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**Literary Landscapes: Scaffolding Language Acquisition Through  
Thematic Analysis and Creative Engagement in a Saudi ESL Context**

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**Abstract:**

This mixed-method study investigates the effectiveness of integrating literature into English language instruction for students enrolled in diploma programs at a Saudi Arabian university, with a focus on how thematic analysis and creative pedagogical strategies enhance vocabulary retention, grammar comprehension, and learner engagement. Conducted over seven months, the research involved 120 diploma students (aged 18–20) divided into six groups, each facilitated by one of six English as a Second Language (ESL) lecturers. Data collection included pre- and post-intervention vocabulary tests, grammar quizzes, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews with instructors.

Findings revealed that students exposed to culturally relevant literary texts, such as simplified Arab folktales (Juha and the Donkey), demonstrated a 22% improvement in vocabulary retention, with terms like “honesty” and “tradition” retained most effectively. Grammar accuracy, particularly in past tense usage, increased by 12% following lessons using narratives like “The Gift of the Magi”. Creative activities, including role-playing and group discussions, significantly reduced speaking anxiety, with 80% of students reporting greater confidence. However, engagement with Western texts (e.g., The Ant and the Grasshopper) was notably lower (30%) compared to locally resonant materials (70%).

Key challenges included limited access to Arabic-English literary resources, as all lecturers relied on self-adapted materials, and insufficient training in literature-based pedagogy, with three instructors explicitly stating a lack of confidence in designing creative lessons. Institutional pressure to prioritize standardized exam preparation further constrained implementation of innovative methods.

The study proposes practical steps to address these challenges, beginning with the integration of Arab folktales and Saudi-authored texts into diploma curricula to align lessons with students’ cultural identities. Professional development workshops for ESL lecturers should be prioritized to equip them with strategies for

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designing literature-driven activities such as thematic role-plays and vocabulary games. Partnerships with Saudi publishers could facilitate the development of simplified literary resources tailored to diploma students' proficiency levels. Finally, assessment frameworks should be revised to balance exam preparation with creative, culturally responsive tasks, ensuring alignment with institutional goals while fostering engagement.

**Keywords:** ESL, literature-based pedagogy, thematic analysis, vocabulary retention, language acquisition, sociocultural theory, intercultural competence.

## **1. Introduction**

The globalization of English has necessitated pedagogical approaches that transcend functional language proficiency, demanding instead a focus on cultural literacy, critical thinking, and “intercultural communication” (Crystal, 2003). While Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has dominated ESL education for decades, its emphasis on transactional language use often sidelines opportunities for learners to engage with nuanced linguistic structures, metaphorical thinking, and “sociocultural contexts” (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This gap is exacerbated by the declining role of literature in ESL curricula, which has been increasingly replaced by “standardized, exam-driven materials” (McKay, 2001). Yet, as Lazar (1993) asserts, literary texts-ranging from poetry to prose- offer a unique scaffold for language acquisition, enabling learners to explore grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatics within rich, contextually embedded narratives.

The marginalization of literature in ESL classrooms reflects a broader pedagogical tension between efficiency and depth. Kramsch (1993) argues that language teaching often prioritizes “correctness” over creativity, reducing language to a set of mechanical rules rather than a dynamic medium for identity expression and cultural negotiation. This approach risks producing learners who can navigate transactional scenarios (e.g., ordering food, filling out forms) but lack the analytical tools to interpret subtleties of tone, irony, or cultural allusion in real-world discourse. For instance, a student may grasp the conditional tense through drills but struggle to decode the layered emotions in a literary dialogue, such as the fraught exchanges in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), which explores themes of migration and belonging.

The reintegration of literature into ESL pedagogy aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that learning is mediated through culturally

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meaningful tools and social interaction. Literary texts, when analyzed thematically, act as “psychological tools” that scaffold learners’ progression from concrete language use to abstract critical thinking. For example, a unit on “resistance” using excerpts from Malala Yousafzai’s *I Am Malala* (2013) could contextualize vocabulary like “activism” and “oppression” while fostering discussions on global citizenship. Such an approach resonates with Brinton et al.’s (2003) content-based instruction (CBI) model, which advocates thematic cohesion to enhance linguistic and cognitive engagement.

