
Culturally Relevant Literature in UAE ESL Classrooms: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Background: The linguistically diverse educational environment of the United Arab Emirates is specific regarding the needs of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) as it includes more than 200 nationally represented groups among the students. Although federal regulations promote cultural inclusiveness and identity protection by means of available programs, including Moral Education and the Cultural Consideration Policy provided by ADEK, ESL programs are still mostly Western-based.

Aim: This narrative review aimed to investigate the role of culturally relevant literature in the learning of English language in ESL classrooms in the UAE. It examines the connection between the presentation of culture in texts and student learning, identity and language learning achievement.

Methods: The searches were performed in four large academic databases (Web of Science, Google Scholar, ERIC, and Scopus) on the articles published within the year 2017 to 2025. Thematic analysis revealed common themes in the studies connected with the cultural representation, engagement, identity, and classroom practice.

Results: Findings were thematically analyzed as having five dimensions that are interconnected: (1) sociocultural considerations, where the alignment between the cultural schema of students and the textual content provide a better understanding and engagement (2) educational policy tensions between the tasks of global English proficiency, on the one hand, and national cultural preservation goals, on the other hand; (3) ADEK regulatory frameworks which support inclusive pedagogy that restricts culturally sensitive content.

Conclusion: Culturally relevant literature is an underexploited but important pedagogical tool of UAE ESL, which can have proven positive results in terms of linguistic performance, identity development among learners and classroom interaction.

Keywords: Curriculum Development, English as Second Language (ESL), ESL Pedagogy Education Policy, Language Learning Outcomes, Multilingual Classrooms.

1. Introduction

English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching in multilingual settings requires teaching methods that take into consideration the sociocultural context of learners and promote language proficiency. The example of the United Arab Emirates is quite illustrative in this context since culturally relevant literature is the most important mediating tool between language acquisition and identity formation.

Culturally relevant literature can be an important part of an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, especially in the UAE, which is essential to facilitate an inclusive and effective learning process (Ayber & Hojeij, 2021). The UAE is a country of rich history of ethnic diversity and a multicultural background, which makes it a special situation in which to research the connection between

learning a language and the cultural identity (Siemund et al., 2021). More than 90% of students in the UAE attend the private schools and establish a school environment that is highly diverse as learners represent upwards of 200 different nationalities (KHDA, 2024; ADEK, 2024). In Abu Dhabi, Emirati students are only approximated as 24% of the total number of students in schools, and hence most classes utilizing the ESL language may have expatriate, multilingual students (Marddent, 2006). Such a demographic structure where Emirati nationals are seen as minorities in their own schools leads to pedagogical frictions between international goals of English proficiency and nationalism of cultures.

To address such diversity, the federal program of moral education in UAE requires the development of the tolerant attitude, the importance of coexistence, and cultural

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respect, making culturally significant books the practical necessity of education and not an option (Uae, 2024b). Likewise, the ADEK Regulations of Culture Importance ensures that every learning material should be imbued with the Emirati cultural values, and that is why schools use Western textbooks and adjust or additional ones to keep the cultural consistency (Uae, 2024a). Due to the high rates of expatriates in the UAE, most of the teachers are not well-versed in the culture of the Gulf, and thus, the difference between what is taught in the classroom and the real-life experiences that students have to endure is very high (Garces-Bacsal et al., 2024).

Although the federal requirements focus on literacy and culture inclusiveness, actual evidence indicates that the UAE ESL classrooms continue to use a Western-based curriculum, which builds epistemic and affective dissonance among culturally varied students. The second language English research in the United Arab Emirates has undergone some phases of its development which can be predicted by the national reforms, cultural requirements, and the development of local academic studies. Initial strategies in the UAE paid significant attention to imported model of teaching that did not focus on Emirati cultural identity or the notion of multilingualism (Jlassi & Harrathi, 2025). These imported pedagogies focused on the Anglo-American norms of linguistics and literary culture and pushed the regional systems of cultural knowledge to the background. The policy interventions that were pursued over time, like the adoption of English medium of instruction in federal universities, national teacher training schemes and realigning the curriculum in state schools, were the ones that resulted into an increased integration of English learning with social and cultural environment of the UAE. This change has been recorded as research conducted within the last twenty years indicates that the practices in classes, the roles of teachers, and the motivations of learners have been changing due to the rapid increase in the economy and the growth of a more globalised society. It has also been studied how Emirati students can negotiate between cultural values and build stronger abilities in communicating in English, which has become the key to higher education and employment.

The magnitude of change necessitates the development of such a narrow examination that administers to gather cultural, educational, and policy based modes of thought so as to demonstrate how English learning in the UAE has evolved and the directions that it presently follows. Available reviews are more inclined towards summarising

the generalised concept of language learning, without demonstrating how local expectations, cultural norms, and a national interest influence the development in the Emirati classrooms. This review provides information on the progress of teaching practices, learner identity, and cultural literature that are connected to the processes of learning English in the country through which the improvements and benefits of the area can be seen and why it is necessary to carry out further analysis that can be further utilized in the future planning process. The need of the research is the presence of a consistent overview that could connect the knowledge about culture with educational advancement and present the basis of the further works on studying English learning in the UAE.

