

Politics of English in the Arabian Gulf

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Abstract: The number of American, English and Australian branch campuses in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region almost doubled between 2000–2007 from 140 to 260, and Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) alone have established over 40 branch campuses during this period. The language of instruction at these institutions is primarily English, which is creating some tensions in the region related also to the rapid influx of other expatriate language groups including Urdu, Nepali, and Tagalog. Not only do native Arabic speakers fear the loss of cultural and linguistic heritage, as Gulf governments begin heavily investing in biotechnology, ITC capacity and research output (patents and peer-reviewed scientific papers) educated elites in the GCC countries are confronting the widespread use of English on the internet and the international science community. Policy makers, particularly in Qatar, UAE, and Saudi Arabia, are responding to the growing use of English by sponsoring cultural heritage museums and libraries, programs in digitization of Arabic heritage books, and funding research into real-time Arabic-English and English-Arabic machine translation. This contribution outlines the debates found both in scholarly journals as well as popular regional newspapers in English and Arabic on the use of the English language, and analyzes the cultural, political, and social context of these arguments.

Key Words: English language–political dimensions, English instruction–Arabian Gulf (GCC)

Introduction

Although surpassed by Chinese and Spanish in numbers of native speakers, English may be one of the most influential languages both today and historically since the mid-19th century, primarily due to the industrial and military power of Great Britain and the United States and their Diaspora. The issues of world English and linguistic imperialism have been discussed extensively recently, no less so in the Arabian Gulf where Arabic is still the official and dominant language, even though in some Gulf Cooperation Country (GCC) countries with large southeast Asian expatriate labor forces, it may be becoming a minority language in terms of numbers of users. English has become a symbol of the westernization and modernization that has resulted from hydrocarbon revenues that fuel most of the Gulf economies. As these nations strive to diversify their economies, lower the rates of brain drain, and equip their citizens for participation in the global economy, English has taken center stage in many debates about religion, politics, and culture and the language has frequently been blamed directly for the erosion of Islamic values.

In spite of the visible negative impacts that English may have on local cultures, many younger students entering the workforce appear to recognize the economic benefits of English and are resigned to its use in international business, law, and science. In response to the phenomena of expatriates supplanting Gulf nationals in the private sector workforce, primarily because expatriates command lower wages, GCC governments have launched national preferential hiring programs called variously Qatarization, Emiratization, Omanization and Saudization. Ironically the acquisition of English may be beneficial in these programs in helping to shift the national Arabic-speaking workforce out of the large public sector which is sometimes blamed for economic and developmental stagnation (over-inflated wages; rentier state model). Two studies on Emiratization, for example, by Al-Ali in 2006 and 2008 reported that low levels of English fluency present barriers to private sector workforce growth in the Emirates (Al-Ali, 2006, 2008; Mashood, 2009).

Historical Background

The linguistic and political influence of English on the Middle East region can be roughly divided into 3 broad historical periods: 1) Colonial period – beginning in the early 19th century, the United Kingdom cemented its power over India and many regions of the East, including Egypt, and direct contact with English speakers occurred through military, legal, and social linkages (colonization); after WWI and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, England and France divided the Levant into mandates such as Transjordan, Palestine and Mesopotamia where English continued as an administrative language; 2) the rise of World English as a *lingua franca* – by the

mid-20th century, the United States had emerged as a dominant world power as Europe lay in ruins from two world wars; this rise paralleled the growing use of English in science, technology, and professional discourse. Sporadic attempts to establish English secondary schools and universities in the region also began in the 19th century, with the establishment such institutions as the American University of Beirut (founded 1866) and the American University in Cairo (founded 1919). As oil wealth increased dramatically in the Gulf nations circa 1960-80, countries increasingly sent nationals abroad for higher education degrees as they themselves began to acquire higher education infrastructure; 3) knowledge economy era (mid-1990s): based on a series of UNDP, IMF, and World Bank reports citing low knowledge production in the region, an explosive growth in western branch campuses and western-style educational models occurred in which the language of instruction is primarily English; after 9/11, student visas to western higher education institutes were increasingly difficult to obtain for Muslims, particularly from regions of suspected Al-Qaeda activity (Al-Zubaidi, 2010: 109).

