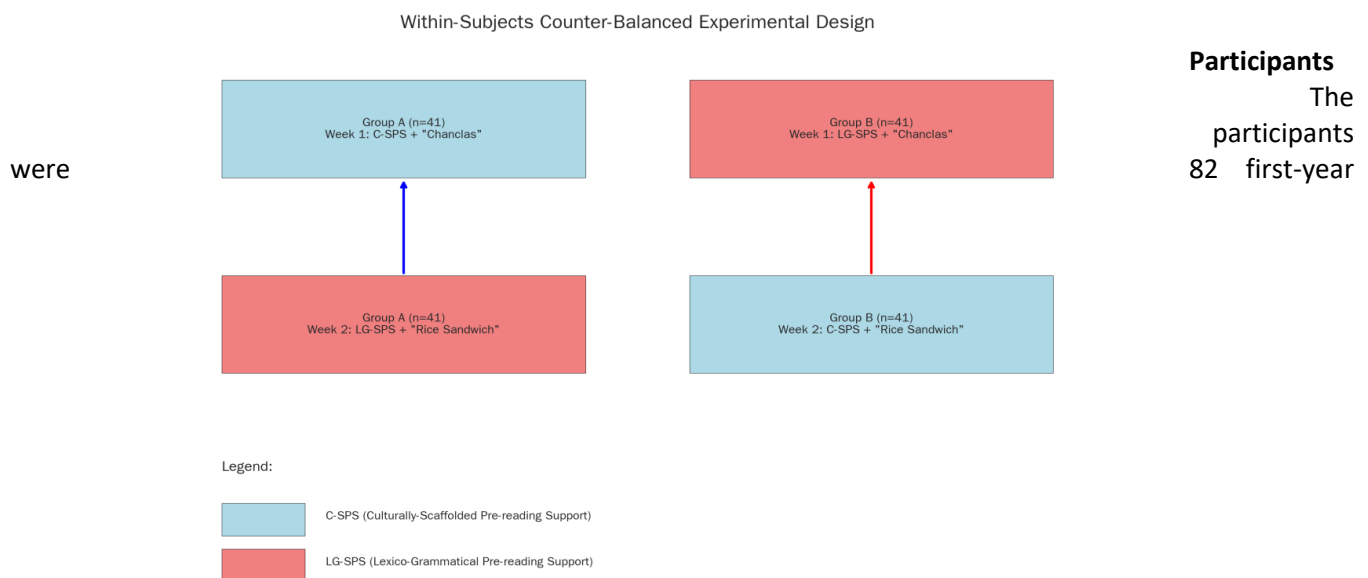
The present study employed a mixed-methods, within-subjects counter-balanced experimental design to investigate the causal effects of two different types of pre-reading support on EFL learners' engagement,

comprehension, and intercultural competence. The protocol was designed to ensure high internal validity while being implemented within the authentic constraints of an intact university classroom.

Research design

A within-subjects (also known as repeated-measures) design was chosen, in which each participant was exposed to both experimental conditions: Culturally-Scaffolded Pre-reading Support (C-SPS) and Lexico-Grammatical Pre-reading Support (LG-SPS). In a within-subjects design, the same participants serve under all conditions, allowing each participant to serve as their own control and thereby minimizing the variance caused by individual differences in language proficiency, prior knowledge, and motivation. This increases the statistical power of the analysis, making it suitable for studies with relatively small sample sizes (Cohen, 1992). Counter-balancing is a specific technique used within the within-subjects design to control for order effects (e.g., practice or fatigue); the two terms are thus complementary rather than synonymous. The counter-balancing procedure was implemented as follows: the cohort of participants was randomly divided into two groups (Group A and Group B). In the first session, Group A received the C-SPS treatment while Group B received the LG-SPS treatment. In the second session, the conditions were swapped: Group A received the LG-SPS treatment with a new, matched text, and Group B received the C-SPS treatment. This procedure is visualized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The within-subjects counter-balanced experimental design.



undergraduate EFL students (58 female, 24 male; mean age = 18.7 years, SD = 0.9) enrolled in a compulsory literature module at a public university in Algeria during the 2024-2025 academic year. All participants were native speakers of either Algerian Arabic or Tamazight, with French as a second language and English as their primary foreign language of study. The designation "first-year" refers to the students' first year of undergraduate study at the university, not their first year of learning English (all had studied English for at least seven years prior). Their English proficiency level was assessed via a university placement test at the beginning of the academic year, ranging from B1 to low B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This cohort was selected because first-year university students typically have had limited systematic exposure to Anglophone

literary texts and the specific cultural contexts they represent, making them an ideal population for investigating the effects of scaffolding.

Materials

Literary texts

Two short vignettes were selected from Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*: "Chanclas" (approx. 600 words) and "A Rice Sandwich" (approx. 620 words). These texts were chosen based on three criteria:

Cultural Density: Both texts are rich with specific cultural references central to the Chicano experience in the United States (e.g., the *quinceañera* ritual [a Latin American celebration marking a girl's fifteenth birthday and her transition to womanhood] in "Chanclas," the social dynamics of the school canteen in "A Rice Sandwich"). These references act as "cultural knots" (culturally embedded reference points that are essential for deep comprehension but are likely unfamiliar to the Algerian student cohort).

Linguistic Accessibility: The syntax and lexis of Cisneros's prose are relatively simple and fall within an "i+1" range (that is, slightly above the learner's current level of linguistic competence, as defined by Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, which posits that learners acquire language most effectively when exposed to input that is one step beyond their current proficiency, for B1/B2 learners, ensuring that linguistic complexity would not be the primary obstacle to comprehension).

Thematic Resonance: The themes of coming-of-age, social embarrassment, and identity are universally relatable, providing a potential bridge for affective engagement.

The texts were matched for length, linguistic complexity (as determined by Flesch-Kincaid readability scores), and cultural density. "Chanclas" was used in Week 1, and "A Rice Sandwich" was used in Week 2 for all participants.

Scaffolding packets

Two distinct one-page pre-reading support packets were created for each literary text, matched for length and visual design but differing entirely in content and pedagogical focus.

Table 1: Comparison of the packets designed for the "Chanclas" text

Feature	A. Culturally-Scaffolded Pre-reading Support (C-SPS)	B. Lexico-Grammatical Pre-reading Support (LG-SPS)
Pedagogical Focus	Culture-first: Activating schemas and building intercultural bridges.	Language-first: Removing potential linguistic obstacles.
Visual Content	Three captioned photos comparing a <i>quinceañera</i> to a local Algerian graduation or wedding ceremony.	None. Text only.
Cultural Content	- A short, 3-sentence caption explaining the <i>quinceañera</i> as a coming-of-age ceremony.- A 50-word "mini-story" from a fictional Latina teenager about the emotional significance of her special shoes.	None. No cultural commentary provided.
Lexical Support	One key cultural term glossed: "chanclas" → everyday sandals/flip-flops.	Eight low-frequency words glossed with English synonyms (e.g., <i>scuffed</i> , <i>limp</i> , <i>strutting</i> , <i>swollen</i>).

Feature	A. Culturally-Scaffolded Pre-reading Support (C-SPS)	B. Lexico-Grammatical Pre-reading Support (LG-SPS)
Grammatical Support	None.	One footnote explaining the use of the past progressive tense for setting a scene (e.g., "The music was playing...").
Overall Goal	To make the text <i>culturally resonant</i> and <i>affectively engaging</i> .	To make the text <i>linguistically accessible</i> .

Procedure

The study was conducted over two regular 50-minute class sessions in two consecutive weeks. All materials were delivered online to facilitate data collection on reading time.

Week 1 (Session 1): - Group A (n=41): Participants first accessed the C-SPS packet for "Chanclas" (5 minutes). They then read the digital version of the text. Immediately after reading, they completed the post-reading measures. - Group B (n=41): Participants followed the same procedure but received the LG-SPS packet for "Chanclas."

Week 2 (Session 2): - Group A (n=41): Participants received the LG-SPS packet for the second text, "A Rice Sandwich," followed by the text and the same set of post-reading measures. - Group B (n=41): Participants received the C-SPS packet for "A Rice Sandwich," followed by the text and post-reading measures.

The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) was administered as a pre-test one week before the first session, immediately after each of the two sessions (Post-test 1 and Post-test 2), and as a delayed post-test two weeks after the final session.

Measures and instrumentation

A combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments was used to triangulate the findings. All measures were designed to be completed within a maximum of 5-7 minutes to avoid participant fatigue.

Task engagement

Reading Dwell Time: An online PDF tool integrated into Moodle recorded the time (in seconds) each participant spent on the page containing the literary text. Students were free to determine the length of their reading time themselves, there was no time limit imposed, and participants could read at their own pace. This served as a behavioural proxy for engagement, with the assumption that a more engaging experience might lead to either faster, more fluent reading or slower, more deliberate reading. It is acknowledged that dwell time is an ambiguous measure: longer reading time could indicate deeper engagement (more careful, reflective reading) or greater difficulty (more struggling with the text). Similarly, shorter reading time could indicate either fluency (ease of comprehension) or disengagement (giving up early). The present study treats dwell time as a supplementary behavioral indicator and relies primarily on the self-reported engagement scale for the engagement measure; the interpretation of the dwell time direction is informed by the engagement scale results.

Self-Reported Engagement Scale: A 4-item Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree) was administered immediately after reading. Items included: "I found this story interesting," "I wanted to keep reading to find out what happened," "I felt connected to the main character," and "The pre-reading support helped me enjoy the story." The scale demonstrated high internal consistency in the present study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

Inferred meaning accuracy

Multiple-Choice Inference Questions: Three multiple-choice questions were designed to assess comprehension of meaning that depended on understanding the central cultural knot of the text. For "Chanclas," an example question was: "Why are the new shoes so important to the narrator? (a) They were expensive. (b) They symbolize her transition to womanhood. (c) They match her dress perfectly. (d) Her mother bought them for her." The correct answer (b) is only clearly inferable through the cultural scaffold. Each correct answer was scored as 1 point.

Open-Ended Inference Question: One open question asked, "Why is the narrator embarrassed in the story?" Responses were coded dichotomously (0/1) based on whether the explanation was purely linguistic/literal (e.g., "Her shoes are old") versus cultural/symbolic (e.g., "Her everyday shoes don't fit the special occasion and make her feel like a child"). Two independent raters coded the responses, achieving a high inter-rater reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = .91$).

