



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge  
Knowledge for All

# CHALLENGES TO EDUCATION IN THE GCC DURING THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

**Edited by**

Ahmar Mahboob and Tariq Elyas



**Challenges to Education  
in the GCC during  
the 21st Century**





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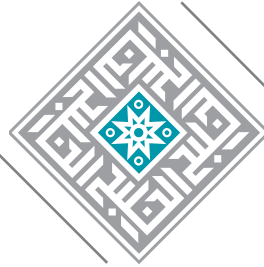
By publishing this volume, the Gulf Research Center (GRC) seeks to contribute to the enrichment of the reader's knowledge out of the Center's strong conviction that 'knowledge is for all.'

”

Dr. Abdulaziz O. Sager  
Chairman  
Gulf Research Center

# About the Gulf Research Center

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The Gulf Research Center (GRC) is an independent research institute founded in July 2000 by Dr. Abdulaziz Sager, a Saudi businessman, who realized, in a world of rapid political, social and economic change, the importance of pursuing politically neutral and academically sound research about the Gulf region and disseminating the knowledge obtained as widely as possible. The Center is a non-partisan think-tank, education service provider and consultancy specializing in the Gulf region. The GRC seeks to provide a better understanding of the challenges and prospects of the Gulf region.



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## The Dilemma of English and Its Roles in the UAE and the Arabian Gulf

*Salah Troudi and Gail Al Hafidh*

### **Introduction**

Issues of language policy in the Gulf, policy-making in education, and the language of instruction, in particular, are complex challenges because of their multifarious nature. As a result of the social composition and economic realities of countries like Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the stakeholders involved in education represent a variety of agendas, approaches, and even educational priorities. In this paper, we discuss how Western educational companies, schools, and universities bring in a global dimension with their economic and cultural agendas, while local voices are striving to reach a state of equilibrium between global forces and local knowledge. In the UAE, the situation is made even more complex because it is not clear whether language policy is a top-down affair or a bottom-up one (Tollefson 2002; Spolsky 2004; Shohamy 2006). The policy of English as medium of instruction (EMI) and its effects, such as alienation from one's mother tongue during the years of formal education, remains under-researched in the Gulf. This paper is an attempt to address the effect of the hegemony of English in the UAE and suggest solutions to redress the imbalance between English and Arabic.



## **English as a Lingua Franca**

The domination of English as a lingua franca, or possibly a “lingua Frankenstein” (Phillipson 2008), in today’s globalized world is well established. English is the language of international trade and business and a knowledge of and competency in it, are perceived by many as a crucial skill that can lead to social, cultural, and economic success. This is clearly apparent in the UAE, and in the Middle East in general. This paper will chart the hegemonic process of English language domination in the region, with particular reference to the UAE. The Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) has enlisted the support of various private, Western consultancy companies – for example, NordAnglia, CfBt and others to work in partnership with the Education Zone and Ministry of Education to, according to their mission statement, “produce world-class learners who embody a strong sense of culture and heritage and are prepared to meet global challenges.” A strong command of English is seen to be key to achieving this goal and from Grade 1, many “model schools” are now teaching Maths and Science to Emirati children through the medium of English. So, the question is whose culture and heritage is being embodied?

Alptekin (1993) argues that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook authors will write, whether consciously or subconsciously, through culture-specific schemas, in most cases English and American. Pennycook (1998) refers to this as the cultural constructs of colonialism. The writers’ views, attitudes, beliefs, and values are transmitted through the teaching materials and so, as young Emirati learners acquire new sets of skills in English, Maths, and Science from the newly created English-medium curriculum (written by western consultants), they are also being exposed to the cultural system embodied therein. The gamble being taken here is of a potential loss both of competency in mother tongue Arabic and of cultural and social identity. Ironically, 2008 was declared the year of National Identity in the UAE. However, it seems that “Auntie English” has, in fact, been invited to stay.

This paper will address the current language of instruction policy in the UAE, with reference to other Gulf States such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. It will engage in a discussion of the official discourse and rationale behind such policies and their possible effects on Arabic as a language of science and academia and as a symbol of cultural identity.

## **The United Arab Emirates: Historical Background**

Today, English is used by at least 750 million people (British Council, 2013), though barely half of those speak it as a mother tongue. Some estimates have put

that figure closer to a billion. English is more widely spoken and written than any other language has ever been. McCrum et al. (1992) would argue that it has become the language of the planet, the first truly global language, but for others the apparent “pre-eminence of English is legitimated as being a ‘common sense’ social fact, thus concealing whose interests are being served by the dominant ideology and dominant professional practice” (Phillipson 1992:76). Global English as a “project,” as described by Phillipson (2009: 104), reflects more than the apparent worldwide spread of the language for economic and communication reasons. Describing the increasingly powerful status of English in a number of countries around the world, Phillipson argues that “the declared goals [of the spread of English] are primarily economic but also cultural and political, with considerable uncertainty about where the project will lead” (2009: 109).

