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SALAH TROUDI AND ADEL JENDLI

## 2 Emirati Students' Experiences of English as a Medium of Instruction

### ABSTRACT

The English language has become the medium of instruction (EMI) in higher educational institutions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The main purpose of this project is to explore and investigate what Emirati university students think of EMI. In particular we investigated the effects EMI has on their educational achievement and learning experiences. The study also revealed students' views about the status of Arabic as a language of instruction at the tertiary level and the possibility of a dual language education. An exploratory research strategy with qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews revealed that students' experiences with EMI at the university level were shaped by a number of educational and sociocultural factors. The nature of the primary and secondary school experience and the students' overall competence in English has to a large extent formed their views of EMI. Students who attended private English-medium schools were much more prepared to face the academic demands of EMI than their colleagues who learned English as a foreign language and a subject among others in the curriculum of the government primary and secondary schools. Family background and parental attitudes towards English have also played a role in students' acceptance of EMI and in many cases a tendency to prefer English to Arabic. However, the data did reveal that Emirati students were also interested in Arabic as a medium of instruction for a number of university subjects. Thinking of employability and market forces, the students had a realistic if not a pragmatic attitude towards Arabic. They also, as expected, associated Arabic with discourses of identity, linguistic, and cultural heritage. One major implication of this study is the inadequacy of the old binary division between Arabic and English as languages of instruction. The study challenges established discourses that have been reinforcing English as a language of science and academia while relegating Arabic to a language of heritage and religion. Arabic and English can mutually co-exist in a model of dual language instruction for university students.

## Introduction

The role of English in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has in the last 20 years surpassed its initial status of a foreign language learned for the sake of communicating with the rest of the world. Being very much aware of its increasingly global status and its central place in preparing a technologically and scientifically competent workforce, the educational authorities of the country have embarked on major infrastructural, educational, and financial efforts to put in place a tertiary educational system with English as the primary language of instruction (Osman, 2009; Troudi, 2009b). This has now become an established policy in the wider region as other countries such as Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain have also opted for the same approach. The current research project aims to study how Emirati students at the tertiary level have reacted to the policy of English as a medium of instruction and what their views are about their educational experiences under such a policy.

## Perspectives on EMI and the UAE context

This chapter is situated within the wide areas of English language teaching (ELT) and language policy, and more specifically the field of language of instruction policy, also known as medium of instruction policies (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004). We start from the premise that a language of instruction policy is not ideologically free and is often politically and economically motivated. Taking on board the main tenets of critical language policy research such as power, struggle, hegemony, ideology, and resistance, our study will look into how practices of English-medium instruction in the (UAE) have come to be seen as acceptable and legitimate (Tollefson, 2007). The debate over the place of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in a context such as the UAE needs to be seen in light of opposing views and

schools of thought on the increasingly powerful role English plays around the world. It is perhaps necessary to state that because of the complexity of language in society and education there cannot be an overarching theory to account for all aspects and areas of language policy (Ricento, 2006). For instance, in the areas of language ecology and linguistic human rights, Phillipson's theory (1992) of linguistic imperialism was proposed to account for the hegemonic influences of English on indigenous languages and its effects on pedagogy in the area of English language teaching around the world.

While "linguistic imperialism" has had considerable effect on the study and debate over the global spread of English, it has been challenged by other theorists like Pennycook (2003), who while challenging the analytical neutrality of the predominant spread of English paradigms, also rejects the structural determinism of some of the critical views on English in the world. Accepting that ELT professionals are intimately involved with the diffusion of English, he states "we should be acutely aware of the implications of this spread for the production and reproduction of global inequalities" (p. 87). The spread of English is not a neutral phenomenon as it serves major economic interests of certain inner circle countries and it can contribute to the marginalization of indigenous cultures and languages.

Another critical but less radical view is Canagarajah's model which sets the conditions for pedagogy of appropriating discourses. This model recognizes that language learning is ideological and that learners face a number of challenges but the solution is "to negotiate with the agencies of power for personal and collective empowerment" (1999, p. 173). The solution therefore is not to reject English but to appropriate it to one's needs. Canagarajah advocates a third way that "avoids the traditional extremes of rejecting English outright for its linguistic imperialism or accepting it wholesale for its benefits" (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 173.). This "third way" strikes a balance between an uneasy awareness of the potential effects English can have on local cultures, languages, and learners' identities on one side, and a need for English for social status and economic progress on the other.

Jenkins' (2007) construct of English as a lingua franca (ELF) does, to a large extent, describe the ways many residents of different linguistic backgrounds use English in the UAE for social communication. In this

model Jenkins argues that it is "NNSs [*non-native speakers*] rather than NS [*native speakers*] who are at the forefront of innovation and change in lingua franca English" (2007, p. 4; emphasis is ours). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to see if linguistic and discursive features of ELF have been accepted in academic contexts in the UAE. However, based on our experience teaching in two academic institutions in the UAE, we can suggest that the situation is typical of English in international contexts where the native speaker model is the norm or "the point of reference" as described by Brutt-Griffler (2002, p. 179).