Specifically in the Arabian / Persian Gulf, England became involved in this region in the 19th century due to its interest in protecting trade routes originating in British India and controlling piracy, as well as checking Ottoman Empire influence in the region. Trucial agreements were signed with Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar between 1820 and 1916 and during this period these Sheikdoms with loosely defined borders and tribal structures were known as the Trucial States or the Trucial Coast. There was only a small Christian missionary presence in the region and even after the discovery of oil in the 1930s and 1940s, there were no overt attempts to supplant the religion, culture, or language of Arabic-speaking peoples, and local Emirs ran their governments in a traditional manner, albeit with British advisors (Political Resident) and restrictions on alienating lands without British approval. However, during the early oil era when large transnational Anglo-American corporations almost completely controlled the exploitation of petroleum reservoirs and simply paid out royalties to the ruling families, the power differential between English and Arabic can be seen clearly in this oil concession contract signed in 1934: "This Agreement is written in English and translated into Arabic. If there should at any time be disagreement as to the meaning or interpretation of any clause in this Agreement the English text shall prevail (Oil Concession Agreement 1934)" (Frade, 2007:55).

Cultural linguistics is important because historical language influences can powerfully impact the current attitudinal orientation of a society towards a former linguistic group, especially in the case of colonization. For example, Farrell, drawing on the study of El-Sayed, explains why the British model of education, now being rivaled by American institutions in the Gulf, has been so prevalent in Qatar. Farrell points out that "El-Sayed (1991) maintains that British Standard English may be an appropriate choice for the target of instruction in some schools in Western Asia, such as the Doha English Speaking School (DESS) in Doha, Qatar. This school follows the British curriculum and hires teachers with UK-recognized qualifications. Furthermore, due to a history of British colonization, Qataris value British Standard English and are exposed to it through British media. They have greater access to British books and materials, and are probably more likely to visit the United Kingdom than other English speaking countries. Thus, teaching British Standard English would be the optimal choice for a teacher at DESS" (Farrell, 1991: 4). Interestingly, all of the institutions in Qatar Foundation's (founded 1995) newly established Education City are based in the United States, since the government now has stronger political links to that country, as Qatar hosts several U.S. CENTCOM bases. Qatar also makes use of the U.S. Liquefied Natural Gas technology which has led to the current economic boom in that country. In a perceptive and controversial article entitled "Petro-Linguistics: The Emerging Nexus Between Oil, English, and Islam," based on his Doctor of Education thesis on English-medium education in the UAE, Sohail Karmani has posited an oil-language-power nexus which he sees operating in the Arabian Gulf (Karmani, 2005, 2010). His general thesis argues that "the decisions to initiate and facilitate the expansion of English [in the Gulf] were ultimately politically driven and wholly caught up in the global and regional struggle for greater control of the region's vital energy reserves" (Karmani, 2005:9-10).

Karmani's work has charted the influx of the English language learning industry, as both an economic and cultural force, into Arabic speaking nations. He further argues that these forces, arising from the 1950s to 70s, are enmeshed in the political sphere and are mutually reinforcing: "In their brief historical introduction on the origins of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Hutchinson and Waters (1987) note that the oil crises of the 1970s vastly accelerated the development of the ELT profession and helped usher in a new uncharted era in the teaching of English as an international language. English, they observe, suddenly became big business and commercial pressures began to exert an extraordinary influence (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). No longer simply a foreign language for casual study or a pastime to satisfy a personal linguistic curiosity, English was now destined to become a highly lucrative international commodity with an annual turnover of over \$9.6 billion (Language Travel Magazine, 2004)" (Karmani, 2005:6).

