

# Challenging the Monolingual Norm: An Exploratory Study of L1-Mediated Classroom Management in Saudi ELT

Voke Efeotor

Standards and Evaluation Department, King Faisal Air Academy, Al Majmaah

[voke\\_e@hotmail.com](mailto:voke_e@hotmail.com)

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**Abstract:** *In alignment with the Saudi Vision 2030 Human Capability Development Program (HCDP), the Kingdom has prioritized the radical transformation of early childhood and primary education to foster a globally competitive generation. Central to this objective is the mastery of the English language, where effective classroom management serves as the baseline for successful pedagogical delivery. This research investigates a critical but often debated variable in primary ELT (English Language Teaching): the strategic use of the students' mother tongue (Arabic) as a tool for fostering professional discipline and classroom harmony. Utilizing a comparative analysis of perceptions among native and non-native English educators within a Saudi Arabian primary school, this paper examines the perceived advantages and systemic challenges associated with bilingual classroom management. The findings offer a nuanced insight into how L1 (Arabic) integration can act as a "scaffolding" mechanism to reduce cognitive load and behavioural friction in early learners. By identifying the specific barriers faced by native-speaking practitioners, this study provides actionable insights for standardizing teacher training and curriculum development. Ultimately, this research contributes to a robust educational framework that supports the Kingdom's goal of building a bilingual, high-potential workforce from the foundational primary level upward.*

**Keywords:** vision 2030, translanguaging, L1 scaffolding, classroom management, pedagogical optimisation, cross-cultural communication.

## INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of Saudi Vision 2030, specifically through the Human Capability Development Program (HCDP), has placed the mastery of the English language at the forefront of the Kingdom's educational agenda. However, the efficacy of pedagogical delivery is inextricably linked to the environment in which it occurs. As Bruhn et al. (2011) note, an orderly, purposeful environment is the prerequisite for a climate that fosters learning. A meta-analysis by Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1994) identified classroom management as the single most critical variable governing student learning. Within the Saudi primary sector, where early-year English immersion is a national priority, the absence of effective management is not merely a classroom issue—it is an economic one, potentially hindering student results on standardized assessments

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (Shinn, Tindal & Spira, 1987) and slowing the development of a bilingual workforce. While classroom management is not synonymous with teaching, it is the "open door" through which successful pedagogy must pass (Palumbo & Sanacore, 2007).

While the definition of classroom management has evolved to encompass social-emotional learning (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006), this research adopts a focused lens on systemic discipline and the mitigation of instructional disruption. Specifically, it examines the strategic integration of L1 (Arabic) scaffolding as a tool to maintain order. In the context of the Kingdom's rapid educational expansion, defining the boundaries of discipline is essential for ensuring that classroom hours are maximized for active learning.

The implications of this research are high stakes for the Kingdom's educational infrastructure. By exploring the correlation between linguistic scaffolding and classroom harmony, this study seeks to identify a "Best Practice" trend for primary ELT. Furthermore, if the findings suggest that specific linguistic competencies (L1 integration) allow educators to more effectively create an environment conducive to learning, this may provide actionable data for a strategic rethink of national recruitment and teacher-training policies. Such insights are vital for ensuring that the Kingdom attracts and develops talent that is specifically calibrated for the unique cultural and linguistic landscape of Saudi primary schools.

### **Contextual Background: Navigating the Native/Non-Native Paradigm**

This exploratory study was initiated following a series of systematic classroom observations within the Saudi primary education sector. Drawing upon my professional tenure as a native English educator in the Kingdom, I identified a recurring operational challenge: a distinct pattern of behavioural and management friction prevalent in the classrooms of native English-speaking practitioners. Conversely, non-native (Arabic-speaking) educators appeared to maintain higher levels of classroom harmony and instructional continuity.

This study aims to determine the extent to which strategic L1 (Arabic) integration serves as the primary contributory factor in this disparity.

### **The Market Paradox and Global Talent Alignment**

In accordance with global trends, native English speakers remain a highly sought-after demographic within the Saudi labour market. This preference is frequently codified in recruitment mandates and salary structures, often justified by the pursuit of "linguistic excellence" and the provision of authentic phonological models (Cook, 1999; Mahboob, 2004). Proponents of this model argue that native practitioners bring the most contemporary pedagogical methodologies to the Saudi classroom (Honey, 1997; Quirk, 1990).

