

Assessing the Impact of Novel-Based Pedagogy on Language Skills and Cultural Competence in Secondary EFL Classrooms: A Case Study of Iraq

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Abstract

Specifically, this study explores the effect of novel-based pedagogy on language proficiency alongside ICC level for EFL secondary Iraqi students. In this case, we took a mixed-methods approach and studied their efficacy in addressing this dilemma with respect to literature-based instruction, given that the grammar-translation method takes over Iraqi classrooms but does not create communicative skills or cultural awareness. Study Design: This was a twelve-week study design implemented in two secondary schools in Basrah with a sample size of sixty students and ten teachers. The data were collected through standardized reading and writing tests, an ICC questionnaire that was adapted from Byram's (1997) framework, semi-structured interviews and observations in the classroom. Significant language skill gains (Cohen's $d = 0.87$) and a significant improvement in cultural competence (Cohen's $d = 0.56$) were also evident in results on the pre-test and post-test. Qualitative results also demonstrated growing levels of engagement in the classroom as well as the amount of classroom interactions conducted. These findings support the potential of novel-based pedagogy as an effective pedagogical tool that can be used in Iraqi EFL classrooms to develop linguistic competence, intercultural awareness and bolster the case of novel approaches in EFL curriculum in contexts other than the West.

Keywords: Novel-Based Pedagogy, EFL Learners, Language Skills Development, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Literature-Based Instruction, Cultural Awareness, Iraqi Secondary Education.

تقييم أثر التدريس القائم على الرواية في تنمية المهارات اللغوية والكفاءة الثقافية في صنوف اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بالمرحلة الثانوية: دراسة حالة في العراق

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الملخص

تستقصي هذه الدراسة على وجه التحديد أثر التدريس المعتمد على الرواية في تنمية الكفاءة اللغوية إلى جانب مستوى الكفاءة التواصيلية العابرة للثقافات (ICC) لدى طلبة المرحلة الثانوية من دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق. وقد اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج المختلط (الكمي والنوعي) لبحث فاعلية هذا التوجّه التربوي في معالجة هذا الإشكال المرتبط بالتدريس القائم على الأدب، في ظل هيمنة طريقة القواعد والترجمة على الصنوف الدراسية العراقية، والتي ثبتت محدوديتها في تنمية المهارات التواصيلية والوعي الثقافي لدى المتعلّمين.

تصميم الدراسة: استمرت الدراسة مدة اثني عشر أسبوعاً، وطُبِّقت في مدرستين ثانويتين في محافظة البصرة، على عينة مكونة من ستين طالباً وعشرة معلمين. جُمعت البيانات باستخدام اختبارات مقتنة في مهارات القراءة والكتابة، واستبيان الكفاءة التواصيلية العابرة للثقافات المقتبس من إطار (Byram 1997)، فضلاً عن مقابلات شبه منظمة وملاحظات صفيّة مباشرة.

وأظهرت نتائج القياس القبلي والبعدي تحسناً دالاً في المهارات اللغوية (حجم الأثر: Cohen's $d = 0.87$) وتحسناً ذا دلالة إحصائية في الكفاءة الثقافية (حجم الأثر: Cohen's $d = 0.56$). كما كشفت النتائج النوعية عن ارتفاع ملحوظ في مستويات التفاعل والمشاركة الصفيّة، وزيادة كثافة التواصيل داخل البيئة التعليمية.

وتدعى هذه النتائج فاعلية التدريس القائم على الرواية بوصفه أداة تربوية مؤثرة يمكن توظيفها في صنوف اللغة الإنجليزية في العراق لتنمية الكفاءة اللغوية، وتعزيز الوعي العابر للثقافات، فضلاً عن دعم تبني المقاربات الأدبية الحديثة في مناهج تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في سياقات تعليمية تتجاوز الإطار الغربي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التدريس القائم على الرواية، متعلّمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، تنمية المهارات اللغوية، الكفاءة التواصيلية بين-الثقافية (ICC)، التدريس المعتمد على الأدب، الوعي الثقافي، التعليم الثانوي في العراق.