Another long quote from Karmani is introduced here since he has cogently summarized a phenomenon (the tremendous growth of English language teaching in the Gulf following the oil boom) that can be readily witnessed at conferences, book fairs, bookstores, career fairs, and secondary and tertiary institutions in most of the GCC countries: "Predictably, an extraordinary influx of ESL instructors, teacher trainers, ELT textbook publishers, and language course providers shortly followed while also thousands of Gulf Arab students were

awarded lavish scholarships to study English in Britain, Australia, and the United States. And as the phenomenal expansion of English translated into huge windfalls for the ELT industry, it all of a sudden became evident to the key players (e.g., British Council, AMIDEAST, Longman, Cambridge University Press, Heinle & Heinle, etc.) that “English” had now truly usurped an unwittingly powerful stake in the future development of the entire region” (Karmani, 2005:7). Critics have disagreed with Karmani’s analysis of the motivations and impact of this development, but his approach is valuable in looking frankly at the economics of educational trends which are too often couched in terms of idealistic and misleading rhetoric.

In response and contradistinction to Karmani’s work, in particular his article entitled ‘English, “terror” and Islam’, Moroccan scholar Ahmed Kabel drew attention to the productive power of post-colonial English as a discourse of creativity, resistance and appropriativity: “instead of considering English and its putative hegemonic discourses as an inhibitive and imposed encumbrance, we need to take into account how the language is constantly and unpredictably appropriated and creatively reshaped and expropriated to give voice to emerging agencies and subjectivities.... I suggest that appropriation, far from being drenched in a confrontational idiom, is a move towards new sites of collaboration and contestation, towards much wider human possibilities” (Kabel, 2007: 136).

The English Language as Symbolic of Western Culture: Linguistic Imperialism and the “Less Islam and More English” Debate

Discussed at length by Robert Phillipson in 1992 in his influential monograph *Linguistic Imperialism*, Phillipson has demonstrated how English Language Teaching (ELT) has been implicated in ‘neocolonialist reconstruction’ and imperialist aims. Numerous arguments for English as the best of all possible languages have been advanced in recent years in a wide variety of contexts – pragmatic arguments look at the sheer number of speakers, therefore laud English as the greatest facilitator of linguistic exchange. In addition, the internet was originally developed from United States networked military computers (ARPANET) and the structures of English and its semantic logic are embedded in computer codes and protocols; thus English has expanded its milieu to the international online ecosystem. A related Functionalist viewpoint argues that facility with English allows greater access to employment and the international business community. The arguments that English is ‘simpler’, ‘more transparent,’ ‘more logical,’ or ‘lacks complicated grammar,’ (the opposite is probably true due to numerous idiosyncratic variations and exceptions to rules) would be met with incredulity by anyone who has studied it as a foreign language. As Crystal points out about the rise in prominence of English in the 20th century, and global languages in general: “A language has traditionally become an international language for one chief reason: the power of its people – especially their political and military power. The explanation is the same throughout history. Why did Greek become a language of international communication in the Middle East over 2,000 years ago? Not because of the intellects of Plato and Aristotle: the answer lies in the swords and spears wielded by the armies of Alexander the Great. Why did Latin become known throughout Europe? Ask the legions of the Roman Empire” (Crystal, 2003: 9).

Imperialism can take numerous forms, such as cultural and linguistic, and both academic and popular discussions have arisen in the Gulf that English in the region has an underlying proselytizing, missionary and value laden subtext that may be at variance with or even contrary to Islamic values. As Ahmed notes, “in the UAE, for example, the language issue has caused heated debates and controversies in the academic and political arenas. It is believed that the Arabic language and ‘national identities’ are being ‘sidelined’ (Hellyer, 2008). English is beginning to be seen as a threat, dominating all aspects of life in these countries” (Ahmed, 2010: 13). Elyas believes that Karmani, for example, has been explicitly arguing that English language dissemination has an ultimate goal of de-Islamization: “As a consequence, Karmani believes that the teaching of English in this modern DNA age, as it has been practised in British Empire, serves as a tool for linguistic imperialism, cultural alienation, and in the case of Muslim countries a de-Islamization of a targeted nation” (Elyas, 2008: 36).

The British Council (founded 1934), which has been heavily involved in the teaching, testing, and awareness of English language and culture internationally, has been active in the Gulf (since 1959, a British Council office has opened an office in each of the GGC countries). The Council itself admits that the “cultural propaganda’ issued by it is designed to promote English values and achievements, not excluding parliamentary democracy. One of the first areas targeted by the Council was the Middle East (Charise, 2007; Pennycook, 1994). Pennycook has examined the role that governments played in supporting EFL and ELT groups such as the British Council.

