

English in the Arab Gulf

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ABSTRACT

Rapid changes are happening at all levels in the modern Arab Gulf societies. One of the fields where these changes matter most is education. Governments are trying to restructure their educational policies to respond to technological, economic and social changes without disrupting or clashing with firmly held beliefs, ideas and traditions. But the dramatic changes in these countries are bound to be accompanied by many challenges. In the field of education, one of the important issues posing a challenge is mandating the use of English as the medium of instruction in many academic institutions. This paper looks at the spread of English in these areas, its current position and the accompanying challenges.

Keywords: *English, education, change, tradition, strategy*

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Rapid changes are occurring on a worldwide basis on every level in modern societies. Of these changes, those in the field of education matter most. Education is a key component for national success but it is getting more difficult due to constant changes not only in classrooms but in teaching strategies and government requirements. Education is continuously debating the most appropriate strategies for coping with such changes. One of its challenges is to prepare individuals for the new expanding and diversified demands for life time learning of the new world order and globalization. Governments are also trying to restructure their educational, economic and social policies in order to respond to these technological,

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economic and social changes. In education, many are caught in what Graddol (2006) describes as a never ending race for continuous upgrading and preparation of individuals. The challenge posed in the Arab Gulf countries is how to meet these increasing demands and ensure that the type of learning responds in an effective manner to the needs of individuals and countries, without disrupting beliefs and traditions.

There is a great deal of literature on how different societies are dealing with such changes whether in reexamining existing policies, methodologies, or concepts in all areas of education and how they are dealing with current changes in light of the new demands and reconfigurations (Baker, 2003; Bamgbose, 2001; Tollefson, 2002; Llosa, 2008; Barber, 2008; Kachru & Nelson, 1996; Kachru, 1977). Yet the Arab countries seem to have been left out of socio-educational discourse, as Findlow (2005) explains, due to factors such as “the accessibility of reliable information and sensitivities about applying a universalist perspective to analyzing the region – largely connected to such considerations of modernity” (p. 286). Lately, education in the Arab Gulf is increasing in importance due to the area’s new position in the world (World Report, 2008). The dramatic changes in these countries are bound to be accompanied by many challenges. In the field of education, one of the important issues posing a challenge is mandating the use of English as the medium of instruction in many academic institutions from primary to tertiary levels.

A Brief Overview

In terms of development, education in the Arabian Gulf countries has undergone tremendous change in a relatively short period of time and some, like the United Arab Emirates, have developed into modern and highly technological societies beginning to compete on a regional and international level. The emerging education systems of the GCC States (Gulf Cooperation Council, including Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) are seeing a tremendous increase in student numbers (Syed, 2003; Mazawi, 2007) and academic institutions. The rise in academic institutions in the Arab Gulf not only reflects this area’s growth and development but also reflects how education has become bound up with globalized structures. This massive educational growth has led to the expansion of private sectors and to education becoming a field of international commerce, with many competing to provide for their needs. Foreign educational institutions are establishing

branches in all parts of the Arab Gulf. In the UAE alone, academic institutions like the American University, New York University (NYU), George Mason University, the Sorbonne, Murdoch University, Michigan State University, and the University of Wollongong have already established branches here and are attracting many students. With the establishment of academic university ‘cities’ and knowledge ‘villages’, these countries aim to provide their citizens with education that they once had to travel abroad to acquire.

Educational reforms are part of national and regional plans that accompany economic success. The aim of such efforts is to eliminate disparities in education and literacy and to try to catch up with the West. By improving opportunities for education and its quality, they aim to raise levels of literacy and conform to the United Nation’s “Education for All”, “Millennium Development Goals”, and “Literacy Decade” efforts. Educational development has also tremendously expanded academic opportunities at elementary and secondary levels with heavy emphasis on the higher tertiary levels. The small Arab Gulf countries which were, according to Findlow (2007), far behind other Arab states in terms of development have, since independence in the 1960s and 1970s, been able to reach remarkable achievements.