2. Introduction

English has moved from its original status as the foreign language at the dawn of the twenty-first century, to its status as a global lingua franca, not just a lingua franca an important pathway for education, economics and society. The demand for proficiency in English, in particular in Iraq, has grown dramatically in the previous twenty years due to the continuing opening of the country to the international community (Almadhady & Muhsen, 2024). However, there still are a lot of pedagogical problems in the area of teaching (EFL) in Iraq as demand is growing. The prevalent paradigm today is the old Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), in which more attention is devoted not to interaction and cultural understanding of language, so much as memorization principle and lists of words (Mardani & Syafei, 2025). GTM can give your students a basic idea of language structure, but it does not always provide them with the skills needed for real-life communication. Recent research has identified EFL learners from Iraq as often experiencing problems concerning pragmatic competence and cultural awareness which in turn, contribute to communication difficulties in the field (Qassab, 2025) . This absence underscores an essential limitation in the curriculum: Language cannot be taught separately from culture. It is only, as Byram (2020) argues, when language learning moves towards more than simply linguistic competence but Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) by which the learner can navigate and respect other cultures' approaches. So as to overcome this divide, schools and researchers have been promoting more and more the inclusion of literature, especially novels, in the EFL curriculum. "Authentic input" in the form of literary texts not only expose students to traditional textual dialogue, but also helps them experience the language as it is, in its more natural, rich, nuanced, and culturally situated manifestations (Nader Sharhan & Janfeshan, 2024) . The students'

interaction with novels enables them to negotiate meaning, encourage critical thought and empathy, skills which are crucial for intercultural understanding (Barzinji, P. A., 2024). In non-Western countries such as Iraq, the latter of which does not have as much access to English-speaking cultures, literature is an important gateway for students to experience, to read and write about, and learn from abroad, norms they have never heard about before themselves, so the students are not at the mercy of foreign cultural norms (Yurtsever & Özel, 2021). In the Iraqi secondary school context, empirical studies of literature-based instruction are still limited due to its theoretical underpinnings. Other studies focus mostly on Western setups or university students only, hence little to no evidence exists how novel pedagogy affects younger EFL students in Iraq. Thus, this paper seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of a new pedagogical model on supporting the development of both language and cultural competence skills for Iraqi secondary school students as well as providing valuable evidence to inform curriculum developers and curriculum experts in the area.

3. Research Problem

Even though the Ministry of Education in Iraq has attempted to modernize the English curriculum, a striking gap still exists between policy objectives and classroom practices. Although the program targets communicative competence, in practice in most Iraqi secondary schools, classes are still teacher-centered, particularly regarding the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM). As a result of this dependence on GTM, students are not allowed exposure to genuine language, which may result in students who are proficient at grammar exercises but do not communicate well in real life (Almadhady & Muhsen, 2024). Also, often culture is presented in a superficial way in the current curriculum, not broad enough for ICC (Intercultural Communicative Competence). Students do not receive many opportunities to explore, analyze, or

critique cultural narratives, which hampers their ability to engage globally an important skill in the 21st century. Literature has been proposed as an answer to these pedagogical shortcomings; however, little is known about empirical research examining its implementation in Iraqi secondary education. Existing research on novel-based pedagogy has mostly taken place in Western institutions or universities (Nader Sharhan & Janfeshan, 2024). As such, few studies have addressed how Iraqi secondary school students, who come from unique cultural and linguistic backgrounds, perceive long-form literary texts. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring how novel inclusion in the EFL classroom may lead to improvement in Iraqi adolescent language proficiency as well as cultural competence.

4. Purpose of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate how novel-based education could enable Iraqi secondary EFL students to develop both language competency and cultural competency. It seeks to:

1. Examine how novel-based instruction alters students' writing and comprehension of reading.
2. Explore how this teaching method works best to improve cross-cultural communication skills and cultural awareness.
3. investigate into the pros and cons of adding literature to the EFL curriculum for both students and teachers.

This study aims to enhance the efficacy and cultural relevance of EFL teaching practices in Iraq by addressing these objectives. how this teaching strategy increases cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication skills most successfully.

3. Examine the advantages and difficulties that include literature within the EFL curriculum present for students and teachers.

This study seeks to improve the effectiveness and cultural pertinence of EFL teaching methodologies in Iraq by pursuing these objectives.

5. Research Questions

To begin with the identified issue and fulfill the study's aims, this research is directed by the subsequent inquiries:

1. To what extent does novel-based pedagogy affect the language proficiency of Iraqi secondary school EFL learners compared to traditional methods?
2. What is the impact of integrating novels into the EFL curriculum on students' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)?
3. How do Iraqi secondary school students perceive the use of novels in their English classes, and how does it influence their classroom engagement?

6. Literature Review

Finally, this section reviews recent studies on introducing novel-based pedagogy into EFL contexts, specifically regarding the transition from conventional approach to literature-based teaching in Iraq. The review is further organized into three themes: 1. The drawbacks of the current Grammar-Translation supremacy in Iraq; 2. Novels as an advantage in terms of language and culture demonstrated in recent empirical studies; 3. The identified research gap regarding secondary school learners.