One conservative Sheikh in Saudi Arabia has gone as far as to equate English with the language of the devil, etymologically linking the English word “please” [‘please,’ Arabic has only one bilabial plosive] with “Iblis,” the Arabic word for Satan. However, a study by Elyas in 2008 at King Abdul Aziz University found that studying another language does not necessarily diminish one’s heritage and concluded that “Saudi students agree (for the most part) that both the study of the English language and its culture are necessary in order to develop

their English comprehension. Thus, for these students, English does not appear to be an indication of an imperialistic purpose of Westernization of their Arabic identity” (Elyas, 2008: 45).

The Rentier state model (a state which derives a large proportion of its GDP from renting resources to foreign companies) has created a situation in which oil-rich Gulf nations feel compelled by the pressures of modernity and the not so subtle hints from the IMF and UNDP reports to modernize, resulting in the belief that foreign expertise must be imported to solve these problems of development – but this results in underdevelopment of local resources, local talent and local problem solving skills. Thus Moody, drawing on the work of Coffman, believes that the growth and interest in English language teaching (ELT) in the region as well as the American model of education is part of a larger pattern endemic to consumption-based rentier economies: “Similarly, Coffman (2003) places ELT in the context of a general tendency of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to ‘import ... foreign experts to perform the necessary technical and managerial functions’ rather than to focus on issues and problems from a local perspective; this fact in his view accounts for the misguided assumption that ‘any quality university program of study must be as thoroughly American as possible’ and the resulting ‘headlong rush toward adoption of the American education model’” (Moody, 2009:100).

On February 2, 2003, the *Washington Post* published Susan B. Glasser’s article “Qatar Reshapes Its Schools, Putting English Over Islam: Conservatives See Reform as Extension of U.S. Influence in Gulf” (Glasser, 2003:A20). The article, which described Qatar’s K-12 educational reform entitled “Education for a New Era,” sparked a number of debates. After the 9/11 attacks, both western countries, Gulf educators and intellectuals and reformers throughout the Gulf began to scrutinize Arabic-language textbooks and teaching methods, particularly in Saudi Arabia. The nations themselves viewed this interest and the subsequent suggestions for reform as intrusions into their cultural sovereignty. As Glasser writes, “Elsewhere in the Middle East, the role of the United States in promoting such change has at times overshadowed the post-Sept. 11 education debate. ‘American occupation,’ complained a Jordanian writer last week of a State Department initiative to promote education and other reforms. ‘American interference,’ declared a Kuwaiti religious leader, Abdul Razak Shuyji, referring to curriculum-reform efforts. ‘A curriculum should present our own identity, our own history, our own religion,’ Shuyji declared. ‘It’s not for others to come and try to change it’” (Glasser, 2003:A20). This article sparked critiques by Karmani and others, partially due to the superficial analysis of complex issues which is typical of journalistic writing.

The uneasy tension between indigenous culture and expatriate workforces has been exacerbated by the recent building boom in the Gulf from high oil prices, especially in the Emirates where Emiratis now only make up approximately 15% of the entire population. As early as 2004, the GCC general secretariat (GCCGS) noted in the report *The Comprehensive Development of Education at the GCC States* that a growing educational concern was the “Absence of cultural dimension in the educational process” (Abouammoh, 2009: 8). Gulf leaders have clearly recognized the role that education can play in maintaining cultural and linguistic heritage.

Accomodationism and Bilingualism

Many laborers in the Gulf hail from former English colonies (Pakistan and India) where English still exists as an important language. English therefore acts as a key lingua franca among different expatriate nationalities and between Arabs and expatriates (in particular Sino-Tibetan, Hindustani, and Austronesian language family speakers). In some Gulf countries, the expatriate population makes up over 81% (CIA, 2011).