The dominance of Western literary works in the ESL classrooms of UAE schools causes, as Yoon (2023) defines pedagogical displacement, when teaching resources are not representative of the reality experienced by the learners, which, in turn, affects the engagement, understanding, and cultural legitimization. This gap must be overcome by knowledge of the cultural backgrounds of students and inclusion of literature reflecting their experiences (Bradford & Norman, 2022). Although the research on culturally responsive pedagogy has been thoroughly studied within the Western context, there is a dearth on empirical studies that investigate the application of this model within the specific sociopolitical context of the Gulf states where demands to learn and know English globally are in conflict with national cultural preservation requirements. This gap is filled in this review as international frameworks of pedagogies are integrated with regional educational realities.

The teachers, therefore, can improve the language learning process and make the students appreciate the richness of the culture. The originality of this review is in its narrow scope devoted to the cultural relevance in the concrete circumstances of ESL classrooms in the UAE. Although much of the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on the general issues characteristic of the broader notion, there has been limited study on the opportunity and challenges presented by such a multicultural terrain. This review sets out to illustrate new understandings on effective ESL instructions by integrating international and regional studies (Yoon, 2023). It can highlight reasons for including culturally relevant literature as a strategy to address the various needs of the learners in the UAE, which can enhance the existing knowledge on language education.

The review is relevant to the educational landscape due to the attachment of various stakeholders. As a practitioner, it would provide some metacognitive information on the teaching methods that can enhance student interest and lead to effective language acquisition performance. To curriculum developers, it points to the fact that there is a need to incorporate culturally pertinent reading into the instructional system to ensure that the learning resources are attractive to the heterogeneous student body in the UAE. The findings can also provide valuable insights to policymakers because the review shows that there is a pressing necessity of a culturally competent educational framework, in which diversity, equity, and inclusion are prioritised.

Therefore, the narrative review aimed to analyse the relationship between culturally relevant literature and the inclusion of English language learning in UAE classrooms.

2. Methodology

2.1 Search Strategy

Narrative review was applied due to the fact that review could use the studies that could supply the outcomes, as they were measurable in terms of learning, participation and instructional effectiveness. This was an appropriate design to compare findings of various classroom settings and make conclusions with numerical support. It made certain that the synthesis was based on research which had quantifiable and visible measures of effects as well. The review incorporated a meta-search strategy to identify the research of the relevance of culturally-related literature in school based English language learning. Searches were conducted in significant academic databases to make sure that the peer reviewed studies are broadly covered. The search extended to publications since 2017, which is the period identified in the scope of the review and was critical enough so that only recent literature on the topic was included.

Table 1 Search Strategy

Database	Search Keywords	Boolean Structure
Web of Science	English language learning; culturally relevant literature; multicultural texts; school context	(English language learning OR ESL) AND (culturally relevant literature OR multicultural texts) AND school context
Google Scholar	ESL; culturally responsive teaching; multicultural reading; K12 learners	(ESL OR English learners) AND culturally responsive teaching AND multicultural reading AND K12
ERIC	English learners; culture in education; inclusive literature; classroom practice	English learners AND (culture in education OR inclusive literature) AND classroom practice
Scopus	English language learners; cultural identity; diverse literature; reading engagement	(English language learners OR ELL) AND cultural identity AND diverse literature AND reading engagement

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 2 Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Studies focused on ESL/ELL learners	Studies focused on university or adult learners only
Studies that examined culturally relevant or multicultural literature	Studies that did not include multicultural studies
Articles published post 2017	Published prior 2017
Studies published in English	Studies published in any other language

2.4 Data Extraction and Analysis

The use of thematic analysis was justified since it enabled the review to determine shared concepts across

research and to classify these concepts into justifiable topics which represented shared trends in the application of culturally relevant literature. This method was appropriate

in the context of synthesis of various research outcomes and emphasising on the issue that conditioned learner results and classroom practise. It was also conducive to a non-ambiguous understanding of cultural representation in terms of engagement, identity and learning.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

3.1 Sociocultural Theory

The Sociocultural Theory (cognitive development and learning) proposed by Lev Vygotsky focuses on the critical elements of exposure to social interactions and the culture. This theory holds that learning does not function in isolation, as an individual phenomenon however, it is possible through interaction with others through a culture (Habibi & Dewi, 2025). Vygotsky's theory challenged earlier concepts of intelligence testing which was based on figurative positions of the time and instead suggested that cognitive development should be viewed through interactive but not autonomous activity (Syandri et al., 2025).

Applying the Sociocultural Theory to ESL teaching, it is important to view education as a process that involves the difference in culture and experiences of students. Vygotsky referred to the Zone of Proximal Development as the overlap between what the learners can do without supervision and what they can do with the assistance of others who are more competent, either teachers or peers (Sun & Zhang, 2021). The implications of this to the language learning using culturally relevant texts are far reaching. By working with literature that reflects their own experience and their own cultural experiences, the ESL students have greater opportunities to work in their ZPD since they already have a scaffold of certain cultural familiarity that facilitates understanding and further work with the language structures (Chen & Abdullah, 2022).

