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REIMAGINING LITERATURE CIRCLES: A HUMAN-CENTERED INTERVENTION TO FOSTER BELONGING IN ARABIC LITERACY CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Research on literature circles has demonstrated benefits for reading comprehension and engagement, yet evidence from Arabic literacy contexts, particularly diglossic classrooms, remains limited. This mixed-methods quasi-experimental study investigated the effects of peer-led literature circles on adolescents' reading comprehension and affective engagement in Arabic language classrooms in the United Arab Emirates. Participants (n = 68) in two public middle schools participated in a six-week intervention using carefully selected Arabic texts. Quantitative data were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests, while qualitative data from student reflections, classroom observations, and teacher interviews were thematically analyzed. Results indicated statistically significant gains in vocabulary knowledge, inferential comprehension, and cause-effect reasoning ($t = 11.593, p < .001$). Qualitative findings suggested increased reader agency, dialogic participation, and a stronger sense of belonging during reading activities, with students reporting greater confidence and willingness to engage with complex texts. The findings extend existing research on literature circles by demonstrating their potential to support both cognitive and motivational dimensions of reading in diglossic and multilingual settings. Implications are discussed for inclusive, dialogic approaches to adolescent reading instruction beyond English-dominant contexts.

KEYWORDS: Literature Circles; Reading Comprehension; Arabic Literacy; Diglossia; Reader Engagement; Dialogic Pedagogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

What happens when students no longer see themselves in the texts, or the classrooms they inhabit? Across education systems, a dual crisis is emerging. Students are reading less and feeling increasingly unseen, undervalued, and disconnected from learning spaces. According to PISA data, nearly one in three 15-year-olds globally reports not feeling a sense of belonging at school, with linguistically diverse students disproportionately affected (OECD, 2019). Simultaneously, PIRLS 2021 reports record-low reading engagement, especially in systems where instruction remains rigid, didactic, and detached from students lived experiences (Mullis et al., 2022). The literacy crisis is no longer just about decoding; it reflects a deeper disconnection from the meaning-making process of education itself.

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), this global pattern acquires heightened urgency. The national bilingual mandate, coupled with Arabic diglossia, creates a complex literacy terrain. While Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the official language of instruction, it remains unfamiliar to many students who grow up speaking dialects, making Arabic texts cognitively distant and emotionally disengaging (Ferguson, 1959; Ahmed & Ali, 2020). Despite sustaining national investment in Arabic literacy and bilingual education, UAE students continue to underperform in Arabic reading comprehension and report low motivation and confidence (PIRLS, 2021; OECD, 2023). These outcomes are not merely technical deficits; they are symptoms of broader educational alienation.

At the core of this alienation lies the overlooked factor of school belonging. Defined as the extent to which students feel accepted, included, and emotionally secure in school, belonging is closely linked to academic motivation, engagement, and well-being (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Allen et al., 2018). In bilingual classrooms, where curricula often fail to reflect hybrid identities or validate students' linguistic resources, reading can become a site of exclusion rather than empowerment. For many students, academic Arabic is not a shared language of learning but a barrier between self and school, an obstacle that technical reading interventions alone cannot address.

Recent UAE-based evidence reinforces the urgency of this pedagogical gap. Studies by Author (2022; 2024) reveal the compounded effects of learning loss, low engagement, and emotional disconnection among Arabic learners during and beyond COVID-19, calling for culturally responsive and emotionally attuned literacy practices. Further,

Author et al. (2018) identified motivation, self-efficacy, and home influence as key predictors of literacy success among Grade 4 students in Abu Dhabi, suggesting that cognitive gains are deeply intertwined with socio-emotional and relational factors.

Few literacy approaches attempt to bridge this divide by integrating cognitive development with emotional and relational depth. Literature circles, student-led, discussion-based reading groups rooted in socio-constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978) and dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981) learning theories, offer particular promise. While international research highlights their effectiveness in improving comprehension, vocabulary, and motivation (Daniels, 2002; Pilonieta & Medina, 2009), their potential to enhance school belonging, identity expression, and cultural agency in bilingual or diglossic contexts remains underexplored. Nowhere is this gap more visible than in the Arab world, where rigid pedagogies and under-theorized literacy models prevail.

This study addresses that gap by investigating literature circles not simply as reading strategies but as human-centered spaces for voice, belonging, and dialogic learning. Using a mixed-methods design, we examine how literature circles affect bilingual middle school students' reading comprehension, motivation, and sense of school belonging in the UAE. Our analysis frames literacy as both cognitive and emotional, a process that, when carefully scaffolded, can transform classrooms from spaces of silent disengagement to communities of dialogue and identity.

At a moment when education systems are being urged to rethink the link between academic achievement and student well-being, this study offers a model that is both scalable and ethically grounded. It responds to calls from UNESCO, OECD, and CASEL to integrate social-emotional learning into academic instruction, especially in multilingual settings grappling with linguistic inequality and disengagement. By centering student agency and belonging, literature circles emerge not as mere instructional strategies, but as a pedagogical invitation to rehumanize learning.

1.1. Research Objectives

To address the complex, interwoven challenges of comprehension, engagement, and belonging in bilingual literacy classrooms, this study aims to:

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of literature circles in improving reading comprehension among bilingual middle school students in the UAE.
2. Examine how literature circles influence

students' social-emotional engagement, motivation, and sense of belonging in Arabic literacy classrooms.

3. Explore teacher and student perceptions of literature circles as a human-centered alternative to traditional reading instruction.
4. Assess the potential of literature circles to serve as a scalable, culturally responsive literacy intervention in bilingual and diglossic education systems.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How do literature circles affect reading comprehension skills (e.g., vocabulary retention, inferencing, cause-effect analysis) among bilingual students?
2. In what ways do literature circles influence students' motivation, emotional engagement, and sense of school belonging?
3. How do teachers and students perceive literature circles in comparison to traditional, teacher-led reading instruction?
4. What are the pedagogical and policy implications of implementing literature circles in bilingual, Arabic-English school settings?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature circles, developed as student-led reading groups, have evolved into dialogic spaces that support both academic growth and socio-emotional development. While widely studied in monolingual English settings, their application in bilingual or diglossic classrooms, especially in Arabic-English contexts, remains limited. This study frames literature circles not only as a literacy intervention, but as a relational pedagogy that fosters belonging, agency, and voice.