Ku and Zussman (2008: 3) argue that not having a common language can have an adverse impact on international trade and that English is the “leading candidate to play this role.” This is supported by an International Research Foundation study (TIFR: 15) that suggests there are “measurable economic returns on English and plurilingual skills for individuals, corporations and economies.” In their global survey of corporations, it was found that “pluralism in English and the local language” were important factors to the success of the companies and this view was echoed by the 70,000 employees surveyed among whom “nine out of ten reported that English proficiency was either important or required for promotion at their company” (TIRF 2009: 20).

It is hard to deny the global influence that English has at this time, the beginning of the 21st century. It is widely considered today as a symbol of modernization, as a key to expanded functional roles, and as a lever facilitating success and upward mobility in culturally and linguistically pluralistic societies (Kachru 1990). Kachru, like Pennycook (1994) and Phillipson (2001), points to the insidious ways in which English has become much more than a simple tool for communication purposes or of “modernization,” into a symbol of power, authority, and elitism. He refers to English as being a “vehicle of values not always in harmony with traditional views and beliefs,” and a language that “unites elite speakers across ethnic, religious and linguistic boundaries used for political change” (1990: 2). However, Kachru does not view English as a static entity, but one that has adapted to suit its role in the maintenance of power. On the one hand, English can be seen as a liberating force, unifying countries, corporations, and individuals; on the other hand, it can be seen as a divisive weapon used by political and corporate power brokers to control the

international balance of power, flow of money, and cultural values in their own interests.

It is very difficult to make generalizations about the influence of English globally without looking more specifically at regional and local differences. Wherever English is spoken, it is against a background of that country or region's historical, political, religious, and cultural context. This paper will focus on the UAE specifically and more generally on the Gulf area and discuss how the history of this particular region is inextricably linked with the rising role of English as the language of globalization.

For the past 200 years, British influence, and therefore the influence of English language, in the region has been indisputable. From the early 18th century, the British viewed their role as being to police the waters of the Gulf and protect British trading interests from piracy (Bristol-Rhys 2009: 111), although, arguably they were equally guilty of piracy and destroying other ships themselves. At the turn of the 19th century, the British, through a series of treaties, insulated and isolated what were then known as the Trucial States. A poor region, which relied heavily on the fishing and pearling industry, it was nevertheless strategically very important to the British as a gateway, via the Gulf, to Iran, colonial India, and beyond. In the UAE, it was not until the discovery of oil in the late 1950s that modern infrastructure started to be developed. Interestingly, many of the historical documents relating to the region at the time were written by British soldiers, traders, and sailors and are therefore "the very people who represented hegemony" (Bristol-Rhys 2009:110) and certainly not without bias. Bristol-Rhys falls short of referring to the Gulf region as part of Britain's colonial empire, although clearly the British forces were dominant there, especially in the coastal areas. In 1838, the British forced the Gulf leaders to sign an anti-slavery agreement which effectively gave them free rein to board, detain, and inspect ships (Kazim 2000). Bristol-Rhys (2009: 112) reflects, "The British are as ubiquitous as sand and camels, and the history of the country is inextricably tied to the British." Darwin (1999: 159) referred to the Middle East region as Britain's "undeclared empire" and argued that this informal empire status was important in order to protect British India and its trade and communication routes (Onley 2005: 42): "Britain's primary motive for entering into these relationships was strategic: to establish a cordon sanitaire around British India."

Historians, including Davidson (2005), Hawley (1970), and Kelly (1968) offer other insights into the motives of the British in the region, and Al Qasimi (1986), the ruler of Sharjah, points to the destruction of the Qawasim trading economy as being a direct result of British policy to control the trading in the Gulf. Bristol-

Rhys (2009) cites accounts which present the British as more friendly, being on first-name terms with the leaders and acting as allies, supporting and helping to develop the administration of the country. Yet other accounts, according to Bristol-Rhys, paint the British as interfering imperialists who were evicted at the hands of Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (Abu Dhabi) and Shaikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum (Dubai) (Bristol-Rhys, 2009).

There is an undeniable link between the country now known as the United Arab Emirates and Britain. Whether for friendly or other motives, the British have played their part in the development of the country. So too have the Americans and a variety of other countries. The British, for example, built the first runway in the country for their Royal Air Force planes to land in Sharjah. Apart from the military connections, civilian companies from English-speaking countries have been integral to the rapid development of the UAE. International giants such as Microsoft and PepsiCo have head offices in the country and the cranes of construction companies such as Halcrow and Taylor-Woodrow are visible evidence of the profitable contribution that international companies have made to the country's development. The UAE offers a range of business opportunities for entrepreneurs, from the individual businessman to multinational corporations. Invariably, the common language linking the employees of these companies is almost always English, and not Arabic. Hence, a good command of English, and the ability to negotiate various varieties of English, is directly linked to employment prospects and economic success in the region, as many of these international companies are among the top employers, offering attractive salaries and good promotion opportunities. Competency in the English language has become synonymous with career success.