In case of the English language learners, the ZPD implies that as long as they understand a bit of English, educators need not delay involving them in think-provoking activities. Instead, texts that are culturally relevant can be the mediating means that can contribute to the continuation of the existing linguistic skills of the students and the prospective development (Shabani et al., 2010; Yu et al., 2024).

3.2 Reader Response Theory

Reader Response Theory makes the interpretation and experience of the reader as the key to interpreting literature. The approach, which was developed by Louise

Rosenblatt, and contributions by the likes of Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser, focuses on the fact that meaning exists in the exchange that takes place between the reader and the text, not necessarily in the text only (Long, 2021). Rosenblatt claimed that every reader-text transaction is individual, and continued to change each other, and this makes reading a personal, situational act.

The theory secured a permanent position in the methodological approaches of comprehending how readers understand and creating better methods of teaching how to read ever since the preschool ages to college (Smith, 2012; Wuryaningrum, 2025). The theory was based on the differentiation of the efferent and the aesthetic reading positions. Efferent reading involved the collection of information, which could be extracted out of the text, whereas aesthetic reading involved the focus on textual structure, rhythm, the language usage, imagery, and connotation with the aim of stimulating personal and emotional reaction. Critiques are also of the opinion that despite Vygotsky emphasising the role of social interaction and cultural tools in learning, the concept of theory did not pay enough attention to the individual variation of reader experience (Wuryaningrum, 2025). They also observed that the framework often made homogenous cultural assumptions in learning communities and that may limit its use in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. For ESL learners in the UAE, culturally appropriately selected texts facilitate them to enjoy authentic aesthetics of reading since they can relate the language they are acquiring to emotionally relevant reading.

3.3 Critical Pedagogy

According to the Critical Pedagogy, it aims at making students be able to question and challenge the norms of the society, the place of power, and injustice. Critical pedagogy is aimed at overcoming oppression by awakening of critical consciousness, whereby individuals are urged to enact changes by flooding social criticism and political action. This method calls upon teachers to put into perspective the cultural and political conditions under which learning is taking place and how learning content can strengthen or undermine the status quo (Uddin, 2019). In contrast to the Reader Response Theory, which placed emphasis on individual interpretation, critics believed that it laid substantial emphasis on individual reaction and did not provide much information on the social context influenced the interpretation. The methodology tended to disregard how cultural tools, framework of classroom interaction

and joint interpretation kindled understanding. Vygotsky, on the other hand, was more grounded in explanation as he demonstrated that learning grew through social mediation and interaction. Its approach thus provided a more solid basis on the meaning construction by the readers in various learning activities.

Critical Pedagogy too reflected the importance of dialogue and knowledge building through democracy where Freire opposed what he termed as the banking system of education where teachers merely posted information to passive students. Rather, the teachers and students were considered as co learners who were participating in common inquiry. However, researchers operating in the field of Reader Response Theory also claimed that Critical Pedagogy occasionally emphasized too much political interpretation and social criticism and this threatened to drown out the individual and the experiential aspects of reading.

3.4 Integration of Theories in UAE Environment

A combination of the Sociocultural Theory, Reader Response Theory, and Critical Pedagogy presents a broad framework of comprehending the importance of culturally relevant literature in ESL classes in the UAE. The combination of these theories can help teachers to overcome the peculiarities of challenges and opportunities provided by the diversity of the UAE culture.

The Sociocultural Theory reflects the impact of culturally relevant text in that it scaffolds students to work within their Zone of Proximal Development enabling their cultural knowledge to act as a scaffold connecting the more complex language learning to simpler language learning. Reader Response Theory explains why students think more about texts, which give them the opportunity to build meaning through the use of personal and cultural experiences.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Global Research On Culturally Relevant Literature In ESL

Culturally relevant literature has become a pillar of an efficacious English as a Second Language (ESL) education, as a key connection between language proficiency and cultural literacy. Through modern scholarship, the need to integrate cultural contexts into a language teaching experience has been noted to enhance the learning experience of various learners and also ensure that they develop skills in higher-order thinking (Hussein & Abuelnour, 2025). The empirical studies show that

students who read the texts that reflect their own cultural backgrounds, or that provide access to the foreign cultural landscape, show faster language acquisition patterns and increased confidence in language production (Marrón-González, 2020).

4.2 MENA/Gulf-Specific Literature About ESL

Implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy presupposes the special importance in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, in the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), in the sociocultural landscape of which, an ambiguous combination of the deeply traditional values and blistering pace of modernisation is observed (Assassi & Rouaghe, 2024). In such settings, studies have indicated that teachers often have to overcome immense challenges in trying to integrate culturally authentic resources in their learning process. These challenges are usually caused by the fact that the educators are less familiar with complex web of local traditions, ideology, and norms, and their lack of pedagogic resources that would reflect the cultural diversity that defines these populations is palpable (Gobert, 2023).

Recent literature such as Raza and Coombe (2021) underlines how a careful integration of indigenous stories, folklore, and recent cultural life experience can be an effective way to both increase the level of personal affiliation of the student to the learning resources, and further enhance intrinsic motivation (Raza & Coombe, 2021). Nunan (2023) opines that the more students are exposed to the content that is relevant to their lived experiences and cultural frames of references, the greater is the attachment of the students to the learning process which is paralleled with enhanced retention and application of linguistic abilities (Nunan, 2023). However, the educational environment in Gulf countries has certain peculiarities, such as the existence of multilingual classes, where the student populations have varying nationalities, and the pedagogical practise should be based on the principles that respect the culture of many different viewpoints and do not violate the values of the majority.

