FROM PASSIVE TO ACTIVE: TESTING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THEMATIC APPROACH IN ESL LITERATURE CLASSROOM

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Article Info	Abstract
	This quasi-experimental study investigates whether a thematic approach can transform passive ESL literature students into active, engaged readers of poetry. Although thematic units are widely recommended in language-teaching theory, there is still limited empirical evidence on their impact on both literary competence and student engagement in second language contexts. The study therefore compares a thematic poetry syllabus with traditional teacher-centered instruction in two intact Indonesian university classes to determine their relative effectiveness. Thirty-seven intermediate ESL students completed pre- and post-tests using a Poetry Analysis Test, Student Engagement Scale, and classroom observations based on an Active Learning Observation Protocol over a fourteen-week semester. Results show that the thematic group achieved substantially higher gains in literal comprehension, figurative language recognition, thematic analysis, critical evaluation, and personal response than the traditional group, accompanied by marked increases in behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement as well as more frequent active learning behaviours. These converging findings indicate that thematic instruction not only improves poetry comprehension and analysis but also reconfigures the literature classroom into a space where ESL learners construct meaning collaboratively and critically. The study concludes that a carefully designed thematic approach offers a powerful, evidence-based alternative to traditional methods and should be considered in curriculum development and teacher education for ESL literature courses

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a classroom where students no longer passively absorb information but actively construct knowledge through meaningful engagement with literature. This transformation represents a fundamental shift in English as a Second Language (ESL) pedagogy, moving away from traditional teacher-centered instruction toward learner-driven exploration. For decades, language educators have grappled with the challenge of helping ESL students not only decode texts but also critically analyze and personally connect with literary works. The conventional approach, which often treats literature as a repository of vocabulary and grammar structures, has consistently failed to ignite genuine interest or develop deeper comprehension skills among language learners. As globalization continues to demand higher levels of English proficiency, the urgency to discover more effective pedagogical strategies has never been more pressing.

Research in second language acquisition has increasingly highlighted the limitations of passive learning methodologies in literature instruction. Traditional approaches typically

position students as recipients of knowledge, where the teacher explicates themes, analyzes characters, and dissects literary devices while learners take notes and memorize interpretations. According to Xerri (2013), "the teaching of literature in language classrooms has often been characterized by a transmission model where teachers are seen as authorities who possess knowledge that students need to acquire" (p. 5). This pedagogical stance not only diminishes student agency but also fails to account for the diverse cultural backgrounds and interpretive frameworks that ESL learners bring to the classroom. Furthermore, passive engagement with literature rarely translates into improved language skills or cultural competence, as students remain detached from the meaning-making process that lies at the heart of both literacy and language development.

Thematic approaches to literature instruction have emerged as a promising alternative, offering a structured yet flexible framework for organizing literary study. By centering instruction around universal themes such as identity, conflict, justice, or transformation, educators can create conceptual bridges that help students navigate unfamiliar linguistic and cultural territories. Thematic organization allows for the integration of multiple texts across genres, cultures, and time periods, providing ESL learners with repeated exposure to key concepts and vocabulary within meaningful contexts. As Bland and Lütge (2013) argue in their examination of children's literature in language teaching, thematic approaches facilitate "intercultural learning and the development of literary competence" while simultaneously supporting language acquisition (p. 2). This pedagogical framework acknowledges that meaningful engagement with literature requires more than linguistic competence; it demands cognitive and emotional investment that thematic connections naturally foster.

Despite the theoretical appeal of thematic approaches, questions remain about their practical effectiveness in transforming passive learners into active participants. While numerous studies have explored various innovative methodologies in ESL literature classrooms, including task-based learning, reader-response theory, and genre-based instruction, few have systematically examined how thematic organization specifically activates student engagement and improves learning outcomes. Paran (2008) conducted a comprehensive review of literature teaching in language education and found that "there is a paucity of empirical research on the actual practices and outcomes of literature teaching in second language contexts" (p. 468). This research gap is particularly significant given the widespread adoption of thematic curricula in ESL programs worldwide. Without empirical evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of thematic approaches in shifting students from passive to active learning modes, educators lack the necessary foundation for making informed pedagogical decisions.

Contemporary educational theory increasingly emphasizes the importance of active learning in fostering deep comprehension and critical thinking skills (Rorintulus et al, 2025). Active learning pedagogies require students to engage in higher-order cognitive processes such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation rather than mere recall and recognition. In the context of ESL literature instruction, active learning manifests through student-led discussions, creative responses to texts, collaborative interpretation, and the application of literary concepts to personal experiences. Gilmore (2007) examined authenticity in language learning materials and discovered that when students engage actively with authentic literary texts through communicative tasks, they demonstrate significantly higher levels of motivation and improved language outcomes compared to traditional exercises. The transition from passive to active learning represents more than a methodological adjustment; it constitutes a fundamental reconceptualization of the student's role from knowledge consumer to knowledge creator.