### ***Educational Context and National Identity***

In March 2009, an announcement was published in the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* declaring that the National Research Foundation of the UAE had approved funding for a center for Bilingualism and Bilingual Education to research and promote academic and professional proficiency in Modern Standard Arabic and English in the country. Zayed University, which was slated to house the center, is committed to its national graduates emerging as “well-prepared professionals ready to become leaders in government, business, civil society and family life.” To do this, the graduates of all programs are expected to “command both the linguistic resources of their modernised mother tongue (Arabic) and the language of international communication (English)” (Piller 2009). Unfortunately, the center, due to lack of funding, did not get off the ground. However, it should

be mentioned in this context that in spite of official discourse, and an apparent awareness of the importance of Arabic, there is practically no bilingualism at UAE universities. Some universities, like Zayed University, have some courses in Arabic in some departments, but English remains the dominant language of instruction (Troudi & Jendli 2011).

Clearly, equal proficiency in both languages in the UAE is associated with success, not only in the professional and political sphere, but also in the social and familial environ. Arabic is important as the official language of the country and of the Koran. Young graduates are effectively being groomed to be bilingual, both in their private lives as well as their public lives. It is commonly thought that only by being bilingual (English/Arabic), can Emirati nationals take their place as modern citizens who are able to compete on the international stage. The focus on the importance of English is reinforced at all levels in the education sector with subjects such as Maths and Science being taught through the medium of English at primary level, in some educational zones, and at tertiary level. In the state-funded Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), a basic level of competency in English is a prerequisite for entering the college: graduation from the college is only possible with an appropriate International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score (currently 5.5) irrespective of the level of success in the content areas, which are all taught via English. Similar restrictions also apply for entry into the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU), Zayed University, and if students wish to apply for scholarships to study abroad. There is a prerequisite English and Maths competency requirement which is assessed by the school-leaving exit exam, Common Educational Proficiency Assessment (CEPA), administered by NAPO, the national admissions placement office. This is a two-hour written English exam with Arabic and English instructions and a 90-minute bilingual multiple choice maths exam. The results from the placement test determine which institution the candidate is eligible to apply to. There is currently no test of Arabic for entry into a state-funded tertiary institution.

Since unification in 1972, the demographic composition of the UAE has changed. In the 1960s, UAE citizens constituted 60 percent of the population, but this was down to 25 percent by 1980, and in a census conducted in 2006, this was found to be between 15 and 20 percent (Saayegh 2008). Due to the intense period of development in the UAE since the late 70s, there has been an influx of foreign workers of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Emirati nationals are numerically a minority in their own country and the language spoken between all the expatriate residents and the local population is often English and other

languages such as Hindi and Urdu, not Arabic. There is regular debate in the local media about the issue of national and cultural identity and that is intrinsically linked to the perceived decline in both the prevalence and status of the national language, Arabic. Al-Kitbi states, “Worries about the national identity emanate largely from two main factors: demographic and cultural. Demographically speaking, we have become a minority in our homeland. This has seriously threatened the stability of our society, while its values and mother tongue are adversely influenced by these demographic shifts” (Al Kitbi 2008: 2).

Al Kitbi (2008) specifies three key areas contributing to the growing feeling of insecurity about national identity: the huge multinational foreign presence in the UAE; the UAE’s educational policy; and the government’s economic strategies. In order to encourage a sense of national identity, she emphasizes the need to promote Arabic in daily life, officially and individually, and to promote national education, media, and culture through the medium of Arabic.

The population of the UAE, and the Middle East region generally, is a young one. According to Lock (2008), six out of ten of the Middle East region’s local population is under the age of 29. In the UAE, 34 percent of nationals are under the age of 24 (CIA World Factbook, 2013). In previous generations, employment choices for the indigenous population were few, but as a result of globalization, the Internet and satellite television, today’s youth are bombarded with images and ideas, in both English and Arabic, which may sit uncomfortably with their traditional past. Khalaf (2002: 18) refers to this as “a rupture in the local life pattern and their historical memory of their social self.” The question is, to what extent is this feeling of uncertain cultural identity a direct result of the perceived status of English as compared with that of Arabic?

Michael, cited in Kayman (2004: 5), refers to the beginnings of compulsory education in nineteenth-century England, when children were sent to school “to learn their mother tongue.” He argues that, because language itself is cultural, children had to be educated in English to sustain the “national imagined community,” and that, through the language, children “learnt how to be English.” This was followed through in colonial British India where English literature was taught “to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Lord Macaulay, cited in Kayman, 2004:5). The link between language and culture here is indisputable, especially through the vehicle of literature, of reading the language.

Phillipson (1992) and Pennycook (1994) cite the British Council's promotion of English language teaching from the late 1950s in Europe as not so much a means of inculcating the learners with the culture, but more as a way of ensuring that British ideological and commercial interests were maintained in Europe and further afield. Following on from this came the explosion in global, technical communication via the Internet. English, once again, is the dominant language of this and, consequently, the phenomenon known as globalization. Giddens (cited in Kayman 2004:13) writes "Globalisation is political, technological and cultural as well as economic" (p. 13) and so the language of English has become not only a vehicle for promoting English culture but also the "technical tool" for global communication.