In the UAE, and the Gulf in general, proponents of the diffusion of the English paradigm employ discourses of social progress, economic and technological advancement, global communication, and trade as forces behind an inevitable EMI policy at the tertiary level, especially for scientific and a large number of academic subjects. Within this school of thought, government officials and academics make ideological and practical associations between the learning of English and through English and economic viability, competitive national workforce, and an active role in this era of globalization. Accepting that English plays a major role in the world economy, the UAE "has no choice other than to prepare its workforce to function in this economy through a good command of English" (Troudi, 2009b, p. 203).

There are also wider socio-cultural, political, and educational factors that helped lay the foundation for an EMI policy in most tertiary institutions in the UAE. English represents power and success, modernism, liberalism, freedom, and equality. It also represents a departure from old-fashioned and inefficient educational systems and didactic teacher-centered approaches where the focus is on knowledge transmission rather than construction.

To enact an EMI policy at the tertiary level, a number of conditions needed to be met. At the tertiary institution structural, administrative, technological, and academic facilities were put in place to provide the necessary conditions for teaching to be conducted in English. A substantially intensive English programme was put in place to help students progress to their academic departments where instruction is in English. At the start of the programme students are classified into different levels of English

according to their achievement on initial English placement tests (Guefrachi & Troudi, 2000). This kind of support is available across the country in all tertiary institutions. It should be mentioned in this context that all these institutions have put in place English admission requirements demonstrated via international standardized tests such as the TOEFL and IELTS.

English as foreign or second language professionals are contractually recruited to teach in these intensive programmes and to help students reach the required level of English proficiency to be admitted into their prospective academic disciplines. The trend is to recruit mostly, and in some institutions exclusively, native speaker teachers from inner circle countries (Karmani, 2005).

In the last 10 years very few studies informed by two mainly opposing paradigms, the diffusion of English and the critical stance, have explored how English is used as a medium of instruction in the UAE's educational system. We hope that this study will fill this gap by shedding some light on the issue of EMI and students' learning experiences at the tertiary level.

On the protagonist side of EMI, perhaps even triumphalist, Jongmsa and Jongmsa (2006) report encouraging results of a small scale pilot study to introduce the teaching of sciences and mathematics in English to first and second grade pupils in the Abu Dhabi educational zone. Participating teachers grew in confidence in their ability to teach scientific subjects through English. The authors also reported pedagogical gains for teachers who embraced collaborative teaching and team work. Pupils were also reported to be using more English both in the classroom and at home. There were also challenges as some teachers still focused on the whole class with little attention to students with special needs and materials were not always used meaningfully. What the authors should have added in their analysis is that the teachers' challenge to teach sciences in the English language is a major problem. These teachers, who were hired from Arab countries to teach in the primary sector, had no prior training in English and neither were they expected to teach through English. Therefore, the decision to switch the medium of instruction to English will have caused them major anxiety and even fear of job loss. These teachers have now had to undergo language training in order to achieve a certain score on IELTS if they wish to keep their jobs. This is one of the professional and human consequences

of an EMI policy at the primary and secondary levels. To our knowledge, no research has been conducted in this area to explore the aftermath of such a policy on the lives and morale of the teachers.

Furthermore, within the predominant EMI paradigm, Bielenberg (2004) argues that mathematics and information technology teachers at the UAE University, where this study was conducted, had to make a number of pedagogical and linguistic devices to help their students understand the content. The "special English" they used featured the use of a slow speed and a focus on selected vocabulary. The students' learning experience was characterized by major challenges they encountered at the level of "the linguistic structures in academic textbooks and the 'normal' academic language of a content area classroom" (p. 109). Bielenberg's study is one of the very few that delineate in some detail the nature of academic complexities encountered by university students in the UAE. These students mostly come from the same primary and secondary school system as those of our study, except for those who went to private schools where English is the medium of instruction. Bielenberg stops short of questioning or challenging EMI and accepts it as a legitimate educational policy.

Related to one of the main aims of this study, Findlow's (2006) qualitative research investigated the role of English language teaching in the UAE and how it is implicated in the configuring of collective identities especially in higher education. She argues that with all academic, economic, and political discourses acknowledging the role of English as the language of globalization, native languages such as Arabic have become "symbolic of nostalgia and authenticity" (Findlow, 2006, p. 2).