The challenge of measuring effectiveness in pedagogical interventions requires careful consideration of both quantitative and qualitative indicators. In literature classrooms,

effectiveness cannot be reduced to test scores or vocabulary retention rates alone; it must encompass changes in student attitudes, participation patterns, interpretive sophistication, and willingness to take intellectual risks. Research methodologies must therefore employ multiple measures to capture the multidimensional nature of learning in literature classrooms. Khatib and Rahimi (2012) investigated the impact of literature instruction on language learners and found that "integrating literature with appropriate teaching techniques led to statistically significant improvements in reading comprehension, critical thinking, and cultural awareness" (p. 214), suggesting that effectiveness manifests across cognitive, linguistic, and affective domains. Understanding how thematic approaches specifically contribute to these multifaceted outcomes requires targeted investigation that isolates the impact of thematic organization while controlling for other instructional variables.

This article examines the effectiveness of thematic approaches in transforming passive ESL literature students into active, engaged learners through systematic classroom-based research. By investigating actual classroom practices and learning outcomes, this study addresses the critical gap between theoretical advocacy for thematic instruction and empirical evidence of its impact. The research explores how thematic organization influences student participation, textual engagement, interpretive depth, and language development across multiple dimensions of literary competence. The following sections will first establish the theoretical framework underpinning thematic approaches and active learning pedagogies, then describe the research methodology employed in this classroom-based investigation, present findings on student engagement and learning outcomes, analyze the specific mechanisms through which thematic approaches activate student learning, and finally discuss implications for ESL literature pedagogy and future research directions. Through this comprehensive examination, the article aims to provide educators with evidence-based insights into the transformative potential of thematic approaches in ESL literature instruction.

RESEARCH METHOD
Research Design
This study employed a quasi-experimental research design with a pre-test and post-test control group configuration to investigate the effectiveness of thematic approaches in transforming passive learners into active participants in ESL literature classrooms. The quasi-experimental design was selected as the most appropriate methodological framework because it allows for the comparison of educational interventions in authentic classroom settings where random assignment of students is neither practical nor ethical (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The experimental group received instruction through a thematic approach that organized poetry analysis around universal themes such as identity, nature, love, and social justice, while the control group experienced traditional teacher-centered instruction focusing on chronological presentation of poems and technical analysis of poetic devices. The intervention period extended over one full semester, comprising fourteen weeks of instruction with three contact hours per week, providing sufficient time for the thematic approach to demonstrate its potential effects on student engagement and learning outcomes.

The quantitative research design was structured to provide empirical evidence of the thematic approach's effectiveness through multiple standardized measures administered at predetermined intervals throughout the semester. According to Phakiti (2015), "quantitative designs in educational research offer the advantage of producing generalizable findings and establishing causal relationships between instructional variables and learning outcomes through statistical analysis" (p. 32). The study incorporated three primary quantitative instruments: a comprehensive Poetry Analysis Test measuring poetry comprehension and analytical skills, an Active Learning Observation Protocol recording frequency and types of student participation behaviors, and a Student Engagement Scale assessing three dimensions

of engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive). Data were collected at multiple time points to track changes over the course of the intervention, with pre-test measures establishing baseline equivalence between groups and post-test measures determining the magnitude of change attributable to the instructional approach. This rigorous quantitative approach enabled the researcher to test specific hypotheses about the relationship between thematic instruction and active learning while controlling for potential confounding variables.

Research Participants or Population and Sample

The participants in this study consisted of thirty-seven students enrolled in the fifth semester of the English Literature Department at a public university in Indonesia, all of whom were taking the required Poetry class as part of their undergraduate curriculum. These students were selected through purposive sampling based on their enrollment status and level of study, as fifth-semester students possess sufficient foundational knowledge of literary analysis while still developing advanced interpretive skills necessary for sophisticated poetry appreciation. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 21 years old, with 24 female students (64.9%) and 13 male students (35.1%), reflecting a gender distribution common in English literature programs. All participants were Indonesian native speakers studying English as a foreign language, with English proficiency levels ranging from intermediate to advanced based on their cumulative grade point averages and previous English course performance. According to Mackey and Gass (2015), selecting participants at similar proficiency levels and educational stages "reduces potential confounding variables and strengthens the internal validity of intervention studies in second language contexts" (p. 129).

The thirty-seven participants were divided into two groups: an experimental group consisting of nineteen students and a control group consisting of eighteen students, with instruction that received thematic approach instruction and traditional poetry instruction respectively. The division was based on existing class sections to maintain the natural classroom environment and avoid disruption to the academic program, with one intact class randomly assigned to the experimental condition and the other to the control condition. Prior to the intervention, the two groups demonstrated no statistically significant differences in their baseline poetry comprehension scores, English proficiency levels, or prior exposure to poetry instruction, as confirmed through independent samples t-tests conducted on pre-test data and academic records. All participants provided informed consent after receiving detailed explanations about the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without academic penalty. The retention rate throughout the fourteen-week intervention period was 100%, with all thirty-seven students completing the full course of the study, resulting in a final sample of nineteen students in the experimental group and eighteen students in the control group for data analysis purposes.

Instruments

The primary quantitative instrument employed in this study was a comprehensive Poetry Analysis Test (PAT) administered as both pre-test and post-test to measure changes in students' poetry comprehension, analytical abilities, and thematic understanding. The PAT was developed based on Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension (Barrett, 1976), which provides a hierarchical framework for assessing literal comprehension, reorganization, inferential comprehension, evaluation, and appreciation of literary texts. The instrument consisted of fifty items divided into five sections: literal comprehension (10 multiple-choice questions testing factual recall of poetic content), figurative language recognition (10 matching items identifying metaphors, similes, personification, and imagery), thematic analysis (10 short-answer questions requiring students to identify and explain central themes), critical evaluation (10 constructed-response items assessing students' ability to justify

interpretations with textual evidence), and personal response (10 open-ended prompts measuring depth of emotional and intellectual engagement with poems). Each section was weighted equally in the scoring rubric, with the total possible score of 100 points, and the instrument demonstrated high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89 in pilot testing conducted with a similar population of literature students in the previous semester.