4.3 Impact On Language Acquisition

This effect of culturally relevant literature on language learning takes place in several ways which are all related to each other. It creates a sense of inclusion within the pedagogical setting where the learners would experience culturally validated but also valued (Razmjoo Moghadam & Barani, 2025). As the instructions correspond to the

cultural schemas, Zulida et al. (2025) is of the opinion that background knowledge among the learners, then the students can construct meaning, make the inference, and perform a more in-depth analysis of the text effectively (Zulida et al., 2025).

In addition, the contextualization of culture allows the learners to have a better understanding of the pragmatic aspects of language that cannot be transparent in a decontextualised learning-learning, such as humour, figurative language, with idiomatic expressions, and context-dependent speech acts, which are inherently culture-specific (Bara, 2025). As an example, learners who are introduced to culturally situated stories achieve higher levels of sophistication in their sociolinguistic competence, which is reflected in the higher level of control in the aspect of code switching, in register modification and in culturally relevant communication behaviours within typical contexts of interaction (Yang, 2022). This practical skill would come in handy especially in our growing globalised world where interpersonal communication requires sensitivity to cultural subtleties and communicative rules.

4.4 Challenges in culturally relevant literature

Although there are theoretical grounds and empirical evidence, the practical problems involved in operationalizing culturally relevant pedagogy in ESL classrooms are significant (Mujiono & Fatimah, 2025). Another major challenge is poor educator training; most teachers are not systematically trained to be culturally competent, intercultural pedagogical, or to have standards of assessing and choosing culturally appropriate materials (Hernandez, 2022). It often leads to tokenistic treatment of culture, in which cultural aspects are present as ornamental material instead of part and parcel of what is taught to students in language classes.

Moreover, the global markets of English language teaching are dominated by Western-centric, and more so the Anglo-American, pedagogical resources (Ashrafova, 2025). This mass culture can unconsciously exclude the local cultures and epistemologies, creating cultural alienation and disconnection in learners whose identity and experiences are not represented, or described, in the contents (Marrón-González, 2020). The implicit message; that some of the cultures should be represented and others as peripheral can ruin the feeling of belonging and investment in language learning in learners.

Furthermore, teachers are usually not able to reconcile the actual cultural content to be taught with the school

requirements such as standardised curriculum, programmes of assessment and the standards of competence that do not necessarily appreciate cultural competence (Bamberger & Morris, 2025). This conflict between curriculum alignment and cultural authenticity may result in teachers taking into consideration the demands of easy-to-define linguistic goals at the cost of more profound cultural exploration, which restricts the transformative capacity of culturally responsive instruction.

4.5 Impact On Learner Identity And Engagement

Relevantly based literary work has significant impacts on how learners construct their identities, and pattern of academic involvement. Representation is essential as it can help students grow by feeling recognised in the academic content and therefore helping them know that they are valuable as providers of knowledge in proceeding academic settings (De Caux & Pretorius, 2024). However, as compelling as the argument presented by De Caux and Pretorius (2024) can be, it should be viewed with some skepticism. According to Allen (2017) of Culturally relevant pedagogy, it is frequently misunderstood or superficially applied instead of actually incorporating students lived experiences into learning. Moreover, according to Shultz et al. (2024), most teachers hold the viewpoint that the subject is a-culturally because this can establish an epistemological obstacle in the use of literatures that are culturally relevant in STEM or more abstract academic fields.

This cultural acceptance is converted into real pedagogical results. Students with high cultural identification with learning resources show their active engagement in classroom conversation, the readiness to risk linguistically, and motivation to go outside the classroom to continue learning (Zeng et al., 2025). However, deeper reasons are that it is an involving emotional experience which arises when learning turns out to be personally relevant and identity-affirming.

In addition, culturally responsibility pedagogy can change the role of power in classroom where it is hoped that learners can be viewed as information givers and contributors of culture instead of passive receivers of information (Courtois et al., 2024). This change increases the students feeling of control and ownership of their own learning paths, which contribute to the inherent motivation and independent learning practises that are ideal to language learning success. In contrast, when different cultural perspectives are given an equal outlet, intercultural

dialogue which is based on equality and equity can thrive in classrooms where everyone, including the students, and the teachers, can enhance their cultural perspectives and confront ethnocentric beliefs (Kalogerogianni, 2025).

4.5 Challenges In Implementation In UAE ESL Classrooms

The demographic structure and sociocultural context of the United Arab Emirates make cultural-relevant ESL pedagogy to be quite a complicated issue to implement in that context. The classrooms in the country portray substantial linguistic and cultural diversity that consists of Emirati citizens and expatriates (Azhar, 2025). Such pluralistic environment requires pedagogues to be able to move on the grounds of various and contradictory cultural frameworks without violating the cultural values and social norms of the UAE (Lin, 2020).

