

*Original Paper*

# The Role and Impact of English as a Language and a Medium of Instruction in Saudi Higher Education Institutions: Students-Instructors Perspective

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## **Abstract**

*English as a medium of instruction in higher education institutions across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a debatable subject. The Ministry of Higher Education mandates English as the Medium Instruction (EMI) in all the higher education institutions across the kingdom. Since Arabic is the mother tongue of the natives and the only spoken language in the entire region, it is the only medium of instruction in all the schools up to the secondary level. English is formally introduced as the language of instruction in undergraduate level. This sudden shift in language produces a barrier which creates chaos and repulsive issues with the medium of instruction. All the universities have their separate English Language Centre (ELC) as well as Preparatory Year Program (PYP) where they intensively train and prepare students for the English language. Emphasis is laid upon improving students reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. However, many studies conducted to examine the issue of medium of instruction have revealed an existence of a huge gap between teaching and learning, knowledge acquisition, and overall understanding of the subjects using English medium of instruction. Arabization is also a major contributing factor in making the situation difficult. Students and instructors encounter high levels of challenges and obstacles during the course of classroom instruction. This paper identifies the gap between English medium instruction (EMI) and Arab medium instruction (AMI) and investigates the root cause of the issues taking into account the reports of other case studies. The paper concludes with recommendations to address these issues.*

## **Keywords**

*medium of instruction, English medium instruction (EMI), Arab medium instruction (AMI), higher education, Arabic-English bilingualism, Arabization*

## **1. Introduction**

The medium of instruction has always been a key issue among educational institutions across the world,

especially in those nations who were once British colonies. Even though those nations have gained independence from the British rule yet its legacy still exists in one form or the other. English language is one of the most prominent legacies left behind by the British Empire. Despite the unceasing global debate on English as the international lingua franca or as “killer language” (Coleman, 2006), the adoption of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has been sweeping across the higher education landscape worldwide (Crystal, 2004). Between 1995 and 2005, a large number of international education institutions expressed a significant interest in adopting English medium of instruction (Marsh, 2006). Presently the most significant educational trends world- wide is the teaching of a growing number of courses in universities through the medium of English. The move towards English-medium higher education is having a number of long-term consequences. First, it accelerates and broadens the second-language use of English in both developed and developing countries, creating a constituency of college graduates, many of whom come to use English more extensively for social communication amongst themselves (Graddol, 1997). It is evident that this paradigm shift is on the rise and has had successful significant impact in some regions worldwide. On the contrary this shift has also posed many challenges and obstacles in the Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Arab world. Arabic is the medium of instruction in all the schools and colleges up to the secondary level, hence all the subjects are taught in Arabic language only. While Arabic is the native as well as the official language in the region, English is not known to the students until they enter the post secondary program. Although the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education is working on reforming the system by instilling English language in schools, yet outcome is not so great. Consequently, students with no prior knowledge of English language end up completely confused, threatened, demotivated, and lost in translation. This sudden change takes a direct hit on their knowledge and learning, performance, and learning outcomes. Consequently, the results are often poor grades, drop outs, and low achievers. Students have to struggle to understand instructions in English and cope with the shift. I have noticed students being inattentive, looking through the roof, chewing pens, and low turn outs which are the indications of loss of connection and communication between the students and the instructor. At times students demand the use of Arabic- English bilinguals in order to translate common Arabic words into English.

## **2. Method**

This study is based on qualitative analysis of previous studies conducted across the region at different times. It also contains accounts of the author’s, students, and instructor’s experiences in a classroom setting which emphasize the study to use the exploratory research design to conduct the research.

## **3. Significance and Purpose of Study**

Although there have been numerous studies conducted in the past to focus on the effects of EMI in Saudi education system, there are opportunities to improve the teaching and learning of students within the parameters of EMI in a typical classroom setting. This paper will attempt to identify some useful and

practical approaches to improve the level of English among students to reduce the language barrier that will boost their over performance and justify the time and money investments.