A common fear throughout the Gulf is the loss and degradation of Arabic as a written and spoken language: “There are many within the Emirati and Arabic communities who are deeply concerned with the effect that such a language shift [to English] is having on the quality of the Arabic language used in the UAE. There is a lively debate in the press at the national level about the necessity to preserve and improve the Arabic language. It is a prime goal of the government in the UAE to preserve and protect Arabic culture and language and the federal government makes every effort through legislation to do so... in Dubai, the National Strategic Plan for 2016 specifically emphasizes the need to enhance Arabic language and local culture in society. 2008 was named as the year of national identity by Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed, President of the UAE, and Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President of the UAE, organized a national identity conference, the major theme of which was the degradation of the Arabic language” (Randall, 2010: 45).

As Syed notes, many instructors from Western English-speaking countries who come to work in the Gulf do indeed lack the requisite cultural and linguistic knowledge necessary to bridge the sometimes wide gap in the teacher-student relationship. Cultural sensitivity training is rarely, if ever, provided by educational institutions in the region. When the author, a non-Arabic speaker who has since gained a functional proficiency in the language, began working in the Gulf six years ago at an American medical college branch campus, he was handed a one-page photocopied sheet of ‘do’s and don’ts’ and was also pulled aside in the hallway by colleagues and given some informal advice on local Islamic sensitivities. This was the extent of cultural training that the institution offered. Syed writes: “most teachers at the tertiary level [in the Gulf] are North Americans, Britons,

and Australians, with some Arab nationals. Although foreign teachers bring diversity into the classroom, and although some use contextually situated pedagogy, there are wide gaps in the expatriate educators' (especially non-Arabs') knowledge of local sociocultural communities and languages. Linguistic and cultural distance between learners and teachers is a serious factor in the Gulf EFL classroom. Reliance on foreign teachers has also limited the necessary work of training and developing local teachers. Only Saudi Arabia has made any significant inroads in training nationals as teachers" (Syed, 2003:338).

Karmani has further alerted us to the power structure of English language training in the Gulf, and some of the disadvantages of using pedagogical materials produced in another country, even though English is a world language with well developed regional dialects that could encompass the lived experience of their populations in locally produced educational media. Large multi-national educational publishers, in a bid to make their products as flexible and neutral as possible for use in diverse language markets have been reluctant to make ELT materials as culturally specific as they should be. Karmani writes: "The use, for instance, of culturally alienating and Islamically inappropriate instructional materials, methods, and approaches is still very much the order of the day [in the Arabian Gulf]. The other factor, and closely linked, is the sombre fact that the upper echelons of major regional ELT bodies like TESOL Arabia (www.tesolarabia.org) continue to be conspicuously filled by an exclusive corps of Anglo-Western TESOL practitioners, most of whom—to be fair—lack the most rudimentary knowledge about "Islam" or even say a smattering of the most basic structures of the Arabic language....." (Karmani, 2005:9).

The often repeated notion that English is supplanting Arabic and carrying embedded hegemonic and imperialist messages, however, has been challenged in a number of studies. Charise in her 2007 survey of Gulf education writes: "Despite the endorsement of English and its utilization in several functions in the Gulf, for the most part, English is not perceived as a threat to the prominence of Arabic. In these Islamic nations, political and cultural practices are based upon varying degrees of Shari'a law drawn from the teachings of the Qur'an. Because the sacred text of the Qur'an is only formally recognized via the Arabic language, the influence of Qur'anic teachings on political policy-making practically ensures the primacy of Arabic language in Muslim societies" (Charise, 2007). Likewise, Schaub in an article on the status of English in Egypt strongly doubts that English will ever replace Arabic as the everyday language of interaction among Egyptians (Schaub, 2000).

A cross-sectional study of 1,176 Saudis by Al Haq in 1996 showed that using English did not make them more Westernized nor interfere with either their religious commitment or patriotism. In fact, learning English was viewed as a national duty in order to serve the state better and teach Islam internationally to non-Arabic speakers (Al Haq, 1996:307). This language dualism – English as a functional global language necessary for modernization and Arabic as a sacred language, the language of the Qur'an, which embodies Islamic identity, social values and spiritual commitment – has been noted in other Gulf nations also, such as the UAE. Clark observes, for example: "The UAE has accommodated globalization by embracing global English within a policy of linguistic dualism whereby English is associated with business, modernity, and internationalism, and Arabic is associated with religion, tradition, and localism" (Clarke, 2007:584).