Participants in Findlow's study argued for the necessity of a dual language system in education. Linguistic dualism fits a fluid and dialogic view of the language-culture relationship where culture is not static but continually re-defined in a changing world. Students have to learn and adjust to new modes of communication to be able to adapt to changing circumstances and purposes. This linguistic dualism, though not equal with English as the dominant language, is a feature of the current educational system in the UAE. Findlow suggests that it enables "two identities and cultures to be claimed at once, [which] can thus be claimed as inevitable, even essential, for societies undergoing processes of acute global-local transition"

(Findlow, 2006, p. 22). While linguistic dualism as an educational approach is not officially stated in language policy documents (Clarke, 2006) it has become common practice in all sectors of the educational systems of most Gulf states, albeit an unbalanced kind of dualism.

Troudi (2009a, 2009b) problematized and questioned EMI in the UAE and the Arab world on the premise that students are more likely to do well in academic subjects when these are taught in the language most familiar to them. A second major argument was the effect of EMI on Arabic as a language of science and academia, a topic still widely ignored by educationalists and ELT professionals in the Arab world, except for some efforts by Arabic scholars (Al Askari, 2002; Al-Dhubaib, 2006; Mohamed, 2007). Troudi's work however, did not delve into the experiences of the students under EMI and its effect on the quality of their educational experience. The current study is an attempt at filling this gap. Overall, we do not espouse an essentialist view about the position of English nor an anti-English position, but we position our work within a critical and postmodern perspective on the pedagogical hegemony of English and its effect on Arabic as a language of academia.

## The study

The following are the main preliminary research questions:

1. What are students' attitudes towards English as medium of instruction at Zayed University?
2. What is the nature of the challenges students face when studying through EMI?
3. How do students cope with these challenges?

### *Methodology*

The nature of the above research questions and our theoretical positions necessitate an exploratory methodology, which seeks to understand how individuals in a given social and educational context make meaning, draw conclusions and make suggestions about their own learning and the language policy being investigated (Perry, 2005; Richie & Lewis, 2003). Because the study does not seek to make predictions or generalizations the focus will be on understanding the views of the participants and the reasons they provide for their choices and actions. This focus naturally justifies the centrality of qualitative data in this research project. The study can also be methodologically placed around the middle of the "basic/applied continuum" (Perry, 2005, p. 72). On the theoretical side the study deals with some abstract concepts such as identity, sense of belonging, and heritage. The study also has an applied dimension as some of the findings and implications can be directly related to areas such as language policy, curriculum development, materials selection, and classroom pedagogy. The overall design of the study is a sequential exploratory design as we used "the quantitative data and results to assist in the interpretation of qualitative findings" (Creswell, 2009, p. 211).

### *The participants*

In total, 110 female Zayed university students ranging in age between 18 and 22 years took part in this study by answering a five-point Likert-scale survey to measure general trends about the constructs of the research questions. Survey participants represented a wide array of academic disciplines such as business, communication and media, education, and information technology where more than 90% of instruction is done in English. For this research report the focus is on the 10 participants who took part in the semi-structured interviews.

We received the consent of the 10 students to be interviewed once the aims of the study were explained to them. They were assured of confidentiality and total anonymity. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities.

They were also guaranteed the right to withdraw from the study and to change their minds about what they said in the interview at the respondent validation stage (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The transcribed manuscripts were shared with the participants for confirmation, addition, or deletion of any item of their choice. The purpose of this validation is to provide, as accurately as possible, a real representation of the students' opinions. In addition to these ethical procedures, an ethical research form was completed and sent to the ethics committee to ensure that the research project was conducted according to the University of Exeter ethical regulations. The ten participants are all juniors or seniors pursuing bachelor's degrees in a number of disciplines. The participants, all Emiratis, come from both public and private schools. The secondary school background proved to be an important factor in shaping students' views of EMI at tertiary level.

Semi-structured interviews averaging one hour in length were conducted with the 10 participants in a space of four weeks. Keeping with the tradition of naturalistic research, the semi-structured format allowed us to be both structured and flexible at the same time. This kind of interview has the advantage of keeping the researcher on the agenda of the study while being open-minded to account for spontaneous and emerging themes that respondents are willing to share with the interviewer (Kvale, 2009; Radnor, 2001). To Kvale (2007) the interview is "a uniquely sensitive and powerful method for capturing the experiences and lived meanings of the subjects' everyday world" (p. 11). The main items of the interview were developed from the major constructs in mainstream and critical literature on EMI and learners' experiences. A number of prompts were used to elicit data (see appendix). The nature of the interview allowed for emerging questions to be asked.