2.1. Literacy Beyond Decoding: A Human Act of Meaning, Emotion, And Connection

For too long, reading has been framed narrowly, as a technical skill, a benchmark, or a set of standardized scores. But increasingly, research affirms what educators have long observed: reading is not simply decoding or comprehension, it is a deeply human act, tied to identity, emotional safety, motivation, and social connection (OECD, 2023; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Paris & Paris, 2007).

Children and adolescents read well not only when they are taught how, but when they are shown why it matters, when they feel safe in the act, and when the text invites them into shared meaning-making. This is especially true for bilingual and multilingual learners, whose relationships with text, language,

and school are often shaped by tension between home culture and classroom norms (Cummins, 2001; García & Wei, 2014).

In the most recent OECD PISA 2018 report, data from over 600,000 15-year-olds revealed a troubling trend: while students may still perform moderately well on literal comprehension tasks, they increasingly lack the motivation, confidence, and personal investment that underpin sustained reading growth. Only 51% of students reported reading for enjoyment, and those who did not enjoy reading scored on average 70 points lower on reading tests, equivalent to nearly two years of schooling lost (OECD, 2019, Vol. I, p. 106).

This crisis of disengagement is qualitative before it is quantitative. When students disconnect from reading emotionally, academically, or culturally, interventions that focus solely on skill-building miss the larger issue: the erosion of reading as a relational, empowering, and meaningful practice.

In a post-pandemic world, these concerns have intensified. According to UNESCO's *Reimagining Our Futures Together* report (2021), education must now be built on principles of solidarity, belonging, and shared humanity, not just assessment efficiency. Literacy, especially among adolescents, should not only prepare students for academic performance but also anchor them emotionally, giving them space to explore identity, voice, and community. Affective connection to reading is no longer optional; it is essential.

2.2. The Role of School Belonging in Literacy Development

School belonging, the sense of being accepted, respected, and supported within the school environment, is now recognized as a core condition for learning, not merely a supplemental factor (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Allen et al., 2018; OECD, 2023). It enables academic risk-taking, sustained motivation, and deep engagement, particularly in literacy.

PISA 2018 data show that students with strong school belonging scored nearly a full grade level higher in reading compared to their peers who felt excluded (OECD, 2019). Yet, one in three students globally report feeling like outsiders at school, a warning sign not just of academic disengagement, but of emotional detachment.

Belonging directly shapes literacy outcomes. When students feel unsafe or unvalued, they disengage cognitively and emotionally (Fredricks et al., 2004; Pekrun et al., 2017). Conversely, those with a strong sense of belonging see literacy as a right, not

a barrier, thus persisting through challenge.

This issue is acute in bilingual and diglossic contexts, where the classroom language (e.g., Modern Standard Arabic) often excludes students' home dialects and identities. Research from MENA countries, including UAE, Jordan, and Lebanon, reveals that students commonly describe Arabic reading classes as emotionally detached, test-oriented, and devoid of meaningful peer interaction (UNICEF, 2022; Arab Reading Index, 2019).

Such instruction misses the relational dimensions of reading, curiosity, connection, and identity. What is needed is not just improved pedagogy, but a rehumanized one. Literature circles offer precisely this: a dialogic structure that centers belonging, voice, and relevance in the act of reading.

2.3. Diglossia, Disconnection, And the Crisis of Arabic Literacy Identity

One of the most complex and under-theorized challenges in Arabic literacy is diglossia, the coexistence of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and regional colloquial dialects (*'āmmiyya*). As originally defined by Ferguson (1959), this dual linguistic system imposes both cognitive and emotional burdens on students who must navigate between two grammatically distinct and hierarchically positioned codes. MSA, the formal "high" register, is associated with intellectual prestige, religious tradition, and cultural heritage, while dialects are often dismissed as informal, fragmented, or deficient (Maamouri, 2013; Al-Naqa, 1999). This hierarchy not only complicates language acquisition but distances learners from academic texts and disrupts the formation of a coherent literacy identity.

Research from across the Arab world has consistently shown that students struggle to transfer phonological awareness, syntactic patterns, and lexical familiarity from their home dialects to MSA, leading to delayed fluency and shallow engagement (Saiegh-Haddad & Spolsky, 2014; Tibi & McLeod, 2021). The cognitive cost is significant, but the affective toll is often more debilitating. In the UAE and broader Gulf region, Arabic literacy is frequently associated with memorization, surveillance, and stress, while English is linked to creativity, enjoyment, and digital fluency (Al Darwish, 2020; Arab Thought Foundation, 2019). This emotional dissonance, what we term *literacy estrangement*, undermines not only reading motivation but also students' sense of belonging and identity within the Arabic classroom.

This detachment has long-term implications for learner agency and educational equity. As Norton

(2013) argues, language learning is deeply intertwined with identity, power, and the right to be heard. In diglossic classrooms that devalue students' natural modes of expression, learners often internalize the belief that their voices are illegitimate. This contributes to silence, withdrawal, and a diminished sense of academic self-worth. Author et al. (2018) found that Arabic reading achievement in bilingual UAE classrooms is closely tied to students' self-efficacy, the perceived legitimacy of their home language, and the emotional resonance of texts. Similarly, studies have noted that the dominance of formal Arabic in school can produce technically proficient yet emotionally alienated readers.

Despite curriculum reforms in countries like the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, Arabic instruction continues to emphasize rote learning, grammar drills, and rigid comprehension tasks (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016). These approaches prioritize accuracy over agency and coverage over connection. As a result, many students decode text without truly inhabiting it, literate in form but disconnected in function.