In the UAE, as everywhere, the use of the Internet as a means of communication has increased exponentially and so too the use of English as a result. But does this necessarily mean that the two languages, Arabic and English, are necessarily in competition with one another? Does it mean that, as Al-Kitbi (2008) fears, Arabic will be lost and the values of the Emiratis will be subjugated to Western ideals and culture via English? Chew (1999) argues that Phillipson's reference to English as a "lingua Frankenstein" is misplaced, and that as a true lingua franca, its use is pragmatic: it is the users who communicate a message via the language, and it is not the language itself that is necessarily culture- and value-bound. Chew goes further to suggest that the standing of a language is not as dependent, as Phillipson would perhaps argue, on the political and economic power of the country of origin but more on the overall use of the language. In this case the perpetuation of Arabic would seem certain, given that Arabic is the language of the Holy Quran and that there are currently estimated to be 1.6 billion Muslims, roughly one fifth of the world's population, engaging with the language. However, evidence suggests that the level of command of Arabic among Emiratis is declining: anecdotal evidence from students suggests that they feel more competent in written English than they do in Arabic (Troudi and Jendli 2011). This is partly because of the challenge of the dichotomy in Arabic between the spoken or colloquial language and that of classical, written Arabic but also because they have simply had more exposure to reading and writing in English in their school experience. Randall and Samimi found that police officers surveyed in Dubai, however, did not see this as a disadvantage: "the use of English is seen in a positive light, embedding ideas of modernization..... there is no evidence that such a widespread use of English may have a negative impact on the Arabic language" (2010: 49).



## **English as “Auntie”**

In the UAE, home to a wide variety of nationalities, English is being appropriated and used according to the needs of its speakers. It is used by Emiratis and non-Emiratis not only to communicate with each other, but also among themselves. So are Arabic, Punjabi, Gujarati, Pashtun, Hindi, and other languages. It could be argued that Phillipson’s theory of a hegemonic Anglo-American ploy to perpetuate the sociocultural and economic interests of the US and the UK is part of the reason for the status of English, but not the whole story. The British Council has a strong presence in the UAE, and there are many other universities and institutions promoting the teaching of EFL/ESL and offering the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and IELTS courses, which are of course, very lucrative for the institutions concerned. These courses are available to all who can afford them, not just the local Emirati population. So, in a sense, it could be argued that the teaching of English in the UAE is no more than a business contract crossing all cultural and linguistic boundaries. That is, however, over-simplifying the situation.

As we have already seen, Zayed University is interested in some level of biligualism. HCT, a federally funded institution, with male and female campuses in every Emirate and a current enrolment of over 18,000 UAE national students (only UAE nationals may attend), offers more than 80 programs, all of which are delivered through the medium of English. English study has therefore been federally mandated at the post-secondary level. There is an economic reason for this. Federal policymakers are concerned that the public sector cannot accommodate all the young nationals looking for work and they, therefore, need to open up opportunities for Emiratis in the private sector, currently heavily dependent on cheaper, imported labor. A good command of English is regarded as one way of gaining access into the private sector workforce.

According to the 2010 UAE Yearbook (Vine), only 8 percent of Emirati university applicants had the required English level to exempt them from an intensive English program. These “bridge” or “foundation” programs are extremely expensive. In 2008, Zayed University spent approximately Dh40 million (20 percent of its academic budget) on preparing students to reach the English level required for their program choices. In response to this, federal policy began to focus more acutely on the school sector.

### ***Expatriate Teaching Schemes in the UAE***

Since 1971, the UAE’s education system has grown from just 74 schools to over 750, and by 2001, a literacy rate of 75 percent had been achieved (Kazim 2000).



However, despite this rapid progress, the education system faces many challenges. Mograby (1999, cited in Clarke, 2008) refers to the following as possible factors in this situation: unclear or conflicting educational missions and goals; inappropriate methods of teaching and learning; inflexible curricula programs; and low school life expectancy. Clarke (2006) claims that part of the reason for this is the “pedagogical gulf” between the existing and the aspirational levels of schooling – of traditional rote-learning as opposed to more experiential learning. Another “gulf” is the fact that most of the UAE government school teachers are non-Emirati expatriate teachers, culturally, but not necessarily linguistically different from their students. In 2008, over 80 percent of the male teachers working in the public sector were expatriate Arabs (Ridge 2010). By 2020, according to the Ministry of Education’s Vision 2020 document, the Emiratization of teaching staff is scheduled to reach 90 percent, but one of the main barriers to this is the “poor grasp of English” of the UAE nationals (Al-Abed et al. 2005: 228).