### *Data analysis*

The interview transcripts were analysed for general content. We followed an exploratory approach using the main aims of the study as a guide for topic ordering and construction of categories, which form the "heart of qualitative data analysis" (Creswell, 1998, p. 144). This thematic organization

and subsequent interpretation (Radnor, 2001) were done with a "strategic and technical detachment" approach to the whole process of data analysis (Holliday, 2001, p. 178). Qualitative data analysis was conducted in stages of describing, classifying, and interpreting. The last stage was initially based on textual "the what" and structural descriptions "the how." The essence of the participants' experiences were constructed through "seeking all possible meanings and divergent perspectives, varying the frames of reference about the phenomenon, and constructing a description of how the phenomenon was experienced" (Creswell, 1998, p. 149).

## Results

### *EMI and school background*

The analysis revealed that the students' primary and secondary school backgrounds and experiences played a significant role in shaping their attitudes towards English in general and using it as a medium of instruction for university subjects. Students who went to private schools where instruction was in English talked of their comfort in studying through English and how it was the normal thing to do as stated by Fatma, "actually I am more comfortable studying these courses in English rather than Arabic. I studied in English my whole life so if I studied these courses in Arabic that will be somehow a challenge." This was echoed by Khadija who explains that "studying in English made more sense to me since I talk in English even at home. It's a benefit for us to study in English because if we want to continue our masters or get a job, most of the places require using the English language." Here a reference is made to the use of English for communication at home, which is increasingly gaining status as a common linguistic and cultural feature in the daily life of a number of Emirati families. Students described how in many families' domestic helpers and child carers hired from some Asian countries speak to Emirati children in English and in many cases reduce the children's exposure to

Arabic. This was well captured by Maryam who mentions how "there is something that really affect kids. For example kids have nannies, and my nanny talks to me in English since I was a baby, because she didn't know how to talk in Arabic but through living here and living with us she did learn eventually Arabic."

Some parents also play a significant role in creating an Anglophone environment for their children from a very early age. In many cases parents with an awareness of the global role of English and its potential for opening educational and economic horizons for their children, or simply because of cultural trends in modern media and associations between speaking English and discourses of modernity and development encourage English. Arabic, even at home, loses its major role as the mother tongue and the language of one's heritage. While this should not be interpreted as a conscious or a deliberate attempt at marginalizing Arabic, in fact, many parents are aware of the effect of English on their children's Arabic, the obvious result is that these children will grow up thinking English is the natural language to use for both communication and education. Against such a sociocultural background English has gained a major status before children are even introduced to it at school. Arabic on the other hand, is increasingly introduced as a minor subject relegated to the areas of social studies and religion. The following excerpt from Maryam shows how parents' linguistic decisions have affected a child's ability to speak what is naturally supposed to be her first language, "My cousin has a small daughter she talks to her in English all the time so now it's a problem cause her daughter doesn't understand Arabic. But now she started to talk to her in Arabic and she's progressing."

Prior to their transition to university many of the participants were informed by school advisors, and through visits to higher colleges and universities, about the system of education and the language of instruction at the tertiary level. One participant explains her reason for choosing Zayed University: "Well it [English] was one of the reasons that we chose ZU actually. I mean I had the choice of going to either United Arab Emirates University, Zayed University, or Higher Colleges of Technology, and I knew that some of the courses in UAEU are taught in Arabic. Because we've been in private schools we started our education in English and we

wanted to continue in the same American system." In the case of these students there was full awareness of the system ahead of them and the kind of linguistic environment they were going to join.

According to one participant from the College of Communication and Media Sciences, in a typical class of 30 students only one third would be from private school background, which implies that the majority of the students experienced a total shift in the medium of instruction at the time of their transition to tertiary education. To address the linguistic and academic needs of students with low English proficiency, a language preparation programme was established with a focus on the major language skills. The aim of such an academic and linguistic provision is to prepare students to join their academic departments where subjects are mostly taught in English. Such programmes are a common feature of tertiary education in the UAE and large numbers of EFL specialists are employed to cater for the students' linguistic needs and provide academic support. The majority of the students in these intensive English programmes come from public school backgrounds, where content subjects were taught in Arabic.

Among the interviewed participants there was a general acceptance and recognition of the international status of English and its role in development, economy, and global communication. Many participants provided realistic and pragmatic reasons for the necessity of EMI as described by Leila in the following excerpt:

Well in university at this level it's not about just the fact that it's easier for us, and it's more flexible for us to be taught in English because we can express ourselves better. But it is also the fact that at this point you need to know these terms in English because you are going to go to the workforce. The majority of them are not locals. Whether we are in an Arabic country or not. So you need to interact with people who are going to be speaking in English.