#### **4. Literature Review**

This paper reviews the impact of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in Saudi Arabia. Many studies conducted on EMI in different parts of the world reveal that the future of EMI has a high stake in both educational and cultural setting by and large (Coleman, 2006), (Crystal, 2004), (Graddol, 1997), and (Marsh, 2006). However, EMI has posed several challenges and obstacles in educational settings in Saudi Higher Education settings and also across other parts of the Arab world. Local studies have shown there are a huge communication, connection, and cultural gaps between students and instructors in a typical classroom setting of lecture delivery in English language. Cultural barrier is yet another dominant factor in posing a challenge in the promotion of EMI into education system. The results are staggering in terms of poor performance and grades, poor knowledge and learning, low learning outcomes. Even though billions of dollars are being invested in education sector yet the results are not proportional to the level of spending. This paper analyzes the impact of EMI in Saudi education setting and proposes approaches to address challenges and obstacles.

#### **5. Saudi Language Policy**

Language policy in countries is a decisive component in drafting education policies. (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996) pointed out that language policy as "decisions on rights and access to languages and on the roles and functions on particular languages and varieties of language in a given polity. Such policies, and the decisions that highlight them, may be more or less overt or covert." A similar case applies in the Saudi education system and the relative policy making. In Saudi Arabia such policies are rather covert owing to the fact that Arabic is the only spoken language and also the official language. Further, the system is predominantly influenced by religion since Islam is the only religion practiced in the country and the entire region. The government also intends to preserve the sanctity of the religion, heritage, culture, and the Arabic language itself and most importantly Arabic is also the language of the Holy Quran. Hence, it is widely believed that introduction of EMI at school level could threaten the religious and cultural heritage of the country. For that matter, the Saudi education policy has put five articles (24, 46, 50, 114, 140) related to language policy (Al- Abdaly, 2012). These articles stipulate all educational levels should be taught in Arabic, enrich Arabic language by improving the linguistic ability, and focus on Arabization. However, there are provisions in articles 50 to acquire knowledge from another language in order to promote Arabization, spread knowledge among the citizens, contribute Islam, and to service the humanity. In 2003, the Saudi Ministry of Education passed a law that mandates the teaching of English in the public schools starting from Grade 6. A year later, the teaching of English started in Grade 5 (Al-Jarf, 2008). This phenomenon is however progressing at a very slow pace due certain constraining factors as pointed out above. On the other hand numerous international schools across the

kingdom are thriving to cater the educational needs of the children of the expatriates working in the kingdom. In these schools all the teaching activities are conducted in English language from kindergarten to intermediate level. Arabic language modules also coexist in parallel but focus is more onto English. Local students in majority, however, do not have access to these schools due to language barrier and differences in curriculum and educational settings.

## **6. Choice of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) or Arabic as a Medium of Instruction (AMI)**

Although article 11 of the education policy stipulates Arabic as the language of education, yet a closer look at the medium on instruction reveals English is the preferred language of instruction in all professional colleges (Science, Business, Computer, Engineering, and Medicine). Arabic is used to teach Islamic studies and a few other subjects like history, geography and courses in education (Al-Hazmi, 2006). Findings of an exploratory study conducted at King Saud University with a sample of students at the colleges of medicine, pharmacy, science, and computer science revealed that English is the language of classroom instruction and of most textbooks in many courses at these colleges (Al-Jarf, 2008). Various feasibility studies on Arabic as a medium of instruction at colleges of medicine and engineering have been conducted during 1980 & 1990. The results were mixed. Study reveals eighty one percent of the participants indicated that in school, students study math and science in Arabic for twelve years and when they enter the university; they study math and science in English. When they graduate from high school, their knowledge of English is limited and as a result of that they face many problems in college. Graduate colleges in Saudi Arabia require students to write their theses in English and do not allow students to write them in Arabic. Higher education policies do not mandate Arabic as a medium of instruction. In addition, they need English to pursue their studies abroad (Al-Jarf, 2008). Some students supported Arabic as a medium of instruction while other did not see any difference in either of the two medium of instruction. Some recommended having more text books translated into Arabic for effective teaching in Arabic. (Al-Seghayer D. K., 2012) Dr. Khalid Al-Seghayer argues that article 50 of Saudi Educational Policy stipulates that students should learn at least one foreign language so that they may interact with people of other cultures for the purpose of contributing to the message of Islam and serving humanity. Hence, this should be the rationale for English teaching in Saudi schools, where the learners' ability to communicate with international language users ranks as a priority. The policy-makers, stakeholders, and other decision-making bodies in Saudi Arabia are well aware that English can serve as a very important tool for the development of the country in terms of both international relations and scientific-technological advancement. However, the country's political stance, if it could be termed so, does not recognize English as the second official language in Saudi Arabia due to the fact that it does not fulfill certain functions that are necessary for international communication and it does not have any special administrative status in the country's society (Al-Seghayer, 2012). Despite the fact, English continues to thrive and makes its presence in almost all the public and private sectors. In a globalized