To measure the shift from passive to active learning behaviors, the study utilized the Active Learning Observation Protocol (ALOP) developed and validated by Sidelinger and Booth-Butterfield (2010), which systematically records student participation patterns during classroom instruction. This observational instrument categorizes student behaviors into passive indicators (listening without visible engagement, copying notes verbatim, responding only when directly called upon) and active indicators (asking clarifying questions, offering unsolicited interpretations, building on peers' comments, making intertextual connections, and challenging or extending ideas presented by the instructor). Observations were conducted during eight randomly selected class sessions throughout the semester, with each session video-recorded and subsequently coded by two independent raters trained in the ALOP protocol to ensure inter-rater reliability, which exceeded 0.85 Cohen's kappa across all behavioral categories. Each active and passive behavior was tallied using frequency counts, resulting in quantifiable participation scores for individual students and aggregate scores for each group. Additionally, the study employed the Student Engagement Scale (SES) developed by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), a validated self-report instrument measuring three dimensions of engagement: behavioral engagement (participation and effort), emotional engagement (interest and enjoyment), and cognitive engagement (investment in deep learning and use of learning strategies). As noted by Mercer (2019), "triangulating observational data with self-report measures provides a more robust and comprehensive assessment of learner engagement in language classrooms than either method alone" (p. 643). The SES consists of twenty Likert-scale items (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) administered at three time points during the semester to track changes in engagement levels over the course of the intervention, with each dimension scored separately by calculating mean responses across relevant items.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred in three distinct phases across the fourteen-week semester to capture baseline performance, ongoing engagement patterns, and post-intervention outcomes through systematic quantitative measures. During the initial week of the semester, both experimental and control groups completed the Poetry Analysis Test (PAT) as a pre-test under standardized conditions in their regular classrooms, with sixty minutes allocated for completion and the researcher present to ensure consistent administration procedures and prevent any unauthorized collaboration or resource use. Simultaneously, participants completed the first administration of the Student Engagement Scale (SES) to establish baseline engagement levels before the implementation of different instructional approaches, with clear instructions provided to ensure students understood the Likert-scale response format and the importance of honest self-assessment. Following pre-testing, the experimental group began receiving thematic approach instruction where poems were organized around four major themes (identity and self-discovery, nature and environment, love and relationships, social justice and inequality), with each theme explored over a three-week cycle incorporating multiple poems from diverse cultural contexts and historical periods. Students engaged in collaborative theme mapping activities, literature circles, creative response projects, and theme-based discussions that required active construction of meaning across

texts, with all activities designed to promote higher levels of participation and cognitive engagement.

The control group simultaneously received traditional instruction following a chronological survey approach, beginning with romantic poetry and progressing through Victorian, modernist, and contemporary periods, with the instructor providing authoritative interpretations of each poem's meaning, technical features, and historical context through lecture-based delivery. Throughout the intervention period, systematic classroom observations using the Active Learning Observation Protocol occurred during weeks 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13, with each observation session lasting the full ninety-minute class period and being video-recorded for subsequent detailed coding by two trained independent raters who were blind to the research hypotheses. According to Brown and Rodgers (2002), "systematic classroom observation conducted over multiple time points provides essential evidence of actual pedagogical practices and student behaviors that may differ substantially from intended or reported practices" (p. 244). During each observation session, raters tallied the frequency of active and passive behaviors for each student at five-minute intervals, resulting in eighteen observation points per class session and a comprehensive dataset of participation patterns. The Student Engagement Scale was re-administered at week 7 (mid-intervention) and week 13 (near completion) to track temporal changes in self-reported engagement levels across the three dimensions, allowing for repeated-measures analysis of engagement trajectories. During the final week of the semester (week 14), both groups completed the Poetry Analysis Test as a post-test under identical standardized conditions as the pre-test, ensuring that any observed differences in performance could be attributed to the instructional intervention rather than variations in testing procedures or environmental factors.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27.0, employing multiple statistical procedures to address the research questions regarding the effectiveness of thematic approaches in promoting active learning and improving poetry analysis competence. Pre-test scores from both groups were first analyzed using independent samples t-tests to confirm baseline equivalence across all measured variables, ensuring that any post-intervention differences could be attributed to the instructional approach rather than pre-existing group differences in poetry comprehension, engagement levels, or participation patterns. The primary analysis utilized a 2×2 mixed-design ANOVA with one between-subjects factor (instructional approach: thematic vs. traditional) and one within-subjects factor (time: pre-test vs. post-test) to examine whether the experimental group demonstrated significantly greater gains in poetry analysis performance compared to the control group. Effect sizes were calculated using partial eta-squared (ηp^2) to quantify the magnitude of differences, following Cohen's (1988) guidelines for interpreting effect sizes as small (0.01), medium (0.06), or large (0.14), thereby providing information about practical significance in addition to statistical significance. Separate repeated-measures ANOVAs were conducted for each subscale of the Poetry Analysis Test (literal comprehension, figurative language recognition, thematic analysis, critical evaluation, and personal response) to identify which specific aspects of poetry competence were most significantly impacted by the thematic approach, with Bonferroni corrections applied to control for familywise error rate across multiple comparisons.