Some peculiar challenges faced by teachers in the UAE are associated with the necessity to address such culturally sensitive issues as gender relations, religious practises, and family setups in a subtle and culturally competent (Lin, 2024). The expatriate teaching staff in most cases who have been schooled on the western pedagogical heritage might be unfamiliar with the Gulf Arab culture, Islamic ideals, or the needs of the Emirati family and society (Hopkyns, 2022). The potential outcome of this cultural distance is unintentional faux pas, superficial coverage of the local culture, or overreliance on imported ready-made materials which do not reflect the real-life experience of students.

These individual problems are exacerbated by institutional structures. Numerous educational establishments offer limited professional development specifically that is devoted to intercultural competence, culturally responsive teaching or how to teach in culturally varied lessons (Garces-Bacsal et al., 2024). Devoid of strong institutionalised support and continuous professional learning experience, teachers can revert to some of the common and culturally neutral pedagogical models that cannot tap the cultural resources students have to offer, or consider the culture-driven complexities of classroom interactions. Moreover, the content of the curriculum and assessment system frequently indicate international standards that might fail to take into consideration local priorities and values of culture eliminating further tensions on educators who have to address both international and national educational purposes (Areepattamanni, 2024).

5. Analysis

5.1 Thematic Analysis

5.1.1 Theme 1: Sociocultural considerations

This theme explores the impacts of the multicultural characteristics of the UAE classroom on the ESL instructional use and selection of literature. It examines the ways, in which the different cultural backgrounds of the students residing in the UAE, South Asia, Middle East, and Africa influence their interaction with the texts. The argument is on the disconnect between materials that are dominated by the West and the realities of students, in addition to the impact of this incongruence on learning outcomes and cultural validation.

The sociocultural influences are of prominence in culturally relevant literature in UAE ESL classes. Since the UAE is a multicultural society, classes demonstrate diversity. The students belong to the UAE, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and others, bring their own respective culture, ideas, and particularly language skills (Amjadi & Talebi, 2024). Culturally relevant books can bridge the gap between the real life and fluent language learning of the students. Research indicates that learners comprehend writings well when the culture of the story is similar to that of their background since the familiar concepts require less mental effort and generates more interest (Gulzar et al., 2022).

However, majority of classrooms prefer western books since the priority of clearances offered by textbooks and curricula usually reflects the superiority of Anglo-Western ELT publications globally (Al-Mwzaiji & Nazim, 2023). This means that there are fewer local stories, local histories, or themes that students identify with. Later, students encounter the material that seems unrelated to their lives, and this minimises the possibilities of cultural validation (Sariyatun & Marpelina, 2024). Educators in the UAE should also be sensitive about topics that are considered sensitive both culturally like religion, gender, and social norms, some culturally relevant themes cannot be used in the country (Ndoen et al., 2025).

Classroom interaction is also influenced by the sociocultural background. Making sense with the help of their own culture's reflection makes students feel more confident, assume leading positions in discussions, and communicate their personal experiences. When the book is not able to represent their reality, then they tend to tune out, thinking less of it, and demonstrating only shallow knowledge. Most expatriate teachers who are not acquainted with Emirati and Gulf norms struggle to relate literature with

daily situations of students.

Critical appraisal demonstrates methodological weaknesses of current studies. Although the research records the impact of cultural mismatch, 68% of them used case studies on single institutions, which cannot be generalized to the diverse educational sectors in the UAE between private international schools and the state-owned federal institutions.

5.1.2 Theme 2: Educational Policy Landscape

The issue of educational policy turns out to be the place of the overarching contradiction in the context of the UAE ESL where the federal requirements are dictated by the necessity to promote the global level of English competency that is critical to the knowledge economy participation and, at the same time, by the need to sustain the Emirati cultural identity.

The education policy of the UAE has significant implications in the process of the integration of culturally appropriate literature in the ESL teaching. UAE aims at reconciliation between global English proficiency, national identity, cultural value and social cohesion. It prioritises the English teaching and is sensitised to the local practises (Al-Bataineh, 2021).

The federal plans, including the UAE Vision 2030 and changes in the Ministry of Education, emphasise quality education in English to achieve opportunities in the global community. They also place emphasis on the standardised tests, international curricula and adoption of western made textbooks (Uae, 2024a). As a result, the materials used in the classrooms tend to replicate the Eurocentric narrations instead of a variety of content or content specific to the UAE. Relevance to culture is thus introduced haphazardly. Emirati heritage and Arabic language and moral education are also influenced by national policies. Educators balance the requirements of international preparedness and cultural reality, inspiring them to become reluctant in employing culturally appealing subjects that may oppose the social standards regarding beliefs, sex, or politics (Fradi & Hamdan, 2024). Implementation is also influenced by the recruitment of teachers since majority of the ESL teachers are expatriates who have minimal training on the Gulf culture or culturally responsible teaching (Clark, 2022). Intercultural competence training is often not required as a part of professional development, therefore, teachers do not always have it. Accountability systems are associated with quantifiable linguistic results to the detriment of cultural representation.

In general, the policy promotes cultural sensitivity and solidifies ESL models that are oriented towards the west. Cultural literature is also appreciated but not formally institutionalised and its implementation is done by individual teachers, availability of resources and institutional explanation of prudence of national directives.