Part of the “2020 vision” was the creation of 50 Madares Al-Ghad (schools of tomorrow) government schools in 2007. These were mandated to improve the levels of competency in Maths, Science, and English, through the medium of English. The Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) embarked on an aggressive recruitment drive, with its private educational consultants (including Nord Anglia, CfBT, SABIS, Penta International Limited, and Mosaica) contracted to find who they considered to be the appropriate teaching staff. According to a teacher recruitment advertisement designed to entice English-speaking teachers from abroad to work in the Al Ghad schools, graduates of these schools would be “fully bilingual, knowledgeable about their rich culture and heritage, educated in an active learning environment, skilled in the use of information technology, soundly grounded in Mathematics and Science and prepared for higher education, successful careers, healthy lives and parenthood, all within a global context” (Burke 2007). This was a very broad and far-reaching set of goals, which not only include academic skills but also life skills (parenting, healthy living) and learning about the culture and heritage of the UAE. It would seem a tall order for an expatriate, English-speaking teacher, to teach the students about their own heritage and culture, without directly knowing about it themselves, and through the medium of English rather than Arabic, the language in which that heritage and culture is rooted.

The principals of the Al Ghad schools voiced their concerns in 2009 at the Federal National Council (FNC) meeting, citing the demise of Arabic as a major worry. The principal of a boys primary school in Dubai stated, “we have noticed that the younger children just don’t use their Arabic as much; their vocabulary is

suffering. They cannot even describe the body parts in Arabic because they are learning the English words for them in science classes.” A further concern was, according to the principal of a girls’ primary school in Dubai, that the instruction of Maths and Science in English was causing problems between students and parents: “the parents are not as good in English, so they can’t help their children with homework, or explain a concept to them, and in turn, the children don’t know their numbers in Arabic ...” (Khalaf 2009).

*“English as Medium of Instruction” Policy in the Gulf*

As we have discussed, the dilemma for the policymakers is how to bridge that gap between having a country whose citizens are capable of operating within a global context while retaining their national identity. This is a dilemma not only for the UAE but for the Gulf region as a whole. The challenge that faces the UAE and other Gulf nations like Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia is which educational and language policy approach to follow in order to achieve a balance between the need for a competitive national workforce capable of taking part in a world economy, while at the same time, maintaining a sense of national and linguistic identity.

These two goals are not contradictory in nature. In fact, many countries around the globe, and some emerging economies, are contributing to the world economy without running the risk of eroding their first languages or cultural heritage. The situation in the UAE is different because of the historical, economic, and demographic reasons explained above. Perhaps what makes this situation more complex is the apparent paradox between the official rhetoric of cultural and linguistic revival, and the official educational and language of instruction policies being put into practice in emirates like Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

The official discourse coming from the UAE national bodies like the FNC is the necessity to address the threat of erosion of Emirati culture represented by major elements such as social habits, language, and customs. The forces of globalization and modern lifestyles as well as electronic media and an increase in material income have been identified as major contributors to the waning focus on cultural and linguistic heritage. There is also a clear and unequivocal recognition of Arabic as a “major component of the Arab identity and a strong preserver of heritage” (Al-Karni 2010). There have also been official calls and plans to reinstate Arabic as a vibrant language both in Qatar and the UAE. Some cultural activities and festivals have been organized in these two countries to highlight the importance of Arabic. There is therefore no doubt about the awareness of the waning status of Arabic. What is

needed is a clear strategy of how to revive it in the school system. The challenge for this revival surpasses the established issues often related to the problem of teaching Arabic, such as outdated curriculum and materials, inappropriate methodology, and the lack of teacher education schemes for Arabic teachers. While all these factors obviously need serious attention if Arabic is to regain its status, the real problem lies in the official educational position of Arabic when compared to English and the unwritten messages that the current language of instruction policy sends out about Arabic.

### **Unequal Bilingualism**

Recent, but overall limited, efforts to revive Arabic are currently taking place within a wider educational context that is characterized by dwindling academic standards in Arabic proficiency and an increasing reliance on English as a medium of instruction in the primary and secondary school sectors in many Gulf States. In the last decade, there has been a sharp increase in the number of parents sending their children to private English-medium schools. In Qatar, the independent school system has opted to teach Mathematics and Sciences in English. This is similar to the recent scheme of the National School Model (NSM) introduced by ADEC, which will see Maths and Science subjects taught exclusively by native-speaker teachers of English, while other subjects such as Islamic Studies and Social Studies will be taught by Arabic speaking teachers starting with Grade 1. The scheme also introduces pupils in Kindergarten 1 and 2 to a bilingual education with an English and Arabic teacher working collaboratively.

It is clear that the rationale behind such a scheme is to increase the exposure of the students to English and to better prepare them for a tertiary education where English is the medium of instruction. This version of “bilingual education,” also described as “bi-literal teaching” methods, is being increasingly adopted in the Gulf as a necessary approach towards a knowledge economy. Given the global status of English, this approach is shrouded in a new discourse of educational inevitability. This kind of bilingualism is at the root of why Arabic will continue its fall in its social status and in the proficiency levels of its students. Being an unnatural sort of bilingualism, given the linguistic and ethnic history of the Gulf, the message sent to the students is that of the implicit, if not explicit, inferiority of Arabic when compared to English. Within an educational curriculum that confines Arabic to the study of social studies and religion while elevating English to be the vehicle for sciences and mathematics, there is no surprise that students might associate English with modernity, technology, and power and link Arabic to cultural heritage, Islam,

and national identity (Findlow 2006; Troudi 2009). Arabic is seen by some students as a language of the past, with almost a romantic image, reminiscent of past glories (Findlow 2006).