Intercultural competence

Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS): A 15-item subset of the original 24-item scale by Chen and Starosta (2000) was used, focusing on the sub-scales of Interaction Engagement and Respect for Cultural Differences. The scale uses a 5-point Likert format. It was administered at four time points: Pre-test, Post-test 1, Post-test 2, and Delayed Post-test.

Reflective Writing Prompt: After each session, participants responded to the prompt: "What did you learn about coming-of-age rituals (or school life) that you did not know before? How does it compare to your own experience?" Participants were asked to write approximately 100 words (i.e., a brief, paragraph-length response); this was a guideline rather than a strict requirement, and responses varied in actual length between 75 and 150 words. The responses were analysed for markers of intercultural learning. The coding scheme focused on identifying: (1) the number of explicit cultural comparisons, (2) instances of perspective-taking ("I can imagine she felt..."), and (3) expressions of empathy or altered viewpoints. Two raters coded the data, achieving a Cohen's κ of .88.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (Version 28). Paired-samples t-tests were used to compare the mean scores for dwell time, engagement Likert scale, and inference accuracy between the C-SPS and LG-SPS conditions for each participant. A repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted to analyse the ISS scores across the four time points, with the scaffolding condition as the within-subjects factor. For the open-ended inference question, which yielded dichotomous (0/1) data from the same participants under two conditions, the present study initially reported a chi-square test of independence. However, because the two observations per participant are not independent (each student contributed one response under C-SPS and one under LG-SPS), the standard chi-square test is inappropriate, as it assumes independent observations and inflates the effective sample size (McNemar, 1947). Therefore, these data were re-analysed using McNemar's test for paired nominal data, which properly accounts for the within-subjects dependency. Qualitative data from the open-ended inference question and the reflective prompts were subject to content analysis using the predefined coding schemes. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa.

Ethical considerations

As the study was conducted as part of a normal educational practice within an established course, it was deemed exempt from a full institutional review board (IRB) process. However, ethical principles were strictly upheld in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the Belmont Report.

Respect for Persons: All students were informed about the study's purpose and procedures. They were assured that their participation was voluntary, their data would be anonymized, and their decision to participate or not

would have no bearing on their course grade. Written informed consent was obtained from all 82 participants for the use of their data for research purposes.

Beneficence: The study was designed to maximize benefits and minimize risks. The potential risk was minimal, limited to the cognitive effort of a standard class activity. The benefits included exposure to a potentially more effective learning strategy. The counter-balanced design ensured that all students received the hypothesized "better" intervention (C-SPS) at some point, upholding the principle of equitable distribution of benefits.

Justice: The selection of participants was based on their enrolment in the course, not on any vulnerability or convenience. The counter-balancing ensured fairness, as no group was relegated to a "no-treatment" or "lesser-treatment" control condition for the entire duration of the study. All students had an equal opportunity to benefit from the pedagogical innovation.

Results and discussion

The analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data revealed significant differences between the Culturally-Scaffolded Pre-reading Support (C-SPS) and Lexico-Grammatical Pre-reading Support (LG-SPS) conditions. The findings consistently support the hypotheses that C-SPS enhances task engagement, improves inferred meaning accuracy, and fosters greater gains in intercultural competence.

Hypothesis 1: task engagement and inferred meaning accuracy

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the C-SPS condition would lead to significantly higher task engagement and inferred meaning accuracy compared to the LG-SPS condition. This hypothesis was fully supported by the data from paired-samples t-tests.

Task engagement

Task engagement was measured via self-reported interest on a Likert scale and behavioural data on reading dwell time. As shown in Table 2, participants reported significantly higher levels of engagement after the C-SPS intervention ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.65$) than after the LG-SPS intervention ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 0.78$). This difference was statistically significant, $t(81) = 11.54$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.62$).

The reading dwell time data showed that participants spent significantly less time reading the text in the C-SPS condition ($M = 295.4s$, $SD = 45.2$) compared to the LG-SPS condition ($M = 348.1s$, $SD = 51.6$). This difference was also significant, $t(81) = -6.82$, $p < .001$. Taken in conjunction with the significantly higher self-reported engagement in the C-SPS condition, the present study interprets the reduced dwell time as indicative of increased reading fluency and reduced cognitive load (i.e., the cultural scaffold facilitated smoother processing), rather than as evidence of disengagement. If the reduced dwell time indicated disengagement, the present study would expect lower self-reported engagement, the opposite of what was observed. Nevertheless, as noted above, the present study acknowledges the inherent ambiguity of dwell time as a measure and recommends that future studies incorporate additional behavioural measures (e.g., eye-tracking, think-aloud protocols) to disambiguate its interpretation.

Table 2: Paired-samples T-Test results for engagement and accuracy measures (N=82)

Measure	Condition	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Engagement (Likert 1-5)	C-SPS	4.12	0.65	11.54	< .001	1.62
	LG-SPS	2.89	0.78			
Dwell Time (seconds)	C-SPS	295.4	45.2	-6.82	< .001	-1.05

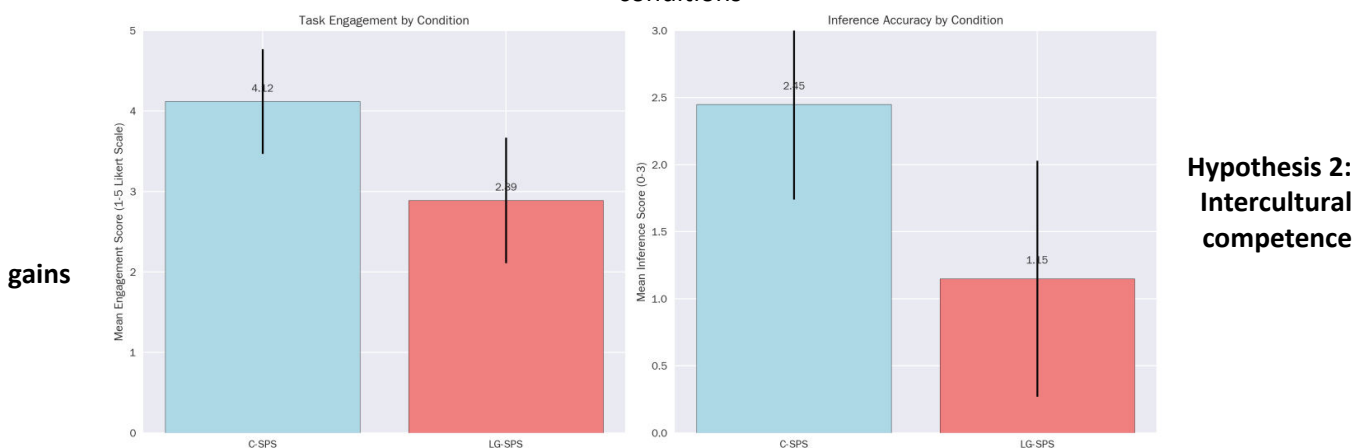
Measure	Condition	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
	LG-SPS	348.1	51.6			
Inference Score (0-3)	C-SPS	2.45	0.71	13.98	< .001	1.96
	LG-SPS	1.15	0.88			

Inferred meaning accuracy

The ability to correctly infer meaning from culturally-embedded cues was significantly higher in the C-SPS condition. On the three multiple-choice inference questions, participants scored an average of 2.45 (SD = 0.71) in the C-SPS condition, compared to only 1.15 (SD = 0.88) in the LG-SPS condition. This represents a substantial and statistically significant improvement, $t(81) = 13.98$, $p < .001$, with a very large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.96$).

The qualitative data from the open-ended inference question ("Why is the narrator embarrassed?") corroborated this finding. In the C-SPS condition, 78% of participants (64 out of 82) provided a culturally-informed answer (e.g., "She is embarrassed because her everyday shoes clash with the symbolism of the special event"). In contrast, in the LG-SPS condition, only 22% (18 out of 82) provided such an answer, with the majority giving a literal explanation (e.g., "Her shoes were old"). McNemar's test for paired nominal data confirmed this association was highly significant, $p < .001$ (two-tailed, using the binomial distribution for the discordant pairs). It is acknowledged that this result is, in a sense, predictable: the C-SPS condition explained the cultural significance of the shoes before reading, so it is not surprising that students who received this explanation were more likely to refer to it. This raises an important question about what exactly is being measured: recall of a pre-explained cultural fact, or genuinely inferred intercultural understanding. It is argued that the measure captures both: the scaffold provides the cultural knowledge, but the student must still apply it interpretively to answer the question. Moreover, the qualitative data from the reflective prompts (discussed below) suggest that the scaffold did more than provide a fact to recall; it prompted genuine perspective-taking and cultural comparison that went well beyond the information explicitly provided in the C-SPS packet. Figure 2 visualizes the stark difference in both engagement and accuracy.

Figure 2: Comparison of mean scores for engagement and inference accuracy across C-SPS and LG-SPS conditions



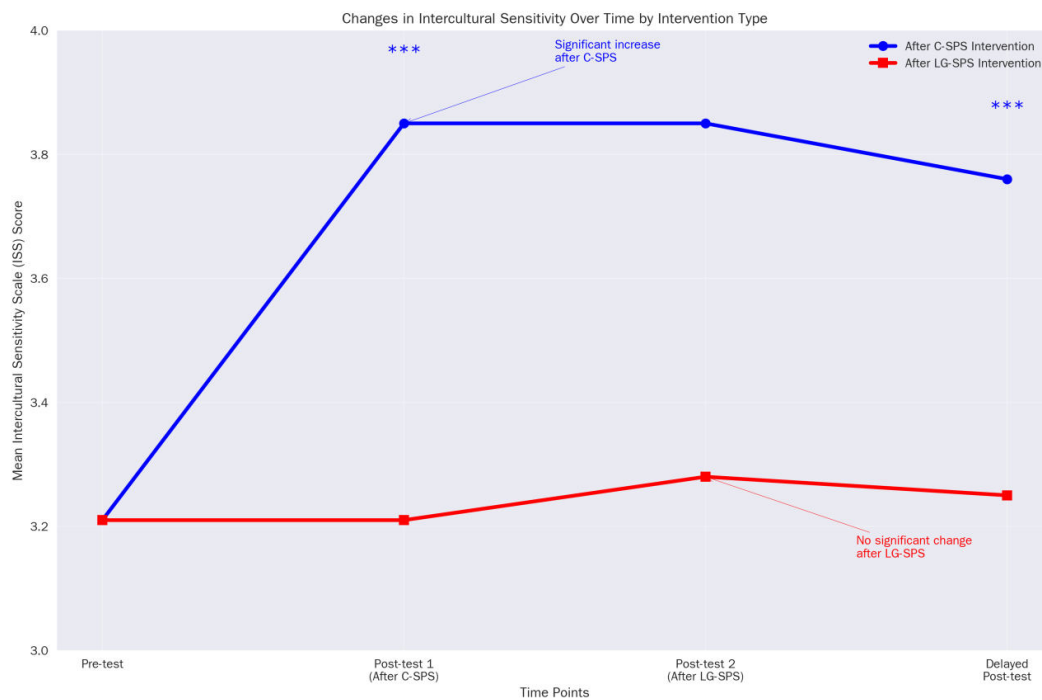
Hypothesis 2 posited that the C-SPS condition would produce significantly greater gains in intercultural sensitivity than the LG-SPS condition. This was tested using the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) and qualitative analysis of reflective prompts.

Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS)

A repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted to examine the change in ISS scores over time. There was a significant main effect of time, Wilks' $\Lambda = .41$, $F(3, 79) = 37.81$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .59$, indicating that scores changed across the four measurement points. More importantly, there was a significant time $\times$ condition interaction effect, Wilks' $\Lambda = .75$, $F(3, 79) = 8.76$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .25$. This indicates that the change in ISS scores over time was different depending on the type of scaffolding received.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the data are plotted to show the mean ISS scores at each of the four time points, with separate lines for the condition that each group received first. Because of the counter-balanced design, each group experienced the conditions in a different order: Group A received C-SPS in Week 1 and LG-SPS in Week 2, while Group B received LG-SPS in Week 1 and C-SPS in Week 2. The figure shows that ISS scores increased significantly after the C-SPS intervention regardless of when it was received (i.e., in Week 1 for Group A and in Week 2 for Group B), while LG-SPS did not produce significant change. Post-hoc tests with Bonferroni correction revealed that there was a significant increase in ISS scores from the pre-test ($M = 3.21$) to after the C-SPS intervention ($M = 3.85$, $p < .001$). However, there was no significant change in ISS scores after the LG-SPS intervention ($M = 3.28$, $p = .345$). The gains made after the C-SPS intervention were largely retained at the two-week delayed post-test ($M = 3.76$), which was still significantly higher than the pre-test score ($p < .001$). This suggests that the cultural scaffolding, and not merely comprehending a text, was the driver of intercultural sensitivity gains.

Figure 3: Mean Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) scores across four time points, showing the differential impact of C-SPS and LG-SPS



interventions.

Qualitative analysis of reflective prompts

The content analysis of the reflective prompts provided rich qualitative evidence supporting the ISS data. Responses written after the C-SPS condition contained significantly more markers of intercultural learning than those written after the LG-SPS condition. On average, C-SPS responses contained more than double the number of perspective-taking markers and cultural comparisons. Table 3 summarizes these findings.

Table 3: Mean frequency of intercultural markers in reflective prompts per condition (N=82)

Qualitative Marker	C-SPS Condition (Mean Frequency)	LG-SPS Condition (Mean Frequency)	t-value	p-value
Cultural Comparisons (e.g., "This is like our weddings when...")	1.88	0.45	14.21	< .001
Perspective-Taking (e.g., "I can understand why she felt...")	1.52	0.61	9.88	< .001
Other-Culture Empathy (e.g., "It must be difficult to...")	0.95	0.21	8.15	< .001

The following examples are drawn from the pool of student responses and have been lightly edited for grammar (minor corrections to articles, prepositions, and verb tense) to improve readability; no substantive changes to meaning, argumentation, or vocabulary have been made. The original unedited responses are available upon request from the authors. It should be noted that the apparent stylistic difference between the two examples reflects the genuine variation in response sophistication across students and conditions, a pattern consistent with the quantitative data showing that the C-SPS condition elicited more complex and elaborated responses. For example, a typical response after the LG-SPS condition was descriptive and surface-level: "The story is about a girl at a party. She has old shoes. She is sad because of this."

In contrast, a typical response from the same student after the C-SPS condition demonstrated deeper processing and perspective-taking: "I learned that the quinceañera is a very important 'coming out' party, a bit like how we celebrate a girl's graduation or engagement. So the shoes are not just shoes, they are a symbol. I can understand why she felt so embarrassed; it's like her family's honour was at stake, and her old shoes made her feel like she was still a little girl, not the young woman she was supposed to be."

This qualitative shift from description to interpretation and empathy was a consistent pattern across the participant pool, providing strong evidence that the C-SPS intervention was successful in activating the ZPD for intercultural learning.

Discussion

The results of the present study provide compelling evidence for the superiority of a "culture-first, language-second" scaffolding approach when teaching culturally dense literary texts in an EFL context. The findings indicate that Culturally-Scaffolded Pre-reading Support (C-SPS) is not merely an "add-on" to traditional language instruction; rather, it functions as a powerful catalyst that significantly enhances learner engagement, deepens comprehension, and, most importantly, fosters measurable growth in intercultural competence. However, it must be reiterated that an important caveat applies: the design compares cultural scaffolding versus no cultural scaffolding, not the sequencing of culture before language versus language before culture. The results demonstrate that providing cultural scaffolding produces better outcomes than not providing it; they do not, strictly speaking, demonstrate that culture must come first. A combined condition (both C-SPS and LG-SPS) or a

post-reading cultural discussion condition might yield equally strong or even stronger results, a possibility addressed in the recommendations for future research. This discussion will interpret these findings in light of the theoretical framework and consider their broader pedagogical implications.

5.1. Cultural Scaffolding as a Catalyst for Engagement and Fluency The first major finding was that C-SPS simultaneously increased self-reported engagement and decreased reading dwell time. This seemingly contradictory result is, in fact, a powerful indicator of the scaffold's effectiveness, when interpreted alongside the engagement scale. The higher engagement scores suggest that by bridging the cultural gap, the C-SPS made the story more relatable and affectively resonant for the Algerian students. The mini-story and comparative photos allowed them to connect the unfamiliar quinceañera ritual to their own cultural schemas of coming-of-age events, transforming an abstract cultural fact into a lived, emotional experience. This aligns with Peacock's (1997) findings on the motivational power of authentic materials, but adds a crucial caveat: authenticity's benefits are unlocked through appropriate mediation. This finding also resonates with Philp and Duchesne's (2016) multi-dimensional framework of engagement, which emphasizes that emotional engagement (interest, enjoyment) and cognitive engagement (strategic processing) are intertwined; the results suggest that C-SPS fostered both dimensions simultaneously.

The decreased reading time suggests that C-SPS reduced the cognitive load associated with cultural processing. In the LG-SPS condition, students likely spent more time struggling to make sense of the cultural context, leading to slower, more laborious reading. By pre-emptively clarifying the central cultural knot, the C-SPS allowed students to read more fluently, dedicating their cognitive resources to following the narrative and appreciating the language, rather than deciphering the cultural puzzle. This combination of higher engagement and greater fluency supports the hypothesis that the primary barrier was cultural, not linguistic. Once the cultural barrier was scaffolded, the text became both more engaging and easier to process, a finding that resonates with the Vygotskian principle of activating the ZPD to make a challenging task manageable (van de Pol et al., 2010). It should be acknowledged, however, that the process of deciphering the cultural puzzle itself (for instance, through collaborative group discussion during reading) could constitute a meaningful learning activity. Scaffolding does not necessarily have to come in the form of explicit explanations before reading; post-reading or during-reading cultural exploration may also activate the ZPD and foster intercultural learning through discovery-based processes. Future research should directly compare these alternatives.

From literal comprehension to inferred intercultural meaning

The most striking quantitative result was the dramatic improvement in inferred meaning accuracy. The LG-SPS condition, which provided ample lexical and grammatical support, still left the majority of students unable to answer inference questions that hinged on cultural understanding. They could decode the words but could not decode the meaning. This demonstrates the critical limitation of a language-first approach: it can lead to correct literal comprehension but fails to facilitate the deeper, culturally-situated understanding that constitutes true reading proficiency.

The C-SPS, by contrast, equipped students with the specific cultural schema needed to interpret the symbolic weight of the "chanclas." This enabled them to move beyond a surface-level reading ("the shoes are old") to a nuanced, intercultural interpretation ("the shoes represent a clash between her childhood identity and her emerging womanhood within a significant cultural ritual"). This shift is a clear example of learning within the ZPD. The scaffold provided by the teacher (via the C-SPS packet) allowed the learners to achieve a level of interpretation they could not reach alone. This process is the essence of what Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) describe as the cycle of noticing, comparing, and reflecting, which is fundamental to developing IC.

The causal link between cultural scaffolding and intercultural competence

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the present study is the clear causal link it establishes between cultural scaffolding and gains in intercultural competence. The repeated-measures ANOVA on the ISS scores showed that only the C-SPS intervention produced a statistically significant increase in intercultural sensitivity. The LG-SPS intervention, despite facilitating some level of text comprehension, had no impact on students' IC. This finding is critical: it suggests that intercultural growth is not an automatic byproduct of language learning or text exposure. It must be intentionally and explicitly fostered.

The qualitative data from the reflective prompts vividly illustrate the mechanism behind this growth. The C-SPS, with its explicit comparative element, prompted students to engage in the very cognitive and affective processes that define IC: comparing their own culture to the target culture, attempting to see the world from the narrator's perspective, and developing empathy. This aligns perfectly with Byram's (2021) model of the "intercultural speaker" and Deardorff's (2006) emphasis on internal outcomes like perspective-taking. The C-SPS did not just tell students about the quinceañera; it invited them into Kramsch's (2014) "third space" where they could actively negotiate meaning between their world and the world of the text. The retention of these gains at the delayed post-test suggests that this was not a fleeting effect but the beginning of a more durable shift in intercultural awareness.