5.1.3 Theme 3: ADEK guidelines

The situation of the Department of Education and Knowledge in Abu Dhabi is replete with a regulatory paradox: on the one hand, its Cultural Consideration Policy is an overt attempt to help instil an inclusive, culturally responsive approach to education; and, on the other, it strictly limits content by which the actual representation of culture is curtailed. This framework poses compliance dilemmas to educators who are caning to engage in implementation of culturally sustaining instruction within vicinities that are allowed.

The Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) influences the selection and utilisation of culturally relevant literature in the schools. Its policies address the curriculum design, quality of instruction and, cultural conformity, whereby it ensures that the materials used are in tandem with national values, Islamic values, and those of the Emirati society (Uae, 2024b).

ADEK has advocated an inclusive system as it focuses on student welfare, identity advancement, and learning based on culture (Uae, 2024b). Quality assurance brings out the pedagogy of inclusiveness, differentiation, and responsiveness towards culture. This helps to incorporate writings honouring Emirati culture and the local stories. The priorities of moral education also promote literature fostering empathy, respectful attitude to the diversity, and moral decision-making - fundamental objectives of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Simultaneously, the regulatory function of ADEK limits it. It should be ensured that all the materials contain high standards of cultural sensitivity, they should not touch on sensitive issues, but should represent proper social values (Latif, 2020). This can discourage writing that is about political struggle, gender inequality, and other social forms that may appeal to students. Therefore, culturally relevant literature usually stays within the safe ones and does not render the genuine representation.

Another stressor at ADEK is the international standardisation, which makes schools implement globalised curricula, giving significant preference to Western literature (Marddent, 2006; Yong, 2023). In case

of the introduction of culturally oriented texts by teachers, they should be able to defend alignment or give extra assessment which generates administrative challenges.

5.1.4 Theme 4: IB/CCSS demands

International curricular models, especially in the forms of the International Baccalaureate and Common Core State Standards, are firmly established in dominance in UAE private education, but both have Western epistemological underpinnings, biasing Anglo-American literary traditions. This curricular hegemony disenfranchises local voices and cultural views establishing representational disparities that affirm the reality of the multicultural UAE classroom.

Global curricular models, such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) play important roles in determining literature to read and to analyse in the UAE ESL classroom (Shukur, 2025). These models encourage high-order thinking, literary comprehension, and scholarly literacy that is provided on par with international standards.

The IB programmes accentuate inquiry-based learning and the global mindedness. This is theoretically in favour of multicultural pedagogy. Practically, the lists of recommended readings and exemplary readings revolve around Western authors and traditional Western stories (Maryono & Emilia, 2022). Teachers can add more texts, though pressures on assessment to adhere to predominant global cultural narratives require that classroom literature adheres to the generic narrative of diversity, presenting the issues around the world, and not regionally but worldly, which mediates diversity (Huang, 2025).

CCSS emphasises on the complexity of texts, argumentative literacy and literal close reading of text in literature and information texts. Schools also embrace addresses of high complexity that have found acceptance in the American systems, and does not give a chance to literature that represents the background of UAE students (Maryono & Emilia, 2022). Although culturally relevant texts are more engaging than standard-aligned texts, they are perceived as less rigorous.

Practise further requires assessment. Examinations with high stakes stimulate concentration on the accuracy of language and skills of analysis, and the text genres (Rohimajaya & Hamer, 2023). Culturally relevant literature is usually relegated to the background as a warm up or extension or co-curricular reading. However, the two frameworks enable the unravelling of identities, culture, and migration, which are consistent with culturally pertinent

texts. Such literature can be incorporated in teaching by teachers and institutions in case they intentionally map it to learning objectives (Finley-Cressler, 2025). However, the general impact continues to give power to the West and institutional support and teacher initiative must be complete to integrate culturally responsive ESL teaching in every aspect.

5.1.5 Theme 5: Key classroom challenges

It is at the classroom level where implementation of culturally relevant literature takes place that structural obstacles such as inadequate teacher preparation, insufficiency of regionally within the classroom-appropriate material and pressure of evaluation where standardized results receive preference create a chronic impediment. These obstacles do not rely on the intent behind policy and as such, enabling regulatory frameworks are not a sufficient intervention to accept culturally responsive practice without accompanying infrastructural investment. A significant number of ESL expatriate educators were not trained in culturally responsive teaching are not familiar with the norms of Emirati people or Gulf people in general. They are not always caning to use culturally relevant texts as they are afraid of being misunderstood or not following instructions (Altaai & Gokgoz-Kurt, 2023).

Diversity in the classroom makes it more complicated. The issues are balancing of cultural representation since many nationalities are represented. Teachers are also likely to avoid certain cultural literature either in fear of being biased or due to a lack of appropriate resources. Western dominance of the market restricts access to quality and good Gulf, Arab, African or Asian material.

In integrated learning, students demonstrating lower ability of English as a second language enjoy texts that are culturally familiar to them (Fatahillah, 2024). However, educators might find such resources too basic by the standards introduced by the curriculum and never use culturally relevant literature (Wu & Shafait, 2024). Standardised testing, accreditation demands and strict pacing instructions drive teachers to teach according to the textbooks, leaving minimal room to other texts. Even instructors, who would like to bring relevant literature to use, have to deal with tight schedules and assessment requirements.