Without studying the sciences in Arabic, the current linguistic dualism or bilingualism that characterizes the UAE and other Gulf States will remain unbalanced and unequal. This is because scientific subjects are more likely to have greater academic prestige than non-scientific subjects, and Arabic will become a language that is not perceived as a carrier of science. In this context, Findlow's question of "how far the requirement of native Arabic speakers to pursue their higher studies in English has been an inevitable response to market needs, and how far a symptom of neo-colonialist power politics in which Arabic is relegated as non-useful and Arab culture as 'other'?" (2006: 21) remains highly relevant to the current status of Arabic. There might be voices arguing that Arabic is not in any danger, especially with the current resurgence of the link between national and linguistic identity espoused by some governmental institutions, yet the reality on the ground shows a different picture of an "otherised Arabic" in education, and in other domains such as business, media, and entertainment. As for the association between development and English medium education, the argument for mother tongue education can be further reinforced by looking at cases such as Japan, South Korea, China, and some European countries where advances in science and technology have been made in first languages.

It should also be mentioned in this context that the trend of sending Arab children to private English-medium schools, which has shown a sharp increase in the last decade in the Gulf, is (Al-Dhubaib 2006) partly the result of large-scale parental dissatisfaction with the quality of state education and national curricula (Troudi 2007). This choice of private education has also been made possible by a relatively high material standard of living and the preponderance of a consumerist style of life. Sending one's children to private, English-medium schools is a sign of social prestige. Educational choices in the area can also be explained in terms of the growing effect of Western mores and way of life on the lifestyles of Gulf citizens and residents. This expansion does not always sit comfortably with the norms, values, and traditions of the area (Buzan and Gobzales-Pelaez 2009).

### ***A Double Burden***

Absent from the academic discourse in the region is a link between English as a language of instruction and the inevitable demise of the status of Arabic as a language of science and academia (Troudi 2009). There are still very few academic

research publications about the issue. While Arabic is not in danger as a language of social communication and media in the Arab world, the “English as a language of instruction” policy will expedite its erosion as a channel for academic and scientific content. What needs to be debated and evaluated is the educational and linguistic double burden an Arab student bears when forced to study in a foreign language. Research shows a direct link between mother tongue instruction and educational achievement (Marke 2002; William and Cook 2002). In the case of first language instruction, familiarity and command of the language and its cultural elements facilitate the learning of curriculum subjects whereas instruction through a foreign language can disenfranchise learners who do not necessarily benefit from it (Rea-Dickins, Khamis and Olivero 2013). In Malaysia, which is often hailed as a successful model of development, the English-medium policy for sciences and mathematics was recently abandoned in favor of a return to the use of Bahasa Malaysia and Chinese as languages of instruction in the primary and secondary system. This change in direction is due to the realization that Malaysian students did not improve in mathematics and science proficiency as a result of English instruction. This policy reversal confirms established findings in educational studies which show strong links between educational achievement and learning in the mother tongue (Williams 1996).

In the UAE and the Gulf, the issues of academic burden that come with English-medium instruction, and the students’ lack of choice over the medium of instruction, remain under-researched. In a rare study on the academic challenges faced by university students studying scientific subjects in English, Bielenberg (2004) states that teachers of mathematics and information technology of first- and second-year university students have resorted to a special kind of academic English to help their students understand the content. Teachers’ talk is characterized by slow speed and a deliberate focus on selected vocabulary directly related to the content of the subject being taught. In addition to the nature of the content of the specific scientific field, Arab university students have to grapple with additional difficulties associated with the nature of English, such as vocabulary, grammatical structures, rhetorical and cohesive devices, and phraseological patterning. Troudi (2009) argues that this situation is not surprising given the way students perceive English and the quality of their English preparation prior to university. It is a common university experience to be challenged by the linguistic structures of even mother tongue academic textbooks and the specific new jargon of scientific subjects. In a second-language medium of instruction, such as pertains in the Gulf, this experience becomes vastly more challenging.

On top of this linguistic burden, students in the Gulf need to be able to manage the psychological pressure and anxiety of having to do well in English examinations to access academic departments. Pennycook (1994: 42) describes this psychological state by claiming that, “students around the world are not only obliged to reach a high level of competence in English to pursue their studies but they are also dependent on forms of Western knowledge that are often of limited value and extreme inappropriacy to the local context.”

This kind of alienation through English during one’s university studies remains under-researched in the Gulf. The “English as medium of instruction” policy adopted in tertiary, and increasingly in primary and secondary education in the Gulf, such as the National School Model (NSM) scheme described previously, does emanate from a genuine concern on the part of the local policymakers about the need for the Gulf students to be able to compete at national and international levels. However, this policy also has some major side effects. Such a policy will reinforce the splurge of overseas English-language teaching bodies, educational models, and experts, and this might even stifle any much-needed national solutions. Given that the model of educational development is seen to be “best coming from the West,” mainly the UK or USA, local teachers with their expertise and initiatives are not going to be able to contribute fully to educational solutions. In cases where native-speaker English teachers are seen as the best and the only teachers who should be allowed in English medium classes, the fallacy of the native-speaker superiority is perpetuated and reinforced (Phillipson 2002; 2009). This of course takes place at the expense of diversity, competence, and a major need for Gulf students to see successful role models represented through English teachers from the Gulf and the Arab world.