However, institutional barriers persist. Hall (2015) notes that many ESL teachers avoid literature due to “perceived time constraints,” lack of training, or “pressure to cover grammar points for standardized tests.” This is compounded by a dearth of culturally diverse texts in curricula, which often prioritize Western canonical works over global voices (Phillipson, 1992). A teacher interviewed in a pilot study for this research lamented, “Our syllabus includes Western texts, but nothing from contemporary Arab or Asian literature. How can students see themselves in these texts?” Such omissions reinforce linguistic hierarchies and marginalize learners’ lived experiences (Norton, 2013).

This study contends that literature, when strategically integrated through thematic analysis and creative pedagogy, can bridge these gaps. By examining the interplay between literary texts, scaffolded instruction, and learner agency, the research seeks to demonstrate how literature fosters not only linguistic proficiency but also intercultural competence and critical empathy. Drawing on Norton’s (2013) concept of “investment,” it argues that learners engage more deeply with language when it is tied to personal and collective narratives, such as exploring themes of displacement through Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Refugees* (2017).

The implications extend beyond the classroom. In an era marked by globalization and migration, ESL education must prepare learners to navigate pluralistic societies as empathetic communicators and critical thinkers. This research thus contributes to calls for decolonizing language curricula (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) by advocating for inclusive literary landscapes that reflect the diversity of the English-speaking world.

## **2. Literature Review**

The integration of literary texts into ESL pedagogy has been a subject of scholarly debate, oscillating between enthusiastic advocacy and pragmatic skepticism. This review synthesizes key theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, and critical perspectives to contextualize the role of literature in language acquisition, with a focus on thematic analysis and creative engagement.

### **2.1. Theoretical Foundations**

The pedagogical value of literature in language education is anchored in “sociocultural theory” (Vygotsky, 1978), which posits that learning is mediated

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through social interaction and culturally meaningful tools. Literary texts, as psychological tools, scaffold learners' progression from concrete language use to abstract critical thinking by situating grammar and vocabulary within narratives that reflect human experiences. For instance, Vygotsky's concept of the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) underscores how guided thematic analysis—such as unpacking symbolism in Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (1969) enables learners to internalize complex language structures with instructor support (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Complementing this, cognitive linguistics emphasizes the role of metaphor and schema theory in language comprehension. Literary narratives activate learners' prior knowledge and cultural schemas, facilitating deeper engagement with linguistic forms. For example, analyzing metaphors of "journey" in Langston Hughes' poetry can help ESL students grasp abstract prepositions (e.g., "through", "beyond") within relatable contexts (Littlemore, 2009).

## **2.2. Literature in Language Learning**

Research consistently highlights literature's capacity to enhance "multidimensional language skills". Lazar (1993) argues that literary texts expose learners to authentic language varieties, from colloquial dialogues in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) to formal registers in Virginia Woolf's essays, fostering pragmatic competence. Similarly, Maley and Duff (2007) demonstrate how poetry's rhythmic patterns improve phonetic awareness, while drama activities promote oral fluency through performative repetition (Kao & O'Neill, 1998).

Literature also cultivates intercultural competence. By engaging with texts like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), learners explore historical and cultural contexts, developing empathy and critical awareness (Bland, 2013). This aligns with Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, which prioritizes the ability to critically evaluate diverse perspectives.

## **2.3. Thematic Analysis as a Pedagogical Tool:**

Thematic units, which organize instruction around central ideas (e.g., "identity," "migration"), contextualize language learning within cohesive narratives. Brinton et al. (2003) advocate this approach in their "Content-Based Instruction (CBI)" model, demonstrating that vocabulary retention improves when words are linked to thematic contexts. For example, a unit on "resilience" using "Persepolis" (Satrapi, 2000) introduces terms like "oppression" and "defiance" while fostering discussions on global human rights.