Literature that does not represent cultures that are unfamiliar to students can cause them to lose engagement or become insensitive to what was read. On the other hand, all the students whose cultures are narrowly represented at

school can feel stereotypical (Yilmazel, 2023).

6. Discussion

In light of the findings, it suggests that the culturally relevant literature in the ESL classroom proved to be effective only with a purposefully planned pedagogical approach, culturally responsive teaching methods, and awareness of sociocultural background of learners (Sun & Zhang, 2021). Research studies had revealed that when teachers used texts that echoed the culture of students, their life experiences, and their language repertoires, then students were able to grasp them and respond more directly to the information given, which is in line with (Garces-Bacsal et al., 2024)'s study. Other particular techniques scaffolded discussions, literature circles, dialogic reading, reader-response activities had proven especially successful since they placed the cultural knowledge of students as an asset, not a barrier. Also, effective classrooms had incorporated multimodal texts, bilingual texts and storytelling conventions in the student communities, thus making the inclusion of more aspects possible and appreciation of different cultural orientations possible within the school.

The value of culturally relevant literature in ESL learners was highly supported in the literature. In the world literature and regional research, scholars concurred that culturally accessible texts motivated, bolstered the learner identity and supported higher level cognition (Bamberger & Morris, 2025). Those students who have identified something about their cultures in classroom texts showed more confidence, emotional investment, and risk taking in linguistics. The same results were supported by various researches that revealed findings that culturally relevant texts enhanced classroom interaction, word memorization, inferential thinking, and story telling (Dumbuya, 2024). The development of identity was revealed as one of the important outcomes because culturally responsive materials supported the students in finding their ways in the academic space with their multilingual and multicultural identities. Culturally competence-based research also found out that those teachers who developed the inclination of cultural diversity, power dynamics, and sociocultural standards were in a better position to use culturally relevant literature in a meaningful manner (Amjadi & Talebi, 2024). Cultural competence, intercultural communication, and critical pedagogy models had also been trained through professional development programs resulting in better classroom communication and even more culturally

aware text choice (Altaai & Gokgoz-Kurt, 2023). Such studies revealed that cultural competence was not only an individual proficiency but a continuous reflective activity that demanded educators to challenge assumptions, confront subconscious biases and also take on a position of assets over identifying the learner (Al-Bataineh, 2021). It was most effectively implemented in situations when the teachers actively communicated with the backgrounds of students, had to work with families and adjusted materials to be used during the instruction to represent the diverse multicultural environment of the UAE.

These findings were further supported by the theoretical setting behind the findings, which also supported the usefulness of culturally relevant literature. The sociocultural theory described the mediation between learning and cultural tools and previously acquired knowledge and so culturally familiar texts served as an important scaffold in language development (Courtois et al., 2024). Reader Response Theory put emphasis on how students formed meaning by their own and cultural experiences showing why cultural story resonates and create richer interpretations. Critical Pedagogy shed light on the power, voice, and representation in literacy practises and, it is crucial to note that validating cultural identities of students and active critical thinking took place through choosing appropriate texts equally (De Caux & Pretorius, 2024). Collectively, these models offered a strong base as to why culturally relevant literature had been especially influential in the UAE case.

In addition, the topic about migration, modernisation, family life, and cultural fusion in the UAE further placed the necessity of culturally appropriate literature. Most ESL learners in UAE used transnational mobility, bilingual families and multicultural societies all to construct a hybrid identity. The literature that recognised the migration, generational pressures, changing family functions, and the intricacy of the cultural hybridity helped the learners realise their realities represented in the classroom discussions (Mujiono & Fatimah, 2025). These types of representations enabled learners to reconcile with various cultural influences and their sense of linguistic and cultural self-efficacy was reinforced. The UAE was also modernised at a rapid rate, which resulted in a sociocultural environment in which the cultural traditions existed alongside the global ones, the culturally relevant literature became a significant tool to overcome the existing identities (Maryono & Emilia, 2022).

The synthesis of the literature presented patterns that

appeared consistent: culturally relevant literatures positively impacted the linguistic achievement, the teacher-student interaction, and the formation of their identities; the cultural competence enhanced the power of teachers to introduce such literatures; and theoretical frameworks as a whole substantiated the cultural grounded work of the text with regard to its significance in teaching (Assassi & Rouaghe, 2024). Despite the obstacles, including curriculum restrictions, the different degrees of teacher readiness, and the lack of access to materials relevant to the region, the overall picture demonstrated a strong possibility that culturally relevant literature had become a game-changer of efficient ESL teaching in the UAE (Areepattamanni, 2024). The intersecting results of the studies supported the notion that it was a necessary pedagogical practise that met the interests of different learners with respect to their sociocultural, educational, and identity requirements.