However, while the linguistic benefits of native instruction are well-documented, this research argues that pedagogical efficacy is neutralized if the learning environment is unstable. If, as this study hypothesizes, native Arabic-speaking educators are more effectively equipped to establish an environment conducive to learning through shared linguistic scaffolding, then classroom management competency must be weighted as heavily as native-level fluency in national recruitment frameworks.

## **Addressing Stakeholder Expectations**

The significance of this analysis extends to public sentiment and quality of life, key pillars of Vision 2030. Currently, there exists a significant parental preference for native English instruction, often based on perceived prestige rather than pedagogical outcomes. By providing data-driven insights into the challenges facing native-speaking practitioners, this research facilitates a nuanced dialogue with stakeholders (parents and school boards). Ultimately, it seeks to align parental expectations with evidence-based practices that ensure Saudi students receive the most effective, disciplined, and linguistically supportive education possible.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Optimizing the Instructional Vector**

The criticality of classroom management in relation to student achievement has been extensively documented. Doyle (1986) established a foundational link between management and instructional strength, arguing that effective management depends on the "strength and durability of the primary program" (p. 393). In the contemporary Saudi context, this "vector of action" is directly tied to the HCDP's objective of fostering foundational literacy. When students are engaged in a predictable and consistent environment (Wong & Wong, 2005), achievement increases while "lost time" is minimized (Crocker & Brooker, 1986).

### **Management as a Specialized Skill Gap**

Despite its importance, classroom management remains a significant area of "trepidation" for educators (Putman, 2009). While general pedagogical research is abundant, there is a notable scarcity of studies focusing specifically on the Foreign Language Teacher within the Middle Eastern context. As Wright (2005) notes, classroom management is often "a neglected topic in debates on language education," despite being the central element of a teacher's professional experience. Recent Saudi-based research (e.g., Al-Zahrani, 2024) suggests that this training gap is particularly acute for international faculty navigating the unique socio-cultural dynamics of Saudi primary schools.

### **Translanguaging and the "Control Mechanism"**

The traditional "English-only" immersion model is increasingly being challenged by the concept of Strategic Translanguaging. While early studies by Wilkerson (2008) viewed L1 use primarily through the lens of time management, more recent scholarship recognizes it as a sophisticated control mechanism.

Kim and Elder (2008) found that code-switching is often "necessary to keep the class on task," a finding echoed in the Saudi context by Almusharraf (2022), who posits that L1 integration reduces the "affective filter" and prevents behavioural escalation. Furthermore, studies by Tien (2009) and Bateman (2008) demonstrate that while the "general trend" in ELT methodology is to limit L1 to increase target language exposure, teachers' fear of losing control remains the primary driver for L1 use.

### **Strategic Alignment: Balancing Linguistic Exposure with Discipline**

For the Kingdom to achieve its Vision 2030 goal of a globally competitive workforce, the education system must move beyond the binary "L1 vs. L2" debate. This research suggests that systematic L1 scaffolding is not a sign of linguistic weakness, but a professional competency that ensures an "orderly, businesslike" classroom (Crocker & Brooker, 1986). By redefining the use of Arabic as a strategic management tool, we can standardize teacher training to ensure that instructional time is not lost to disciplinary friction, thereby maximizing the Return on Investment (ROI) in national primary education.

#### **Research Questions and Objectives**

To address the core challenges identified in the Saudi primary sector, this research is guided by a central research question: *Is the use of the students' mother tongue advantageous vis-à-vis classroom management in a TEFL classroom in a primary school in Jeddah?*

#### **METHODOLOGY**

##### **A Strategic Exploratory Framework**

This study is designed as a first-stage exploratory analysis aimed at identifying actionable trends within the Saudi ELT sector. By adopting a qualitative approach, the research seeks to uncover deep-seated pedagogical challenges that can be addressed in future, large-scale Vision 2030 educational initiatives.

The primary research tool utilized was the semi-structured interview, which provided the necessary flexibility to pursue detailed responses while maintaining a consistent thematic focus (Gill et al., 2008). This approach allowed for an "interactive process of refinement" (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992), ensuring that insights from initial participants could be cross-referenced with subsequent interviews to build a robust narrative of classroom management in Jeddah.