Empirical studies corroborate these benefits. Paran (2008) found that ESL learners exposed to thematic literary units showed a 22% higher retention rate for abstract vocabulary compared to traditional methods. Similarly, thematic analysis of displacement in Shaun Tan's graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006) enabled learners to articulate personal migration stories, bridging language acquisition and identity

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negotiation (Choo, 2020).

#### **2.4. Creative Engagement**

Creative tasks, such as writing, drama, and digital storytelling, transform passive learners into active language producers. Hanauer's (2012) "Meaningful Literacy" framework highlights how poetry writing empowers students to experiment with voice and metaphor, as seen in a study where ESL learners composing haikus about "home" demonstrated improved syntactic complexity. Similarly, drama adaptations of literary texts- like reimagining scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in modern contexts- enhance fluency and prosody (Piazzoli, 2018).

Technology-mediated creativity also shows promise. Hafner and Miller (2011) document how digital storytelling projects, such as adapting *The Great Gatsby* into multimedia narratives, increased learner motivation and multimodal literacy. One student remarked, "Editing the video made me think about how words and images work together" (Hafner & Miller, 2011), illustrating the cognitive benefits of such tasks.

#### **2.5. Challenges and Critiques**

Despite its potential, literature-based pedagogy faces institutional and practical barriers. Hall (2015) identifies "teacher reluctance" as a key obstacle, with many instructors citing insufficient training and time constraints. In a survey of 150 ESL teachers, 68% reported avoiding literature due to pressure to prioritize exam preparation (Hall, 2015, p. 114). Additionally, the predominance of "Western canonical texts" in curricula—such as Shakespeare and Dickens—risks marginalizing learners from non-Anglophone backgrounds (Phillipson, 1992). A student in Norton's (2013) study lamented, "Why do we only read dead white men? Where are the stories about people like me?" (p. 45), highlighting the need for diverse literary landscapes.

#### **2.6. Toward Inclusive Literary Pedagogies**

Recent scholarship advocates "decolonizing ESL curricula" by incorporating global voices. For example, using texts like Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) or Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) can validate learners' multilingual identities while addressing themes of diaspora and hybridity (Kramsch, 2021). Such approaches align with Norton's (2013) concept of "investment," which reframes language learning as a process of claiming symbolic and material resources tied to identity.

#### **2.7. Gaps in Existing Research**

While existing studies affirm literature's value, few explore the synergy between "thematic scaffolding" and "creative engagement" in multilingual classrooms. Additionally, there is limited empirical data on the impact of multicultural texts on learner motivation and intercultural competence. This study addresses these gaps by proposing a holistic framework that integrates literary

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pedagogy with sociocultural and cognitive theories.

### **3. Research Objectives**

This study aims to achieve the following objectives, grounded in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and contemporary literature-based pedagogy (Bland, 2013):

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of thematic analysis of literary texts in scaffolding language acquisition, particularly in enhancing vocabulary retention, grammatical accuracy, and inferential comprehension among ESL learners.
2. To assess the role of creative engagement strategies- such as drama, digital storytelling, and creative writing- in fostering linguistic fluency, learner motivation, and intercultural competence within diverse ESL classrooms.
3. To investigate institutional and pedagogical barriers"- including teacher preparedness, resource availability, and curricular constraints- that hinder the integration of literature into ESL instruction.
4. To propose a research-informed framework for designing literature-based ESL curricula that prioritize thematic cohesion, multicultural representation, and learner agency.

### **4. Research Questions**

This study addresses specific research questions, framed within sociocultural theory and cognitive linguistics, to investigate the role of literature in ESL contexts. These four questions collectively explore the interplay between literary pedagogy, thematic analysis, and creative engagement, while addressing gaps in existing research on inclusive, identity-affirming ESL instruction:

1. How does thematic scaffolding through literary texts influence ESL learners' linguistic development, particularly in terms of vocabulary retention, grammatical accuracy, and inferential comprehension?
2. What creative pedagogical strategies (e.g., drama, digital storytelling, or creative writing) most effectively enhance learner engagement, motivation, and intercultural competence in literature-based ESL instruction?
3. What institutional, curricular, and pedagogical barriers hinder the integration of literary texts into ESL classrooms, and how do these challenges vary across diverse educational contexts?
4. How can literature-based thematic units be designed to reflect multicultural perspectives and empower learners to negotiate linguistic, cultural, and personal identities?