Implications for pedagogy and curriculum design

The findings have several important implications for EFL pedagogy, particularly within the framework of literacy-based Intercultural Communicative Language Education (ICLE).

Prioritize Culture-First Scaffolding: For culturally dense texts, teachers should consider inverting the traditional preparation model. Instead of starting with a vocabulary list, they should begin by identifying the central "cultural knot" and designing activities that bridge this to students' own experiences.

Scaffolding is Not Simplification: The present study demonstrates that effective scaffolding does not mean "dumbing down" the text. The literary text remained intact in both conditions. The scaffold simply provided a new entry point, making the existing complexity manageable and meaningful.

Leverage Comparative Methods: The use of comparative photos and prompts was highly effective. This encourages teachers to be ethnographers of their own students' cultures, finding relevant local analogues to build bridges to the target culture.

Integrate Mixed-Methods Assessment: The combination of quantitative scales (ISS, Likert) and qualitative prompts provided a holistic view of student learning. This model can be adapted by teachers to assess both engagement and intercultural growth in their own classrooms.

Consider Combined Scaffolding Approaches: While the present study compared C-SPS and LG-SPS as separate conditions, it is not suggested that teachers must choose one over the other. A combined approach that provides both cultural and lexico-grammatical scaffolding, either simultaneously or in sequence, may be optimal, particularly for lower-proficiency learners. This represents a promising direction for future research.

Limitations and future research

While the within-subjects design provides strong internal validity, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted with a specific demographic (Algerian university students) and with texts from a specific cultural context (Chicano-American). Future research should replicate this design with different learner populations and different types of literary texts to test the generalizability of the findings.

Second, the intervention was short-term (two 50-minute sessions). The brevity of each session limits the ecological validity of the intervention; real-world pedagogical implementations would likely extend cultural scaffolding across multiple class periods with richer follow-up activities. A longitudinal study could track the

development of IC and reading engagement over an entire semester, examining the long-term effects of consistent cultural scaffolding.

Third, the present study focused on intercultural sensitivity gains and did not measure lexico-grammatical progress. It is therefore possible that the LG-SPS condition produced linguistic benefits that the instruments did not capture. Future studies should include measures of vocabulary acquisition and grammatical development alongside intercultural measures to provide a complete picture of the differential effects of each scaffolding type. This would allow researchers to determine whether C-SPS and LG-SPS produce complementary benefits and whether a combined approach is superior to either alone.

Fourth, as discussed above, the design compares the presence versus absence of cultural scaffolding, not the ordering of culture-first versus language-first. A more definitive test of the "culture-first" hypothesis would require a condition in which students receive cultural scaffolding after reading (rather than before) or a condition combining both types of scaffolding. Future research should include such conditions to determine whether the sequencing of scaffolding matters, or whether the critical factor is simply the provision of cultural support regardless of timing.

Fifth, regarding the qualitative data, the student quotes presented in this paper have been lightly edited for readability (correction of minor grammatical errors). Future research should consider presenting both raw and edited versions of qualitative data, or using think-aloud protocols during reading to capture real-time cognitive and affective processes in students' own unedited language.

Furthermore, while the present study focused on teacher-prepared scaffolds, future work could explore the role of collective, student-led scaffolding (Donato, 1994). For instance, students could be tasked with researching and presenting cultural bridges for their peers. Finally, the interaction between scaffolding type and learner proficiency warrants further investigation. It is possible that lower-proficiency learners might require a combination of both cultural and linguistic scaffolding, and future studies could explore this dynamic interaction.

Conclusion

The present study set out to determine if a "culture-first" scaffolding approach could enhance EFL learners' engagement and intercultural competence more effectively than a traditional "language-first" approach. The results from the experiment with 82 Algerian EFL students provide a clear and affirmative answer. Culturally-scaffolded pre-reading support (C-SPS) not only made a culturally dense literary text more engaging and accessible but also acted as a direct catalyst for the development of intercultural sensitivity. In contrast, lexico-grammatical support (LG-SPS), while potentially useful for word-level decoding, proved insufficient for fostering deep comprehension, affective engagement, or intercultural growth.

The key takeaway is that for literature to fulfil its promise as a tool for intercultural education, teachers must do more than simply make the text linguistically comprehensible. They must actively mediate the cultural distance between the world of the text and the world of the learner. The findings demonstrate that this mediation, when grounded in Vygotskian principles of scaffolding and aligned with models of intercultural competence, can produce significant and lasting learning outcomes. The proposed C-SPS protocol offers a practical, evidence-based method for achieving this, empowering educators to transform the literary text from a linguistic object to be analysed into a cultural world to be experienced. By placing culture at the forefront of instruction, language is not neglected; the very conditions are created of engagement and relevance under which language acquisition can best thrive. At the same time, the present study acknowledges that the evidence supports the value of cultural scaffolding as such, not the specific sequencing of culture before language; future research should continue to investigate the optimal timing and combination of scaffolding types in literary-based intercultural language education.

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Exploring the roles of English and Arabic in English-medium higher education programs in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Higher educational institutions across the globe have been adopting English as a medium of instruction (EMI) (Brown & Bradford, 2017; Dearden, 2014; Lasagabaster, 2022). Within Arabian Gulf countries, EMI's growth has sparked concerns of weakening Arabic language skills and Islamic identity (Abdel Latif & Alhamad, 2023). Some opposition to EMI is found in Saudi Arabia, largely due to students' limited English proficiency (Al-Kahtany, Faruk & Al Zumor, 2016; Louber & Troudi, 2019). In effect, preparatory programs that involve intensive English language study are commonly used as a language support model (Curle, Jablonkai, Mittelmeier, Sahan & Veitch, 2020; Macaro, Curle, Pun, An & Dearden 2018). Nevertheless, previous studies from Saudi higher education indicate that translanguaging (Alanazi, 2021; Al Makoshi, 2014) and applying the content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approach (Eltoum, 2019) can minimize language barriers in EMI programs. These findings spark questions concerning the roles of English and Arabic in institutional EMI support strategies. To better understand how both languages can be applied to strengthen student outcomes and enhance EMI implementation, this study gauged the views of both teachers and graduates from Saudi EMI programs. This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining statistical and thematic analysis. Questionnaires with both Likert-scale and open-ended items were completed by 150 teachers and 150 graduates from Saudi institutions. The results confirm that language-related barriers represent the foremost challenge in EMI programs and that expanding the roles of English and Arabic can improve student outcomes. In effect, institutions can reinforce their language support strategies by applying bilingual language policies, using a language-focused approach, and integrating supplementary English language provisions. The findings suggest that incorporating such a comprehensive strategy can enhance EMI implementation by promoting short-term and long-term outcomes while addressing students' culture and needs.

Keywords: *English as a medium of instruction, content and language integrated learning, language policy, language support, teacher development*

Introduction

English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has become increasingly popular in higher education systems worldwide (Brown & Bradford, 2017; Dearden, 2014; Galloway, Numajiri & Rees, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 2011; Lasagabaster, 2022). The growth of English-medium programs can be explained by pressures to adopt internationalization strategies meant to increase collaboration between institutions and organizations. A key step in this strategy is to adopt EMI in lesson delivery and research (de Wit & Altbach, 2020) since the English language is dominant in academia (Lasagabaster, 2022; The British Council, 2013). In turn, adopting EMI facilitates the recruitment of international faculty and scholars, integration of an international curriculum, promotion of global citizenship, and establishment of partnerships (de Wit, 2019; de Wit & Altbach, 2020; Lee, 2015; Maringe, 2010). For students, EMI is believed to improve English language development, expand knowledge of the target culture, and open academic and career-related opportunities (Dearden, 2014).

Following these trends toward internationalization, EMI has been implemented in the Arabian Gulf. For learners, the approach is thought to build content matter knowledge, English language proficiency, and English communication skills while supporting efforts to retire rote learning methods. Ultimately, this development is meant to promote students' employability and national efforts to localize employment (Deveci, Ayish & Midraj,

2023). While EMI is associated with academic and career-related benefits in this context, implementing this approach in Saudi Arabia poses unique obstacles. Arabic is a cherished language in the region, and there are concerns within Arabian Gulf countries regarding diminishing Arabic language and literacy skills, adherence to Islamic identity, and Arab culture (Abdel Latif & Alhamad, 2023). EMI is also found to pose a barrier to achievement in content courses, spurring calls to change the language of instruction to Arabic (Al-Kahtany, Faruk & Al Zumor, 2016; Louber & Troudi, 2019). On the other hand, previous studies have shown that teachers have been integrating Arabic (Al Makoshi, 2014; Alanazi, 2021) or applying the content and integrated learning (CLIL) approach to make the content more accessible to learners in EMI classrooms (Eltoum, 2019).

The literature indicates that expanding the roles of Arabic and English in EMI programs through L1 translanguaging or integrating English language objectives may foster students' comprehension and outcomes. However, such practices represent coping mechanisms or experimental methods rather than official institutional strategies. This study aims to expand on previous research by investigating the difficulties in implementing EMI and offering suggestions to enhance institutional support in these programs. To do so, the research questions address proficiency-related challenges, stakeholders' views on the roles of English and Arabic in EMI, and additional recommendations to improve EMI programs. Subsequently, this research advances the literature on language support in EMI implementation. As EMI continues to grow, the findings inform strategies for implementing EMI in contexts in which this approach may be at odds with students' cultural adherence or limited English language proficiency.

Theoretical background

EMI and its institutional implications

EMI involves using "the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English" (Dearden, 2014: 4). When implementing EMI, institutions must deliberate on the roles of English and the learners' L1 in the support model applied, the approach used in EMI programs, and language policies applied within classrooms.

Institutions often integrate a model of language support to ensure students are prepared to learn content in English, or they may offer language provisions throughout EMI programs. One model involves preparatory year programs, in which students complete an intensive English program before beginning EMI courses (Curle, Jablonkai, Mittelmeier, Sahan & Veitch, 2020; Macaro, Curle, Pun, An & Dearden, 2018). The concurrent support model uses English for academic (EAP) or specific purposes (ESP) courses that are taken simultaneously with EMI courses to aid students as they cope with the demands of English in their content courses. While the previous models focus on English as a second or foreign language to be developed, another model only employs the language as a means to access EMI. The selection model uses standardized English tests to confirm that students have the necessary English proficiency to begin EMI. Finally, the Ostrich model describes when institutions take no action to support EMI students (Curle et al., 2020).

