

Blending Beliefs: How Epistemology and Islamic Principles Shape English Teaching in the UAE

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the epistemological beliefs of English teachers in the UAE and their influence on teaching practices, using a Critical Narrative design. The research addresses three primary questions related to the nature of knowledge, knowing, and the integration of Islamic principles with modern educational practices. Narrative Inquiry was employed to analyse three stories from the participants. The findings reveal a significant impact of these beliefs on instructional strategies, highlighting the necessity for culturally informed professional development programs. This study contributes to the understanding of how teachers' beliefs shape their pedagogical approaches within a specific cultural context. The implications underscore that religion plays a significant role in harnessing Islamization elements to be instilled in students through the participants' teaching practices.

Keywords: Epistemological beliefs, teaching practices, qualitative research, UAE, Critical Narrative design, Islamic principles, modern education

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Introduction

The exploration of teachers' epistemological beliefs and their influence on teaching practices has garnered significant attention in educational research. While predominantly quantitative studies provide broad generalizations, they often miss the nuanced understanding that qualitative approaches can offer. Teachers' beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing critically shape their instructional methods and classroom interactions (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). This study aims to address the gap in the literature by employing a qualitative approach to examine these complex relationships within the specific cultural and educational context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). By focusing on English teachers in the UAE, this research seeks to provide context-specific insights that can inform culturally appropriate professional development programs.

Furthermore, this research aims to support the UAE's Vision 2021, which emphasizes enhancing innovation, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. Epistemological studies are vital for ensuring that teachers' practices align with these goals by promoting student-centered, inquiry-based learning. Teachers with well-developed epistemological beliefs are more likely

to adopt teaching methods that encourage students to become independent learners and critically evaluate assumptions. This is particularly relevant in subjects like science, where knowledge is constantly evolving. Given the diverse student population in the UAE, understanding teachers' epistemological beliefs can also improve how they address variations in students' backgrounds, catering to different religions and personalities. This has implications not only for the UAE but for the broader region as well.

Research Questions

1. What are the epistemological beliefs of English teachers about the nature of knowledge and knowing?
 - a. How do English teachers' epistemological beliefs influence their views on the nature of knowledge and their role as teachers in the classroom?
 - b. How do English teachers' epistemological beliefs influence their views on the nature of knowing and the role of students in the learning process?
2. How do English teachers' epistemological beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing inform their understanding of the teaching and learning process?
3. How does the integration of Islamic principles with modern scientific knowledge impact English teachers' pedagogical practices?
 - a. What are the challenges and benefits of integrating Islamic principles with modern educational practices?
 - b. How do teachers balance the demands of modern curricula with the need to incorporate Islamic values?

Literature Review

Epistemology, traditionally a philosophical concept, has gained significant attention in psychology over the past decades as researchers explore individual perceptions of knowledge and their impact on the learning process. Philosophically, epistemology investigates the essence, origins, limits, and validity of knowledge. Psychologically, personal epistemology or epistemic cognition concerns one's understanding of the nature of knowledge and its acquisition (Chen et al., 2021; Mardaha & Alibakhshi, 2020). This includes the development, interpretation, evaluation, and justification of knowledge. According to Hofer and Pintrich (1997), epistemological beliefs are "individuals' beliefs about the nature of knowledge and the process of knowing." These beliefs influence how individuals approach learning, define and validate knowledge, and perceive the processes associated with knowing, teaching, and learning. Essentially, these beliefs act as personal frameworks that impact behaviour and decision-making in educational contexts (Huling, 2014; Anđelković & Milutinović, 2018; Manu, 2014).

Teachers' epistemological beliefs significantly shape their teaching practices. These beliefs, which encompass notions about the certainty, sources, justification, acquisition, and organization of knowledge, guide teachers' instructional methods and classroom interactions. There are two primary teaching approaches: traditional and constructivist. The traditional approach is teacher-centered, focusing on knowledge transfer where the teacher serves as the

main source of knowledge. Conversely, the constructivist approach, influenced by Piaget and Vygotsky, emphasizes co-constructing understanding and knowledge with students. Teachers in this approach facilitate interactive learning environments and encourage active student participation (Mardiha & Alibakhshi, 2020; Chai, 2010). This distinction illustrates how teachers' epistemological beliefs influence their preference for either a student-centered, interactive approach or a more traditional, teacher-centered method.