Leila's views on the position of English can be seen in light of the English as a lingua franca (ELF) framework which postulates that the changing role of English "seems to be an entirely logical and natural development arising out of new language contact situations in an expanding circle context" (Jenkins, 2007, p. 5). However, this seemingly neutral view of English needs to be balanced against an opposite view that challenges the neutrality

of ELF. Working within a broader paradigm of linguistic imperialism and the hegemonic spread of English, Phillipson (2009) prefers to use the term *lingua academica* to refer to the international use of English in higher education. In fact, English is now spreading to primary and secondary schools in a number of countries both in the private and public sectors, as in the case of the UAE. Phillipson challenges the discourse of neutrality and objectivity of ELF and argues that its advocates "falsely assume that the language is neutral, free of all cultural ties and serves all equally well" (p. 338). While questioning and challenging the role English plays in tertiary education, especially in a context like the UAE, is necessary for a balanced analysis of any language of instruction policy, the forces of economic reality and issues of employability remain too strong to ignore. Students are thinking of their careers and self-interest and are well aware of the competitive edge of EMI and the advantage their ability to speak English fluently offers them in the job market.

#### *Arabic as a medium of instruction*

Views on the possibility and necessity of Arabic as a medium of instruction at the university level varied. Some participants saw no scope for using Arabic to teach content classes in their academic departments and were very clear in their positions vis-a-vis English and Arabic. For them the issue is settled and is not open for reconsideration. Arabic cannot be used because they are more familiar with English and more comfortable with its associated approaches and methodologies. Salwa, one of the participants from a private school background, expressed her realistic and functional view on the issue, "honestly we are against Arabic taught in the university, so I don't know if that's going to help with anything ... because we are used to English, it's much easier to write in English than writing in Arabic ... because we got used to it ... Because we were in private schools, and English is taught in most of our subjects."

Given this kind of educational background of students like Salwa, who come from an English medium private school background, Arabic does not seem to have a role to play at the tertiary level. It will simply hinder

the quality of their educational experience and cause too many unwanted challenges. However, this view was not shared by all the participants of the study. In spite of a consensus on the importance of English as a medium of instruction some students lamented the situation of Arabic at the tertiary level and in the wider social environment in general. For some students like Khadija, in addition to being her first language Arabic serves a utilitarian purpose. Thinking of employability in an increasingly competitive job market, Arabic would provide an added edge. She explains this in the following excerpt:

I think it's a good thing that we are studying in English but again I think that they are doing that on the expense of our own language. I might be more comfortable with English but I still think that we should take courses in Arabic because when we'll graduate we are going to work in the UAE and not all companies use the English language. For instance the government companies use Arabic language, so how am I supposed to work in Arabic if I didn't study in Arabic. I suggest that they add maybe more courses in Arabic instead of just the writing courses in which there is only the Arabic Professional Writing course and the Arabic lab course; those are the only courses taught in Arabic and then there are the three courses in the colloquy and the rest are all in English.

It is obvious that according to Khadija the current curriculum at Zayed University does not provide enough content courses in Arabic. The current provision of Arabic courses is to help the students with their writing and oral skills. It needs to be mentioned that these Arabic courses are a part of the curriculum of the College of Communication and Media Sciences as a response to a need identified by future employers. Available courses are media storytelling in Arabic 1 and 2 for intermediate and advanced, public speaking in Arabic, and media translation workshop. However, such provisions for Arabic courses in other colleges such as Education or Business and Information Technology are nominal and limited to one credit lab courses where the focus is to provide students with equivalent Arabic terminology to the subjects taught in English. Khadija's views were echoed by other participants with similar utilitarian and realistic views. Many have come to the realization that in the job context of the UAE English proficiency is now the norm and Emirati citizens are expected to be proficient in Arabic

as well as in English if they are to compete for jobs. Fatma, who is aware of this advantage, describes this need for Emirati Arabic speakers "... but it also gives you an advantage, because again you are the minority this is your country, they need you to know Arabic so that what they can't do, the majority of the workforce, you can do, that is why they hire Emiratis. So it is important." In the UAE, Emirati citizens are indeed a minority as more than 75% of the population is made up of expatriates and English is the main lingua franca among most of the residents of the country. Arabic, therefore has become a rare but necessary commodity in administrations and businesses. Students are now well aware of how Arabic is in demand and many have expressed their concerns about their lack of proficiency in their first language, especially those from an English medium school background. Many bemoaned their inability to write in Modern Standard Arabic, the version of Arabic used for education, and, in some cases, even to speak their local dialect fluently. Some students even called for Arabic preparation courses similar in nature to the current provision under the English Academic Bridge Programme. The following excerpt from Hala illustrates this view, "... but it's not a bad idea having the readiness taken here in Arabic as well. Because readiness here in the university is for people who are weak in English, why not make it for students who are weak in Arabic as well. It's going to be difficult of course, but it will help us." Readiness refers to the language preparation programme that students need to take in order to meet the English admission requirement. Hala is suggesting that a readiness programme in Arabic should be provided to help students with their Arabic.