world where English has become a global language, many people – including Arabs - currently feel that English is superior to all other languages –including Arabic. Many young people have become keener on learning English than Arabic as they feel that English is superior. Hence, the aims of the present study is to investigate the following: (i) How college students view the status of English and Arabic in Saudi Arabia in the early 21st century; (ii) In which colleges and majors students think English should be used; (iii) In which colleges and majors students think Arabic should be used; (iv) The scientific, technological, educational, social and labor market factors for preferring English/Arabic as a medium of instruction at the university level, as perceived by the subjects; and (v) How students view their role in developing/maintaining the status of the Arabic language in the 21st century (Al-Jarf, 2008).

Further findings of the study (Al-Jarf, 2008) have shown that 96% of the participants consider English a superior language to Arabic because they think that the world has become a small village and English is the dominant language and the language of communication in this global village. English is used all over the world, whereas Arabic is used in limited geographical areas. It also revealed 82% of the participants believe that Arabic is more appropriate for teaching Islamic studies, history, Arabic literature and education, whereas English is more appropriate for teaching medicine, pharmacy, engineering, science, nursing, and computer science.

### **7. Proposed Innovate and Change Approach to Reduce the Gap between EMI and AMI**

It is quite evident that from the above facts that “English is not going anywhere” and its presence will ever exist whatsoever for a variety of reasons. Due to the increasing dominance of the English language, the number of people seeking to learn English is increasing. About one billion students are teaching English worldwide (Crystal, 2004). English is the official language of leading political wings, bodies, and other organizations. One in four persons speaks English.

A peek at Saudi education schooling system at the grass root level reveals that English has no significant presence in schools. It is recommended to at least introduce basics of English despite the factors that consider EMI could pose a potential threat to the closed Saudi society if offered at primary school level. Keeping those constraints in view, we have to find ways to equilibrate the English- Arabic language barrier. In the present classroom scenario, there exists only one way student-instructor communication, i.e., from instructor to student. Although instructors make their best to deliver the best knowledge within a time pressed schedule, it is often hard for them to verify if the message was delivered. However, the results are not as expected. The underlying cause is quite obvious; communication gap between student and instructors due to language barrier and possibly cultural. Since everybody talks about it all the time and many studies have been conducted and reported on the issues, but the major question is the fact “*what are we actually doing about it*”. I believe a simple step taken today may change the dynamics of the education system tomorrow in the given scenario. My classroom experience dealing with student with no prior knowledge of English has been a very challenging subject to deal with. The majority of non Arabic instructors encounter the same issue. A mass of the students who I interact with are the ones who

have spent a whole year in English Language Centre (ELC) and Preparatory Year Program (PYP) doing intensive English learning course. ELC and PYP have the best and qualified international staff to teach them. When students advance to level two, it is expected of them to have some significant amount of English language knowledge. In disbelief, I wonder why are they still unable to write their names or introduce themselves in English. Further investigation revealed that the text books and other study material they are reading at ELC and PYP are of very high standard which I believe is unsuitable for their current comprehension level. Upon discussion with most of the academic staff on the subject, they expressed unanimous concern and directly pointed out to the high standard of study resources. Students need a basic study material to start off. Consequently, during the course of classroom lecture, students appeared completely away, unwilling to respond, de-motivated, confused, disinterested, and missed lectures. This directly impacted their performance in assessments and grades, results are always bad. I conducted an experiment to deal with the situation that best serves the interest of the students learning by simplifying the study material to the barebones in an attempt to integrate English and Arabic language. With this innovate and change approach I redesigned the study material to more of an activity based intuitive and interactive learning experience, adding quizzes and exercises to keep students engaged, making them write on the whiteboard, and questioning them about their learning. I translated the most commonly used English words and summarized the chapters into Arabic language with the help of Arabic speaking colleagues. During the lecture I picked up two students to stand up in front of the class to read the chapter text in English and Arabic one by one. (Moran, et al., 2007)The following points were considered in designing innovate and change approach to address the EMI and AMI learning objectives;