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between teachers' epistemological beliefs and their teaching practices. Soleimani (2020) found that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Iran adopted constructivist teaching styles, valuing adaptable learning, effort-based knowledge acquisition, and critical thinking. Similarly, Mardiha and Alibakhshi (2020) reported that Iranian English teachers preferred constructivist methods, highlighting the positive correlation between their epistemological beliefs and teaching practices. Chen et al. (2021) compared teachers in Finland and Taiwan, finding that while both groups held constructivist views, they faced challenges in applying these practices due to contextual factors. These studies underscore the importance of considering teachers' beliefs in educational reforms and the need for further research in diverse cultural contexts.

Understanding teachers' epistemological beliefs is crucial for improving teaching practices and educational outcomes. These beliefs influence instructional methods and classroom interactions, guided by underlying philosophical foundations. Research consistently shows a link between epistemological beliefs and teaching practices, suggesting that professional development programs should focus on enhancing teachers' beliefs and promoting student-centered approaches. This literature review highlights the need for more qualitative studies to gain deeper insights into the complex relationship between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practices, particularly within different cultural and educational contexts.

The study of epistemological beliefs—understandings about the nature of knowledge and the process of knowing—has been pivotal in educational research. Pallas (2001) underscores the challenges and significance of preparing doctoral students for epistemological diversity within educational research. By employing Wenger's (1998) concept of community of practice, Pallas argues that the preparation of educational researchers typically occurs within localized communities of practice, which often limits exposure to diverse epistemological perspectives. This notion highlights the need for educators to engage with multiple epistemological viewpoints to foster a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of educational phenomena (Pallas, 2001).

Siegel (2006) critiques the emphasis on epistemological diversity, suggesting that while familiarity with various epistemologies is beneficial, it is often overstated. He advocates for practical pluralism, where researchers maintain a balance between depth and breadth in their epistemological understanding. Siegel's arguments provide a framework for discussing how educators in different cultural contexts, such as the UAE, navigate the integration of Islamic principles with modern educational practices without succumbing to relativism or scepticism (Siegel, 2006).

Metz (2001) introduces the concept of intellectual border crossing, describing the experiences of students navigating different epistemological and methodological traditions. This concept is particularly relevant to educators in the UAE, who must balance the integration of Islamic principles with modern scientific knowledge. Metz's findings on the benefits and

challenges of intellectual border crossing can be linked to the experiences of UAE teachers, providing a nuanced understanding of how they incorporate diverse epistemological perspectives into their teaching practices (Metz, 2001). Page (2001) discusses the reshaping of graduate preparation in educational research methods, emphasizing the importance of methodological diversity. Her insights highlight the need for teacher education programs to adapt and expose educators to a range of research methodologies, thus preparing them to integrate various epistemological beliefs, including Islamic principles, within modern educational frameworks. Page's work suggests that curriculum reforms are essential for enhancing the preparedness of teachers to navigate and integrate diverse epistemologies (Page, 2001). Bernal (1998) introduces a Chicana feminist epistemological framework, which challenges traditional patriarchal and liberal educational scholarship. This framework can be paralleled with the integration of Islamic principles in the UAE's educational context. Bernal's discussion on intersectionality—considering race, class, gender, and epistemology—provides a valuable perspective on how Islamic epistemologies intersect with modern educational practices, enriching the educational experience and fostering a more holistic approach to teaching and learning (Bernal, 1998).

To effectively integrate epistemological beliefs with educational practices, it is crucial to adopt practical strategies that elevate the discussion of epistemology within educational institutions. Pallas (2001) and Page (2001) recommend creating environments where epistemological experimentation is encouraged and supported. This involves fostering an open dialogue about epistemological perspectives among faculty and students and ensuring that these discussions are linked to actual research practices. Such an approach can help educators in the UAE and other contexts balance modern curricular demands with the incorporation of Islamic values, ultimately promoting a more inclusive and reflective educational environment.