While participant observation was considered, it was ultimately bypassed to ensure data integrity and ethical compliance. As Wardhaugh (2006) notes, the presence of an observer can confound results, particularly in a primary school setting where a new presence often alters student behaviour. Furthermore, while video recording was an option, I prioritized the cultural and ethical comfort of the participants. In alignment with Saudi social norms and professional privacy, I opted for audio recording supplemented by detailed observational notes on non-verbal cues (King & Horrocks, 2010), thereby ensuring an accurate transcription without compromising participant trust.

Rather than utilizing random sampling, which Marshall (1996) suggests is less effective for understanding complex human behaviors, this study employed purposive sampling. Four "information-rich" educators, two native English speakers and two native Arabic speakers, were selected from a private school in Jeddah. The participants were chosen based on their longevity and experience within the Saudi primary system. By interviewing these seasoned professionals individually, I mitigated the risk of "group dynamics or power hierarchies" (Robson, p.241) affecting the honesty of the responses. This was particularly important given the sensitivity of discussing classroom "embarrassment" or management failures. To ensure the

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clarity and cross-cultural validity of the research, the interview guide was vetted by independent native and non-native English staff. This triangulation of perspectives ensured that the questions were linguistically accessible and culturally appropriate for the Jeddah educational context.

### **Ethical Considerations: Cultural Sensitivity and Data Integrity**

In accordance with global standards for social research, this study was conducted with a rigorous adherence to the four primary ethical pillars: the prevention of harm, informed consent, the protection of privacy, and the avoidance of deception (Diener & Crandall, 1978). To ensure no harm, professional or personal, befell the participants, a strict confidentiality protocol was implemented. In a competitive educational landscape like Jeddah's, protecting the reputation of both the educators and the institution is paramount. While Bryman (2012) notes that pseudonyms do not entirely eliminate the risk of identification, every possible measure was taken to mask the identities of the participants and the school. This ensures that the findings remain focused on systemic pedagogical trends rather than individual performance, fostering a safe environment for honest professional reflection.

Guided by the principle that participants must have the right to refuse cooperation (Bryman, 2012), I rejected the use of covert observation. Instead, a process of total transparency was adopted. Each participant was provided with a comprehensive briefing on the nature and national significance of the research, specifically its potential to inform Vision 2030 educational benchmarks. This allowed the educators to make a fully informed decision to contribute their expertise to the study.

The right to privacy is a deeply held value within Saudi society, and any transgression in the name of research is unacceptable (Bryman, 2012). This was a primary factor in the decision to forgo the use of recording devices in the classroom. Furthermore, respecting the cultural preference for private discourse, interviews were conducted in settings chosen by the participants themselves. By facilitating these discussions in a space where the educators felt secure and respected, the study gained access to higher-quality, more authentic data while maintaining the highest level of cross-cultural ethical compliance.

## **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

### **The "Instructional Gap" in Saudi ELT**

The data gathered through thematic analysis (Figures 1 & 2) reveals a significant correlation between linguistic scaffolding and classroom management efficacy. The transition from open to axial coding identified three core themes that impact the Human Capability Development Program's (HCDP) goals for foundational education.

