

English Medium in the United Arab Emirates: Serving Local or Global Needs?

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Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Bowman McLaren', is written over a light blue rectangular background.

ABSTRACT

The United Arab Emirates promotes English as the Medium of Instruction (hereafter referred to as EMI) at tertiary level, which results in many ‘content’ subjects being taught via English. Many institutions employ native English speaking teachers, referred to as either NESTs or NS, for language classes and insist that content teachers operate through this second or other language (L2), to the detriment of ‘non-native’ English speaking teachers in terms of recruitment, and also to the detriment of the students who must study their major subjects via a foreign language. NS teachers are expected to enforce a monolingual classroom environment where English is compulsory and use of the students’ first language is penalised. The U.A.E. is also engaged in spreading this monolingual culture to primary and secondary schools.

This mixed methodology study evaluates faculty and management perceptions of the English medium status quo and current concerns within the TEFL/ TESOL profession. As well as surveying faculty opinions via a quantitative questionnaire and then a qualitative appraisal of written comments, interviews with senior management aided a critical appraisal of so-called ‘common-sense’ (Tollefson, 2002) policies and assumptions. The quantitative stage indicated discrepancies between different groups of faculty and the qualitative analysis of written comments and interview data allowed for some, often contradictory, themes to emerge.

It will be suggested that many faculty were unconvinced that monolingual classroom environments were efficacious. EMI was challenged on the grounds that studying through another language adds to the learner’s cognitive burden (Troudi, 2009) and makes mastery of content subjects more difficult and contingent upon the student’s language skills. The management interviewees conceded these issues but felt that Content and Language

Integrated Learning in English was vital for students who must function in an increasingly globalised market place. Little thought was given to what this might mean for the status of Arabic.

It was recommended that Arabic should be reinstated as the medium of content instruction, that English be taught as a foreign language only, and that the way in which English is taught should be critically overhauled to make best use of the diverse skills of NESTs and NNESTs alike. It was also suggested that countries such as the U.A.E. are more likely to achieve the modernity they seek by following a model where the L1 is the language of instruction, while English fulfils its parallel role as a foreign language and international lingua-franca.

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