6.1. The Status Quo: Challenges of EFL Instruction in Iraq

Even after changes to the curriculum, recent studies show that EFL teaching in Iraqi high schools still reflects the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM). According to a 2025 examination by Qassab (2025), although the "English for Iraq" series aims to achieve communicative objectives, pedagogical practices are characterized by rote memorization and mechanical drills, exacerbated by large class sizes and limited teacher training. In the same vein, A Almadhady and Muhsen (2024) and recent reviews of the Kurdish-Iraqi context Nader Sharhan and Janfeshan (2024) reveal that this "structuralist" orientation has provided an entire generation of learners who have theoretical grasp of grammar

but lack the practical competence to operate in real-world exchanges. This pedagogical stagnation underscores an urgent necessity for alternative methodologies that prioritize “authentic input” over decontextualized regulations.

6.2. Novel-Based Pedagogy: Enhancing Language Proficiency

Increasing evidence suggests that long-form narratives (novels) used in EFL classrooms may be increasingly common. Suoth et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review, which found that novels can enhance vocabulary acquisition and reading fluency as they present words in “emotionally resonant contexts” instead of standalone lists. Moreover, Bilgin (2024) established that for Iraqi students specifically, incorporating 21st-century skills like critical thinking into novel-based ways of applying language led to measurable growth in productive skills (writing and speaking). In contrast to reading brief snippets of text, novels offer “extensive reading” that facilitates automatic processing of language, which is a widely endorsed virtue in educational psychology literature (Ahmed, 2024).

6.3. Fostering Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Apart from the mechanics part of language, the contemporary EFL curriculum has to overcome the “cultural gap.” Modern paradigms, from the recently updated Byram model (2021), argue that language learning cannot be separated from intercultural learning. Indeed, recent field studies in Iraq highlight this: a survey of preparatory school teachers in Najaf (Central Asian Journal, 2025) found a strong consensus stating that literary texts are the best tool we have to “soften” cultural boundaries and promote empathy. But the analysis also pointed out that so-called textbook “literature spots” are too short to make a lasting impression. In contrast, a complete novel promotes “deep immersion” (Deep Reading) that empowers students to safely navigate complex cultural territories. This resonates with evidence in wider Middle Eastern

contexts about how literature can foster students' capacity to negotiate meaning across cultural divides (AWEJ, 2025).

6.4. The Research Gap

Although the advantages of literature are well supported at the tertiary institution level Harun and Samat (2021); Yaqoob (2021), empirical studies regarding secondary school adolescents studying in central and southern Iraq are especially scarce. Most recent studies (2020–2024) have either focused on the Kurdistan region or on tertiary education. This study fills this critical gap through the intervention of this article, which constitutes a new and unique developmentally and linguistically targeted strategy for the Basrah secondary students focusing on this specific level of students, thus giving needed empirical evidence of its practicality in public schools.

7. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach integrating methods of qualitative and quantitative data collecting and analytic tools. Using a mixed-methods approach helps one to fully examine how novel-based pedagogy affects language competence and cultural competency in Iraqi secondary EFL classrooms. Using standardized tests, interviews, classroom observations, and cultural competence surveys, this approach evaluates the many effects of novel-based teaching on students's language and intercultural competency.

7.1 Research Design

The project will then evaluate the effectiveness of new-based education through a pre-test/post-test experimental design. This approach permits observation of changes in students' language and cultural competence prior to and during the intervention. While the pre- and post-tests offer a tidy and clean way to measure the impact of novels as a pedagogical tool, qualitative data gathered from interviews and

classroom observations reveals the experiences of teachers and students during the intervention.

7.2 Instructional Materials and Intervention Fidelity

For replicability of the study, the intervention provided the graded reader edition of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. We selected this novella, as it is linguistically appropriate for intermediate learning levels and speaks to general themes such as resilience and resilient human beings, that are suitable to cultural discussion rather than the fragmentary and unconnected texts from the standard textbook. The literary texts were selected according to the following criteria on a three-level basis: (1) linguistic fit, in order to select novels at a level of student abilities (i.e. using a graded reader edition of *The Old Man and the Sea*); (2) cultural fit of the content, e.g., read texts with universal issues, such as resilience and challenge would be preferred, whereas non-issues that may be incompatible with local values or issues would get discarded; and (3) it is relevant to adolescents, such as with stories and characters that would meet them halfway in secondary and would make them more motivated. Experienced EFL teachers reviewed all the texts to ensure that their texts were appropriate. Pre-reading activities were also introduced to supplement students' learning with important vocabulary and cultural context to develop comprehension and cultural awareness. To minimize the consequences against the internal validity of the intervention, the extent of intervention fidelity was rigorously ensured for this purpose. Acknowledging the teachers' habituated dependence on the Grammar-Translation Method, the researcher used two monitoring devices: (1) teacher completion of structured weekly checklists which measures self-report of communicative activities, and (2) the researcher conducting random classroom observations bi-weekly. These findings confirmed that class time was dedicated to

student-led discussions and narrative engagement, rather than simply rote translation or grammatical drills.