Kincheloe (2004) expands on the concept of critical complex epistemology, emphasizing the importance of understanding the socio-political context of education. He argues that teacher education must integrate multiple forms of knowledge, including empirical, normative, critical, experiential, and reflective-synthetic knowledge. This comprehensive approach helps educators develop a nuanced understanding of educational practice and fosters a reflective and ethical teaching persona (Kincheloe, 2004). By integrating these multiple forms of knowledge, teacher education programs can better prepare educators to navigate the complexities of modern educational environments while remaining rooted in their cultural and epistemological contexts. This approach is particularly relevant for educators in the UAE, who must balance Islamic principles with the demands of a modern, globalized education system.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, specifically utilizing a Critical Narrative Research design, which is well-suited for exploring and understanding teachers' lived experiences. This design facilitates an in-depth examination of how teachers' epistemological beliefs influence their instructional practices, providing rich contextual insights.

The theoretical foundation for this research is grounded in the narrative turn, which emphasizes the importance of language in shaping human experiences and understanding

reality. According to Nowak-Dziemianowicz (2020), the narrative approach highlights the meanings that narrators assign to their own experiences, suggesting that our human experience is actualized through language. This perspective aligns with the educational context, where narrative research has become a valuable tool for exploring, interpreting, and understanding the stories and lived experiences of educators.

Following Adu and Gavidia's (2022) framework for Critical Narrative Inquiry, this research considers four key elements: the critical paradigm (which views meaning as constructed by social, political, and cultural values over time), the use of storytelling to explore narratives, ensuring trustworthiness through multiple data collection methods, and addressing the social and personal significance of the study. These elements guide the research process, ensuring a comprehensive and reflexive approach.

The data collection process was designed to ensure the trustworthiness and richness of the data. Multiple data collection methods were employed, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and the collection of lesson materials. This triangulation of data sources strengthens the validity of the findings by providing multiple perspectives on the same phenomena.

The data collection process unfolded in three phases. Firstly, selecting and securing the participation of a suitable school proved challenging due to the high stakes associated with school inspections and performance pressures. After numerous rejections, permission was secured from a private international school referred to as the 'British School' for anonymity. Secondly, obtaining consent from teachers involved addressing their concerns about anonymity and the purpose of the research. Finally, scheduling and conducting interviews and observations required careful coordination to accommodate teachers' workloads.

The study was conducted in a private international school in Ajman, UAE, offering the National Curriculum of England. Three English teachers participated in the study: Ms. Sara, Ms. Kholoud, and Ms. Dina. These teachers were selected through purposive sampling to provide diverse perspectives based on their varying experiences and backgrounds. Ms. Sara, an English teacher from Pakistan, teaches secondary levels and coordinates English for secondary grades. Ms. Kholoud, an Iraqi, teaches primary levels and holds a degree in English education, while Ms. Dina, also an Iraqi, teaches lower secondary levels and holds a degree in literature. Their different cultural backgrounds and teaching experiences provided a rich context for exploring how their epistemological beliefs influence their teaching practices.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data. This method involved reading and re-reading interview transcripts and observation notes to become thoroughly familiar with the data. Initial codes were created to label significant data segments, which were then organized into broader themes. These themes included personal beliefs about knowledge, the role of the teacher, the role of the student, instructional techniques, assessment methods, and challenges.

Maintaining the integrity of the participants' narratives was crucial during the coding process to preserve the meanings and structures of their stories. The themes were continuously compared across different data sources to ensure consistency and coherence. The final analysis synthesized these themes into a cohesive narrative structured around the observed lesson flow: lesson warm-up, main activities, and assessment. This approach allowed the readers to connect with the teachers' beliefs and practices through detailed and organized storytelling.

Results

Ms. Sara's Narrative

Epistemological Beliefs about the Nature of Knowledge and Knowing

Ms. Sara, an English teacher with seven years of experience (four of which are at her current school), transitioned from a professional content writer to an educator, bringing a unique perspective to her teaching methods. Ms. Sara views knowledge as a dynamic, living-learning process that emphasizes relevance, real-life application, and active experiential learning. According to Ms. Sara, knowledge acquisition occurs through experimentation and exploration, meaning it is actively constructed through the learner's experience. This belief is reflected in her use of hands-on activities, role-play, and real-life applications in her lessons. For instance, she stated, "A person can learn through experiences. A person can learn through observation... They don't need to be in a structured environment to acquire knowledge." This perspective aligns with constructivist theories of learning, suggesting a significant influence of her epistemological beliefs on her pedagogical practices.