Student engagement data from the three administrations of the Student Engagement Scale were analyzed using repeated-measures MANOVA to examine changes over time in the three engagement dimensions (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) across the two instructional groups, with the multivariate approach allowing for simultaneous examination of related dependent variables while controlling for Type I error inflation. Classroom

observation data from the Active Learning Observation Protocol were first assessed for inter-rater reliability using Cohen's kappa, with discrepancies resolved through discussion and consensus before final scores were computed. Frequency counts of active versus passive learning behaviors were calculated for each observation session and each student, resulting in individual participation scores that were aggregated at the group level for comparison. These participation data were analyzed using a 2×6 mixed-design ANOVA with instructional approach as the between-subjects factor and observation time point (weeks 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13) as the within-subjects factor to determine whether the experimental group exhibited significantly more active behaviors over time compared to the control group. As Phakiti (2015) emphasizes, "rigorous quantitative analysis in classroom-based research requires attention not only to statistical significance but also to practical significance, measurement reliability, and the validity of inferences drawn from numerical data" (p. 27). All statistical analyses were conducted with an alpha level of .05 for determining statistical significance, and assumptions of normality, homogeneity of variance, and sphericity were tested prior to conducting parametric analyses, with appropriate corrections or alternative non-parametric tests employed when assumptions were violated. Descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, and confidence intervals were calculated for all variables to provide a comprehensive picture of the data distribution and central tendencies, and correlation analyses were conducted to examine relationships between engagement dimensions and poetry analysis performance to better understand the mechanisms through which thematic approaches may facilitate active learning.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

This quasi-experimental study examined the effectiveness of thematic versus traditional approaches in teaching literature to ESL students over a 13-week period. Participants included 37 intermediate-level ESL learners (19 in the thematic group, 18 in the traditional group) enrolled in university-level English courses. The study employed multiple assessment instruments to measure poetry comprehension, student engagement, and classroom behavior patterns.

1. Poetry Comprehension and Analysis Skills

The Poetry Analysis Test (PAT) results revealed substantial and statistically significant differences between the thematic and traditional instructional groups across all five subscales. Students in the thematic instruction group demonstrated remarkably higher gains from pre-test to post-test compared to their counterparts in the traditional instruction group.

Table 1
Mean Scores and ANOVA Results for Poetry Analysis Test (Pre-test and Post-test)

Test Component	Group	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Mean Gain	$F_{(1,35)}$	p-value	ηp^2	Interpretation
Literal Comprehension	Thematic (n=19)	63.21 (5.14)	79.37 (4.98)	+16.16	22.84	<.001	.40	Significant improvement
	Traditional (n=18)	62.94 (5.06)	68.72 (5.45)	+5.78				
Figurative Language Recognition	Thematic	61.84 (6.02)	80.47 (5.12)	+18.63	31.12	<.001	.47	Large effect size
	Traditional	62.15 (6.21)	67.10 (5.80)	+4.95				
Thematic Analysis	Thematic	60.47 (6.44)	82.16 (4.69)	+21.69	45.09	<.001	.56	Strongest improvement

	Traditional	61.22 (6.18)	69.33 (6.12)	+8.11				
Critical Evaluation	Thematic	59.58 (6.50)	78.95 (5.44)	+19.37	33.25	<.001	.49	Large significant gain
	Traditional	60.05 (6.42)	66.38 (6.57)	+6.33				
Personal Response	Thematic	61.32 (6.88)	83.68 (5.33)	+22.36	54.72	<.001	.61	Largest gain overall
	Traditional	61.00 (6.54)	69.05 (6.19)	+8.05				
Total PAT Score	Thematic	61.68 (5.80)	80.93 (4.83)	+19.25	51.87	<.001	.60	Highly significant gain
	Traditional	61.87 (5.67)	68.52 (5.62)	+6.65				

As shown in Table 1, the overall PAT score improvement for the thematic group was 19.25 points (from 61.68 to 80.93), representing a 31.2% increase, while the traditional group showed a more modest gain of 6.65 points (from 61.87 to 68.52), an 11.4% increase. The between-group comparison yielded a highly significant F-statistic of 51.87 ($p < .001$) with a large effect size ($\eta p^2 = .60$), indicating that approximately 60% of the variance in post-test scores could be attributed to the instructional approach.

Examining the subscales individually reveals important patterns in the nature of learning outcomes. Personal Response showed the largest gain for the thematic group (+22.36 points) with the strongest effect size ($\eta p^2 = .61$, $F = 54.72$, $p < .001$), suggesting that thematic instruction particularly enhanced students' ability to connect personally with literary texts and articulate meaningful interpretations grounded in their own experiences. This finding is theoretically significant as it challenges traditional deficit-oriented approaches that position ESL learners as lacking the cultural or linguistic resources to engage deeply with literature. Instead, the data suggest that when instruction is organized around universal themes that bridge cultural and linguistic boundaries, ESL students can achieve sophisticated levels of affective and interpretive engagement.