### *Voices from inside the Gulf*

While there is a dearth of research studies on the status of English and medium of instruction policies in the Gulf, there is certainly no shortage of voices questioning such policies and warning about their major consequences on mother tongue literacy and national identity. Looking at the situation in the UAE, Randal (2010: 2) suggested that “the socio-linguistic and socio-political consequences of a move to more English-medium instruction really need to be seriously researched and considered in a wider context than the narrow goal of university entrance.” Al Karni (2010), representing the Gulf Educational Bureau (GEB), a body overseeing educational issues at the level of the Gulf States with its headquarters in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, insists that the teaching of English is not going to take place at the expense of national identity. Believing that Arabic needs to be maintained and

supported, the GEB founded the Center of the Arabic Language in Sharjah to look into ways of improving the teaching of Arabic. It should be noted here that most of the voices calling for the protection of Arabic in the Gulf were not critical of the language of instruction policy. In fact, the GEB recognizes English as the language of science and that without it, “we cannot provide the right sources of knowledge to our students ... we need to teach English at primary level because it is a social, modern and a professional need” (Al Karni 2010: 4). A strong association is made between English and modernity, even in discourses calling for the protection of Arabic.

As stated earlier, at the level of official rhetoric, no link is being made between the English-medium language policy and the dwindling status of Arabic in schools. Al Dhubaib (2006) is one of the few scholars who have openly criticized the language policy and the hegemony of English in the educational systems and media in the Gulf, and in Saudi Arabia in particular. He warns that Arabic is currently facing major challenges and he traces the decline of Arabic to historical reasons such as colonialism and current forms of cultural and economic imperialism within an era of incessant globalization and ideological conflicts between major economic and political powers.

Another important reason for this decline, according to Al Dhubaib, is an internal and self-inflicted defeatism. The Arab world is suffering from a massive psychological defeat and self-doubt regarding its language, political institutions, and models of development. Many in the Arab world perpetuate the legacy of colonialism by emulating the ex-colonizer’s models of education and development (Troudi 2009). The way forward, according to many Arab intellectuals, is to raise awareness in the Arab world about the importance of Arabic, both in maintaining the Arab identity and in strengthening political and economic independence (Al Askari 2002; Shibani, 2003). In fact, Al Dhubaib puts Arabic as a major condition for a modern Arab renaissance and does not see it as less able than English for the presentation of ideas, international collaboration, scientific inventions, and knowledge.

In Kuwait, specifically at the level of media and public debate, there have been voices of concern regarding the status of Arabic and its potential to contribute to world knowledge. For Al-Askari (2009), being an “Arabophone” does not clash with the globalization of knowledge, trade, and the free exchange of ideas. However, in order to contribute equally with other major languages in the world, Arabic has to undergo a major reform at the levels of educational policy, curriculum, and teacher preparation.



Describing the medium of instruction policy at tertiary level in Kuwait, Al Rubaie (2010: 72) states that it “currently experiences some of the tenets of language imperialism listed by Phillipson... [and] the policy extrapolates pro-imperialist constraints beyond the realm of ELT.” She states that one of the consequences of such a policy of “anglicized” curricular content is that some university graduates face communication problems in certain domains, such as the medical services. For example, doctors have been reported to find it difficult to speak in Arabic and explain procedures and treatments to Arabic-speaking patients. The Secretary General of the Center for the Arabisation of Health Sciences for the League of Arab States has called for a strategy for the Arabization of medical and health sciences in university departments. However, such a strategy can only become reality if it is supported by political will and a realistic and futuristic approach to language policy.

In the Gulf, and to a wider extent in the Arab world, there is concern about the potential threat that the spread and hegemony of English poses to the religious and cultural identities of Arabs. This has been exacerbated by the aftermath of the 9/11 events and the escalation of anti-terrorist discourses in the media. There were also concerns voiced about the influence of foreign powers on educational decision-making and curriculum content in some Gulf States (Glasser: 2003). The other side of the argument is that there is no denial of how English has transformed the educational, professional, and social lives of many people in the Gulf. Al Rubaie revealed that “Kuwaiti female residents who managed to enter higher-education establishments envisage English as unlocking internal and external state boundaries, and helping them to virtually or physically travel between countries and cultures” (2010: 200). She further argues that, for some Arab women, “English-medium professional instruction and the English language became powerful tools of self-construction and rebellion against social and political regulations” (Al Rubaie 2010: 200).