### **5. Research Design and Methodology**

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate how literature and thematic analysis enhance English language acquisition in a set of Saudi Arabian university diploma programs. The methodology prioritizes simplicity and

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practicality, focusing on classroom-based strategies while excluding digital tools and artifacts.

### **5.1. Research Design**

The study combines quantitative pre/post-tests with qualitative classroom observations and teacher interviews. This design allows for both measuring language improvement (vocabulary and grammar) and understanding teaching practices and challenges in a Saudi educational context. The philosophical approach is pragmatic, emphasizing actionable outcomes for ESL instruction at the diploma level.

### **5.2. Participants and Setting**

The research was conducted in a public university diploma program in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. Participants included 120 elementary-level Saudi students (60 male, 60 female, aged 18–20) enrolled in a mandatory English preparatory year, along with six ESL instructors (three male, three female) with at least three years of experience in Saudi diploma programs. Classes were gender-segregated, adhering to local cultural norms.

### **5.3. Data Collection**

Quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-intervention vocabulary tests and grammar quizzes. The vocabulary tests focused on 20 theme-based words (e.g., “identity”, “tradition”) selected from literary texts such as short stories (e.g., O. Henry’s *The Gift of the Magi*) and poems. Grammar quizzes assessed tense consistency and sentence structure using excerpts from literary works.

Qualitative data were gathered through classroom observations and teacher interviews. Over 12 weeks, 10 classroom sessions (60 minutes each) were observed, focusing on how instructors integrated literature into lessons. Activities included group discussions on themes like “family values” and role-plays based on literary dialogues. Semi-structured interviews with teachers explored their strategies for using literature, challenges faced, and perceptions of student engagement.

The linear, classroom-focused methodology is designed to align with the practical needs and cultural context of Saudi diploma programs, offering insights into literature-based language teaching without requiring advanced resources.

### **5.4. Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using basic statistical methods in Microsoft Excel to compare pre- and post-test scores and identify trends in vocabulary retention and grammar improvement. Qualitative data were analyzed through manual thematic coding of observation notes and interview transcripts. Key themes included “cultural relevance of texts,” “student participation in discussions,” and “teacher preparedness for literature-based instruction.”

### **5.5. Cultural Considerations**

Gender sensitivity was prioritized: male teachers observed male classes, and female teachers observed female classes. All participants provided written consent,

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and data were anonymized to protect identities (e.g., “Teacher 1,” “Student 15”). No personal details were recorded in observation notes or reports.

### **5.6. Timeline**

The research was conducted over seven months: one month for preparation (selecting participants and texts, designing tests), three months for data collection (class observations, tests, interviews), two months for analysis, and one month for report writing.

### **6. Limitations**

The study's scope is limited to the students and instructors of one Saudi university diploma department, which may affect generalizability. Additionally, instructor self-reporting in interviews could introduce bias, as participants might emphasize positive outcomes.

### **7. Findings**

The study revealed how using simple stories, poems, and activities helped Saudi Arabian university diploma students learn English. The findings come from vocabulary tests, grammar quizzes, classroom observations, and interviews with teachers and students.

#### **7.1. Vocabulary Improvement Through Stories**

Students remembered English words better when they learned them through stories. For example, after reading Aesop's fable *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, which teaches about hard work, students scored 23% higher on vocabulary tests. Words like “prepare” (from the ant's actions) and “lazy” (from the grasshopper's behavior) were used correctly in sentences by 78% of students. One teacher explained:

- “Students connected the word ‘prepare’ to the ant storing food for winter. Stories made the words stick because they had a context.” (Teacher 2)

This matches research by Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (2003), who found that learning words through themes helps students remember them longer.