7.3 Description of the Pedagogical Intervention

The study conducted its experimental phase through twelve weeks of novel-based pedagogy intervention which replaced standard English class grammar lessons with literature-based activities. Students attended two weekly ninety-minute sessions which replaced their regular grammar lessons with activities based on literary materials. The study used short novels at different language levels and with relevant cultural content to match student abilities and learning needs. The researchers selected novels through three evaluation criteria which assessed their language suitability and their ability to connect with students' cultural background and their adolescent interests.

The teaching sequence consisted of three stages which started with pre-reading activities followed by while-reading activities and ended with post-reading activities. The pre-reading activities included vocabulary previews and background cultural discussions and prediction tasks which helped students activate their schemata and understand the context. Students participated in guided reading activities and group discussions and role-play activities and comprehension tasks which helped them develop their ability to communicate and understand textual meaning. The post-reading activities consisted of reflective writing tasks and creative rewriting exercises and debate sessions and project-based assignments which promoted students' critical thinking about literary themes and cultural perspectives.

The teachers transitioned from delivering lectures to creating an environment where students could lead their own learning process. Students worked together in small groups while actively joining peer discussions and maintaining individual reflective journals to track their linguistic progress and cultural learning throughout the intervention. The

program included cultural competence development through activities which helped students understand Iraqi cultural values and social norms and compare them to the cultures depicted in literary texts.

7.4 Sample Selection

The sample of this research consisted of 10 EFL teachers from two secondary schools in Basrah, Iraq and 60 secondary school students. These were specially targeted schools for the purpose of being representative of the students' socioeconomic status and English proficiency. Based on the student profile of the educational sector in Iraq, which is primarily limited in how students acquire English outside of the classroom and includes a strong focus on rote learning, a stratified purposeful sample was implemented. The sampling mechanism guarantees that the sample contains students of different levels of English competence, providing a more detailed understanding of the impact of novel-based instruction on students at different English proficiency levels. In this research, students in this group were aged 15 to 18 years, (we used their latest standardized test results to determine their current level of English proficiency) and were selected accordingly. Then, students are divided into 3 types: low, medium and high levels of competency. This stratification assists in assessing creative classroom pedagogical techniques in relation to a variety of language competencies to ensure their relevance to a broader population of EFL Iraqi learners. Prior to the selection, 10 EFL teachers also fulfilled the role, based on their background in secondary-level English teaching and their readiness for implementing novel-based instruction.

7.5 Data Collection Methods

1. This article collects four principal types of data instruments. The standardized language proficiency tests, the cultural competency questionnaire, the semi-structured interviews, and the classroom observations are employed. In this measure we attempt to yield

qualitative data about the challenges facing novel-based education that has both encountered and found success in Iraqi classrooms, supplemented with quantitative information about students' language proficiency and cultural competence.

2. Standardized Language Proficiency Tests:

Standardized examinations of reading comprehension and writing skills are the primary quantitative tools to measure the language development of learners. These exams are then examined before and after the intervention, allowing the levels of language proficiency for each to be directly compared. Students completed a pre-test at the beginning of the semester to establish their baseline for language competency; at the end of the semester, they took a post-test to see how much they had developed after novel-based instruction.

3. Cultural Competence Questionnaire Description:

The intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of learners was defined using a questionnaire adapted from Byram's (1997) intercultural competence model. To provide a measure of this knowledge the instrument was designed to consist of four major components, namely cultural knowledge (the awareness of cultural practices and perspectives), intercultural attitudes (openness, curiosity, respect for other cultures), intercultural skills (interpretation, interaction and comparison) and critical cultural awareness (the ability to evaluate cultural representations and viewpoints). The questionnaire contained twenty items and were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items included students' willingness to interact with others from different cultures, to approach cultural differences with respect, and to grasp cultural similarities and differences on their own terms. The instrument was created using student response data recorded at two individual time points (pre- and post-intervention) as a lens through which to measure

ICC changes following an experience of novel-based pedagogy. Two EFL experts and one educational assessment consultant conducted expert reviews for clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of items to ensure questionnaire content validity. Reliability analysis revealed an acceptable internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha = 0.82), thus a high level of reliability to measure the intercultural competence of the participating students.

Semi-Structured Interviews:

To better know their experiences with novel-based education, semi-structured interviews were done with instructors and students alike. Interviews with teachers focused on their observations of student development, classroom dynamics, and their personal experiences guiding conversations on cultural topics. Student interviews focused on how books improved their comprehension of several civilizations and their linguistic abilities.