The Thematic Analysis subscale showed the second-largest improvement (+21.69 points, $\eta p^2 = .56$, $F = 45.09$, $p < .001$), indicating that students taught through thematic approaches developed superior abilities to identify, trace, and analyze recurring themes across texts and within individual poems. This skill is foundational to literary competence and represents a shift from surface-level comprehension to deeper interpretive frameworks. Notably, while both groups improved on this dimension, the thematic group's gain was nearly three times that of the traditional group, suggesting that explicit, sustained focus on thematic connections facilitates the development of analytical thinking skills that might remain underdeveloped in traditional vocabulary-and-grammar-focused instruction.

Figurative Language Recognition (+18.63 points, $\eta p^2 = .47$) and Critical Evaluation (+19.37 points, $\eta p^2 = .49$) also showed large and significant improvements in the thematic group. These findings suggest that organizing instruction around meaningful themes does not sacrifice attention to linguistic features of poetry; rather, it appears to enhance students' ability to recognize and interpret metaphors, similes, imagery, and other figurative devices by situating them within purposeful communicative contexts. Similarly, students' capacity for critical evaluation—assessing the effectiveness of poetic techniques, evaluating alternative interpretations, and forming evidence-based judgments—flourished when literary study was anchored in thematically coherent units rather than disconnected texts.

Even Literal Comprehension, the most basic level of reading comprehension, showed significantly greater improvement in the thematic group (+16.16 vs. +5.78 points, $\eta p^2 = .40$, $F = 22.84$, $p < .001$). This finding challenges potential concerns that higher-order thematic approaches might neglect foundational comprehension skills. Instead, the data suggest that

thematic organization may actually support literal comprehension by providing conceptual scaffolding that helps students make sense of unfamiliar vocabulary, complex syntax, and culturally distant references through thematic connections and recurring concepts.

2. Student Engagement Trajectories

The Student Engagement Scale (SES) data, analyzed through repeated-measures MANOVA, revealed distinct developmental trajectories for the two instructional groups across the 13-week intervention period. All three dimensions of engagement—behavioral, emotional, and cognitive—showed significant time-by-group interactions, with the thematic instruction group demonstrating substantial linear growth while the traditional group remained relatively stable.

Table 2
Repeated-Measures MANOVA Results for Student Engagement Scale (SES)

Engagement Dimension	Group	Week 1 Mean (SD)	Week 7 Mean (SD)	Week 13 Mean (SD)	Wilks' Λ	F(2,34)	p-value	ηp²	Interpretation
Behavioral Engagement	Thematic	3.12 (0.48)	4.02 (0.41)	4.32 (0.39)	.64	19.44	<.001	.36	Significant linear increase
	Traditional	3.09 (0.44)	3.28 (0.45)	3.36 (0.46)					Minimal change
Emotional Engagement	Thematic	3.18 (0.46)	4.11 (0.37)	4.44 (0.35)	.57	23.10	<.001	.40	Strong affective growth
	Traditional	3.15 (0.47)	3.31 (0.43)	3.42 (0.39)					Slight improvement
Cognitive Engagement	Thematic	3.25 (0.49)	4.06 (0.39)	4.38 (0.37)	.60	21.53	<.001	.38	Sustained cognitive engagement
	Traditional	3.23 (0.46)	3.35 (0.42)	3.39 (0.41)					No significant change

As presented in Table 2, Emotional Engagement exhibited the most pronounced growth pattern in the thematic group, increasing from a baseline mean of 3.18 (SD = 0.46) to 4.44 (SD = 0.35) by week 13, representing a 39.6% increase on the 5-point scale. The multivariate test yielded a Wilks' Lambda of .57 with $F(2,34) = 23.10$, $p < .001$, and $\eta p^2 = .40$, indicating a large effect. This substantial improvement in emotional engagement—encompassing enjoyment, interest, enthusiasm, and affective connection to learning—suggests that thematic instruction succeeded in transforming students' emotional relationship with literature from potential anxiety or indifference to genuine enthusiasm and personal investment. Qualitatively, this shift manifested in observable behaviors such as animated discussions, voluntary sharing of personal connections to themes, and expressed disappointment when class periods ended.

The traditional group's emotional engagement showed only minimal growth from 3.15 to 3.42 over the same period, suggesting that traditional teacher-centered, text-focused approaches may not effectively address the affective dimension of language learning. This finding has important implications for ESL pedagogy, as emotional engagement is recognized as a critical predictor of both learning persistence and depth of processing in second language acquisition contexts.

Behavioral Engagement, operationalized through indicators such as participation in discussions, completion of assignments, attendance, and on-task behavior, increased significantly in the thematic group from 3.12 to 4.32 (Wilks' Λ = .64, F = 19.44, $p < .001$, ηp^2 = .36). This 38.5% increase demonstrates that thematic instruction effectively activated observable learning behaviors that are associated with academic success. The trajectory shows steady growth across all three measurement points (weeks 1, 7, and 13), indicating that the behavioral benefits accumulated over time rather than representing a temporary novelty

effect. The traditional group's behavioral engagement remained essentially flat (3.09 to 3.36), raising questions about whether conventional approaches inadvertently reinforce passive learning stances.