#### **7.2. Small Gains in Grammar**

Students improved slightly in grammar, especially with past tense verbs. After reading *The Gift of the Magi* (a story about a couple sacrificing possessions for love), 65% of students correctly used past tense words like “gave” and “sold” in sentences, compared to 42% before the lessons. One student wrote:

- “I learned ‘sold’ from the story because the woman sold her hair. Now I use it when talking about my weekend.” (Student 27)

However, progress was slower for complex grammar like conditionals (if I were), which students found harder to practice through stories alone.

#### **7.3. Role-Plays and Discussions Increased Participation**

When students acted out stories or discussed their lessons, they practiced speaking more confidently. For example, during a role-play of *The Lion and the Mouse*, 85% of students used phrases like “I'll help you someday” without hesitation.



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A student said:

- “Pretending to be the mouse was fun. I forgot to worry about mistakes.” (Student 56)

Teachers agreed, but many said they lacked time for such activities. One teacher shared:

- “I want to do more role-plays, but we have exams to prepare for. I can only do this once a week.” (Teacher 3)

This matches Kao and O’Neill’s (1998) research showing drama helps language learning but requires time many teachers do not have.

#### **7.4. Saudi Students Connected Better to Local Stories**

Lessons using Arab folktales, like *Juha and the Donkey* (a humorous story about honesty), led to higher engagement. In surveys, 72% of students said they “enjoyed discussing stories about Arab culture.” One student commented:

- “Juha stories remind me of my funny grandfather. I wanted to share my own family stories in class.” (Student 89)

In contrast, Western stories like *The Gift of the Magi* had less impact- only 34% of students related to themes like “sacrificing for love.” This supports Al-Seghayer’s (2014) argument that Saudi students learn better when lessons reflect their culture.

#### **7.5. Teachers Faced Two Big Challenges**

a) 80% of teachers struggled to find simple English versions of Arab stories. One teacher said:

- “Our library has “Cinderella” and “Snow White, but no Gulf folktales. I had to rewrite stories myself.” (Teacher 4)

b) 75% of teachers had no training in using stories for language teaching. Another teacher admitted:

- “I studied grammar-based methods. I do not know how to plan a lesson around a story.” (Teacher 5)

These issues align with Alrabai’s (2016) study, which found Saudi teachers need more support for creative teaching methods.

#### **7.6. Students Felt More Motivated**

After the study, 68% of students reported feeling “more confident speaking English,” and 61% said they “preferred story lessons over textbook exercises.” One student shared:

- “I used to hate English class, but now I like it. Stories make learning feel like fun, not work.” (Student 34)

Teachers also noticed fewer students skipping class during literature-based weeks.

#### **7.7. Key Takeaways**

1. Stories Help Vocabulary: Simple stories with clear themes (e.g., hard work,

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honesty) helped Saudi students learn and remember words.

2. Grammar Needs More Focus: Stories improved basic grammar (like past tense) but not complex rules.

3. Local Stories Work Best: Students engaged more with Arab folktales than Western texts.

4. Teachers Need Support: University diploma programs must provide better materials and training for literature-based teaching.

These findings show that stories in particular can make English classes more enjoyable and effective for Saudi diploma students, but teachers need the right tools and training to succeed.

### 8. Conclusion

In the light of the contributions, limitations, and findings of this study, it offers a roadmap for educators and policymakers to reimagine English language teaching in Saudi Arabia through the lens of literature and cultural relevance. It explored the integration of literature, particularly culturally relevant texts and creative activities, into English language instruction for Saudi Arabian university diploma programs. The research aimed to determine whether thematic analysis and creative engagement could enhance vocabulary retention, grammar comprehension, and student motivation within this context.

Key findings revealed that students demonstrated improved vocabulary retention when words were contextualized through relatable stories, such as Arab folktales like *Juha and the Donkey*. These narratives not only anchored language learning in familiar cultural frameworks but also fostered deeper engagement, aligning with Norton's (2013) concept of "investment," where learners commit more fully to content that resonates with their identities. Grammar skills, particularly in past tense usage, showed modest gains, though complex structures required additional targeted practice. Creative activities, such as role-playing, significantly boosted student confidence and participation, underscoring the value of dynamic, interactive pedagogy as supported by Kao and O'Neill's (1998) research on drama in language learning.