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While this is a legitimate academic need identified by a number of students facing major challenges with the academic side of Modern Standard Arabic, it also reflects a larger and more serious issue, which is the quality of the teaching of Arabic in the UAE and the overall proficiency level of Emirati students in their first language. There have been major debates at the ministerial level to put Arabic back on the list of national priorities but there has not been any tangible action at decision making or curricular levels to resurrect Arabic. In fact, while the official discourse recognizes



Arabic as the official and national language and calls for its protection and dissemination, the trend in education is going in the opposite direction, with the continuous spread of English to all levels starting at year one of primary school. For some of the study participants the suggested solution was an obvious need for the improvement of the quality of teaching Arabic at all levels and mainly at university, and the introduction of more Arabic medium content classes. This call for dual language education was made by Arwa:

We did personally take some courses in Arabic, three courses in Arabic actually, I find them very very useful, I am not advocating English all the time. I think it is important to study in English but at the same time to have these courses that the university has done where you get the terminology translated into Arabic so you know both. I am a strong believer in being bilingual, being totally, having both.

Aysha, another participant, confirms the need for a dual language approach to the curriculum when she describes what can be done in teaching some disciplines.

I am not against Arabic, and I think there are some courses we need to balance, and study them in Arabic such as the media writing, and that's what they are doing now in the college of communication. I feel that we should take more courses in Arabic. I know that I am weak in Arabic, but still that would help me for later in the future workforce especially in writing.

It is worth pointing out that Aysha went to English-medium primary and secondary schools, but her EMI background did not negatively influence her views about EMI.

#### *Challenges with EMI and coping strategies*

Data about academic challenges experienced by university students in their pre-college stage and during their specializations confirmed findings in the literature about the consequences of EMI on the quality of the students' learning experiences in content classes. There were major similarities at the level of linguistic challenges observed by Bielenberg (2002) and those

recounted by some of our participants. Like most of the students in our study Bielenberg's participants are the product of public school education in the UAE, where Arabic is the medium of instruction. Upon transition to university, the students experienced a total shift in the medium of instruction and consequently a different approach to education entailing new definitions and roles for them. The salient challenges were linked to English language proficiency and the kind of academic skills required to perform well in an EMI environment. Recounting her story of the major efforts she spent on improving her English, Salwa describes how her first two years at university were marked by a struggle to cope with the demands of EMI:

I graduated from a public school, so that was the challenge because when I took the first English course (English 145), I faced a lot of difficulties and couldn't follow up with my peers, and in the first two assignments I got very low grades but then I started to depend more on myself, and on my readings and also the instructor was taking me on a side, and looking more through my drafts, so that's the way I improved myself. But there was a big challenge for me in writing.

The students' Arabic academic background interfered with their learning of the new mode, a phenomenon observed by Osman (2009). Their major educational schemata and learning experiences are rooted in Arabic and its associated models of learning. This is well captured by the following excerpt from Selma:

The Arabic language was the base in which I get my ideas from I didn't have a background in English books so I was more into Arabic even when I am writing in English I try to think in English but it's a bit hard not to think in Arabic. I always have the ideas in my head regardless of the grammar mistakes. Before I used to think in Arabic and try to translate my thoughts in English but now I somehow think in both English and Arabic. When I used to think in Arabic and try writing it in English, the outcome was a mess.

EMI did serve as a gatekeeper (Troudi, 2009b) to those who could not meet the challenge of achieving the required English language proficiency to be accepted in some colleges. While this has become an established educational practice in the UAE and increasingly in the Gulf the detrimental

effects of EMI policies on students' educational and career choices have largely been ignored. Selma's quote illustrates this point:

There were girls who faced problems in English even after entering the general programme and that stopped them from entering the communication and media major. They thought that since they were weak in English they wouldn't be able to do well in this major and they chose the Education major given that it may be easier for them. Thus this college uses simple English rather than the advanced English. Other majors like the business major, they use specific terms and have their own world of teaching. I think that at the beginning of entering any major, you'll face some problems but if you try to adapt it will be easier for you to learn while if you didn't you'll be facing problems until you graduate.

The literature abounds with arguments questioning the legitimacy and even the ethicality of language policies that involve exclusionary practices (Abbott, 1992; Hewson 1998; Markee, 2002; Williams & Cook, 2002). Of equal importance is the argument that EMI policies and instruction in a foreign medium is not supported by research and does not guarantee success or equivalent levels of educational achievement as when mother tongue education is in place (Bruthiaux, 2002).

In the case of the current study and the population it represents, students facing academic challenges in their majors, as a result of EMI, resorted to seeking support from available resources put in place by the university. These varied from extra tutorials by lecturers to writing centres. Students also relied heavily on dictionaries to understand main texts in their fields. Students from English medium schools also faced some challenges, but they were not attributed to English proficiency. Those who were "lucky" enough to go to private schools reported their ease with English and how comprehension of content was rarely a problem.