Figure 1: Thematic map for Ali & Khalid

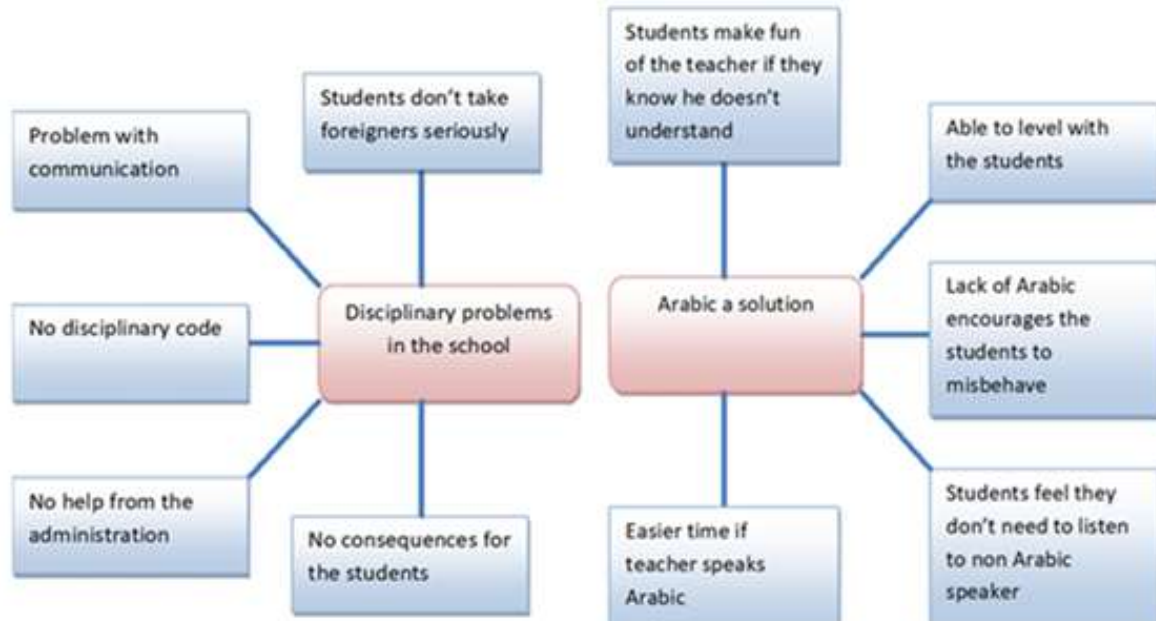
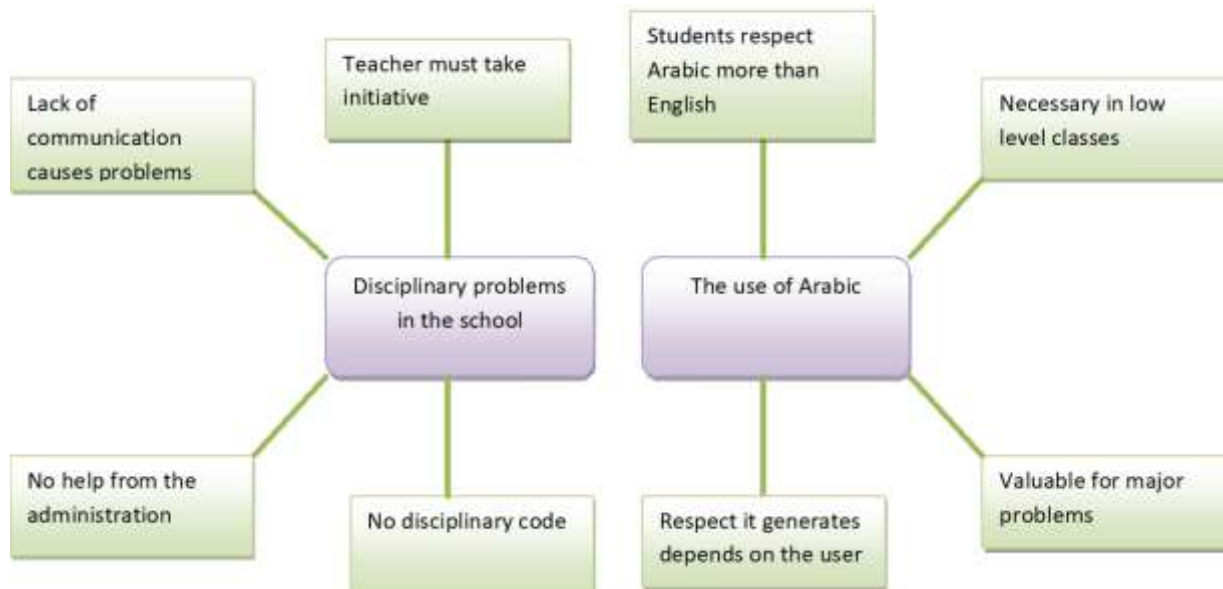


Figure 2: Thematic map for Ahmad & Faisal



### The Administrative Vacuum: A Call for Standardized Codes

A primary finding across all participants was the perceived lack of a unified disciplinary code. This lack of institutional structure created a "vacuum" where educators felt compelled to improvise individual management strategies, leading to inconsistency across the English

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development UK department. Ali’s observation that misbehaving students return with "candy and rewards" highlights a misalignment between faculty and administration.

| Partial Transcription of interview with Ali (native English language teacher) |   |
|---|---|
| Interviewer   | So, if you find—If you see a student misbehaving in the class, what’s your first course of action?  |
| Ali   | Ask the kid to sit and behave himself.  |
| Interviewer   | Aha   |
| Ali   | And that’s about it, you can’t do anything else. If he refuses, then he refuses. You can’t kick him out of the classroom. There’s no one to send him to. And if there is a student counsellor to send him to, he comes back with candy, and rewards. (Laughter) |
| Interviewer   | (Laughter) Yeh.   |
| Ali   | So, there’s not really a set discipline code for kids in my school.   |

### The "Native Speaker Paradox": Communication as a Barrier

The interviews with native English speakers (Ali and Khalid) reveal a "Communication Obstacle" that directly impacts student behaviour.