Going hand in hand with these changes, religion and culture have always had a strong presence in the Arab Gulf countries. Islam and the Arabic language have played a major role in the politics and education of this area throughout history. Education, prior to western imperialism was the sole responsibility of Islamic religious institutions (Hitti, 1970; Tibawi, 1972). Yet independence, modernization and globalization have brought with them, as Findlow (2008) explains, “concessions to culturally conservative forces, local and international” (p. 340) and “culturally conservative” factors such as religion have come to be debated in government policies. Arab political and legal systems have come “to pick and mix from a range of secular and religious codes” (Findlow, 2008, p. 341). With further liberalization and westernization, as Findlow explains, we see “authorities considering relaxing laws governing the teaching of Arabic and Islamic studies in schools” (p. 345).

The Spread of English

The quality of education sought by the Arab Gulf countries is believed to be the key to development, growth and empowerment. Governments are

spending a large percentage of their total budgets on education. Leaders of these Arab countries have come to recognize the need for modernization and change, and the source of their inspiration is the West (Kirdar, 2007). New curricula are being imported from the West and with them comes the English language and native English speaking faculty and staff to run these new rapidly developing institutions. Modernization and growth have mandated the use of the global language English and many of these countries have therefore required English to become the medium of instruction in many, if not the majority, of their academic institutions.

It seems that the “English factor” as Graddol (2006) explains, “is found in virtually every key macro trend” that has happened across the world, including “the reform of education in universities and schools” (p. 20). English as a global or international language has spurred a good deal of debate across the globe and has been the topic of a great deal of research (Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984; Kachru, 1992; Kramersch, 1993; McKay, 2002). The general debate on the teaching of English on a worldwide level (where English is not the native language), has revolved around whether teaching English means teaching the culture that comes with it or including the culture of the students involved. There are two views here. The first view is that language can be utilized to communicate cross-culturally and does not require attachment to any particular country or culture, while learners do not need to internalize its cultural norms in order to effectively utilize it (McKay, 2002). The belief here is that other cultures besides that which accompanies English can and should be offered in the English language classroom (Adaskou, Britten & Fahsi, 1990; Kramersch, 1993; McKay, 2002; Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984; Asraf, 1996). Research that supports this has shown that though students want to learn English, they are often unwilling to receive “the cultural load of the target language” (Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984, p. 17) or are just not interested in learning the culture of the Inner Circle (Kachru, 1992). Others believe that English should not replace other languages but should serve as an integral part of bilingualism (Brutt-Griffler, 2002). There are those in this camp that believe that even the English conventions used by the Inner Circle countries are irrelevant and may be considered inappropriate by the speakers involved (Kachru, 1992).

The second view is that the language being used as a medium of instruction should fully incorporate culture as a crucial component of language learning because the study of another language should also provide students with a knowledge and understanding of the culture that utilizes that language. This incorporation of language within a wider

social and cultural perspective is also supported by a great deal of research (Damen, 1987; Byram, 1994; Valdes, 1990; Stern, 1992; Seelye, 1993; Peck, 1998). It is believed that students should learn the “culturally appropriate behavior” that goes with the language (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003, p. 2) and so incorporating culture teaching is essential to the language syllabus and instrumental in fostering communicative competence (Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002). Therefore, the idea of those in this camp is that teaching language in isolation from its cultural background “can become communicatively and culturally vapid” (Oxford, 1994) and if learners are not taught the cultural contexts of the language itself, the learning experience is not vivid or purposeful (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003).

The global spread of English does not just raise linguistic, educational and economic issues. It also raises cultural, political and ethical ones (Graddol, 2006) and with the rise of such issues, there is a possibility, as Graddol explains, of a beginning of a new story about globalization, a giving way to greater regionalism and more complex patterns of linguistic, economic and cultural power (p. 13). Language and the culture that comes with it are powerful factors that need serious consideration because of their importance and the ramifications that can accompany them. They can be tools for symbolic violence and have a great deal of power in education.

The Challenges

For the Arab countries, the language issue is causing a great deal of concern and posing many challenges firstly because the official language of all Arab countries is Arabic. Arab Gulf countries, being members of the Arab League, are committed to cooperate educationally in the cause of “Arabization”, and to revive the “intellectual and artistic legacy of the Arabs” by including Arab history, geography and literature in educational curricula, with Arabic being “the language of instruction in all subjects and in all educational stages in the Arab countries” (Findlow, 2006). But this commitment has not been fully realized in the Arab Gulf because of “prioritization of international communication and competition” (p. 347).