Despite her constructivist views, Ms. Sara also holds that some learners have innate abilities that give them an advantage in certain skills and subjects. She critiqued parents for believing that all children can achieve equally with effort alone, highlighting the importance of recognizing individual natural talents and abilities. This nuanced perspective reflects her complex epistemological beliefs, which integrate both constructivist and essentialist elements.

Influence on Teaching and Classroom Roles

Ms. Sara's epistemological beliefs significantly shape her views on her role as a teacher and the role of students in the learning process. She believes that teachers should be facilitators who guide and support students' active learning. This is reflected in her minimal teacher-talk time and emphasis on student-centered activities. During her lessons, students work in groups to prepare interview scripts, practice them, and present them, with Ms. Sara only intervening or aiding when necessary. This approach demonstrates her commitment to fostering an interactive and participatory learning environment.

However, Ms. Sara also acknowledges the challenges that come with this teaching style, particularly in maintaining classroom discipline. She noted, "It takes longer to discipline a class with this kind of attitude... But since the teachers have become facilitators now and their role is non-existent in the classroom, it's all about the students." Despite these challenges, Ms. Sara remains committed to her facilitative role, believing it ultimately benefits students' learning experiences.

Understanding of the Teaching and Learning Process

Ms. Sara's beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing inform her understanding of the teaching and learning process in several ways. She emphasizes the importance of connecting lessons to students' lives and experiences using methods like project-based learning and real-

life applications. For example, in one lesson, she tasked students with creating video-recorded speeches in a vlog style, integrating various skills and technologies. This approach aligns with her belief in making learning relevant and engaging for students.

Ms. Sara also personalizes her assessments to match students' learning styles and interests. She believes in providing positive and encouraging feedback while highlighting areas for improvement. Additionally, she adapts assessment content based on the students' preferences, such as selecting sports articles for boys' classes and fashion articles for girls' classes. Despite her preference for personalized assessment, she expressed concerns about the standardized format of external examinations, advocating for more level-based assessments that reflect students' diverse abilities.

Ms. Kholoud's Narrative

Epistemological Beliefs about the Nature of Knowledge and Knowing

Ms. Kholoud, an English teacher with four and a half years of experience, believes that knowledge must be filtered through Islamic ethics before being taught to students. She categorizes knowledge into three types: cognitive knowledge, which is acquired through observation until the age of four; physical knowledge, gained through experience; and theoretical knowledge, taught by experts. She strongly believes that manners and discipline, grounded in Islamic ethics, are the foundation for all other knowledge. According to Ms. Kholoud, without a disciplined and ethical mind, knowledge is meaningless. She emphasizes that students should not start formal education until they are seven years old to ensure they have a strong ethical base.

Influence on Views of the Nature of Knowledge and Teacher's Role

Ms. Kholoud's belief that Islamic ethics is the primary source of knowledge significantly shapes her role as a teacher. She views her responsibility as not only imparting academic knowledge but also instilling Islamic manners and values in her students. Her interactions in the classroom reflect this, as she frequently uses Islamic phrases and reinforces ethical behaviour. For instance, she expects students to greet with "السلام عليكم" (may peace be upon you) and to show respect and gratitude in their interactions.

Her commitment to Islamic ethics often leads her to modify or skip parts of the curriculum that conflict with her values. She scrutinizes lesson content to ensure it aligns with Islamic principles, sometimes using time limitations as an excuse to avoid teaching certain topics. Despite the strict implementation of the Cambridge curriculum at her current school, she strives to teach according to her values, often incorporating discussions on international issues and moral dilemmas to enhance students' ethical and social awareness.

Influence on Views of the Nature of Knowing and Students' Role

Ms. Kholoud's epistemological beliefs also influence her views on the nature of knowing and the role of students in the learning process. She believes that students should learn through

exploration and experimentation guided by ethical principles. She encourages students to critique and filter what they learn through discussions and critical thinking exercises. For example, during a lesson on metaphors, she pushed students to analyse and reflect on the poem, encouraging them to share their interpretations and relate them to their cultural and national backgrounds.