- **Behavioural Escalation:** Ali noted that the lack of Arabic "encourages misbehaviour," as students utilize the language gap to undermine authority. Ali stated that he believes he “would have a much better time controlling his class if he were fluent in Arabic.” Moreover, he believes that because he is not an Arabic speaker “it encourages them (his students) to misbehave.” The students “laugh and poke fun at the teacher because...they can say things that (Ali is) not able to understand.” Ali said, ““I find communication to be an obstacle, for me, who is a non-Arabic speaker, to discipline my kids.”
- **Instructional Latency:** Khalid’s testimony is perhaps the most critical for national policy: he reported losing ten minutes per class to establish order.

Strategic Insight: For a standard 45-minute period, a 10-minute loss equates to a 22% reduction in instructional efficiency. Scaled across a school year, this represents a massive deficit in the Kingdom's "Human Capital" development.

| Partial Transcription of interview with Khalid (native English language teacher) |  |
|--|--|
| Interviewer  | Do you believe that communication is an obstacle to discipline in your classroom?  |
| Khalid   | Yes. Definitely. I do feel that it is a barrier to discipline in the class. I’ve seen many times when an Arabic teacher or a non-native English teacher who can speak Arabic gives instructions. He’s able to say a command in Arabic and the student complies straight away. Whereas, there have been times when I’m in the class and I give an instruction and I have to repeat something five or ten times to the students and it’s not complied with whereas another teacher may just walk into the class, and they’re talking the students and the teacher will just say-tell them to be quiet in Arabic and they understand it, and they comply straight away. |

### **The L1 Advantage: Scaffolding for Compliance**

A primary finding across all participants was the consensus that Arabic proficiency acts as a significant catalyst for effective classroom management. Ahmad, a native Arabic-speaking educator, noted that while L1 use varies based on student proficiency, it remains a critical tool for resolving "major issues," observing that "they listen to you in Arabic more." In foundational levels, he argued that teaching exclusively in English can lead to a total breakdown in communication, essentially rendering the instructor as "speaking to himself."

### **Cultural Authority and the "Saudi Identity" Factor**

Ahmad introduced a nuanced sociolinguistic dimension regarding student respect, noting that it is often influenced by the teacher's perceived identity. He stated:

"They respect the Arabic speakers more than they do natives, even if the native speaker speaks some Arabic. And another level is, they respect a Saudi, or someone looks like a Saudi... more than they do, other Arabs."

This observation suggests that the advantage of L1 integration is intertwined with cultural authority. It presents an opportunity for future research to explore whether this management advantage is exclusive to native Arabic speakers or if it is specifically heightened for Saudi nationals.

### **The Native Speaker's Perspective on Linguistic Barriers**

Ali, a native English speaker, explicitly linked his lack of Arabic fluency to a decrease in classroom control. He admitted:

"I would have a much better time controlling my class if I were fluent in Arabic, or if I were a native Arabic speaker."

He further noted that students may exploit the language gap, observing that "they feel like they don't have to listen to me because everything I say to them is funny and they don't take it serious."

### **Instructional Time and Energy Expenditure**

Khalid highlighted the operational cost of this linguistic barrier, noting that the inability to use Arabic results in significant "instructional latency." He noted that while an Arabic-speaking teacher can achieve compliance "within seconds," his own process is far more taxing:

"By the time the class is ready, ten minutes of the class has already gone, so that affects students' learning, their learning time..umm...you know...all these things"

### **L1 as a Descriptive Tool for Behavioural Correction**

Faisal emphasized that Arabic is the most effective medium for addressing complex behavioural issues in lower-level classes. He shared a compelling comparison with a British colleague who required his assistance to maintain order:

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"Arabic helps me a lot to tell my students about a behavioural problem... I have a friend who is from Britain. Sometimes he uses me just to come to his class and tell them- to say the rules and procedures in erm..Arabic for the students to behave well inside the classroom."