Within EMI programs, institutions may apply English as solely the medium for teaching and learning or a language to be explicitly developed within content courses. Generally, gains in English proficiency represent a by-product of the approach, yet there is no explicit focus on language development (Curle et al., 2020; Lasagabaster, 2022). On the contrary, the content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approach includes both the subject matter and language within its learning goals (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010; Dalton-Puffer, 2011). In addition to addressing language, this approach also incorporates methodologies and theories related to second language acquisition, notably communicative language teaching and task-based instruction (Dalton-Puffer, 2007). While EMI and CLIL differ regarding the role of language in instruction, there is a middle ground between the two approaches. CLIL-ized EMI involves an overt focus on language development as a complementary or supplemental feature within content courses (Hu, 2023; Pérez Cañado, 2021). This approach focuses on teachers' ability to aid students in understanding content knowledge and using disciplinary language in classrooms (Moncada-Comas &

Block, 2021). While CLIL-ized EMI may seem like an ideal midpoint between CLIL and EMI, there are practical challenges in implementing the approach, such as appropriately balancing content and language objectives in lessons, negotiating content instructors' roles and sense of identity, and standardizing institutional language policies and practices (Hu, 2023; Moncada-Comas & Block, 2021).

Lastly, institutions must decide on the roles of English and students' L1 in language planning and policies. Full EMI is used when all elements of instruction are in English. In contrast, partial EMI involves the planned delivery of some elements in the local language (Pecorari & Malmström, 2018). Even within full EMI programs, institutions need to develop language policies that outline the terms for applying students' L1. Three main types of policies can be implemented in these programs. Monolingual policies involve the exclusive use of English in contexts in which students' L1s are seldom used. Bilingual policies involve applying English and a national language, and trilingual policies are described by the use of English along with national or regional languages (Risager, 2012).

Although stricter monolingual policies may be expected in EMI, there has been greater acceptance of language mixing in education (see Coleman et al., 2018) due to both social and practical reasons. Implementing EMI may cause the local language or its speakers to become stigmatized and face epistemic injustice (Sah & Li, 2024). In the Gulf region, EMI may disadvantage students who previously had limited exposure to English-medium curriculum in public schools or a lack of linguistic capital in their homes (Hopkins, 2023). Language proficiency also influences the complexity of learning content in another language, especially for students who have low levels of language proficiency (Lasagabaster, 2022). In effect, their success in English-medium programs can be negatively impacted (Curle et al., 2020). Considering these factors, previous findings have shown that EMI classrooms typically integrate students' L1 to aid comprehension or communication (Lasagabaster, 2022; Curle et al., 2020). These practices can be defined as translanguaging, which describes the "act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, to maximize communicative potential" (García, 2009: 140). Translanguaging shows greater acceptance in EMI (Lasagabaster, 2022), and this strategy can inspire a sense of linguistic security and identity and promote multilingual education (García, 2009). At the same time, instructors may avoid translanguaging due to fears of alienating international students, efforts to conform to institutional language policies, and limited teacher training in language-aware practices (Curle et al., 2020).

EMI implementation in Saudi Arabia

Within Saudi higher education, EMI has become ubiquitous. Previous studies have estimated that 50 (Macaro et al., 2018) to 100 (Deveci et al., 2023) Saudi tertiary-level institutions have adopted EMI. EMI is widely implemented in majors related to engineering, medicine, and computer science (Elyas & Al-Hoorie, 2024) and is being considered in other majors such as business (Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi, 2017). As these provisions continue to grow, so have concerns regarding the Arabic language's domain loss along with a weakened sense of cultural identity (Abdel Latif & Alhamad, 2023; Hopkins, 2023). Additionally, EMI is associated with barriers to comprehension and achievement. Saudi students' language proficiency ranks very low on a global scale (English First, 2023). At the tertiary level, they often lack preparation for EMI and show limited language skills (Phan & Barnawi, 2015).

Previous studies have highlighted both support for and opposition to EMI in Saudi higher education. A study from Al-Jarf (2008) shows approval for EMI in programs related to medicine, pharmacy, engineering, science, nursing, and computer science. The majority of the respondents believed English to be a superior language and associated the language with modernity and opportunities. On the other hand, students and teachers in a study conducted by Louber and Troudi (2019) described a preference for EMI. They reported pedagogical and practical barriers in implementing EMI as a result of students' limited English proficiency. In turn, teaching and learning was largely carried out in Arabic. Similar challenges were reported in Al-Kahtany's (2016) study, and students

advocated for changing the medium of instruction to Arabic. Students expressed their right to study content in their native language, spurring questions related to linguistic rights and hegemony within the institution.

Considering this integration of Arabic in EMI, two studies highlighted the use of coping strategies to aid students. In Alanazi's (2021) study, teachers and students described comprehension-related challenges, difficulties with discipline-specific writing, and limited fluency in communication. To assist students, coping strategies such as code-switching in Arabic and English language simplification were applied. Moreover, Al Makoshi (2014) explored teachers' use of code-switching at an EMI-oriented medical college. Her analysis of instructors' verbal techniques showed how Arabic was used to promote classroom management and cohesion in addition to content comprehension. This technique also facilitated communication, covering dense content, and student participation. Overall, both studies suggest that integrating students' L1 may ease language-related challenges and improve content learning.

Rather than investigating the potential use of Arabic in EMI, one study concentrated on the impact of the educational approach applied. Eltoum (2019) explored the effect of implementing CLIL within an introductory English-medium algebra course. Her findings show significant differences in the students' conceptual understanding of the content objectives, as students' test scores increased. She also found linguistic gains, but the test results were not significant. Eltoum described a positive learning environment that focused on active and deep learning within the CLIL classroom. Hence, applying CLIL may promote student achievement in introductory EMI courses.

Previous studies show support and opposition for EMI and describe how integrating Arabic reinforces students' comprehension. Furthermore, Eltoum's (2019) study indicates how student outcomes can be strengthened through employing a language-focused approach in EMI courses. Theoretically, expanding the role of Arabic or English can make content more accessible to learners in EMI programs. However, these practices represent coping mechanisms or experimental methods rather than aspects of an official institutional language support strategy. This research aims to expand upon these studies to better understand the views of teachers and graduates on the roles of English and Arabic in EMI programs, then outline suggestions to enhance institutional support strategies. More specifically, this study aims to confirm language-related barriers students face in EMI, investigate views on translanguaging, explore the potential impact of applying a language-focused approach, and gather opinions on other strategies to improve EMI programs. In effect, the findings are meant to inform recommendations to improve EMI implementation by balancing student support, outcomes, and culture.

Methodology

This research aims to investigate stakeholders' views on the roles of English and Arabic in EMI programs within Saudi higher education and chart recommendations for enhancing language support. To meet these aims, the following research questions were posed:

1. What are the main challenges that students and teachers face in EMI programs?
2. Do teachers and graduates believe that integrating Arabic into EMI programs can improve student outcomes?
3. Do teachers and graduates believe that implementing a language-focused approach in EMI programs can improve student outcomes?
4. What additional strategies do teachers and graduates recommend to improve EMI programs?

This study reflects a mixed methods approach in which questionnaires and thematic analysis were used. Responses to the Likert-scale and open-ended questionnaire items contributed both quantitative and qualitative data that were subsequently analyzed. The questionnaires were completed by teachers and graduates from public universities and colleges, private universities and colleges, and vocational institutions.

To explore the research questions, the mixed-methods design was most effective. Because qualitative and quantitative data from various sources were gathered concurrently, the design reflected triangulation (Ivankova & Creswell, 2009). This design facilitated comparisons in the data (Almeida, 2018; Ivankova & Creswell, 2009), as the findings from the quantitative data were cross-validated with the qualitative findings. Stakeholders' free responses explained the statistical trends found in their Likert-scale responses while offering context regarding any differences found by stakeholder type. Overall, a deep understanding of the four research questions could be achieved (Hesse-Biber, 2010), and thoughtful recommendations could be made in light of the findings.

To carry out this research design, a questionnaire was used as the data collection tool.² The items reflect a few questions used from a larger questionnaire that explored the prevalence, difficulties, and disadvantages associated with EMI in Saudi higher education. The questionnaires can be found in Appendices 1 and 2. The Likert-scale items were divided into the following sections: informed consent and demographic questions, language-related challenges, views on using Arabic, and attitudes toward using a language-focused approach. The questionnaire items regarding challenges focused on students' limited language proficiency. Concerning Arabic's role in EMI, these items addressed translanguaging in content delivery and resources. Lastly, the questions about a language-focused approach were prefaced by items that defined CLIL and gauged current CLIL provisions in the full questionnaire. Since teachers may not have been familiar with CLIL or CLIL-ized EMI, the items focused on the potential impact of applying a general language-focused approach. The open-ended questions addressed challenges in implementing EMI and recommendations to improve EMI programs. All items were available in English and Arabic to ensure respondents' comprehension.

The two questionnaires were pre-tested by three experts in the field, then piloted by 15 teachers and 15 graduates who had taught in or graduated from Saudi EMI programs. Native English speakers and Arabic speakers piloted the questionnaires to ensure that questions in both languages were comprehensible. After editing the items in line with their feedback, the final questionnaires were delivered to 150 teachers and 150 graduates during the period from November 2022 to November 2023. The teachers and graduates must have taught in or completed an English-medium program within the past five years. Rather than collecting data from students, graduates were recruited because their opinions offered insight into the impact of EMI both academically and in their experience post-graduation. The stakeholders were recruited through the researcher's connections and social media sites, as those meeting the inclusion criteria were invited to participate.

To provide a snapshot of EMI throughout the Kingdom, the recruitment process considered institution type, gender, and location. Since college and universities are largely gender segregated, recruiting roughly equal numbers of male and female participants reflected student enrollment and ensured that both male and female institutions would be represented (UNESCO, 2026). Efforts were made to recruit participants from a variety of provinces and institutions so that Kingdom-wide trends could be observed. Quota sampling was used to recruit 50 participants from public universities and colleges, private universities and colleges, and vocational institutions. This sampling plan was advantageous since all institution types could be represented, and the plan reflected the growth in vocational education and privatization of educational institutions (Knight Frank, 2021). Accordingly, the general findings and recommendations would apply to long-term national higher education planning. The data allowed for country-wide trends to be established, and disaggregation was done by stakeholder type to compare the perspectives of teachers and graduates throughout the Kingdom.