A small number of Muslim educators believe that an "Islamic English" should be developed with its own rules and adaptations, such as spellings and religious terms. These same educators, according to Dhabi, "are warning against the harmful consequences of exposing young minds to 'English as a cultural language,' and some are working on eliminating all sorts of 'offensive' cultural material from English Language Teaching textbooks....." (Dhabi, 2004: 629). In a study of Pakistani English, Mahboob believes that this form of English does not implicitly transmit underlying messages of non-Western peoples' inferiority, and Pakistani English can evolve and adapt to the Pakistani worldview: "while the Core varieties of English may indeed be intertwined with such messages, the new Englishes (of which Pakistani English is a good example) are rich new varieties which reflect and incorporate local – and in this case Islamic – philosophies, idioms, and cultures" (Mahboob, 2009:181).

Another reasonable solution for balancing Arabic and English language needs is simply bilingualism. However, in some regions Arabic language education and education in general is underdeveloped, particularly in North Africa where the general public has been burdened by corrupt government, and educational development has been grossly neglected except for the elite. The authors of the United Nations Human Development Reports (such as *Building a Knowledge Society*, 2003), although of primarily Arabic heritage, have criticized current Arabic language teaching methods and aims, calling for a focus on a more practical functionalist Arabic for use in science, technology and business. However, many Gulf educators would strongly disagree with this approach, pointing to the role that Arabic plays in developing individuals who appreciate the richness of Arabic art, literature, poetry and the beauties of the Qur'an. According to Dhabi, "The United Nations Development Program reports on human development in the Arab world for 2002 and 2003 have pointed out with great emphasis the handicap that the Arabic language constitutes for Arab development. Important reforms are needed to make Arabic language pedagogy more function-oriented, more focused on the language arts, and on the skills

of reading and writing, rather than on aspects of formal aesthetics and on the rhetoric of display” (Dhabi, 2004:31). What the UNDP authors have not explained is why Arabic was flexible enough during the golden age of Islamic science to capture scientific ideas, including almost the entire body of Greek learning, and transmit it to a global scholarly audience stretching from Al Andalus to Cairo to Damascus to Baghdad. The answer probably has little to do with the Arabic language *per se* or how it is taught, but various political, economic and social factors (for example, modern Arabic states’ low investment in knowledge producing activities and the negative impact of colonial forces on local knowledge production).

What has developed in some Gulf nations can be best described as a bifurcated, rather than a bilingual, model of education and medium of instruction. The term bilingual implies some sort of exchange and accommodation between L1 and L2. Findlow’s studies in the UAE revealed the existence of two parallel educational systems in the UAE. At one end stands the Egyptian-based UAEU, founded in 1976, in which a religious foundation was preserved, and at the other end the US-Canadian style Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) founded 12 years later. “The system became broadly bifurcated, until the exponential growth in numbers of [Higher Education Institutes] in the 1990s: UAEU (1977) following a traditional Egyptian model in which the link between religious and academic authority was to some extent preserved, and the Higher Colleges of Technology (1988) following a North American one” (Findlow, 2008: 9).

Mouhanna has examined the issue of bilingualism extensively in his study of Math and IT courses at UAEU. Since science and math topics are increasingly only being offered in English across the Gulf, instead of Arabic, this development may limit student options and erode the ideal of producing bilingual graduates fully fluent in two languages: “The university language policy based on the drive to produce bilingual graduates often means that students find it challenging to complete their degrees in a non-native language. To further exacerbate their difficulties, the tertiary institution’s policy requires that courses be taught in the medium of English to the exclusion of the L1” (Mouhanna, 2010: 2).

Conclusion

Every aspect of the rise and dissemination of the English language in the Arabian Gulf has many more facets and subtleties than can be delineated in this short contribution. The issues are not academic or trivial – questions of national identity, heritage, knowledge production and culture are at stake. Both English speaking and Arabic speaking intellectuals are fully cognizant of the implications of English in the Gulf: some of the recent developments in this area may be unstoppable global forces that have been set in motion by historical circumstance. However, continuing debate and exchange may arrive at equitable and satisfying solutions for both native Arabic speakers and English and non-English speaking expatriates.

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