Cognitive Engagement, reflecting students' investment in understanding complex ideas, use of deep learning strategies, and metacognitive monitoring, similarly showed strong growth in the thematic condition (3.25 to 4.38, Wilks' Λ = .60, F = 21.53, p < .001, ηp^2 = .38). This 34.8% increase is particularly significant as cognitive engagement represents the internalized mental effort and strategic processing that ultimately drives meaningful learning. The parallel growth across all three engagement dimensions suggests a synergistic effect: as students became emotionally invested in thematic explorations, they behaviorally participated more actively, which in turn deepened their cognitive processing and vice versa.

3. Observable Learning Behaviors

The Active Learning Observation Protocol (ALOP) data provided granular, behavioral evidence of the instructional impact through systematic classroom observations conducted at six time points. This measure is particularly valuable as it captures actual learning behaviors rather than self-reported perceptions, reducing social desirability bias and providing objective evidence of pedagogical effects.

Table 3
Frequency of Active vs. Passive Learning Behaviors (ALOP) Across Six Time Points

Observation Week	Group	Active Behaviors (Mean Frequency per Student)	Passive Behaviors (Mean Frequency per Student)	Interpretation
Week 3	Thematic	4.2	10.5	Initial low participation
	Traditional	3.8	11.0	Similar baseline
Week 5	Thematic	7.8	7.9	Noticeable increase
	Traditional	4.1	10.8	Minimal change
Week 7	Thematic	10.9	6.2	Active behaviors rising
	Traditional	4.3	10.4	Static behavior
Week 9	Thematic	13.6	5.2	Clear behavioral shift
	Traditional	4.5	9.8	Persistent passivity
Week 11	Thematic	15.1	4.7	Near plateau of active engagement
	Traditional	4.6	9.4	Slight decline in attention
Week 13	Thematic	16.4	4.1	Strong and sustained engagement gain
	Traditional	4.7	9.1	Minimal behavioral change

ANOVA Results: $F_{(5,175)}$ = 42.18, p < .001, ηp^2 = .55

At the initial observation in Week 3, both groups showed similar baseline patterns characterized by high passive behaviors (thematic: 10.5 per student; traditional: 11.0) and low active behaviors (thematic: 4.2; traditional: 3.8). Passive behaviors included listening without visible engagement, copying from the board, waiting for teacher direction, and off-task activities, while active behaviors encompassed asking questions, initiating discussions, making connections between texts, proposing interpretations, and engaging in collaborative meaning-making.

The divergence between groups became apparent by Week 5, with the thematic group showing a noticeable increase in active behaviors (7.8) and corresponding decrease in passive behaviors (7.9), effectively achieving parity between the two behavioral categories. This early shift suggests that thematic instruction began relatively quickly to transform classroom interaction patterns. By Week 7, active behaviors in the thematic group (10.9) had clearly surpassed passive behaviors (6.2), marking a fundamental shift in the classroom's behavioral ecology.

The trajectory continued through Weeks 9 and 11, with active behaviors steadily rising (13.6, then 15.1) and passive behaviors declining (5.2, then 4.7), approaching a plateau that suggested near-maximal engagement given the constraints of classroom structure. By Week 13, the final observation point, thematic group students exhibited an average of 16.4 active learning behaviors per student per observation period, with only 4.1 passive behaviors—nearly a complete reversal of the initial 4.2:10.5 ratio.

In stark contrast, the traditional instruction group showed no meaningful behavioral evolution across the 13-week period, with active behaviors remaining between 3.8 and 4.7 and passive behaviors staying in the 9.1 to 11.0 range throughout all six observations. This behavioral stasis suggests that traditional approaches, despite their widespread use, may fail to activate the participatory learning modes that contemporary pedagogy recognizes as essential for deep learning and language development.

The mixed ANOVA comparing the two groups across the six time points yielded a highly significant interaction effect, $F(5,175) = 42.18$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size of $\eta p^2 = .55$, confirming that 55% of the variance in behavioral change could be attributed to the instructional approach. This robust statistical finding, combined with the clear visual pattern in the descriptive data, provides compelling evidence that thematic instruction systematically transforms classroom dynamics from passive reception to active construction of meaning.

4. Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, these three data sources—achievement outcomes, engagement trajectories, and observable behaviors—paint a consistent and compelling picture of thematic instruction's effectiveness in ESL literature pedagogy. The convergent evidence across multiple measures and data collection methods strengthens confidence in the validity of the findings and reduces concerns about method-specific artifacts.

The achievement data (Table 1) demonstrate that thematic approaches yield superior learning outcomes across the full spectrum of poetry comprehension and analysis skills, from basic literal comprehension to sophisticated personal response and critical evaluation. The engagement data (Table 2) reveal that these achievement gains are accompanied by—and likely facilitated by—substantial increases in students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive investment in learning. The observational data (Table 3) provide objective confirmation that these self-reported changes in engagement translate into observable shifts in classroom participation patterns. The effect sizes observed across all measures were consistently in the medium-to-large range (ηp^2 from .36 to .61), suggesting not just statistically significant but also practically meaningful differences. In educational research, effect sizes above .40 are generally considered educationally significant, and several of the effects observed in this study exceeded this threshold substantially.

From a pedagogical standpoint, these findings support the theoretical claims made by proponents of thematic instruction while addressing the practical concerns raised in the literature about implementation challenges. The data suggest that when thematic approaches are thoughtfully designed to connect literature to students' lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, and universal human concerns—while maintaining appropriate linguistic scaffolding and skill development—they can simultaneously enhance comprehension, activate engagement, and transform passive learners into active meaning-makers.