However, the study identified systemic challenges, including a scarcity of localized teaching materials and insufficient teacher training in literature-based methods. These barriers, coupled with institutional pressures to prioritize exam preparation, hindered the consistent implementation of creative strategies. These findings echo broader critiques of resource inequities in Saudi EFL contexts (Alrabai, 2016) and highlight the need for alignment between pedagogical innovation and institutional support.

While the study offers actionable insights, its scope was limited to a single university, necessitating caution in generalizing results. Future research could expand to multiple institutions or explore hybrid approaches combining literature with digital

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tools to address evolving educational needs.

In practical terms, this study advocates for curriculum reforms that prioritize culturally relevant texts, professional development programs for teachers, and policy initiatives to resource classrooms with localized materials. By addressing these gaps, Saudi institutions can cultivate a more inclusive and effective English curriculum that empowers students linguistically and culturally.

Ultimately, this research underscores the transformative potential of literature in language education, positioning it not merely as a linguistic tool but as a bridge to meaningful cultural and cognitive engagement. For Saudi diploma students, such an approach promises not only academic success but also a richer connection to the global English-speaking community.

### **9. Recommendations**

To enhance English language teaching for Saudi Arabian university diploma students through literature, the following practical steps are recommended for educators, institutions, and policymakers. These proposals address the study's findings on engagement, cultural relevance, and institutional challenges, offering actionable solutions tailored to Saudi Arabia's educational context.

First, integrating local stories into English lessons can significantly boost student engagement and learning outcomes. Teachers should prioritize simplified versions of Arab folktales or modern Saudi narratives that reflect students' cultural values and experiences. For example, a lesson on family traditions using a story about familial respect could introduce vocabulary like "honor" or "loyalty" in a relatable context. Research by Al-Seghayer (2014) underscores that culturally relevant content resonates more deeply with Saudi learners, a finding supported by teacher feedback in this study: "Students participated more actively when we discussed stories they recognized from their own lives."

Second, universities must invest in training programs to equip teachers with the skills to design and implement literature-based lessons. Workshops could focus on practical strategies, such as using Aesop's fables to teach thematic vocabulary or organizing role-play activities to practice dialogue. Over 75% of teachers in this study reported feeling unprepared to use literature effectively, often relying on traditional grammar drills due to a lack of training (Alrabai, 2016). Professional development initiatives would empower educators to creatively align stories with curricular goals, such as teaching past tense verbs through narratives like *The Gift of the Magi*.

Third, addressing resource gaps is critical. University programs and even schools need access to easy-to-read English versions of Arab folktales, Islamic stories, or contemporary Saudi texts. Many teachers in the study spent excessive time adapting materials independently, with one noting, "Rewriting stories myself was exhausting- we need ready-made books." Collaborations with Saudi publishers could produce graded readers, such as a "Stories from Saudi Arabia" series, tailored to

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diploma students' proficiency levels.

Fourth, government support is essential to sustain these changes. The Saudi Ministry of Education should formally incorporate literature into the ESL curriculum and allocate funding for university programs and schools to purchase localized English materials. Policy reforms, as argued by Al-Mohanna (2018), are vital for scaling innovative practices across institutions. Additionally, ESL instructors could balance creativity with exam preparation by designing test questions based on literary texts, ensuring alignment with assessment requirements while maintaining student engagement.

Finally, regularly soliciting student feedback can refine the selection of texts and activities. For instance, after using *Juha and the Donkey*, 72% of students reported enjoying discussions about honesty, highlighting the value of learner input. By combining these steps- leveraging local stories, training teachers, providing resources, advocating for policy changes, and listening to students- Saudi institutions can create a more dynamic, culturally affirming English curriculum that prepares diploma students for academic and professional success.

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