She also emphasizes the importance of maintaining Islamic ethics over academic excellence. Ms. Kholoud expects students to exhibit good manners and discipline, which she believes are more important than perfect academic performance. This approach fosters a strong bond between her and her students, who understand and monitor their behaviour according to the ethical standards she sets.

Informing Understanding of the Teaching and Learning Process

Ms. Kholoud's epistemological beliefs deeply inform her understanding of the teaching and learning process. She sees her role as a facilitator who guides students to the right conclusions through exploration and critical thinking. However, the structured nature of the Cambridge curriculum often limits her ability to fully implement this approach. Despite these constraints, she employs various methods to encourage students to explore and learn independently, such as differentiated worksheets, one-to-one meetings, and school break challenges aimed at enriching their learning experiences.

Her belief in the importance of ethical and social awareness is also reflected in her assessment methods. While her formative assessments focus on lesson objectives and preparation for final assessments, she tries to link the content to moral and social issues. Although the summative assessments are out of her control, she uses parent-teacher conferences to emphasize the importance of behaviour and discipline, encouraging parents to value ethical development alongside academic achievement.

Ms. Dina's Narrative

Epistemological Beliefs about the Nature of Knowledge and Knowing

Ms. Dina, an English teacher with seven years of experience and a TESOL certificate, categorizes knowledge into three types: good, bad, and useless. According to her, good knowledge is beneficial and aligns with Islamic teachings, bad knowledge is prohibited, and useless knowledge neither harms nor benefits. She emphasizes that one's innate moral compass, guided by Islamic principles, societal norms, and personal experiences, helps distinguish between these types. This moral compass, according to Ms. Dina, is a universal guide that everyone possesses, allowing them to roughly distinguish right from wrong regardless of their religion.

Influence on Views of the Nature of Knowledge and Teacher's Role

Ms. Dina's belief in the moral compass influences her view of knowledge and her role as a teacher. She sees herself as responsible not only for delivering academic content but also for

fostering ethical and moral thinking. At the beginning of each academic year, she conducts a lesson titled "Moral Compass," presenting students with moral dilemmas to discuss and debate, aiming to guide their thinking and behaviour. She believes that this ethical guidance is crucial for students' overall development and helps them understand the rationale behind her teaching choices, such as skipping or modifying lessons that conflict with Islamic values or community norms.

For instance, Ms. Dina once had to skip a lesson on Korean pop music (K-pop) because it did not align with her educational goals. Instead, she chose a different topic to teach the lesson's skills and objectives, explaining her decision to the students. This approach ensures that the content is relevant to students' lives and aligns with her ethical standards.

Influence on Views of the Nature of Knowing and Students' Role

Ms. Dina's epistemological beliefs also shape her views on the nature of knowing and the role of students in the learning process. She believes that students should be active participants in their learning, engaging in discussions, debates, and collaborative activities. She emphasizes speaking activities and discussions as formative assessments, allowing students to express their understanding in their own words, gain confidence, and appreciate diverse perspectives.

During lessons, Ms. Dina involves students in decision-making, such as choosing whether to work in pairs or individually. She believes that giving students responsibility for their learning encourages them to be more engaged and mature. However, she maintains that the teacher should have the final say to ensure that the lesson objectives are met and the learning process remains structured and effective.

Informing Understanding of the Teaching and Learning Process

Ms. Dina's beliefs about knowledge and knowing deeply inform her understanding of the teaching and learning process. She strives to balance traditional and modern teaching methods, combining authoritative guidance with facilitation. She believes that younger students (years 7 and 8) require more structured guidance and occasional lecturing to ensure they grasp key concepts, while older students can benefit from a more facilitative approach.

Her approach to assessment reflects her belief in continuous observation and formative evaluation. She emphasizes daily assessments and classroom observations over traditional paper-and-pen tests, arguing that these provide a more accurate measure of students' progress and understanding. For her, the teacher's observation throughout the year should be the primary determinant of student achievement.

Ms. Dina also integrates ethical and moral education into her lessons, reinforcing Islamic values and societal norms. She takes additional responsibilities, such as accompanying students to the prayer room, to support their spiritual development. She believes that these actions positively impact students' behaviour and attitudes toward learning.