To reclaim Arabic literacy as a space of empowerment and expression, pedagogy must engage both cognitive and emotional domains. Students need dialogic spaces to explore meaning, experiment with interpretation, and see their identities reflected and respected. Literature circles offer such a space, creating opportunities for readers to speak, listen, question, and connect in ways that restore voice and agency.

While Ferguson's classical model emphasized the structural and sociolinguistic constraints of diglossia, recent scholarship on translanguaging challenges these rigid divisions. García and Wei (2014) propose that multilingual learners do not compartmentalize their languages but draw fluidly on their full linguistic repertoire. From this perspective, diglossia need not be a deficit; it can be a resource. In literature circles, students often shift between dialect and MSA to co-construct meaning, clarify ambiguity, or express affect, acts that reflect linguistic intelligence rather than confusion. When such translanguaging practices are affirmed rather than suppressed, the classroom becomes a site of linguistic legitimacy and affective inclusion. In this sense, literature circles reconcile the historical burden of diglossia with the liberatory promise of translanguaging, transforming Arabic literacy from a performance of correctness into a process of connection.

2.4. Literature Circles as a Human-Centered Pedagogical Framework

Literature circles, small, student-led discussion groups in which each member assumes a rotating role such as summarizer, connector, or questioner, offer more than a flexible reading strategy. As formalized by Daniels (1994, 2002), they represent a shift from top-down, teacher-centered instruction toward dialogic, relational, and student-empowering pedagogy. Through peer interaction and collaborative meaning-making, literature circles support not only comprehension but also identity development and social connection.

This study conceptualizes literature circles as a human-centered pedagogical framework grounded in four interrelated theories: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Bakhtin's Dialogic Theory, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and Belonging Theory. Together, these perspectives frame literacy not simply as cognitive skill acquisition, but as social practice, motivational experience, and identity work, particularly crucial in bilingual and diglossic contexts.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) posits that learning emerges within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) through mediated social interaction. Literature circles actualize this principle by structuring peer scaffolding through role-based engagement, collaborative interpretation, and mutual support. Each student becomes both a learner and a facilitator, activating dormant comprehension skills often overlooked in traditional, monologic classrooms.

Bakhtin's Dialogic Theory (1981) reinforces this model by framing literacy as polyphonic and inherently social. Meaning arises through interaction, not transmission. Literature circles embody dialogism by centering diverse voices, student agency, and interpretation as a collective act. In multilingual classrooms, this dialogic space validates hybrid linguistic identities and challenges normative hierarchies of language and power.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) explains how literature circles motivate learners by satisfying the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Students have choice over texts and roles (autonomy), build mastery

through repeated practice (competence), and experience supportive collaboration (relatedness). These conditions are especially critical in Arabic literacy contexts, where formal instruction is often experienced as rigid, isolating, and emotionally disconnected.

Belonging Theory (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; OECD, 2023) adds a relational dimension to the framework. Belonging, feeling seen, valued, and safe, is not a byproduct of learning but a prerequisite for it. Literature circles foster belonging by creating spaces for dialogue, peer affirmation, and shared meaning-making. For students navigating linguistic dissonance between home dialects and Modern Standard Arabic, such spaces are essential to reclaiming literacy as a site of self-expression rather than exclusion.

In integrating these theoretical foundations, this study positions literature circles not merely as instructional tools, but as ethical interventions that center student voice, social connectedness, and identity validation. They serve as a bridge between the cognitive demands of reading and the affective, cultural realities of bilingual learners. In doing so, they align with broader international calls, from CASEL, UNESCO, and OECD, to reframe academic instruction through a socially and emotionally responsive lens.

2.5. Toward An Integrated Framework

This study draws on four interrelated theoretical perspectives to conceptualize literature circles not simply as a reading strategy, but as a human-centered approach to fostering emotional, cognitive, and linguistic development. Together, these perspectives, sociocultural, dialogic, motivational, and affective, highlight the potential of peer-based reading practices to deepen comprehension, amplify student voice, and strengthen belonging in bilingual classrooms.

The table below synthesizes these theoretical foundations and their concrete applications in literature circle pedagogy.

Table 1: Integrated Theoretical Framework Linking Human-Centered Literacy to Literature Circles.

Theoretical Lens	Core Principle	Application to Literature Circles
Vygotsky (1978)	Social mediation of learning	Peer scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)
Bakhtin (1981)	Dialogism and multivoiced meaning	Co-construction of interpretation through student voice
Deci & Ryan (1985)	Autonomy, competence, and relatedness	Motivation through role choice, peer validation, and connection
Goodenow & OECD (2023)	School belonging and inclusion	Emotional safety, identity affirmation, and relational trust

This integrative framework affirms that literacy is not a neutral or purely cognitive activity, especially

in multilingual, diglossic classrooms, but a social and identity-forming process. Literature circles, when

thoughtfully implemented, shift the focus from rote comprehension to collaborative meaning-making. They create spaces where students can see themselves reflected in texts, engage with diverse perspectives, and take intellectual risks within a supportive community.

In this light, the study positions literature circles as more than a pedagogical technique. They represent an intervention that reclaims literacy as a site of agency, connection, and belonging.

2.6. The Teacher's Role: From Instructor to Facilitator of Belonging

Implementing literature circles in bilingual and diglossic classrooms demands more than structural change, it requires a reimagining of the teacher's role. No longer simply content deliverers, teachers must become facilitators of dialogue, stewards of identity, and co-constructors of meaning. In this shift, the teacher cultivates not just literacy skills but classroom cultures rooted in safety, inquiry, and mutual respect (Daniels, 2002; Mercer & Dawes, 2014).

This reorientation is especially urgent in Arabic-English bilingual settings, where linguistic hierarchies often devalue students' home dialects. Drawing on translanguaging theory (García & Wei, 2014), effective facilitators embrace students' strategic code-switching between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and vernaculars as a cognitive asset, not a deficiency. Such validation transforms the act of reading into a space of identity affirmation.