The closed-ended questions used a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The responses to these questions provided quantitative data. This data was analyzed according to statistical measurements, including the mean and standard deviation. To assign a description on the scale to the overall

² The questionnaires were approved by the University of Alcalá's ethics committee for research and animal experimentation (approval number CEID/2022/3/046). Participants completed and signed an informed consent page within the questionnaire before answering the items.

means found, Table 1 shows how five equal ranges of 0.79 or 0.80 from 1 (the lowest score) to 5 (the highest score) were matched to the statements. After, unpaired t-tests were conducted to calculate the p-values and understand if there were significant differences between the teachers' and graduates' responses.

Table 1: The mean ranges and their descriptions for the Likert scale

Likert-scale values	1	2	3	4	5
Value on agreement continuum	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Mean range	1.0-1.79	1.80-2.59	2.60-3.39	3.40-4.19	4.20-5

For the open-ended questions, manual coding was used to classify the responses into emergent themes. All responses were pasted into an Excel spreadsheet. Codes were entered into columns next to the texts, then Braun and Clarke's (2021) method for thematic analysis was employed. The researcher reviewed the data in depth, created initial codes, and sought out themes. After reviewing the initial themes, they were finalized with definitions and names. Lastly, a report was produced regarding the final themes and the frequency of the references. These codes represented the main themes, and the number of references to the themes was found in order to quantify the data. The results section integrated this data along with example texts that demonstrated the themes.

Results and discussion

Demographics

Table 2 shows participation by gender and location. Considering the gender of teachers and graduates, similar numbers of male and female teachers and graduates participated. This ensured that both the male and female branches of institutions were represented. As for the provinces, the percentages of participants from both graduates and teachers are similar. This data reflects the views and experiences of respondents from provinces with large student populations and numbers of institutions (Knight Frank, 2021) while also representing stakeholders' voices from other provinces.

Table 2: Participation by gender and location

Gender	Teachers	Graduates
Male participants	85	60
Female participants	65	89
Other/N/A responses	0	1
Province	Teachers	Graduates
Riyadh	33	33
Mecca	27	31
Medina	29	34
Eastern province	38	33
Qassim	7	8
Other	16	11

As for the participation by discipline (shown in Table 3), the number of teachers and graduates representing different types of programs is similar. The top programs relate to IT, business and hospitality, engineering, and health. These majors are common disciplines taught in English (Alseghayer, 2012; Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013) or

are programs with increasing enrollment (Knight Frank, 2021), indicating that the sample accurately represents the population of EMI graduates and teachers.

Table 3: Participation by discipline

Discipline	Teachers	Graduates
Information Technology	26	44
Business and hospitality	51	41
Natural Sciences	12	4
Engineering	12	33
Health	25	11
Technical	6	9
Law	0	2
Humanities	9	4
No answer	0	2

Table 4 shows the reported English proficiency levels of both teachers and graduates. When reviewing graduates' initial and current levels of English, some stark differences can be seen. Initially, 44.7% of graduates had a level of English proficiency below professional working proficiency, and only 13.33% reported current levels below professional working proficiency. This data indicates gains in proficiency as a result of EMI or experiences after graduation. Furthermore, almost no teachers showed a level below this proficiency, validating their ability to report on students' English levels and progression.

Table 4: Reported English proficiency levels of teachers and graduates

English proficiency level	Current level Teachers	Initial level Graduates	Current level Graduates
0 – No proficiency. My knowledge of language is nonexistent or limited to a few words.	2	10	1
1 – Elementary proficiency. I know how to structure basic sentences.	0	29	6
2 – Limited working proficiency. I can have limited social conversations and understand basic commands.	1	28	13
3 – Professional working proficiency. I can contribute to the workplace but need help with more advanced language.	7	28	23
4 – Full professional proficiency. I can participate in advanced conversations at an advanced level but may have some misunderstandings or occasional mistakes.	73	31	68
5 – Primary fluency / bilingual proficiency. I was raised speaking the language or have spoken it long enough to become proficient in it.	67	24	39
Mean value	4.33	2.75	3.79

Views on language-related challenges

The first set of questions examined the language gap, which refers to the gap between students' initial levels of English language proficiency and the level needed for content mastery. Table 5 shows the mean values and standard deviations for the responses.

Table 5: Teachers' and graduates' responses to items related to the language gap

Item number	Question text	Mean	Standard deviation
18 T	The shift of medium of instruction from Arabic at school to English at university was very challenging for my students.	4.27	0.91
19 G	The shift of medium of instruction from Arabic at school to English at university was very challenging for me.	3.09	1.36
P-value		5.69E-16	
19 T	Teaching students who had not previously taken secondary courses through English was very challenging for me.	4.26	0.82

Reviewing the data from teachers, the mean values indicate strong agreement that the transition to EMI represented an obstacle for both graduates and teachers. The lower standard deviations in their responses reflect similar responses despite differences in institutions or programs. In contrast, graduates held a neutral view regarding the impact of the language gap. The p-value indicates a significant difference, further demonstrating the differing views between teachers and graduates concerning this barrier. Also, graduates' standard deviation is high, signifying a greater variety of responses. This result may be related to factors such as the individual's initial level of language proficiency, institution type, or program type. For instance, students with lower initial proficiency levels or who enrolled in institutions or programs with higher requirements for language skills may have struggled more with the language gap.

When examining the free responses that addressed challenges in implementing EMI (see Tables 6 and 7), the main themes largely reflect language-related shortcomings. Both groups of stakeholders mention difficulties with students' limited proficiency, language skills, and vocabulary knowledge.

Table 6: Themes and frequency of teachers' responses regarding challenges in implementing EMI

Theme	Keywords and phrases	Total references
English proficiency	Low level, secondary, national, elementary high school, not taught well, weak, lack of preparation, issues understanding English/lectures	43
Language skills	Weak reading/ writing/listening/speaking skills, pronunciation, not professional, vocabulary, terminology, one-way/poor communication, communication gaps/challenges, hesitate to speak	39
Content	Lack of understanding, difficult to understand, don't grasp content/concepts/material don't get the full meaning, simplify, water down, simple/basic content/language, longer time to explain/adapt/understand, delivery in different ways	29
Attitude	Attitude, behavior, weak passion, low attendance, lack of motivation/ commitment, disruptive, not focused, no interaction, resistance, absenteeism	15

Arabic	Translation, use of Arabic, overuse of native language	11
Lack of streaming	Different levels, mixed ability, fast, slow, no streaming	5
Achievement	Poor grades, low achievement, dropping out	5

Table 7: Themes and the frequency of graduates' responses regarding challenges in implementing EMI

Theme	Keywords and phrases	Total references
None	No challenges, N/A, none	40
Language skills	Reading, writing, listening, speaking, pronunciation, grammar, communication	27
Vocabulary	Terms, terminologies, vocabulary, meaning	26
Gap	Adapting, time, at first, level, low, change, school, lack	24
Applying language	Practice, use of Arabic, continuity, lifestyle, mastering, continuing, environment	12
Comprehension	Translation, understanding, concepts,	9
Professors	Lecturers, professors, Accents, native speakers, lacking English, teaching style	8
Achievement	Grades, assessments, tests	5

Teachers acknowledge the language gap and describe additional challenges spurred by students' limited English proficiency. One instructor describes how "[s]tudents found it very difficult to grasp basic concepts. This resulted in poor class performance and lack of motivation to learn" (TQ.1.42)³. Because students struggled to understand concepts in English, instructors faced issues with pacing due to time-consuming explanations and attempting to "maintain a healthy teaching environment so that no student gets embarrassed" (TQ.1.66). Moreover, a few responses showed frustration due to limitations in designing lessons and integrating higher-level tasks: "Asking students to answer one question in class is an easy exercise. Asking students to get involved in critical thinking and writing long essays is another level. The challenge I faced was regarding this latter" (TQ.1.109).

On the other hand, the responses from graduates do not reflect the same level of variety and frustration as the teachers' comments. The most common theme amongst the graduates (with 40 responses) is "none." When reviewing their responses, they describe the temporary nature of the language gap. One graduate explains how "[a]t the beginning it was a bit hard to understand very well and to communicate professionally as my language wasn't advanced" (GQ.1.93). Even for students who had lower levels of English proficiency when beginning EMI courses, their responses reflected acceptance of the importance of EMI and a sense of resolve: "The main problem is I started from scratch comparing to surrounding students who were better than me. However, my desire to learn the language to continue on the computer science was a must to succeed as all the materials were purely English" (GQ.1.74). Thus, while both types of stakeholders agree that students' insufficient English competence is a main obstacle in implementing EMI, graduates view this challenge as a short-term issue.

Views on using Arabic

Table 8 shows the responses from teachers and graduates concerning the benefits of using Arabic in EMI. The mean values from the teachers' responses indicate agreement; however, most of the values from the graduate

³ The anonymized coding reflects the questionnaire type (graduates or teachers, the open-ended question number, and the response number)

data reflect neutrality. All items also show significant differences based on the p-values. Hence, the data reflects greater support from teachers regarding the integration of students' L1. Furthermore, the standard deviations of the teachers' results are lower than this value in the graduates' data, indicating that the graduates had more varied opinions. This may be due to different experiences based on their initial language levels (see Table 4), as graduates who began their programs with lower levels of English may have preferred the greater integration of their L1.