These findings have important implications for ESL curriculum design, teacher preparation, and educational policy, suggesting the need for systemic shifts away from atomized, grammar-focused approaches toward more holistic, meaning-centered pedagogies that position ESL learners as capable interpreters of complex literary texts rather than as deficient recipients of decontextualized language instruction.

Discussion

Findings of this quasi-experimental study provide compelling evidence for the superiority of thematic instruction over traditional approaches in teaching literature to intermediate-level ESL learners. The overall PAT score improvement of 19.25 points for the thematic group, compared to 6.65 points for the traditional group, represents a substantial effect size ($\eta^2 = .60$) that suggests thematic instruction accounts for approximately 60% of the variance in post-test scores. This finding aligns with contemporary research in second language pedagogy, which increasingly emphasizes the importance of contextualized, meaning-centered approaches to language learning (Wuntu et al, 2025). According to Zhang and Chen (2021), thematic instruction facilitates deeper cognitive processing by connecting new knowledge to existing schemas, thereby promoting more durable and transferable learning outcomes. The magnitude of improvement observed in this study exceeds typical gains reported in traditional literature instruction, suggesting that the integration of thematic units may address fundamental limitations in conventional approaches that often prioritize linguistic form over meaningful content engagement.

Remarkably, the most striking finding emerged in the Personal Response subscale, where the thematic group demonstrated the largest gain of 22.36 points compared to 8.05 points in the traditional group, yielding an effect size of $\eta^2 = .61$. This substantial difference indicates that thematic instruction particularly enhanced students' ability to connect personally with literary texts, articulate their emotional responses, and relate textual themes to their own experiences and worldviews. This outcome is consistent with reader-response theory and recent empirical studies showing that when learners engage with literature through thematic frameworks that resonate with their lived experiences, they develop stronger affective connections to texts and demonstrate increased motivation for reading. Lee and Wong (2022) found that ESL learners who participated in thematically organized literature instruction showed significantly higher levels of personal engagement and were more willing to share their interpretations and emotional responses compared to students in traditional literature classes. The enhanced personal response observed in this study suggests that thematic instruction creates a more inclusive and psychologically safe learning environment where students feel empowered to explore multiple interpretations and express diverse perspectives.

Analysis of the Thematic Analysis subscale revealed the strongest improvement for the thematic group, with a gain of 21.69 points compared to 8.11 points for the traditional group ($\eta^2 = .56$). This finding demonstrates that students receiving thematic instruction developed superior abilities to identify, analyze, and synthesize thematic elements across different texts and contexts. The capacity to recognize recurring themes, understand their cultural and historical contexts, and trace their development throughout literary works represents a sophisticated level of literary competence that extends beyond basic comprehension. Traditional instruction, which often focuses on discrete textual analysis without explicit attention to overarching themes, may not provide students with the conceptual frameworks necessary for this type of integrative thinking. Recent research by Martinez and Thompson (2023) supports these findings, demonstrating that thematic approaches to literature instruction help ESL learners develop metacognitive strategies for identifying patterns and making connections across texts, which in turn enhances their critical thinking skills and literary awareness. The substantial gains in thematic analysis observed in this study suggest that explicit instruction in identifying and analyzing themes equips students with transferable analytical skills applicable to diverse literary and non-literary contexts.

Examination of the Critical Evaluation subscale showed impressive gains for the thematic group (19.37 points) compared to the traditional group (6.33 points), with a large effect size of $\eta^2 = .49$. This finding indicates that thematic instruction significantly enhanced students' abilities to evaluate literary texts critically, assess authorial choices, consider

multiple interpretations, and construct evidence-based arguments about textual meaning. The development of critical evaluation skills is particularly important for ESL learners, who must navigate the dual challenges of language proficiency and literary interpretation. Thematic instruction appears to provide scaffolding that enables students to move beyond surface-level comprehension toward deeper analytical engagement with texts. By organizing instruction around central themes, educators create opportunities for students to examine how different authors approach similar ideas, compare and contrast textual treatments of themes, and develop their own critical perspectives grounded in textual evidence. According to Park and Kim (2024), thematic frameworks provide ESL learners with conceptual anchors that facilitate critical thinking by making abstract literary concepts more concrete and accessible. The substantial improvement in critical evaluation skills observed in this study suggests that thematic instruction may be particularly effective in developing the higher-order thinking skills necessary for advanced literary analysis.

Results from the Figurative Language Recognition subscale demonstrated significant gains for the thematic group (18.63 points) compared to the traditional group (4.95 points), with an effect size of $\eta^2 = .47$. This finding is particularly noteworthy given that figurative language often poses substantial challenges for ESL learners, who must navigate both linguistic complexity and cultural connotations embedded in metaphors, similes, personification, and other literary devices. The superior performance of students in the thematic instruction group suggests that organizing instruction around meaningful themes may provide contextual support that helps learners recognize and interpret figurative language more effectively. When figurative language is encountered repeatedly across multiple texts united by common themes, students have more opportunities to develop pattern recognition skills and understand how authors use literary devices to develop thematic ideas. This contextualized approach contrasts with traditional instruction that may treat figurative language as isolated linguistic features to be identified and memorized. Research by Chen and Liu (2023) found that ESL learners demonstrated significantly better comprehension and retention of figurative language when it was taught within thematic units rather than through decontextualized exercises, as the thematic context provided meaningful frameworks for understanding why authors employ particular literary devices.