Equally vital is what Allington (2013) terms *interpretive vulnerability*, the teacher's willingness to model uncertainty and invite co-exploration. Rather than correcting misreadings, skilled facilitators view them as openings for insight, fostering interpretive agency over compliance (Almasi & Garas-York, 2009).

Yet, this facilitative posture is rarely developed through traditional teacher training in the MENA region, which often privileges authority and correctness over relational engagement (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016). To bridge this gap, professional development must go beyond procedural workshops. It must foster deep pedagogical shifts in teachers' beliefs about voice, control, and what counts as learning.

Key PD components include:

- Reframing "coverage" as depth and student-led inquiry (Rosenblatt, 1995)
- Cultivating dialogic patience through strategies like "Wait Time 2.0" (Rowe, 1986)
- Selecting texts that reflect students'

sociocultural worlds, especially those involving migration, resilience, and belonging

Recent studies support this shift. In Egypt, bilingual educators trained in open-ended questioning increased student talk-time and reading motivation (Ahmed & Ali, 2020). In the UAE, emotional scaffolding helped reduce "silence anxiety" and encouraged student expression in MSA (Alrabi, 2021).

These findings affirm that literature circles thrive not by chance but through teachers who are well-prepared, emotionally attuned, and pedagogically empowered. Teacher development must be central, not peripheral, to any sustainable transformation of literacy practice in the Arabic-speaking world.

2.7. Literature Circles as a Human-Centered, Evidence-Based Intervention

A robust body of international research supports literature circles as an effective, student-centered reading practice that improves comprehension, vocabulary, and critical thinking, while also enhancing emotional engagement, peer collaboration, and motivation. From Western classrooms to bilingual contexts in East Asia and North Africa, literature circles have demonstrated consistent benefits across diverse settings (Almasi & Garas-York, 2009; Kang et al., 2023; Ahmed & Ali, 2020).

Despite this growing evidence base, most studies originate from English-speaking or monolingual environments, leaving a notable gap in our understanding of how literature circles function in Arabic-medium, diglossic classrooms. Here, the very language of instruction, Modern Standard Arabic, can become a barrier, contributing to emotional detachment and reduced reading motivation among bilingual learners. UNESCO (2022) and the Arab Reading Index (2023) warn that this disconnection is not only affecting academic outcomes, but eroding long-term cultural and linguistic engagement.

In response, this study reframes literature circles as a human-centered literacy intervention, not merely a teaching technique. When implemented in bilingual classrooms with care and intentionality, literature circles offer emotionally resonant spaces where students read with, though, and for each other. These circles affirm student voice, invite interpretive risk, and reconstruct school language as a medium of identity, not alienation.

This is particularly critical for students navigating between home dialects and school language norms. In such environments, literature circles allow for translanguaging, emotional expression, and peer

affirmation, creating a counterbalance to systems that often prioritize compliance over curiosity.

The table below summarizes international findings supporting this model:

Table 2: Empirical Evidence on the Benefits of Literature Circles Across Educational Contexts.

Geographic Context	Key Findings	Sources
US, Canada, Australia	Improved reading comprehension and vocabulary	Almasi & Garas-York (2009); Pilonieta & Medina (2009)
Urban/Western settings	Increased engagement and self-efficacy in reluctant readers	Whittaker (2012); Day & Ainley (2008)
Multicultural classrooms	Growth in critical literacy and interpretive dialogue	Clarke & Holwadel (2007)
East Asia (EMI contexts)	Increased agency and intellectual curiosity	Kang, Lim, & Murdoch (2023)
Egypt (bilingual schools)	Gains in comprehension and MSA engagement	Ahmed & Ali (2020)

These outcomes affirm the dual academic and affective value of literature circles. But in the Arabic-speaking world, their greatest potential may lie in repairing fractured relationships between learners and language. As students read in safe, dialogic communities, they begin to see MSA not as an imposed code, but as a flexible, expressive resource, one that can carry emotion, opinion, and meaning.

This reframing invites urgent reflection: What if reading were reimagined not as an evaluative task, but as a relational act? What would it mean to prioritize connection over correction, exploration over rote answers? And how might such models be sustained and scaled in education systems increasingly aware of the social-emotional dimensions of literacy?

By grounding literature circles in a human-centered theoretical and empirical base, this study positions them as a strategic response to disengagement in multilingual classrooms. In doing so, it offers more than a methodology, it offers a pathway to restoring dignity, identity, and joy in the reading experience.

3. METHODOLOGY

To investigate how literature circles impact both comprehension and a sense of belonging among bilingual students in diglossia contexts, this study adopted a robust methodological approach grounded in mixed methods and aligned with its human-centered theoretical framework.

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), integrating a quasi-experimental intervention with qualitative inquiry to capture both the cognitive and affective impacts of literature circles on Arabic-speaking bilingual learners. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and integrated during interpretation. The design sought to answer how dialogic peer engagement through literature circles

mediates both reading comprehension and psychosocial development in diglossic classrooms.

Four theoretical lenses guided the research:

- Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, framing scaffolding comprehension subskills in a collaborative zone of proximal development.
- Bakhtinian dialogism, guiding the analysis of peer-led discourse and interpretive agency.
- Goodenow's belonging theory, informing instruments targeting school connectedness and emotional safety.
- Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading operationalized through journal prompts and teacher observation to capture relational meaning-making and affective engagement.

These theories were mapped onto two primary outcome domains:

- Cognitive: vocabulary acquisition, inferencing, summarization, and cause-effect reasoning.
- Affective: school belonging, motivation, interpretive confidence, and emotional expression.

3.2. Setting And Participants

The study was conducted in two gender-segregated government middle schools in Abu Dhabi, in alignment with national schooling norms. Schools were matched for socioeconomic indicators, curricular standards, and administrative support. While gender parity was maintained, the absence of mixed-gender interactions limit broader applicability.