### ***Complexity of Language Policy***

Policy-making in education, and the language of instruction issue in particular, are complex challenges because of their multifarious nature. Because of the social composition and economic realities of countries like Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and the UAE, the stakeholders involved in education represent a variety of agendas, approaches, and even educational priorities. Western educational companies, schools, and universities bring in the global dimension with its economic and cultural agendas, while local voices are striving to reach a state of equilibrium between global forces and local knowledge. In the UAE, the situation is made even



more complex because it is not clear whether language policy is a top-down affair or a bottom-up one (Findlow 2006; Troudi 2009).

Within the current climate of the powerful presence of English in the educational institutions and societies of the Gulf, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect to reverse the situation and reinstate Arabic as a language of science and academia. In addition to strong political will and a need to reform the teaching of Arabic in terms of pedagogy, content, and materials, a major challenge remains at the level of attitude. Arab voices, calling for the creation of space for the local in knowledge construction, face additional challenges from within their own circles. There are, unfortunately, in the Arab world, voices calling for the reduction of Arabic to the study of heritage, folklore, and religion. These are voices that do not believe in the ability of Arabic to compete with other modern languages as a carrier of the sciences. These attitudes have been passed on to students at the Gulf universities. For example, Findlow (2006), who 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, reports that all academic, economic, and political discourses acknowledge the role of English as the language of globalisation, while native languages such as Arabic have become “symbolic of nostalgia and authenticity” (Findlow 2006: 2).

Perhaps this kind of unequal educational bilingualism will continue to describe the educational language policies of the Gulf for the foreseeable future. It is a bilingualism that is no doubt viewed by those in power as a positive and enabling tool that learners will use to negotiate the demands of national and external worlds. The participants in Findlow’s 2006 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 redefined 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, an increasingly strong feature of the Gulf, will enable “two identities and cultures to be claimed at once, [and] can thus be claimed as inevitable, even essential, for societies undergoing processes of acute global-local transition” (Findlow 2006: 22).

## **Conclusion**

The position of English in the UAE and other Gulf countries is still being presented, by policymakers and academics alike, as neutral, necessary, and harmless. It is a language that came into the region a few decades ago as a friendly “Auntie”, shy and not very confident of its role. It was, however, on the whole content with its function as a foreign language. Now this situation has changed and this “Auntie” has become much more confident, stronger, and certainly more established and even aggressive. Auntie’s language has become a medium of learning and has managed to associate itself with power, social prestige, knowledge, modernism, the future, and even freedom. However, some will argue that it is an “Auntie” with more than one face, that it has become too loud, pervasive, and invasive; and that underneath its educational aims it has hegemonic agendas that serve the global forces of linguistic and cultural imperialism. If left unchecked, this “Auntie” might cause some irredeemable damage to local cultures, languages, and educational practices. Al Kitbi’s views of English in the UAE clearly question the supposedly gentle and benign role of this “Auntie” and depict it as a dominant and pervasive intruder:

The increasing reliance on English is an example of the sort of proposed changes in educational systems that serve foreign interests more than they serve the societies of the Gulf. The insistence of foreign powers on a change in the educational philosophy in the Arab Gulf region comes within the context of the control and suppression of university youth so that their world view in the future will be compatible with and serve the interests of those powers (Al-Kitby 2006: 2).

We believe that the way forward is to continue in the efforts of reclaiming the local (Canagarajah 2005) to reach a balanced version of linguistic dualism and educational bilingualism. Arabic is and has been a language of science and academia; it is beyond the scope of this chapter to endeavor to justify and support such a statement (for further reading on this point, see Abou Ghayour (2014) and Kacem (2014) who argue for Arabic as a vehicle for scientific knowledge). In theory, Arab students do not need to study their academic disciplines, scientific or not, in English in order to gain reliable and practical knowledge useful for their futures. For voices concerned about the need for Arab students to communicate their knowledge and needs to the rest of the international community, there is always the option of English for academic purposes (Troudi 2009). What the educational system in the UAE needs is a critical look at the status of Arabic and the linguistic and academic proficiency of the Emirati students. Troudi and Jendli’s study (2011) revealed that university students were struggling to perform adequately in Arabic. Many were denied access to jobs because of poor Arabic language skills.

Perhaps Al-Sultan's (2009) statement from Saudi Arabia captures the feeling of many in the Arab world about the problematic status of English:

Knowing or mastering the English language is of paramount importance, but not to the extent of submerging our cultural identity. By making English the medium of instruction, we will be making dead our own language. Japan and South Korea have not achieved progress by phasing out or marginalizing their national languages. They have, instead, adopted an ambitious translation program that enriched their languages. The deficiency of English has not deterred the Japanese and Koreans from excelling in all spheres of knowledge, while at the same time preserving their cultural identity (*Arab News*, 2009).

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# CHALLENGES TO EDUCATION IN THE GCC DURING THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

This volume examines the applied and theoretical frames of reference that operate in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and probes the relevant aspects of scale, proportion, and the grounding of education in the Gulf region. The five papers included in this volume discuss elements of policy and curriculum, teachers and teacher identity, students and student identity, and social conditions that affect teaching and learning in the 21st century in the GCC states. Together, these papers raise and discuss issues of critical importance as we plan for education in the GCC for the 21st century.

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