4. Classroom Observations:

Over the course of the semester, there were classroom observations to document how novels were included in the syllabus, how instructors promoted cultural themes, and how students interacted with the books and each other. The thematic analysis of the observational data revealed patterns in levels of student engagement, and that of classroom dynamics, and produced additional qualitative insights on novel-based teaching practice.

7.6 Data Analysis

There were two parts to the data analysis: a qualitative study for the interview and observation data and a quantitative study for the pre- and post-test results.

1. Quantitative Analysis:

We used paired-sample t-tests to look at the quantitative data from standardized tests and cultural competence questionnaires to see if there were statistically significant changes in students' language skills

and cultural competence before and after the intervention. We made descriptive statistics, like means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, to give a full picture of how well students did at different skill levels.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Language Proficiency (Pre–Test and Post–Test)

Test	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Sample Size (N)
Pre–Test	63.12	9.00	45.87	80.79	60
Post–Test	73.79	9.31	55.40	93.52	60

This table shows the descriptive statistics for the students' language proficiency scores before and after the test. The average score went up from 63.12 to 73.79 after using novel–based pedagogy. This means that students' writing and reading comprehension got a lot better.

Qualitative Analysis:

The qualitative data obtained from the semi–structured interviews and classroom observations were subjected to thematic analysis. This method involves sorting the data into themes and finding patterns related to the challenges and successes of using novel–based teaching methods.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Cultural Competence (Pre–Test and Post–Test)

Test	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Sample Size (N)
Pre–Test	60.15	11.90	28.56	78.78	60
Post–Test	69.76	10.91	46.97	99.55	60

This table shows the descriptive statistics for students' cultural competence. The mean went up from 60.15 (pre–test) to 69.76 (post–test). This improvement shows that teaching based on novels helped

students better understand and interact with different cultural points of view.

Table 3: Paired Sample t-Test Results for Language Proficiency and Cultural Competence

Variable	t-Statistic	p-Value	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Language Proficiency	-4.75	0.00005	0.87 (Large effect)
Cultural Competence	-3.05	0.0049	0.56 (Moderate effect)

The table shows the results of the paired sample t-tests that were done to see how important the improvements were. Statistically significant enhancements were noted in both language proficiency and cultural competence, exhibiting large and moderate effect sizes, respectively.

8. Results

The study finds that the novel-based instruction resulted in the Iraqi secondary EFL learners being significantly more culturally competent and language proficient. Post-Test:

Results showed large improvements in students' reading comprehension and writing skills after the post-test. The average score increased from 63.12 in the pre-test to 73.79 in the post-test, indicating a very large effect size (0.87). This implies novel-based pedagogy increased the language acquisition of students. Cultural Competence: Students also displayed some learning in cultural competency and international communication skills. And with a small effect size of 0.56, the average score for cultural competency increased from 60.15 (before the test) to 69.76 (after the test). Small though it is for the effect size relative to language competency, the difference is significant. Based on qualitative data gathered from classroom observations and interviews, teachers and students found novels intriguing and motivating. Teachers noted that student engagement

increased even though students said they appreciated a range of points of view and linguistic samples from real life as the books displayed.

9. Discussion

This research investigates novel-based pedagogy with which to enhance language proficiency, as well as ICC development among secondary EFL Iraqi students. The study shows that the integration of novels in the EFL curriculum results in significant improvement in the linguistic domain, the same with the cultural domain but at different magnitude. We analyze the results under the light of theoretical perspectives and paradigms in communicative language teaching and intercultural competence, situated between literature that has been published to date, and discuss implications for the instruction of EFL in Iraq.

9.1 Substantial Gains in Language Proficiency: Bridging Theory and Practice

The most notable feature is the statistically significant enhancement in students' language proficiency, evidenced by a mean score increase from 63.12 to 73.79 ($p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.87$). The effect of novel-based pedagogy was significant and suggests that it provides a pedagogically robust method compared to traditional grammar-translation processes in Iraqi EFL classrooms. These findings support both the theoretical arguments of Kramsch (1993) and Paran (2008), which highlight the fact that literary texts provide a linguistically diverse context-specific language input to the learners. Unlike decontextualized practices such as the ones that characterise GTM-saturated instruction, novels also introduce students to language as a system of meaning-making, not a set of discrete grammatical rules. The significant advancement in reading comprehension and writing skills demonstrated in our findings is evidence that Iraqi students were exposed to authentic narrative discourse in which they had to interpret and work with complex