However, Faisal also raised a critical pedagogical trade-off: while Arabic facilitates discipline, it can inadvertently reduce the "target language exposure" students need for acquisition, as they naturally prefer to converse in their mother tongue.

| Partial Transcription of interview with Faisal (non-native English language teacher) |  |
|--|--|
| Interviewer  | Do you believe that if you couldn't speak Arabic you would have a more difficult time controlling your class?  |
| Faisal   | I can say a big yes. Arabic helps me a lot to tell my students about a behavioural problem. I know-I think it's going to be a big problem really if I couldn't speak Arabic. I know-I have a friend who is from Britain. Sometimes he uses me just to come to his class and tell them- to say the rules and procedures in erm..Arabic for the students to behave well inside the classroom. So, you know, compared between me and him, yes, my British friend he has lots of trouble dealing with his students, so let's say..dealing with behavioural problems inside the classroom. And I think that dealing- to answer the problem in Arabic helped me a lot. |

| Partial Transcription of interview with Ahmad (non-native English language teacher) |  |
|---|--|
| Interviewer   | What effect do you think it has on the students, you know, the reality that you speak the same mother tongue as them? What effect do you think that has on the students from the beginning?  |
| Ahmad   | Well it has some effect. You know, they respect the—they respect the Arabic speakers more than they do natives. Even if the native speakers speak some Arabic. And another level is, they respect a Saudi, or someone looks like a Saudi.... more than they do, other Arabs. |

## CONCLUSION AND STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

This exploratory pilot study was designed to identify emerging themes within the Saudi primary ELT sector that warrant further strategic investigation. Based on the qualitative data gathered, there is a clear indication that the systematic use of Arabic is fundamentally advantageous for classroom management. This efficacy is rooted in two primary factors: the immediate clarity of instructional intent and the cultural authority it commands within the Saudi student demographic.

### Scalability and Future Research Directions

To validate these findings for national application, this research serves as a foundation for a more expansive study. To ensure the generalizability required for Vision 2030 policy-making, future inquiries should:

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- **Broaden the Demographic Scope:** Incorporate a larger sample size across diverse age groups and institutions, specifically including female practitioners to assess gender-specific management dynamics in the Kingdom.
- **Multilateral Stakeholder Analysis:** Integrate perspectives from school administrations and students to build a 360-degree view of the classroom environment.
- **Methodological Triangulation:** Utilize Data and Observer Triangulation (Denzin, 1988). By combining interviews with classroom observations and student questionnaires—conducted under strict ethical oversight—the validity of the "Bilingual Advantage" can be solidified for peer-reviewed publication.

### **Policy Alignment and Institutional Reform**

A critical revelation of this study is the disconnect between institutional policy and classroom reality. While current school mandates often prohibit L1 use, these policies are frequently bypassed by faculty to maintain order.

This research suggests a strategic rethinking of the "English-only" immersion model in the Saudi primary context. While the recruitment of native English speakers remains a priority for phonological excellence, the Kingdom's educational goals (HCDP) are best served by educators who can navigate the linguistic and cultural complexities of the local environment.

### **The "Special Talent" Contribution**

Ultimately, if further research yields consistent results, it will necessitate a shift in recruitment and training paradigms. By identifying that classroom management is a prerequisite for linguistic achievement, this study provides a blueprint for:

### **Hybrid Staffing Models: Optimizing Instructional ROI**

There are several different possible models to examine to optimize instructional efficacy, suggesting that the traditional native speaker-led classroom may need revising to better serve modern institutional needs. These alternatives include a Specialist-Led Rotation model that separates oral proficiency coaching from foundational linguistic instruction, Digitally Augmented Instruction which leverages high-fidelity technology for phonological modelling to scale resources, and a Competency-Based Upscaling approach focused on developing "universal educators" through intensive cross-training in both pedagogy and local classroom management. By pivoting toward these diverse frameworks, institutions can move away from high-cost, single-threaded staffing and instead maximize their return on investment through a more strategic application of human and technological capital.

### **Governance Reform: Unified Disciplinary Standardization**

My research highlights a critical need for standardizing disciplinary codes across the Kingdom's private sector.

- **The Goal:** To eliminate the "administrative isolation" felt by educators by establishing a transparent, consistent, and institutionally backed behavioural code.

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- The Impact: Creating a stable educational environment that supports the Vision 2030 objective of improving the Kingdom's ranking in international education benchmarks (PISA/PIRLS).

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