- identify and analyze the learning gap between students and instructors;
- search for and identify common solution that best serves student-instructor interest of successful learning outcome via transfer of skills, knowledge and attitudes (Moran, Durham, & Owen, 2007);
- the integration of EMI and AMI in the course within an interdisciplinary, blended learning to provide students with greater ability to apply English in a variety of authentic context;
- recognize the evolutionary development of basic English concepts;

## 8. Findings

Initially, the students demonstrated resistance and shyness due to lack of confidence and poor knowledge of English. However, over a period of time, they began to respond, felt more confident, and demonstrated interest in learning and sharing. Although this was just the beginning of the new learning approach, yet very encouraging way to work with them. Their grades improved significantly. Some of the poor achievers still existed but this experiment yielded satisfactory results overall. The following findings are summarized for enhanced student learning experience.

1. Integrated innovate and change (English-Arabic) concept is cooperative and experimental learning activity which empower students to internalize, reflect on and externalize concepts.

2. Easier student friendly teaching transferable skills and facilitating the development of student's self direction.
3. Integrating activities and assigning small tasks in a group that require students to interpret and transform information.
4. Students perceive integrated approach as having a real purpose by relating existing knowledge that they will use in further study and in their careers.
5. It will also enhance their English learning experience and proficiency.
6. The use of integrated content material, resources, and skills in authentic tasks, coupled with integrated assessment tasks, is motivational and constructive.
7. The integrated approach is effective at fostering critical thinking and linking skills acquisition, and the application of content course concepts.
8. When task completion expectations are high students are 'challenged' by these expectations and a higher quality of work is produced and submitted.

## 9. Recommendations

(Al-Jarf, 2008) 96% of the participants consider English a superior language to Arabic because they think that the world has become a small village and English is the dominant language and the language of communication in this global village. English is used all over the world, whereas Arabic is used in limited geographical areas. 82% of the participants believe that Arabic is more appropriate for teaching Islamic studies, history, Arabic literature and education, whereas English is more appropriate for teaching medicine, pharmacy, engineering, science, nursing, and computer science (Al-Jarf, 2008). There should be a system in place that maintains a balance of the needs of both the languages. The Saudi government needs to establish a flexible language policy and establish new strategies for protecting and developing the Arabic language and having English as language of communication for international business and communication. It is quite evident that many courses and programs especially in Information Technology cannot be totally taught in Arabic. Further those students who travel to the west for pursuing master's and doctorate programs obtain degrees in English only. This does not mean that Arabic language should be abandoned as a medium of instruction. However, it is highly recommended that Saudi government should make a wide range of highly specialized adequate resources available in Arabic language. This job definitely involves high costs and long time yet it would address the current issues in the future and there are ways to do it. Transliteration is a suggested way. Countries like Armenia, Ukraine, Turkey, Korea and Japan have successfully aligned with the broad spectrum of ever-changing global trends by publishing and translating specialized material into their native language (Al-Jarf, 2008). It will also serve the purpose of arabization, minimize the conflict, and possibly maintain the balance between the two mediums of instruction as well as the languages per se. It would be up to the discretion of the readers to choose from resources available English and Arabic languages depending upon their learning needs.

## 10. Conclusion

It can be concluded from the findings of the present study that it is English is gradually making is widespread presence in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. However, it should not be considered as threat to the existence of Arabic language which is the native language of the nation and the associated Arabic culture. English as a language has its own importance and relevance in international setting with its association to educational, scientific, technological, and social arenas. Many Saudi students travel overseas (Australia, Canada, USA, and UK) to pursue post graduate degree courses, English is still required as the only means of communication in these nations. It is best in their interest to possess the level of survival English to at least communicate.

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