Arabic is not just the official language, it is the language of the Quran, which means Islam. And Islam is not just a religion but a way of life for those who follow it – an integral part of the culture and identity of its members. Language has become a national issue in all the Arab

states. This poses a challenge for governments, curriculum developers, educators and parents. An important matter of concern here is their Arab-Islamic identity which many believe is at stake. The responsibilities behind the different choices made at all these levels of education and the use of English as the medium of instruction being one of them need to be reviewed. Reforms need to be characterized by a sense of realism that entails careful changes and a balance among the dominant forces. The position and status of Arabic as being the national language of these countries determines how it will be handled and promoted. New curricula which are being imported may need to be revised in terms of contextual and cultural appropriateness.

The majority of educational institutions, despite the many foreign components, from the curricula to faculty and staff, remain dominated by a student body with a collectivist high context culture that may have different, if not conflicting concepts and “another system” (Hall, 1976, p. 53) that may not be compatible with these new concepts and ideas. There are many factors that need to be taken into consideration even at this level. Cultural transmission and linguistic issues are developing and many have cautioned about transfer in education (Dyer, 1998; Thomas, 1997). Sentiments about culture and cultural sensitivity are surfacing (Sonleitner & Khelifa, 2004). There are differences in the characteristics of those involved (Almany & Alwan, 1982; Barakat, 1993; Feghali, 1997) in the academic context and in the difficulties that may be encountered due to cultural differences that relate to teaching and learning (Ortloff & Ortloff, 2003; Fisch, Greenfield & Trumbull, 1999; Dyer, 1998). There are also cultural conflicts that may result (Maurice, 1986) besides the other factors that need to be contended with.

Currently the “buoyant” economies may have “enabled coexistence and keep[t] a lid on discontent” (Findlow, 2005, p. 299) and the benefits of teaching English have so far outweighed any negatives (Zogoul, 2003; Syed, 2003). But there are potential problems lurking in the future. The spread of English as a medium of education, cultural shifts and cultural reproductions “against a context of rapid modernization with a regional undercurrent of recurrent pan-Arab and Islamist tinged nationalism” (Findlow, 2006, p. 21) are sites of evident concern. And, “How far does the linguistic-cultural dualism amount to a loss of linguistic-cultural diversity, and how far there is a linguistically-framed discourse of resistance to such a process” (Findlow, 2006, p. 21) are questions that need to be addressed. There are underlying ideological conflicts that now exist in these societies, as Findlow (2006) explains, and “changed political or

socio-economic circumstances could at any time threaten this balance and bring about a rather different set of feelings about the prevalence of English” (p. 34). In addition, the emergent global hierarchies of knowledge and their accompanying concepts and ideas of prestige and status with the neoliberal presumptions that Western norms should prevail (Graddol, 2006) are being questioned. The latest research shows that we are entering the next stage of global development where new and dramatic changes are also on the horizon. According to Graddol (2006), the world is rapidly shifting to a completely new social, economic and political order with a new world order in languages in which Spanish, Arabic and Mandarin may be dominating the educational scenes.

There is evidence of a beginning response to modern conditions and rapid and dramatic social changes in the Arab Gulf. Reactions are beginning to be felt in Kuwait (Tetreault, 1999, 2000), Saudi Arabia (Yamani, 2000) or the UAE (Findlow, 2005, 2006, 2008). 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.

Language and culture and their positions in the curricula are a matter of great concern. Introducing a more coherent approach to the teaching of English in accordance with the needs of the new globalized world and in the context in which English is taught in will have to be revisited. This is important if we are to embark on teaching English and using it as the medium of instruction in private and public schools, especially with today’s heightened sentiments of nationalism and instability. Language and culture are pivotal points for curricula all over the world, even in those which were once considered as ‘melting pots’ and ‘mosaics’ and remain among “the most contentious concepts in academia” (Jandt, 2007, p. 6). They continue to be “very much a burning issue at the beginning of the 21st century” (Atkinson, 2004, p. 279).

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