Table 8: Teachers' and graduates' responses to items related to the benefits of using Arabic in EMI

Item number	Question text	Mean	Standard deviation
20 T	If the assessments were in Arabic, I believe that my students would have gotten higher grades in my courses.	3.56	1.16
20 G	If the assessments were in Arabic, I believe that I would have gotten higher grades in my courses.	2.91	1.45
P-value		4.87E-05	
21 T	If Arabic were used in lesson delivery, I believe that students would better understand the concepts taught in my courses.	3.72	1.08
21 G	If Arabic were used in lesson delivery, I believe that I would have better understood the concepts taught in my courses.	2.99	1.23
P-value		2.49E-07	
22 T	My students had difficulties understanding the course content because the English level of the materials was too advanced.	3.44	0.93
22 G	I had difficulties understanding the course content because the English level of the materials was too advanced.	2.35	2.21
P-value		1.23E-15	
23 T	Teaching my classes in both Arabic and English was more beneficial for students than only teaching in English.	3.92	1.11
23 G	Teachers using both Arabic and English in classes was more beneficial for me than only learning in English.	3.28	1.29
P-value		2.80E-05	

As for the free responses regarding challenges (see Tables 6 and 7), teachers referenced content comprehension more often than graduates. For Item 22, Graduates disagreed that English-medium materials represented a barrier. In fact, one response describes how "[t]he subject would have been of the same quality if I had studied in my mother tongue" (Author's translation GQ.1.45). Since graduates see the language gap as a temporary problem, their responses may reflect beliefs that Arabic is only needed for language support in introductory classes. Because teachers recognize language-related challenges as a larger obstacle compared to graduates, they promote the more general use of Arabic throughout EMI programs.

Considering recommendations for improving EMI (see Tables 9 and 10), both graduates and teachers reference changes in language policies in their free responses. Graduates do not recommend changing the language of instruction to Arabic. In fact, they request English-only policies, native English-speaking teachers, and additional English classes alongside individual and national efforts to improve their language development. Their views indicate a complete lack of opposition to EMI, perhaps due to established assistance from translanguaging practices (as shown by the data from Item 23 G) and few challenges faced in their later years of study within these programs. At the same time, graduates are sympathetic towards their classmates who had limited exposure to

English in their schooling. One graduate explains how “[s]ome of the students have a hard time understanding the course being taught in English as they haven’t learned the language from a young age so they will face difficulties” (GQ.1.61). Perhaps as a means to assist these students, a few responses suggest using Arabic-medium aids such as vocabulary lists and parallel Arabic-medium content.

Table 9: Themes and frequency of teachers’ recommendations for improvement in EMI programs

Theme	Keywords and phrases	Total references
Language support mechanisms	Simplify/simplified courses, support classes, more often/courses, beginning courses, language courses, preparation year, intensive English courses, foundational level, streaming, ESP, CBI, EAP, vocabulary, reading, writing, listening, speaking, English skills, stream	63
Methodologies	Participate, presentations, discussions, practice, hands-on, real conversation, communication, focus on speaking, engagement, Situational, realia, technology, PBL, Practical English, assignments, examples, exercises	23
Language policy	Arabic, elementary, school, test, bilingual, immersion/technique, admission test, assessments	21
Resources/aids	More resources, international standards in resources, language aids, definitions, recorded lectures, international and local cases, companion websites, industry experts, appropriate textbooks, diverse materials, resource development, images, videos	15
Technology	Technology, search	6

Table 10: Themes and frequency of graduates’ recommendations for improvement in EMI programs

Theme	Keywords and phrases	Total references
Methodology	Skills, reading, writing, listening, speaking, materials, resources, vocabulary, good, basic, conversations, practice, intensive, interaction, simple, communication	52
Institutional policies	Professors, English-only, English and Arabic, accents, courses, strict, occupational	51
Individual efforts	Practice, conversation, homework, assignments, daily life	21
National efforts	Elementary, secondary, high school, strong foundation, from early ages, young, application	9

While some teachers support English-only policies, others promote bilingual policies. The variation in their responses suggests that teachers advocate context-specific solutions that align with their students’ differing levels and needs. One response explains how a one-size-fits-all policy may not be applicable:

“I believe there should be less focus on standardizing syllabi and assessments. . . . In general, we have qualified instructors, but they aren’t given a free hand to adapt the syllabi to meet students’ needs” (TQ.2.31). In addition, teachers’ free responses encourage employing admissions tests and offering additional English language courses. Their requests reflect expectations for language development at the tertiary level before students enroll in EMI courses and in tandem with content courses. Alongside these additional provisions, some teachers still

recommend Arabic-medium assistance: “By supporting [students] with other courses that focus on academic writing and daily English language activities, and by using both languages English and Arabic as content and in teaching to break the boarder between the two languages” (TQ.2.56). Despite some differences of opinion between graduates and teachers on language policy, both acknowledge the benefit of dedicating more space to Arabic in EMI courses while expanding English language provisions.

Views on applying a language-focused approach

The data related to teachers’ and graduates’ responses concerning the potential effect of applying a language-focused approach is shown in Table 11. Both types of stakeholders agree or strongly agree with the items, reflecting their support for this approach. Item 24, which addresses minimizing classroom-related challenges, has the lowest mean among both teachers and graduates. The p-value indicates a significant difference only for this item, signifying a divergence in opinions regarding the short-term impact of the approach. Due to graduates’ experience in their postgraduate studies or careers, they may believe that the long-term benefits of employing a language-focused approach surpass the short-term advantages in the classroom.

Table 11: Teachers’ and graduates’ responses to items related to the potential use of a language-focused approach

Item number	Question text	Mean	Standard deviation
24 T	A focus on both language and content in English-medium courses can minimize classroom-related challenges.	3.92	0.93
24 G	A focus on both language and content in English-medium courses can minimize classroom-related challenges.	3.71	0.77
P-value		0.044	
25 T	A focus on both language and content in English-medium courses can support graduates’ future academic opportunities.	4.34	0.74
25 G	A focus on both language and content in English-medium courses can support students’ future academic opportunities.	4.18	0.72
P-value		0.059	
26 T	A focus on both language and content in English-medium courses can support graduates’ future career-related opportunities.	4.39	0.74
26 G	A focus on both language and content in English-medium courses can support students’ future career-related opportunities.	4.22	0.76
P-value		0.050	

As for minimizing the difficulties in EMI classrooms, the solutions seem to be more complicated. Both teachers and graduates’ reference institutional policies and methodologies as a means to improve EMI programs (see Tables 9 and 10). Teachers also request that institutions simplify content courses and offer additional language courses. A language-focused approach may represent a partial solution, especially early in a student’s EMI journey: “In the beginning level courses where course content is comparatively easier, the teachers should focus on the communication skills of students so that higher courses will be easier to understand when communicated in English” (TQ.2.55). Nevertheless, the results indicate that a more comprehensive strategy involving institutional and classroom-based language support is needed. The following recommendation concisely describes such a strategy: “Courses taught through English can be improved by enhancing teacher training, supporting student

language development, adapting course materials to suit students' language proficiency levels, and incorporating technology to supplement classroom instruction" (GQ.2.43). Consequently, the role of English would need to be adjusted both within content courses and in language provisions.

For academic opportunities (Item 25), teachers' responses show strong agreement, and their free responses regarding recommendations for improvement (see Tables 9 and 10) further explain this data. They address the importance of integrating more resources along with additional language classes, such as EAP and ESP courses:

Need for intensive English for Specific Purpose (ESP) programs at freshman year where ESP teaching teams should be liaise with subject matter experts (aka faculty members of the department will be teaching major-related courses to students to agree on the English language to be taught in the ESP course(s) and the students' major-related technical jargon to be included in the ESP course(s). (TQ.2.144)

Their responses suggest an aim to reinforce students' disciplinary language development, perhaps to prepare them for postgraduate studies in their fields. Meanwhile, both teachers and graduates strongly agree with Item 26, which addresses career-related opportunities. This agreement aligns with their recommendations for improvement. Responses from teachers and graduates describe teaching methodologies that emphasize practical learning and interaction, perhaps to develop key communication skills needed by employers. For instance, one graduate's response recommends a focus on speaking skills that would "[help] when you get in the workplace and you need to communicate many complicated topics to leadership in a simple and easy to understand way" (GQ.2.3).

Overall, the responses indicate that applying a language-focused approach may minimize language-related challenges while maximizing future opportunities for students. Therefore, both types of stakeholders acknowledge that changing the role of English in EMI courses from the language of instruction to an area of explicit focus may improve short-term and long-term outcomes.

Discussion

This study investigated the roles of English and Arabic in promoting student outcomes in EMI programs to recommend language support strategies to improve EMI implementation. Regarding research question one, the results confirm that students' limited English proficiency represents the primary challenge in Saudi EMI programs. Teachers highlight this obstacle and its impact on students' comprehension, which coincides with the findings from the literature (Alanazi, 2021; Al-Kahtany et al., 2016; Louber & Troudi, 2019). Nonetheless, graduates seem to view this language gap as a short-term phenomenon. Their responses align with the results of Alanazi's (2021) study, in which challenges related to students' limited language skills were found to be more prominent as students began EMI programs.

For research question two, stakeholders approve the continuation of EMI while expanding the role of Arabic. Considering language policy, both teachers and graduates acknowledge the benefit of using students' L1 in EMI. Teachers acknowledge that language barriers may extend past students' first year of study and impact their comprehension of the course content. Their acceptance of Arabic's role in EMI reflects the overall paradigm shift that is reducing the stigma associated with language mixing in educational settings (see Coleman et al., 2018). Simultaneously, the findings show overwhelming support for EMI along with demands for greater exposure to and opportunities to use English. The findings diverge from criticisms of EMI in the literature, which highlight issues related to social justice and the dominance of English (see Hopkyns, 2023). Moreover, graduates seem to downplay the challenges they faced in EMI classes and emphasize the advantages of these programs for their future opportunities. Given the trajectory of Saudi Arabia's economic growth and the need for English speakers in the labor market (see Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, n.d.), the practical benefits of learning content in English may outweigh the negatives related to a loss of language or culture. Hence, the results contradict Al-Kahtany et al.'s (2016) results, in which students believed that using Arabic as a medium of instruction was in the Kingdom's national interest.

Considering research question three, teachers and graduates believe in expanding the role of English in content courses by using a language-focused approach. They agree that explicitly focusing on English language development in content courses may minimize language barriers. Their responses align with beliefs that CLIL-ized EMI can promote students' language acquisition and their understanding of the subject matter by explicitly addressing language (Hu, 2023; Moncada-Comas & Block, 2021). In addition, the findings describe how employing this approach may improve student outcomes. Responses regarding academic opportunities may reflect potential growth in discipline-specific skills and literacy as a result of integrating language into content courses (Coyle, 2018). As for career opportunities, the results coincide with previous studies that show increased employability amongst bilingual or CLIL learners (Arnaiz-Castro et al., 2022; Gómez Parra et al., 2021; Yang, 2017).