Student Sample (N = 132)

- Experimental group (n = 66): 34 girls and 32 boys.
- Control group (n = 66): 36 girls and 30 boys, matched by GPA, standardized Arabic scores, and class section. All participants were Emirati nationals enrolled in Arabic-English bilingual programs. Generalizability in rural, mixed-gender, or refugee populations is limited and discussed in Section 5.4. While tuition,

transport, and meals were provided equally, home environments varied in literacy support, which may affect extraneous motivation variables.

Teacher Participants (n = 4)

- Two teachers in the experimental group received a five-session professional development (PD) module designed to re-socialize facilitation around relational, dialogic, and trauma-informed pedagogy.
- Topics included: managing interpretive risk, role flexibility, ethical handling of disclosures, and translanguaging sensitivity.
- Two teachers in the control group delivered standard textbook-aligned instruction.

Implementation fidelity was monitored using a customized checklist and weekly observations conducted by two trained raters using an adapted CLASS rubric. Inter-rater reliability averaged 87% across 12 sessions.

3.3 Intervention Procedure

Duration: 8 weeks Frequency: Two 45-minute literature circle sessions per week

Text Selection:

1. *Ministry of Education Arabic Language Textbook (Grade 7)* – aligned with national curriculum.
2. *Sard al-Dhāt (“My Life: A Record of My Life’s Journey”)* by Sheikh Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi – chosen for emotional depth, genre variation, and cultural salience.

Circle Roles:

- Summarizer: synthesized key plot and theme elements.
- Vocabulary Explorer: unpacked lexical complexity and idiomatic expressions.
- Connector: linked text events to students lived or cultural contexts.
- Questioner: posed interpretive, moral, and affective queries.

Students rotated roles and prepared in advance. Discussions occurred primarily in Modern Standard Arabic, with flexible use of Emirati dialect encouraged for emotional or spontaneous expression. Teachers withheld evaluative grading to promote formative risk-taking.

3.4. Instruments And Measures

- Reading Comprehension Assessment: A researcher-designed 24-item test (6 per subskill: vocabulary, inference, cause-effect, summarization), piloted with a demographically similar cohort ($a = 0.81$).
- Sense of Belonging Survey: Adapted from

OECD-PISA (2019), back-translated, expert-reviewed, and pilot-validated in the local context ($a = 0.86$).

- Student Journals (n = 50): Weekly open-ended responses analyzed for affective markers such as empathy, identity, resistance, and interpretive agency. Sample prompt: “*I connected with this character because...*”
- Teacher Interviews (n = 4): Pre- and post-intervention interviews coded for changes in perception of student participation, emotional scaffolding, and code-switching.
- Classroom Observations (n = 12): Audio-recorded and scored using modified CLASS rubric. Codes included dialogic turn-taking, peer affirmation, affective vocabulary, and facilitator flexibility.

All qualitative data were entered into NVivo 12 and coded using a theory-informed codebook.

3.5. Data Analysis

A-. Quantitative Analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed using both within-group and between-group comparisons. Paired-sample t-tests assessed pre-post gains within the experimental and control groups, while independent-sample t-tests examined differences between the two conditions. Effect sizes (Cohen’s d) were reported for each reading subdomain to evaluate the magnitude of observed changes (e.g., $d = 1.21$ for peer acceptance, $d = 0.96$ for vocabulary acquisition). Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were tested and confirmed using Shapiro-Wilk and Levene’s tests, respectively.

B- Qualitative Analysis: A six-phase thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to student journals, classroom observations, and teacher interviews. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing patterns related to voice, agency, empathy, and belonging to emerge from the data. Triangulation across data sources strengthened validity, ensuring that emergent themes were corroborated by multiple forms of evidence. To support convergence across methodologies, a mixed-methods integration matrix was constructed. This matrix aligned cognitive outcomes with affective indicators, such as engagement and school attachment, and traced them back to the study’s theoretical constructs (e.g., Vygotskian scaffolding, dialogic inquiry, motivational autonomy). This integrative approach enabled a holistic interpretation of the impact of literature circles on both comprehension and student well-being.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to all relevant ethical protocols to ensure the protection, dignity, and well-being of participants, particularly given the study's focus on emotional engagement and identity.

- **Approvals:** Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant educational authorities [Blinded for Review].
- **Informed Consent:** Written informed consent was secured from all parents or legal guardians, alongside signed assent from student participants, in accordance with national research ethics guidelines.
- **Confidentiality and Data Security:** All students and teacher participants were assigned anonymized pseudonyms. Audio recordings and written data were securely stored on password-protected institutional servers, accessible only to the research team.
- **Psychosocial Safeguards:** Teachers in the intervention group received explicit training in trauma-informed facilitation to foster emotionally safe learning environments. Journal entries or classroom disclosures indicating distress or vulnerability were reviewed sensitively and, when necessary, confidentially referred to the school's designated mental health professionals in line with UAE child protection policies.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the study in alignment with the three research questions and overarching objectives. Findings are organized into

three domains: (1) cognitive gains in reading comprehension (RQ1), (2) affective-social outcomes including belonging and agency (RQ2), and (3) perceptions of literature circles as a pedagogical intervention (RQ3). Quantitative results are supported by qualitative insights, offering a multi-layered account of the intervention's effects across cognitive and emotional domains.

4.1. Cognitive Gains in Reading Comprehension (RQ1)

To address Research Question 1 (RQ1), *What is the impact of literature circles on bilingual students' reading comprehension in Arabic?* we analyzed pre- and post-intervention scores on a researcher-designed diagnostic assessment targeting three comprehension subskills: vocabulary acquisition, main idea identification, and cause-effect reasoning. These subskills were selected based on their alignment with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which posits that inferential and summarization abilities are best developed through scaffolded, interactive learning; and Bakhtinian dialogism, which emphasizes meaning-making through discourse.

A paired-sample t-test was conducted within the experimental group ($n = 56$) to examine pre/post gains, while an independent-sample t-test compared the post-test performance of the experimental and control groups ($n = 112$). Cohen's d was calculated to determine effect sizes. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Pre-/Post-Test Scores by Comprehension Subskill (Experimental Vs. Control) ($N = 112$; 56 In Each Group).