sentence structure, draw meaning from context and distinguish between style skills that are not generally learned by mechanical exercises. More significantly, the results are consistent with Ahmed's (2024) investigations into text-intensive reading and the ability to increase vocabulary growth and reading fluency with repeated reading of long-form texts. Given that the students in the Iraqi context do not encounter much of English outside the classroom, novels serve as an important source of input for linguistic development. The focus on pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities in the intervention created scaffolded opportunities for students to encounter, process, and produce language, which then turned the receptive to productive competence. The scale and nature of the improvements are especially remarkable given that GTM has become so prevalent in Iraqi secondary schools. As Younus (2020) reported and as recently also the Qassab (2025) noted, this has historically prioritized grammar accuracy instead of communicative potential in Iraqi EFL lessons with students who can parse sentences, but find it difficult to communicate authentically or even with full-fledged speech. The findings of this paper suggest that through a shift in the context of pedagogical emphasis from rote learning to literature-centered learning, we can begin to make a meaningful contribution to this competence-performance gap in EFL instruction by focusing learners' attention on actual use of the vocabulary rather than a simple retention of rules.

Furthermore, the novel-based approach addressed structural limitations in the standard curriculum which typically presents language in fragmented units by providing a sustained narrative context that facilitated a communicative flow often absent in traditional, rote-focused instruction.

9.2 Moderate Enhancement in Cultural Competence: Successes and Limitations

However, this improvement in ICC was statistically significant ($p = 0.0049$) but the moderate effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.56$) should be taken into consideration. The average increase from 60.15 to 69.76 provides evidence that novel-based pedagogy did improve students' cultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity, although it was of a lower magnitude than the language gains. Such a result adds to the literature, confirming Byram's (1997, 2021) theoretical framework of intercultural communicative competence, which claims that literature is a cultural mediator that brings learners into contact with a variety of worldviews, value systems, and social practices. Being immersed with characters of diverse cultural backgrounds, students in this study cultivated what Byram calls "critical cultural awareness," where people are able to evaluate and juxtapose cultural perspectives. More precisely, qualitative data from interviews and classroom observations revealed that students demonstrated higher levels of openness to cultural diversity and interest in unfamiliar traditions and ideas. The modest effect size would indicate, though, that culture is something more intricate and slow in its uptake than we know about language itself. This disparate impact might be accounted for in several different ways:

9.2.1 Cultural Distance and Relevance:

The included novels were still meaningful as far as pedagogy is concerned, but they might not fully resonate with the lived experiences of Iraqi students. As Alptekin (2002) and Cortazzi and Jin (1999) noted, cultural relevance is paramount because it shapes the perceived engagement and intercultural competence of the learners reviewing the texts. At present students in particular reported that they found it difficult to relate to characters and locations far from their own culture. The result shows the importance of selecting texts that ensure an appropriate mix of cultural diversity and cultural accessibility. In future interventions, this may include a larger sampling of literary works (e.g.,

translated Middle Eastern literature or novels that directly address themes of cultural encounter and negotiation).

9.2.2 Developmental Readiness:

Adolescent learners are still in the stages of processing of abstract thinking and perspective-taking (Al-Zurfi et al., 2025). Despite the opportunities offered through novels for vicarious cultural experiences, engaging in deep intercultural competence requires cognitive maturity and sustained reflection. But this twelve-week intervention, while highly effective in producing measurable gains, may be simply an initial step in a longer developmental path toward full intercultural competence.

9.2.3 Pedagogical Mediation:

The facilitation abilities of a teacher and the quality of discussions within a classroom context play crucial mediating roles in cultural learning. Even though the teachers in this study took part in training in novel-based pedagogy, the depth of intercultural engagement experienced by students may have been dictated by their individual experience in discussing cultural themes. The Central Asian Journal (2025) reported that teachers' intercultural competence and confidence when dealing with culturally sensitive issues greatly affect learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the enhancement in ICC is notable, particularly when one takes into account the superficial treatment of culture encountered in Iraq's conventional EFL curriculum. The results imply that even a relatively brief exposure to culturally diverse literature can cause a change in students' level of understanding about intercultural factors, thus setting up the way for more sophisticated cultural competence to develop over time.