## Discussion

The data showed a clear division in attitudes and experiences between students based on their school background and the medium of instruction. There is a disparity in the quality of experience at university level due to English language proficiency. Perhaps the concept of a 'choiceless choice' best describes the situation of the majority of Emirati students regarding the language of instruction. Being a speaker of Arabic, an Emirati has no choice but to study his/her chosen university subjects in English. This is now a taken-for-granted reality and an uncontested practice in many Arab countries.

If one takes students' experiences into consideration and the argument of students' rights to be taught in their mother tongue (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009), can EMI continue to prosper and can it avoid the image of English being an oppressive and dominant ideology especially in contexts with apparent differences between the local and the global? We think that in the case of the UAE and the Arab world in general, EMI needs to be engaged in self-criticism. To do so the discipline needs to adhere to some theoretical requirements. For without theorization and without awareness of the role of mother tongue and bilingual education, EMI will continue to alienate the very participants it claims to serve and empower in the first place. These are the students who have no right to choose the language of their instruction. Instead of an over-reliance on received knowledge about the status of English and fashionable trends in international education, educationists in contexts such as the UAE need to consider the quality of the learning experience of the students. Equally important are the effects of an EMI policy on the overall qualification levels of graduates in the workplace and their performance. Evaluation and research studies need to be conducted to investigate these two issues. In addition, principles of scientism were used as a mechanism to rationalize EMI. While this is a recognized strategy in introductions of educational policies there is equally a need for an interpretive and critical approach with qualitative methods to uncover the quality of educational experience under EMI

policies. Without a critical approach to issues of education, the nomothetic and at times erroneous nature of the claim to scientific objectivity by educational policies such as EMI will continue to exert a lot of power and influence on the lives of generations of students. An analogy can be drawn to the debate over bilingual education in the US, which at present is still "dominated by positivistic and management models which hide their ideologies behind a demand for objectivity, hard data and scientific rigor" (Macedo, Dandrinis, & Gounari, 2003, p. 69). In fact, the claim to scientificity and neutrality used by proponents of EMI can itself be used by counter-discourses calling for interrogating such an approach. There are, up to now, no empirical studies in the Gulf region which prove that graduates of mother tongue educational programmes are outperformed by those who underwent an EMI model.

Contrary to how it is neutrally and "scientifically" presented EMI is not ideology free. What is missing is a healthy dose of self-criticism, scepticism, and contestation, which are central to the scientific approach, to avoid the fragmentation of bodies of knowledge (Macedo, et al., 2003, p. 76). If and when research studies are conducted, EMI proponents show one side of the picture which serves their ideological agenda (e.g. Jongmsa & Jongmsa, 2006). When linguistic challenges are mentioned they are reduced to necessary developmental stages in need of pedagogical interventions.

Can we afford to see EMI isolated from issues of socio-cultural and linguistic identity which ultimately shape the students' learning experience at the tertiary level? Neutral and pseudo-empirical discourses in education, especially in matters of language policy, can distort reality. In pursuit of performance, achievement, and employability students' faces are dehumanized and their voices silenced and the result is a distorted reality of the students' learning conditions. A critical reading of this reality is needed so we can engage with the various effects of the EMI policy. Some critical writers like Macedo, Dentrinos and Gounari (2003) warn that the wrong language of instruction policy can cause fractured cultural identities which "usually leave an indelible psychological scar experienced even by those subordinated people who seemingly have 'made it' in spite of all forms of oppression" (p. 77). The participants in this study expressed major concerns about the constant onslaught of English and its potential

disastrous effects on Arabic as a language and a cultural symbol. While acknowledging the major role English plays in helping them secure employment and a career, they were aware that this is taking place at the expense of the status of Arabic, which is undergoing a perpetual reduction in its role in their educational experience at the tertiary level. Besides being the symbol of their cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage Arabic was, for the majority, the language of instruction in their first twelve years of primary and secondary education. They have experienced its rapid fall from educational grace and an almost total devaluation at tertiary level. The language of education was not anymore the language of their culture. For educational and pragmatic reasons English was widely embraced and even those who experience language difficulties often manage to seek and find academic support. But this linguistic dualism, which characterizes the situation in the UAE (Findlow, 2006) is fraught with uncertainty and unease. The relationship between English and Arabic is not based on equity or mutual coexistence and harmony. With respect to language use, this relationship remains asymmetrical with English being the dominant force. There are local and regional voices calling for the reassertion of the local and the indigenous in an attempt to resist imperialistic and neo-colonial cultural hegemony (Al-Dhubaib, 2006; Messidi, 2010). This needs to be seen within the wider socio-cultural and political climate in the region and in the aftermath of the recent political conflicts in Iraq and Palestine. In the context of this study the participants and their colleagues translated their dissatisfaction with the status of Arabic into critical action when they organized a university-wide campaign to protect Arabic.