Skill Area	Group	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	Gain	t	p	Cohen's d
Vocabulary Acquisition	Experimental	5.78 (1.3)	8.93 (1.0)	+3.15	11.59	< .001	1.42
	Control	5.74 (1.2)	6.29 (1.4)	+0.55	,	,	0.39
Main Idea Identification	Experimental	6.01 (1.4)	9.11 (1.1)	+3.10	10.78	< .001	1.35
	Control	6.04 (1.3)	6.35 (1.3)	+0.31	,	,	0.23
Cause-Effect Reasoning	Experimental	5.55 (1.5)	8.62 (1.2)	+3.07	11.22	< .001	1.38
	Control	5.51 (1.5)	6.11 (1.2)	+0.60	,	,	0.33

All three subskills showed statistically significant gains ($p < .001$) in the experimental group, with large effect sizes ranging from 1.35 to 1.42. The largest improvement was observed in vocabulary acquisition, followed closely by cause-effect reasoning and main idea identification.

Between-group comparisons confirmed that the experimental group outperformed the control group post-intervention across all skill areas ($p < .01$), reinforcing the conclusion that improvements were

attributable to the literature circle intervention rather than maturation or instructional drift.

These findings empirically support the theoretical claim that dialogic, peer-led reading contexts create scaffolded opportunities for deeper comprehension. Students constructed meaning collaboratively and engaged critically with text, demonstrating the cognitive benefits of socially mediated literacy, in line with Vygotskian theory and Bakhtin's dialogism.

Additionally, these gains validate the use of a

dual-text model, integrating a Ministry of Education textbook with a culturally rich autobiographical novel, as a powerful cognitive scaffold. The integration of formal Arabic (Fushā) and emotionally resonant content appears to have supported comprehension at both surface and inferential levels.

4.2. Social-Emotional Outcomes: Belonging, Agency, And Emotional Engagement (RQ2)

To address Research Question 2 (RQ2), *How do literature circles influence students' sense of belonging, motivation, and emotional engagement in Arabic language classrooms?* the study analyzed results from an adapted PISA Sense of Belonging Survey alongside qualitative data from reflective journals, teacher interviews, and classroom observations. This mixed-methods approach enabled a layered understanding of how dialogic reading practices affect students'

affective experiences in bilingual, diglossic contexts.

4.2.1. Quantitative Results: Survey of School Belonging

Students in the experimental group completed a culturally adapted Arabic version of the OECD PISA Sense of Belonging Scale. The instrument underwent back-translation, reviewed by three bilingual experts, and was piloted with a demographically similar cohort (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$). The survey included 10 items across three domains:

- Peer Acceptance
- Teacher Affirmation
- Classroom Inclusion

Results demonstrated statistically significant improvements across all subdomains. Table 4 summarizes the pre/post comparisons.

Table 4: Pre-/Post-Survey Scores on School Belonging (Experimental Group, N = 56).

Subdomain	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	Gain	t	p	Cohen's d
Peer Acceptance	3.21 (0.65)	4.18 (0.51)	+0.97	9.04	< .001	1.21
Teacher Affirmation	3.34 (0.71)	4.25 (0.57)	+0.91	8.72	< .001	1.18
Classroom Inclusion	3.10 (0.68)	4.14 (0.54)	+1.04	9.28	< .001	1.24

Interpretation: Students reported stronger peer relationships, greater trust in teacher responsiveness, and a heightened sense of classroom inclusion following the intervention. These outcomes align with Goodenow's (1993) theory of belonging, which links perceived emotional safety and recognition to academic motivation and engagement.

To minimize Hawthorne effects, control groups were informed they were part of a broader literacy study, without emphasis on differential treatment. Additionally, emotional engagement was monitored longitudinally through journaling and classroom observation, providing further triangulation.

4.2.2. Qualitative Insights: Journals, Observations, And Teacher Reflections

Student Journals (n = 50) revealed emergent affective themes:

- Identity affirmation: "I saw myself in the author's struggles."
- Safety to express: "I was not afraid to speak today. No one laughed."
- Agency and ownership: "This time I led the discussion and they listened."

These entries, coded manually using NVivo, clustered around three thematic nodes:

1. Dialogic Belonging: Feeling heard, valued, and respected.
2. Emotional Resonance: Deep connections to characters, stories, or moral dilemmas.

3. Linguistic Confidence: Increased comfort using Fushā in peer dialogue.

Classroom Observations (n = 12), coded with an adapted CLASS protocol, reinforced these findings. Codes such as AFFECT_DISPLAY and DIALOGIC_TURN_TAKING spiked in frequency by mid-intervention, signaling greater emotional expressiveness and equitable peer participation.

Teacher Interviews echoed the above:

- "Students who never raised their hands now lead discussions."
- "They feel this class is about *them*, not just rules."

The emotional and social gains observed point to literature circles as more than a literacy tool, they served as a relational pedagogy fostering inclusion, expression, and identity affirmation. These effects are especially salient in diglossic Arabic classrooms, where formal instruction often fails to validate students lived experiences or language repertoires.

4.3. Stakeholder Perceptions of Literature Circles as Dialogic Pedagogy (RQ3)

To answer Research Question 3 (RQ3, *how do teachers and students perceive the use of literature circles as an alternative pedagogy in bilingual Arabic classrooms?*) the study analyzed post-intervention teacher interviews, student journal narratives, and observation notes. This domain was key to understanding implementation fidelity, pedagogical

transformation, and perceived learner agency from both student and educator perspectives.

4.3.1. *Teacher Perspectives: From Didactic to Dialogic*

All four participating teachers (two in the intervention, two in the control) were interviewed pre- and post-intervention. Those facilitating literature circles reported a notable pedagogical shift, from transmitter to listener, and from evaluator to co-learner.

Key perceived benefits included:

- Student-Led Discourse: "They stopped looking at me for the 'right' answer. They listened to each other."
- Emotional Maturity: "One girl cried when reading about Sheikh Sultan's childhood. It was the first time she said a book 'understood' her."
- Code-Switching as a Resource: "Students used 'āmmiyya' to explain their emotions, but always returned to 'fuṣḥā' when citing the text. It worked beautifully."