Discussion

Impact of Integrating Islamic Principles with Modern Scientific Knowledge on English Teachers' Pedagogical Practices

The integration of Islamic principles with modern scientific knowledge profoundly influences the pedagogical practices of English teachers. This approach fosters a holistic educational environment that prioritizes both academic rigor and ethical development. Through this integration, teachers navigate a complex landscape that merges traditional values with contemporary educational demands (Rashid & Muhammad, 1992).

Challenges and Benefits of Integrating Islamic Principles with Modern Educational Practices

Challenges:

One of the primary challenges faced by teachers is the rigidity of standardized curricula, such as the Cambridge curriculum, which often lacks the flexibility to incorporate Islamic values seamlessly. Teachers like Ms. Kholoud encounter difficulties in adapting these curricula to include ethical discussions and moral teachings. This requires significant effort to modify or supplement existing lesson plans independently, which can be time-consuming and may not always align perfectly with the curriculum's objectives.

Another challenge is managing the diverse expectations of parents regarding the balance between religious education and academic excellence. Some parents prioritize high academic achievements and view additional religious instruction as secondary. Teachers like Ms. Dina must navigate these expectations carefully, often needing to provide evidence of the effectiveness of their integrated teaching methods to gain parental support and understanding.

The lack of readily available teaching materials that align with both Islamic values and modern educational standards presents another significant challenge. Teachers are often required to develop their resources, which can be a demanding task. This process involves ensuring that the materials are not only educationally sound but also culturally and religiously appropriate (Herrera, 2004).

Benefits:

Despite the challenges, the integration of Islamic principles with modern educational practices offers substantial benefits. One of the most significant advantages is the promotion of holistic student development. This approach ensures that students are not only academically proficient but also ethically and morally grounded. Teachers like Ms. Kholoud emphasize manners and discipline as foundational elements, ensuring that students develop a strong ethical base before focusing on academic achievements (Shorish, 1988).

The integration of moral and ethical discussions into the curriculum encourages students to engage critically with the content. Teachers like Ms. Dina incorporate moral dilemmas and

ethical debates into their lessons, fostering an environment where students are active participants in their learning process. This approach enhances students' critical thinking skills and helps them develop a nuanced understanding of complex issues.

Integrating Islamic principles into modern education ensures that the content is culturally relevant and resonates with students' values and beliefs. This relevance enhances student engagement and motivation, as they see the direct connection between their education and their cultural and religious identities. Teachers like Ms. Sara utilize experiential learning methods to make the curriculum more relatable and engaging for students (Pallavicini, 2016).

Balancing Modern Curricula with Islamic Values

Teachers employ various strategies to balance the demands of modern curricula with the need to incorporate Islamic values effectively. Teachers adapt their teaching methods to integrate Islamic values within the framework of modern educational practices. Ms. Kholoud, for instance, uses debates and discussions to develop students' critical and ethical thinking. These methods not only meet curricular standards but also ensure that students receive a comprehensive education that includes moral and ethical dimensions (Rashid & Muhammad, 1992).

Customizing assessment methods to align with students' learning styles and emphasizing positive feedback is another strategy used by teachers like Ms. Sara. This approach reflects a commitment to nurturing both academic proficiency and moral development. Personalized assessments help cater to individual student needs while maintaining high academic standards.

Incorporating ethical discussions and moral dilemmas into the curriculum is a key strategy employed by teachers like Ms. Dina. This ensures that students consider the moral implications of their knowledge and apply Islamic principles to their academic work and daily lives. This approach helps students develop a strong moral compass and prepares them to navigate complex ethical issues in the future (Shorish, 1988).

Conclusion

The integration of Islamic principles with modern scientific knowledge significantly shapes English teachers' pedagogical practices. While challenges such as curriculum constraints, parental expectations, and resource limitations exist, the benefits of this integrated approach are profound. It promotes holistic student development, enhances critical thinking, and ensures cultural relevance. Teachers employ various strategies to balance modern curricular demands with the incorporation of Islamic values, creating an educational environment that is both academically rigorous and ethically sound. This integrated approach not only prepares students for academic success but also nurtures their moral and ethical sensibilities, equipping them to navigate the complexities of the modern world responsibly (Pallavicini, 2016).

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