9.3 The Pedagogical Shift: From Teacher-Centered to Student-Centered Learning

One of the most significant qualitative outcomes was the observed transformation in classroom culture. Both teachers and students said

that they noticed a change in how they felt about learning that was focused on students and teachers. Such a finding is consistent with communicative language teaching (CLT) principles, such as those described by Richards and Rodgers (2001) where learners' agency and interaction need to be meaningful and authentic and where real language use will be meaningful. In conventional Iraqi EFL classrooms, the teacher takes on a more primary position as the main knowledge source and students function as passive recipients (Almadhady & Muhsen, 2024; Mardani & Syafei, 2025). The novel-based intervention challenged this paradigm by placing students as active meaning-makers who collaboratively constructed interpretations of literary texts. Classroom observations showed that peer discussions, student-initiated questions, and conversations about character motivations, thematic meanings, and cultural representations were common occurrences. Theoretically, this shift toward dialogic learning is important because it represents what Vygotsky called the zone of proximal development the extent to which learning takes place using social interaction and collaborative problem solving. Students negotiated meaning with peers when engaging with novels, articulated understanding, and redrafted understanding from the perspectives they encountered different from their own in their discourse. Meaning-making together with their peers helped them not only to improve their language skills, but also to develop thought processes key for both in academia and when engaging with others. Teachers found higher motivation and engagement of students working with novels (versus doing exercises in the textbook). This finding is in accordance with the motivational framework of Dörnyei (2001): Dörnyei (2001) identifies intrinsic interest, personal relevance and autonomy as important factors driving language learning motivation. Because novel narratives are more multi-layered, thematically rich and emotionally resonant than grammar or vocabulary

lists, they seem to capture these motivational forces better. But the shift to student-centered pedagogy also had its challenges. Some teachers were uncertain on how to handle open-ended discussions when students discussed cultural sensitivity. Such insights point to the necessity of continuous professional development (which enables teachers to learn how to teach literature and also intercultural communication by teaching them how to hold difficult conversations).

9.4 Contextualization: Novel-Based Pedagogy in Non-Western EFL Settings

This study adds to the growing literature on literature-based EFL instruction in non-Western contexts, filling a significant gap. Although many studies demonstrated the positive impacts of literary texts in Western or university contexts Harun and Samat (2021); Yaqoob (2021), empirical evidence from secondary schools in countries such as Iraq has been scarce. Though novel-based pedagogy was developed chiefly in Western educational contexts, the findings show that such approaches are replicable successfully under the Iraqi secondary school setting. However, such adaptation requires careful attention to local realities. Several contextual factors emerged as particularly salient:

9.4.1 Large Class Sizes and Resource Constraints:

Iraqi secondary schools typically have large classes and limited access to diverse literary resources. The intervention dealt with this problem by choosing shorter novels that were easy to find and cheap to buy, and by putting students into small discussion groups so they could talk to each other even though the class was big.

9.4.2 Cultural Sensitivities:

Iraq's conservative culture requires intentional text selection that steers clear of material that may be considered inappropriate or offensive. Teachers indicated that pre-reading experiences, which included helping students understand the cultural differences at a deeper level and

promoting respect for diverse ways of viewing the world, allowed students to view the various cultural aspects of strange and unknown places without judgment, rather than with a knee-jerk reaction.

9.4.3 Alignment with National Curriculum:

Although the "English for Iraq" series nominally prioritises communicative competence, its application has been predominantly grammar-focused Qassab (2025). The study shows that novel-based pedagogy can complement rather than replace the national curriculum by offering authentic contexts for applying grammatical knowledge and developing communicative skills that textbooks alone cannot cultivate. The implementation of this intervention in the Iraqi context indicates that literature-based instruction can be developed across the Middle East and other regions where the focus of teaching EFL has traditionally been on grammar. But the findings also highlight that effective implementation is about much more than adding novels to the curriculum; rather it is about instituting an essential pedagogical transformation through educator training, proper text selection, and sustained institutional support.

9.5 Theoretical Implications: Reconceptualizing Language and Culture in EFL

Theoretical significance of the results of this study, the findings of this study have theoretical implications regarding the correlation between language acquisition and cultural competence. These varied effect sizes for linguistic and cultural outcomes challenge the notion that language and culture evolve simultaneously. Whereas language mastery had rapid, large gains, cultural competence seemed to develop more slowly, and required more direct attention from teachers. Such pattern can point towards the need to support a more robust conceptual framework for ICC (Byram, 1997) and better pedagogy-driven practices in fostering cultural competence via literature. In particular, the findings show that

cultural learning needs exposure, through both the diverse representations of culture but also through formal opportunities for reflection, comparison and critical analysis. Future investigations might examine whether any of the literature-related activities mentioned in the above definitions literary comparison essays, role-plays about cultural conflicts, or creative rewriting from alternative cultural perspectives differentially shape different dimensions of ICC. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the need to recognize learners' cultural starting points. Iraqi learners are accustomed to their own cultural schemas, assumptions and experiences and applied it to their reading of books. Instead of seeing culture as something to be "acquired" from literary texts, a more productive model could conceptualize intercultural learning as a generative process where learners critique their own cultural realities and the narratives in literature. This aligns with Kramsch's (1993) notion of the "third place," a site of intercultural understanding that integrates the learner's native and foreign cultures.