Teachers also reflected on challenges:

- Letting Go of Control: "At first, I wanted to correct every answer. But I realized my silence allowed more voices to emerge."
- Assessment Anxiety: "Because there were no grades, some high-achievers were uncomfortable. But by week four, they adjusted and started enjoying the freedom."

These reflections affirm Rosenblatt's transactional model: reading became a lived experience where personal, emotional, and linguistic identities converged in community interpretation.

4.3.2 *Student Voices: Belonging, Risk-Taking, And Ownership*

Students described literature circles as "freeing," "different from normal Arabic class," and "like talking about life, not just books." Several themes recurred across journals and post-intervention focus prompts:

- Personal Connection: "I didn't know a Sheikh could feel weak. That made me feel strong."
- Linguistic Identity: "I used to feel shy about my Arabic. Now I see it as a gift."
- Collaborative Safety: "In our circle, I said what I thought. Nobody said it was wrong."

Crucially, students in the control group, who received traditional instruction, did not report similar affective or interpretive depth, though they covered the same texts. This contrast underscores the pedagogical distinctiveness of literature circles, even

within identical curricular content.

4.3.3. *Observational Evidence: Embodied Engagement*

Structured observations documented a shift in classroom atmosphere. Early sessions showed hesitant turn-taking and teacher-dominated exchanges.

By Week 6:

- Students initiated topics without prompts
- Empathy was visible in body language and tone
- Code-switching was purposeful and context-sensitive

Observation excerpts included:

- "Student A interrupts respectfully to agree with a peer, citing a line from Sard al-Dhāt in Fuṣḥā."
- "Student D mimics an author's experience to explain her own family struggle with displacement."

These behaviors support Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, where each utterance is a response, not in isolation, but embedded in social interaction and mutual meaning-making.

Stakeholder responses overwhelmingly framed literature circles as a liberatory departure from scripted, grammar-centric instruction. Both teachers and students described the experience as transformative, promoting deeper listening, emotional risk-taking, and linguistic confidence. While not without implementation tensions, the intervention appeared to realign Arabic literacy with students lived identities, affirming its relevance in a bilingual, emotionally complex educational landscape.

5. DISCUSSION

This study began with a central concern for Arabic-English bilingual learners: why do students who are fluent in spoken dialects often remain disconnected from academic Arabic reading? The findings provide a multidimensional response. Literature circles did more than support measurable improvements in comprehension, they restructured the reading experience into a participatory, emotionally resonant, and socially validating process. Through dialogic reading practices, bilingual students were not merely recipients of meaning but active constructors of it. The classroom shifted from a site of passive absorption to a space of identity negotiation, voice, and belonging.

5.1. *Socially Mediated Cognitive Gains*

The robust quantitative gains in vocabulary, inferencing, and analytical reasoning observed in the experimental group cannot be understood in isolation from the dialogic structure of the intervention. Drawing on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, these gains reflect learning that is fundamentally mediated by social interaction within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Literature circle roles, Summarizer, Connector, Vocabulary Explorer, Questioner, scaffolded layered cognitive tasks in developmentally accessible ways. Teachers, trained to act as facilitators rather than evaluators, created relational safety that allowed meaning to emerge from peer negotiation.

The pattern of comprehension improvement was mirrored by classroom observations and journal entries. Students who demonstrated the most significant gains frequently used role-based discourse to connect texts to personal experiences. One student wrote: "When I explained the vocabulary to my group, I felt like the teacher. I remembered the word better because I was responsible for it." This kind of reflective ownership underscores how dialogic peer roles function as metacognitive accelerators, transforming literacy from a task into a relational exchange.

Quantitative trends were further illuminated by qualitative triangulation. Students with the highest post-test gains also exhibited the most consistent role engagement, self-monitoring behaviors, and emotionally rich journal responses. For example, students who scored in the top quartile on inferencing tasks tended to articulate cross-textual comparisons or personal analogies during discussions. This pattern suggests that comprehension was amplified not merely by exposure to text, but by structured participation in co-constructed meaning-making, validating the synergistic power of mixed-methods integration in reading intervention research.

5.2. *Belonging, Voice, And Emotional Engagement*

Beyond cognitive growth, literature circles created a shift in how students experienced themselves as readers. Affective data, particularly journal reflections and classroom discourse, revealed powerful gains in emotional engagement and school belonging. Students used language such as "safe," "included," and "respected" when describing the literature circle environment. One 7th-grade girl wrote: "Before, I never spoke in Arabic class. In the circle, I led the discussion twice. I felt like I mattered." These expressions are indicative of what Goodenow (1993) defines as perceived belonging, an internal sense that

one's presence, voice, and participation are valued in the learning environment.

The study extends this further by showing that belonging was not incidental, it was structurally embedded. Teachers were trained to open sessions with emotionally resonant prompts, to validate linguistic fluidity between 'Ammiyya and Fuṣḥā, and to adopt a trauma-informed stance toward student expression. These practices affirmed identity, built community, and counteracted the institutional alienation often reported in Arabic language instruction.

5.3. *Translanguaging As an Asset, Not A Deficit*

One of the study's more illuminating findings was the role of translanguaging in scaffolding comprehension. While the intervention was designed in Modern Standard Arabic, students naturally used English during preparation phases, especially to explore themes or clarify concepts. Rather than hinder Arabic acquisition, this cross-linguistic flexibility deepened engagement. It aligns with García's (2009) notion of translanguaging as a pedagogical tool that activates the full linguistic repertoire of bilingual learners.

Importantly, teachers were trained not to penalize students for code-switching but to recognize it as a bridge to meaning. This reorientation reframed bilingualism from a challenge into a resource. For instance, one male student noted in his journal: "I explained the scene in English to myself, then wrote my journal in Arabic. That helped me say what I really felt." Such episodes highlight that when affective safety and cognitive strategy are aligned, language becomes not only a medium of learning but of emotional processing and identity affirmation.