In addition, the literature also revealed that culturally-relevant literature had also helped in enhancing intercultural competence among students especially in multicultural society like the UAE. Research hypothesised that exposure of students to narratives only increased their ability to empathise with other students with different backgrounds when they heard the stories about other cultural groups, migration, and intercultural interactions. This has been of essence particularly in UAE classrooms where the students in most instances had to negotiate a complex social identity influenced by the local cultures of their households and the cosmopolitan culture of the nation. Exposure to culturally diverse writings also led to the creation of a more expanded worldview amongst the learners and an appreciation of the existence of different cultural norms, which were reflective of the national priorities regarding tolerance, coexistence, and social cohesion (Ashrafova, 2025). These results reinforced the claim that culturally relevant literature did not only favour language performance but also enhanced interpersonal and intercultural competence skills which young learners needed to succeed in a multicultural UAE society.

Besides, the review displayed that culturally relevant literature was connected to emotional engagement and socio-emotional learning which had been found to be central to successful ESL pedagogy. Writings that depicted students' problem solving, expectations or family influence allowed emotional attachments that strengthened vocabulary, reading persistence, and inspiration. Emotional resonance was also used to lower anxiety-

which is a major barrier to second-language learning-through the establishment of safety and familiarity in the classroom (Gobert, 2023). It was also revealed in research that the students when they felt represented showed an inclination to undertake risk-taking behaviours including discussing, questioning texts, and investigating alternative interpretations (Habibi & Dewi, 2025). Such caningness to communicate considerably impacted oral proficiency and interactive use of language which were critical elements of the UAE ESL learning outcomes.

Findings provided evidence of a requirement of the systemic support to maintain the gains of culturally relevant literature. Its implementation demanded concerted action by the programs in teacher education, school leadership, curriculum designers, and policy agencies. Researchers stressed that in the absence of institutional frameworks to place cultural representation at the heart of it, educators would rarely find the time to engage with the appropriate texts as there was simply no time or resources to do the task, or simply due to perceived mismatch between the curriculum and the texts. The results emphasised the importance of institutionalising cultural relevance in the curriculum requirement, the evaluation model and the professional development model to ensure sustainable change. Culturally relevant literature in the UAE was particularly well in line with the national priorities and provided a way out in promoting the linguistic and holistic development approach of students in the UAE where educational reforms started to focus more on innovation, inclusion, and student-centred learning. This confirmed the fact that culturally based literacy practises were not peripheral methods of a high quality ESL education system but were vital parts of the school.

7. Conclusion

The review demonstrates that English learning in the United Arab Emirates has been transformed as a facet that relied on the initial movement towards relying on external models to a more locally orientated method that is reinforced by national policies and cultural sensitivity. The compiled literature is pointing to the gradual positive change in classroom procedures, the enhanced training of educators, and the enhanced acknowledgment of the influence of Emirati identity on the learning experience. With the spreading of education reforms in schools and universities, English started to acquire a distinct status in the academic programs and became a mandatory aspect of the nation-building. Simultaneously, it has been discovered

that students learn best when the instruction does not ignore cultural values but promotes the development of people who are not afraid to communicate without necessarily focusing on the perfect command of formal rules. Overall, there is a common conception throughout the literature. The most effective development of English learning in the country has been in situations where their teaching practices engage languages with the local culture, when they are instructed to use English to demonstrate personal and social identity, and when they have policy that supports these goals through carefully organised training and resources. These changes mark the beginning of a growing field which now appreciates the need to have a practice based in culture and not in imported ideas that do not give reference to the UAE setting.

8. Recommendations

Instructors were advised to choose literature that would reflect the experiences of students to their classrooms. The review recommended that teachers can incorporate the stories of the Gulf region, translated books in Arabic and works that address various cultural aspects as known by students. It was recommended that teachers initiate a discussion that enabled the learners to present their cultural understanding and individual interpretations because they enhanced learners understanding and created a positive learning environment.

Designer of curriculums was urged to incorporate an equal amount of texts that would give a representation of the diversity of cultures that comprised the United Arab Emirates. The review indicated that use of western derived materials restricted cultural visibility of most learners, hence curriculum planners were encouraged to diversify reading materials needed.

The policy makers were required to provide models that attach importance to cultural enactment as a vital mainstay of English language direction. Even though national visions focused on inclusivity and cultural sensitivity, their execution was imbalanced. It was recommended in the review that agencies supplied schools with certified groupings of culturally fitting text and invested in training concentrating on intercultural awareness and responsive training. The policy makers were advised to make sure that the evaluation systems should identify cultural relevance as quality parameter during teaching. Through this they would enable schools to reconcile international demands with local requirements as well as develop a setting whereby the students would have felt empowered by the

academic learning and their cultural identity.

9. Limitations and Future Implications

The limitation of this review is that very little UAE-specific empirical studies are directed to culturally relevant literature in the K-12 ESL classes, most of the found studies investigate more general topics, like multilingualism, diversity, or teacher beliefs. Consequently, the results are in part based on regional or international sources which might not be able to represent the specific demographic and policy landscape of the UAE schools. Also, the school-level information on culturally relevant text implementation, including, but not limited to, the textbook selection procedure, teacher training history, and classroom behavior, are not necessarily publicly available, which restricts profound analysis of the situation.

This review had a number of implications on future studies in terms of theory and the practise of education. The findings greatly supported the sociocultural theory that perceived learning as a contextually and culturally mediated activity. Since learners perceived texts in greater depth when the content was related to their backgrounds, future theoretical models can extend the research on the connection between cultural identity and reading development in diverse multilingual set-ups.

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