Findlow (2005) describes how a tension between global and local interests has characterized the UAE higher education system. This tension, she argues, "mirrors the global-local tensions that underpin society as a whole, with ideas about 'cultural authenticity' formed in the tension between imitation of and resistance against colonial models" (p. 296). We hope to pursue this issue further in future research to explore the relationship between EMI and students' sense of linguistic and cultural identities.

## Conclusion

Hewson (1998) argues "learning a subject in a second language is particularly difficult when the first language is inherently very different from western-based languages. Specialized terminology, which is not necessarily congruent between the two languages, poses considerable problems for the teachers and significant learning difficulties for the students" (p. 318). This view resonates when applied to many of our study's participants.

However, as demonstrated through the data excerpts used in this study, students have managed to appropriate English to their own needs and utilitarian agendas (Canagarajah, 1999). Their sense of agency was not affected by the powerful status of EMI. In fact, an interesting finding in this study is that those students who did not see a role for Arabic as a medium of instruction did not do so on the basis of a conviction that Arabic was not a language of academia or sciences. They did not compartmentalize Arabic to certain classical domains such as Islamic studies and English to other more current or contemporary subjects like technology and sciences the way Findlow reported in her 2006 study. For our participants, Arabic was not considered an academically inferior language. The issue was more to do with the quality of education the students received in their schools and their language ability and overall comfort with Arabic. It was clear that the way these students were taught Arabic has, to a large extent, shaped their attitudes towards using it for instruction at the tertiary level. While the message of the educational system is that Arabic is not the best conduit for scientific and other academic subjects because of the demands of the global market, the students' stance on the issue is informed by more practical considerations of language proficiency and ability to comprehend and produce academic discourse without major challenges while keeping a realistic check on employability.

This study shows the complexity of EMI policies and some of its effects on students' educational experiences and career perspectives. Further studies are needed to look into how EMI shapes the students' sense of linguistic and cultures identities.

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## Appendix

### Semi-structured Interview items:

- General introduction: name, where from?  
 Area of study? Year of study?  
 Story of English: When did you first learn that you would be studying for your degree in English?  
 What did you think about it? How did you feel about it?
- At the end of your secondary education: did you receive any information about your degree? Whether you would be studying in English or in Arabic?
- How would you describe your experience of studying your degree/specialisation in English?
- Prompts:  
 How do you deal with the language of the specialisation?  
 Any issues of comprehension of lectures?

Any issues of comprehension of materials/ textbooks?  
 Any issues with writing your assignments in English?  
 Any challenges in oral activities [participation in class discussion] and presentations?  
 Any other challenges?  
 Ease and confidence in English?

When you have difficulties in any of the above areas how do you solve the problem?  
 Can you get help? How?

What about Arabic?

Prompts:

What role does Arabic play in your studies?  
 Do you think your specialisation can be taught in Arabic?  
 Do you think scientific subjects can be taught in Arabic?  
 If you had a choice between studying your specialisation in Arabic or English what  
 you chose? Why?

In general does studying through English have any effect/bearing on Arabic?

What do you speak at home?

Language used in following: internet, social interaction

What does Arabic represent to you?

Your relationship with English? What does English represent to you?

In general what do you think about EMI?

What English variety do you think you are using at your university? American? British? Australian? Are you aware of any other variety?

LYNNE RONESI

### 3 Who Am I as an Arab English Speaker? Perspectives from Female University Students in the United Arab Emirates

#### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study, undertaken at the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), investigates how female university students – undergraduate writing tutors with very strong English proficiency – understand their identity as Arabs and maintain their native tongue of Arabic even as they are immersed in English on a daily basis. This research examines the students' perceptions, in part, through the analysis of their written response to the prompt "Who am I as a writer in English?" This response was a required assignment in a course that prepared these students to be writing tutors at the university. To expand and verify themes identified in the text analysis, interviews were also conducted with the students. Informed by scholarship in critical applied linguistics and second language acquisition and grounded in participants' accounts of family and educational experiences, this study contextualizes the participants' linguistic attitudes and illuminates how they negotiate the discourses and perspectives of Arabic and English to benefit their agency. The students' educational experiences and insights resulted in suggestions for changes in the instruction and promotion of Arabic that would help support its maintenance – a matter of grave importance to these young women even as English dominates their lives – and provided a strong argument for a movement to two-way bilingual education. These are significant considerations for language learning policy in the UAE and for other Arab countries in which English operates as a lingua franca.