5.4. *Theoretical Implications: Literacy As A Humanizing Act*

The study contributes to theoretical discourse by reframing reading not as a decontextualized cognitive activity but as a dialogic, identity-mediated, and ethically situated act. Drawing on Bakhtinian dialogism, literacy is presented here as a form of social address, a way of speaking and being spoken to. When students interpret a character's pain, connect it to their own life, and discuss it with peers, they engage in what Freire (1970) termed *conscientization*, a process of becoming critically aware through dialogue.

Moreover, Rosenblatt's transactional theory finds robust affirmation in this study. Meaning emerged not from the text alone, but in the transaction between text, reader, peer, and facilitator. This

layered interaction produced what Cummins (2006) called identity texts, spaces where students inscribe their experiences into the curricular fabric. In a context like the UAE, where diglossia often fractures the student's linguistic identity, literature circles offer a pedagogical model that reunifies cognitive, emotional, and cultural dimensions of literacy.

5.5. Practical Implications: Scaling Human-Centered Literacy

A. For Teachers Professional development must prepare educators to shift from content delivery to dialogic facilitation. This includes training in trauma-informed pedagogy, group dynamics, and translanguaging strategies. Tools such as fidelity checklists, rotating role cards, and reflection logs proved essential in sustaining instructional integrity and equitable participation. Teachers who embraced the facilitator, not assessor, stance created emotionally safe spaces that enabled students to take ownership of meaning-making.

B. For Curriculum Designers Arabic language curricula should move beyond monolingual, decontextualized materials and incorporate culturally responsive, multimodal texts that reflect students lived realities. The inclusion of autobiographical Emirati narratives and bilingual discussion prompts deepened engagement and fostered linguistic identity. Designing for dialogic interaction, not rote response, should be central to future textbook reform.

C. For Policymakers Implementation fidelity was supported through weekly teacher logs, mid-point coaching, and optional classroom video reviews assessed against a rubric covering role enactment, dialogic balance, affective climate, and trauma-sensitivity. This continuous feedback loop ensured consistency while respecting teacher agency.

Literature circles offer a scalable, cost-effective model aligned with UAE Vision 2031 goals in literacy, wellbeing, and national identity.

To institutionalize the approach, the following actions are recommended:

- Embed pilot programs in public schools with built-in impact evaluation.
- Fund teacher learning communities (PLCs) to foster cross-school knowledge sharing.
- Integrate dialogic-ready materials and discussion guides into national textbook frameworks.

5.6. Limitations And Future Directions

While the intervention produced meaningful academic and affective gains, several limitations

merit consideration. First, the eight-week duration limits conclusions about retention and transfer. Future studies should incorporate delayed post-tests and longitudinal ethnographic follow-up to assess sustained outcomes.

Second, implementation fidelity, though generally strong, varied across classrooms. Weekly implementation logs and mid-point coaching mitigated this variation, but future research should include validated fidelity rubrics and inter-rater reliability protocols to ensure consistency in larger-scale applications.

Third, the dual-text approach, drawing from the Ministry of Education curriculum and autobiographical narratives such as *Sard al-Dhāt* by Sheikh Sultan Al Qasimi, was culturally resonant but limited in scope. Building a repository of annotated, dialogic-friendly Arabic texts would support replication and adaptation across diverse contexts.

Finally, the sample's relative socioeconomic and linguistic homogeneity, Emirati-only, urban, and gender-segregated, constrains the generalizability of findings. While these conditions reflect mainstream public education in the UAE, they do not capture the complexity of mixed-gender, rural, or refugee schooling environments, where linguistic repertoires, trauma histories, and educational resources differ markedly. Further research is needed to examine how literature circles function in such settings, particularly where students face identity-based marginalization, interrupted schooling, or language loss. Testing the model across diverse sociolinguistic ecologies would inform its adaptability, equity implications, and scalability beyond the current national and cultural frame.

6. CONCLUSION

This study affirms a critical, yet often overlooked truth in bilingual education: meaningful reading comprehension is not merely a cognitive achievement, it is a deeply social and emotional one. When students are invited into dialogic spaces that affirm their linguistic repertoires and cultural identities, literacy becomes more than decoding text, it becomes an act of being seen, heard, and valued.

In the multilingual, diglossic landscape of the UAE, where students often experience academic Arabic as distant or imposed, this shift is urgent. Literature circles disrupted traditional compliance-driven models by positioning students as co-constructors of meaning. In doing so, they not only enhanced vocabulary and inference skills, but also restored voice, motivation, and academic confidence.

These reimagining challenges educators and

systems to go beyond the question of “how to teach Arabic better.” The more generative question is: how can Arabic become a space of connection, emotional, intellectual, and cultural? When bilingual learners are trusted to lead, to listen, and to reflect, the classroom becomes a site not of fragmentation but of belonging.

Methodologically, this study provides a replicable mixed-methods framework for capturing the cognitive and emotional dimensions of literacy interventions. Theoretically, it contributes to a humanizing paradigm that integrates Vygotskian scaffolding, Bakhtinian dialogism, and the psychology of belonging. Practically, it offers teachers a structure for facilitating student-led dialogue; curriculum designers, a blueprint for bilingual relevance; and policymakers, an approach aligned with UAE Vision 2031.

Beyond the UAE, as systems globally navigate crises of learning loss, alienation, and linguistic inequality, the case for human-centered literacy is increasingly urgent. Voice, agency, and safety are not optional enrichments, they are the conditions for equity and excellence.

The promise of literature circles lies in their dual impact: strengthening academic comprehension while creating communities where bilingual learners no longer have to mute, translate, or negotiate their identities. They are invited, instead, to read, and to belong, in full. The question is no longer whether such models should be adopted, but how swiftly we are prepared to act. At its best, literacy is not only a skill to be taught, but a home to be returned to. most powerful, is not only a skill to be taught, but also a home to be returned to.

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