Lastly, recommendations for additional language support models answer research question four. Graduates request greater exposure to English and the use of communicative methodologies, and teachers recommend integrating additional language provisions such as ESP and EAP courses. Their responses call for expanding English's role in content and language courses. These findings suggest that the preparatory model should be combined with concurrent support offered throughout EMI programs. Thus, the findings reflect the notion that models meant to prepare students for EMI are typically not sufficient, requiring the development of a language support system that is relevant throughout the program (Curle et al., 2020).

Recommendations and implications

Considering the findings of this study, some recommendations are made to enhance language support strategies within EMI programs. Institutions should review their language policies to ensure they reflect students' language levels and carve a space for Arabic as needed. Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all policy, program leaders should balance students' exposure to English, their English language development, and any necessary L1-medium assistance. Policies should consider learning outcomes, disciplinary literacy outcomes, and the language of instruction (Airey et al., 2017). Comprehensive policies can promote standardization within departments or programs while devoting space to the application of students' L1 as a resource.

To improve students' comprehension and outcomes in EMI programs, institutions must consider applying multiple language support models. Institutions can use concurrent language classes in addition to the preparatory model. With language teachers leading courses, students' disciplinary and academic language may be further developed. EAP and ESP courses have been implemented in Turkey, another country known for using preparatory year programs in its universities. Research suggests that these courses reinforced students' language acquisition, particularly their receptive skills and vocabulary development (Öztürk, 2013; Sandal & Özkan, 2022).

In addition to language provisions, institutions should apply a language-focused approach within English-medium content courses. Offering professional development training sessions can guide teachers in integrating language objectives and focusing on English language communication skills in their lessons. Training should address areas such as language awareness, scaffolding, pedagogy, strategies for using students' L1, and subject-specific language. Similar topics can be seen in an EMI handbook developed by the Transnational Alignment of English Competences for University Lecturers (n.d.), demonstrating how these areas are essential for language support in EMI.

Lastly, a few recommendations are made for future studies. The main limitation of this study is a reliance on self-reported data regarding students' English proficiency and stakeholder views. Future studies should integrate observational and achievement-related data to better understand the barriers to implementing EMI. Experimental research that explores the impact of combining translanguaging and a language-focused approach should also be conducted. Moreover, researchers can conduct longitudinal studies to investigate the challenges students face at different levels of study. This would facilitate a deeper understanding of the language gap and allow recommendations for language support to be tailored by year of study.

The implications of this research are relevant to both policymakers and practitioners in Saudi higher education and similar contexts. Policymakers must consider students' needs and goals when implementing EMI. Often, students' limited English proficiency represents a barrier to their success in English-medium programs (see Curle et al., 2020; Lasagabaster, 2022), which may fuel opposition. However, the reality of internationalization necessitates English proficiency for students' future studies or careers. Policymakers need to strengthen English language support while dedicating a space for students' L1 in EMI programs. For practitioners, EMI teachers must reflect on how they can bolster students' language development. To improve student outcomes, they must consider integrating language objectives and communicative activities in their lessons. As EMI expands, these findings inform institutional strategies for effectively implementing EMI. Arabian Gulf countries show similar economic diversification plans paired with low English proficiency levels (English First, 2023). Institutions must improve short-term and long-term outcomes while addressing students' culture and needs. In effect, their language support strategies must thoroughly consider using a language-focused approach, bilingual policies, and multiple support models.

Conclusion

This research investigated the roles of English and Arabic in EMI and recommended strategies to promote language support in EMI programs. To do so, the following areas were explored: the main challenges in EMI implementation, views regarding translanguaging and integrating a language-focused approach, and additional recommendations to enhance EMI programs. The key difficulties relate to language, as students' limited English language skills represent a major barrier. To improve outcomes, stakeholders recommend expanding Arabic's role through translanguaging practices. Carving a space for students' L1, especially as students transition to EMI, may minimize the language gap and opposition to EMI. Simultaneously, teachers and graduates believe that expanding English's role in content and language courses can bolster short-term and long-term outcomes. Stakeholders' recommendations for changes in methodologies and language support models also indicate the necessity of developing English language skills in EMI programs. In turn, policymakers need to consider adapting language policies that dedicate a space for Arabic while offering additional English language provisions. For practitioners, professional development opportunities should be offered to help content teachers integrate language into their lessons. Overall, this study's findings indicate that expanding the roles of both English and Arabic in EMI programs can improve students' outcomes within EMI programs and after graduation. Given these results, higher educational institutions must consider using a language-focused approach, bilingual language policies, and multiple support models in their language support strategies. As EMI continues to grow in contexts in which there may be resistance to EMI or a lack of English proficiency, such a comprehensive strategy can enhance EMI implementation and outcomes by meeting students' needs.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Teachers' questionnaire

1-9	Information and informed consent pages
10	At which Saudi university or vocational institution did you most recently teach?
11	Is this institution a university, college, or vocational institution?
12	What is the location of this institution?
13	What specialization did you most recently teach?
14	What is your gender?
15	What is your English language level?
16	Did you previously teach tertiary subject courses in which English was used as the medium of instruction? (note-language courses are not subject courses)
17	Have you taught courses within a Saudi tertiary institution within the past 5 years?
18	The shift of medium of instruction from Arabic at school to English at university was very challenging for my students.
19	Teaching students who had not previously taken secondary courses through English was very challenging for me.
20	If the assessments were in Arabic, I believe that my students would have gotten higher grades in my courses.
21	If Arabic were used in lesson delivery, I believe that students would better understand the concepts taught in my courses.

22	My students had difficulties understanding the course content because the English level of the materials was too advanced.
23	Teaching my classes in both Arabic and English was more beneficial for students than only teaching in English.
24	A focus on both language and content in English-medium courses can minimize classroom-related challenges.
25	A focus on both language and content in English-medium courses can support students' future academic opportunities.
26	A focus on both language and content in English-medium courses can support students' future career-related opportunities.
27	What challenges did you face when teaching through English?
28	How do you believe courses taught through English can be improved?

Appendix 2: Graduates' questionnaire

1-9	Information and informed consent pages
10	At which university or vocational institution did you most recently study?
11	Is this institution a university, college, or vocational institution?
12	What is the location of this institution?
13	In which specialization was your degree?
14	What is your gender?
15	How would you describe your English language level when you began your tertiary studies?
16	How would you describe your current English language level?
17	Were your university/college courses taught in Arabic or English?
18	Have you graduated from a bachelor's or diploma program within the last five years? Or will you graduate this year?
19	The shift of medium of instruction from Arabic at school to English at university was very challenging for me.
20	If the assessments were in Arabic, I believe that I would have gotten higher grades in my courses.
21	If Arabic were used in lesson delivery, I believe that I would better understand the concepts taught in my courses.
22	I had difficulties understanding the course content because the English level of the materials was too advanced.
23	Teachers using both Arabic and English in classes was more beneficial for me than only learning in English.
24	A focus on both language and content in English-medium courses can minimize classroom-related challenges.
25	A focus on both language and content in English-medium courses can support students' future academic opportunities.
26	A focus on both language and content in English-medium courses can support students' future career-related opportunities.
27	What challenges did you face when learning through English?
28	How do you believe courses taught through English can be improved?

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ERL Journal – Scope Major

Key premise. **The educational role of language, reaching far beyond school(ing), is determined by multiple aspects relating to culture, methodology and/or personality.** To be suitably comprehensive, studies blending educational with linguistic studies need to comprise all these aspects.



General rationale. Language lies at the heart of schooling, culture, (learning and teaching) methods, and personality – thus underlying education on the individual and on the social level. Its social existence determines its experiencing by an individual person and vice versa. Both these levels matter when it comes to learning and teaching methods as well as schooling as a whole. Socially determined and individually experienced, language shapes culture and education, and, from an individual perspective, it defines a person's place in the world and defines the world in which a person is placed.

Specific issues. Accordingly, ERL Journal welcomes papers addressing issues such as: language of schooling, bilingual education, language identity, intercultural competence, discourse analysis, children narratives, personal constructs, language in special education, transversal skills, language mediation, academic language, elicitation, plurilingual teaching, CLIL, functions of language, etc.

Expected outcome. Systematization of knowledge concerning the educational position of language; aggregation of empirical findings pertaining to social and cultural determinants of how language serves education; development of interdisciplinary educational and linguistic studies; recognition of problems calling for research and discussion of ways of putting language theories into practice.

ERL Journal – Scope Minor

Key premise. **A person's education is determined by how language operates on four levels – beliefs, activity, affect and thinking.** To be maximally educational, the experiencing of language by a person comprises these four dimensions, which implies a need for their comprehensive studies.



General rationale. How language affects a person's education depends on multiple axiological, psychomotor, affective, and cognitive factors. For instance, what a person thinks of language (e.g. on whether it is worth speaking or not) and how much a person speaks determines that person's mental faculties. Conversely, how a person understands a given issue (as well as how s/he feels about it) impacts on how interesting utterances s/he produces. Hence, there exist relationships between language and all the aforementioned educational domains.

Specific issues. Accordingly, ERL Journal welcomes papers concerning issues falling within one or more of the four domains, such as: status of language in school curricula, language of textbooks, language activity of children or grown-ups, stages of language fossilization, argumentative skills, language learning styles, verbalization of knowledge, approaches to oracy, personal experiencing of language skills, language image of the world, cognitive discourse functions, language reflectivity, etc.

Expected outcome. Collection of theoretical proposals and empirical data supporting learner-oriented educational practice; exploration of the relationship between language and four educational domains; detection of factors determining learners' language identity/personality; accumulation of data providing assistance in construction of language-grounded educational systems.

ERL Journal is designated for papers on cross-disciplinary, educational and linguistic issues. It is meant to address (I) the position of language and how it is put into practice across different schools, cultures, methods and personalities, and (II) the experiencing of language by learners in terms of their language beliefs, activity, affect and cognition. ERL Journal includes theoretical and empirical papers, presenting qualitative and quantitative approaches. Resting on the overarching premise of language shaping our reality and education (assignment of meanings to the world and subject matter learnt), it ultimately aims to unravel this process and to boost the position of language in education.

ERL Journal is international, interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed, and double-blinded.

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