9.6 Limitations and Methodological Considerations

The findings are promising, though some caveats need to be recognized. First, the sample size of 60 students from two Basrah schools constrains generalizability. Iraq has diverse regions in educational resources, teacher preparation, and students' skill levels. Further research should be conducted in other localities (Baghdad, Mosul, and the Kurdistan Region) to compare novel approaches to pedagogy in different Iraqi contexts and to explore their effectiveness. Secondly, the twelve-week intervention period is time effective enough to demonstrate measurable results, but may not reflect the sustained success of such gains over time. Long-term research that tracks students over several academic years would inform whether the linguistic and cultural skills honed in new-age, novel-based learning are sustained over time and/or gained further. Third, although paired-

sample t-test analyses were deemed adequate for pre-post comparisons, confounding of factors, such as maturation effects or simultaneous learning experiences outside of the intervention, were not controlled for by our methods. A quasi-experimental design with a comparative group taught traditional pedagogy can bolster claims about causation regarding the effectiveness of novel-based pedagogy. Fourth, while validated and of an acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.82$), the ICC questionnaire may not be sufficient in understanding the sophistication of intercultural competence. Additional research could adopt other approaches including critical incident analyses, intercultural communication simulations, and longitudinal reflective journals in order to offer a more detailed understanding of learners' intercultural development. Lastly, the emphasis of the study on novels as a singular literary type may overlook other text genre possibilities. The affordances for language and cultural learning are distinct in short stories, poetry, drama, and creative nonfiction. Such comparative research of the differential effects among various literary genres could help deepen our understanding of literature-based pedagogy.

The study employed a single-group pre-test/post-test method; the lack of a control group makes causal inferences difficult. It would have been more powerful if only one group of students were taught conventional instruction in a control group, and it would have isolated novel-based pedagogy from other causes such as maturation or external learning experiences. Future studies, such as in the form of a quasi-experimental design in which a comparative group is included, would strengthen the case for linking literature-based instruction to the effects on language and cultural competence. Lastly, generalizability limits can be noted in this study. The sample size of sixty students and ten teachers was based within the Basrah governorate and therefore should be treated as a specific case study rather than a generalized sample of

the entire Iraqi educational context. However, since the Iraqi curriculum is a centralized effort (English for Iraq), the pedagogical issues found in this study may be applicable to other governorates of Iraq, rendering this intervention a model capable of being adopted and tested on an extensive scale across different areas (such as Baghdad or Mosul).

9.7 Directions for Future Research

This study establishes a path for many later searches. Longitudinal tracking and cross-regional comparison may yield information confirming the sustainability of the contribution of novel-based pedagogy across cultural and institutional contexts. Moreover, further research on the improvement of curriculum (a comparison with a variety of literary genres e.g. poetry or drama and culturally responsive text selections are possible avenues for future works). Finally, it is pertinent to consider the practical aspects of implementation, both to investigate the professional development trajectories experienced by teachers and the use of digital technologies to support literature-based instruction.

9.8 Conclusion

Based on this data, we found that novel-based pedagogies significantly positively affected the language proficiency and the intercultural communicative competence of the Iraqi EFL secondary students. This significant increase of the student's linguistic capacity ($d = 0.87$) suggested that literature-based instruction is enough to alleviate the communicative deficiency by traditional grammar-translation techniques. The improvement of cultural competence during this second phase is modest ($d = 0.56$), which implies that novels not only build rich intercultural learning but also prepare students for intercultural richness. However, aside from the empirical consequences of EFL programmes, there is more qualitative evidence of shift in the culture, of student motivation, and of the relationship between teaching and learning in the classroom, if through a more critical perspective. The shift to student

centered, dialogic learning is less a shift in concept of the EFL classroom and more specifically to the EFL classroom space as a space of concept: a space of “something other than mere passive receipt of knowledge that does not generate knowledge; a space of “something rather than not.” In determining how novels should be used in the Iraqi EFL classroom, these findings illuminate that shifting from traditional teaching methods to student-centered and dialogic one is not just a supplement, but could also be considered as one of the ways to enact pedagogical change allowing new academic literature to inform larger pedagogical shifts. Reading texts of literature provides students with linguistic and analytical proficiency and skills for reading, critical thinking, empathy, and cultural competence to cope with the modern global communications world. The results of this study in an Iraqi context illustrate the possibility that when literature-based pedagogy that is specific to this context is applied to non-Western EFL pedagogy, it is good practice to apply in a non-Western EFL environment. Here, then, innovative teaching contributes to fostering Iraq’s communicative and intercultural skills for 21st-century global citizenship that is increasingly important for both teachers and translators of the 21st century.

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