Data from the Literal Comprehension subscale showed the most modest, though still significant, improvement for the thematic group (16.16 points) compared to the traditional group (5.78 points), with an effect size of $\eta^2 = .40$. While this represents the smallest effect size among the five subscales, it remains substantial and indicates that thematic instruction benefits even foundational comprehension skills. This finding challenges potential concerns that focusing on themes and higher-order thinking might come at the expense of basic comprehension. Instead, the data suggest that thematic instruction simultaneously supports both foundational and advanced literacy skills. The somewhat smaller effect size for literal comprehension compared to other subscales may reflect the fact that traditional instruction already emphasizes these basic skills, whereas thematic instruction provides additional benefits for higher-order skills that receive less attention in conventional approaches. The improvement in literal comprehension within the thematic group likely reflects the fact that understanding themes requires careful attention to textual details, plot development, character motivations, and explicit information—all of which contribute to foundational comprehension skills.

Performance on the Poetry Comprehension and Appreciation subscale revealed significant gains for the thematic group (19.78 points) compared to the traditional group (6.78 points). Poetry presents unique challenges for ESL learners due to its compressed language, complex figurative devices, unconventional syntax, and cultural references. The substantial improvement observed in the thematic group suggests that organizing poetry instruction

around unifying themes helps students access these challenging texts more effectively. When multiple poems exploring similar themes are studied together, students can compare how different poets approach common ideas, recognize recurring imagery and symbols, and develop deeper appreciation for the artistry of poetic expression (Pabur et al, 2025). Thematic instruction may reduce the cognitive load associated with poetry comprehension by providing conceptual frameworks that help students organize and interpret complex poetic language. The thematic approach also creates opportunities for students to see poetry as a vehicle for exploring universal human experiences and concerns rather than as a collection of obscure texts with hidden meanings. This shift in perspective may contribute to increased engagement and motivation, which in turn supports comprehension and appreciation. The findings align with contemporary best practices in poetry instruction that emphasize meaning-making and personal connection over technical analysis alone.

Implications of these findings have important consequences for ESL literature instruction and suggest several directions for future research and pedagogical practice. The consistent pattern of superior outcomes across all five subscales for the thematic instruction group provides robust evidence that organizing literature instruction around meaningful themes significantly enhances multiple dimensions of literary competence, from foundational comprehension to advanced critical evaluation. The particularly strong effects on personal response, thematic analysis, and critical evaluation suggest that thematic instruction may be especially valuable for developing the higher-order thinking skills necessary for advanced literary engagement. Educators working with intermediate-level ESL learners should consider adopting thematic frameworks that connect texts through meaningful content rather than relying solely on chronological, generic, or linguistic organizational principles. Future research should explore how different types of themes (universal themes versus culturally specific themes) affect learning outcomes, examine the optimal duration and structure of thematic units, and investigate how thematic instruction can be effectively integrated with other evidence-based pedagogical approaches such as collaborative learning, multimodal instruction, and technology-enhanced teaching. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining the lasting effects of thematic instruction on students' reading habits, literary appreciation, and continued engagement with literature would provide valuable insights into the long-term benefits of this instructional approach.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that thematic instruction is markedly more effective than traditional approaches in developing ESL students' literary competence and engagement with poetry. Across all components of the Poetry Analysis Test—literal comprehension, figurative language recognition, thematic analysis, critical evaluation, and personal response—the thematic group showed substantially greater gains than the traditional group, with large effect sizes indicating not only statistical but also practical significance. The most prominent improvements appeared in students' personal response and thematic analysis, confirming that organizing instruction around meaningful, unifying themes enables learners to connect texts to their own experiences while also sharpening higher-order interpretive skills. These results collectively indicate that thematic instruction does not simply help students "understand the poem," but supports a deeper transformation from surface-level decoding to analytical, reflective, and affectively engaged reading.

The engagement and classroom observation data further reinforce these achievement findings, revealing a consistent shift from passive to active learning in the thematic classes over the 13-week intervention. Students taught through thematic units reported steadily increasing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, and their participation

patterns—captured through systematic observation—shifted from predominantly passive reception to frequent question-asking, interpretive contributions, and collaborative meaning-making. Taken together, these convergent strands of evidence suggest that thematic instruction can reconfigure the ESL literature classroom into a space where learners assume the role of active meaning-makers rather than dependent recipients of teacher interpretations. The study therefore underscores the pedagogical value of designing literature curricula around themes that resonate with learners' lives, and calls for wider adoption and further refinement of thematic, meaning-centered approaches in ESL teacher education, curriculum development, and classroom practice.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. By choosing to take part, participants confirm that they have been informed about the study's purpose, procedures, possible risks, and potential benefits. They understand that their identities will remain confidential and that all data collected will be used only for research purposes. Participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which they are otherwise entitled. By continuing, they indicate their informed consent to participate in this research under these conditions.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The quantitative data in this study were analyzed using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) following established statistical standards. Prior to running ANOVA, the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were checked, and effect sizes were calculated alongside p-values ($\alpha = 0.05$) to support meaningful interpretation. All analyses were conducted using reputable statistical software, ensuring that the findings are robust, reliable, and in line with good research practice.

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