

English as a Medium of Instruction and Its Effect on Local Cultural Identities

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Abstract

This study examines the advantages and challenges of employing English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in an international school in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The study aims to examine the impact of EMI on the development of students' local cultural identity. The participants of the study are four female students attending an international middle school. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Findings revealed both positive and negative impacts of EMI on students' identities. While EMI had minimal influence on students' religious or cultural values, it significantly affected their Arabic literacy and language preferences. The study highlights the complex relationship between language, culture, and identity in international school settings. It explains the challenges students face in maintaining their Arabic fluency. Results contribute to understanding cultural identity development and suggest the need for further research on EMI's broader implications in the Saudi context.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, English-medium instruction (EMI) has been the subject of research across various fields of applied linguistics. Several studies have indicated that EMI causes a major concern because it could weaken or undermine the local language and values (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2011). There are various perspectives on the use of EMI and the policies governing its incorporation in education. Some views argue against including the cultural components in English language teaching because it is considered "cultural invasion" (Al-Seghayer, 2013, p. 2). Those opposed to teaching English culture argue that curricula in English programs in Saudi Arabia should focus solely on Islamic values and regional culture, as there is a strong association between the English language, culture, and the ideologies of Western nations (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). The opposing views regarding the globalization of English lead to the idea that English is a "double-edged sword" (Hopkins, 2014, p. 6).

In Saudi Arabia, English education was supported by major national initiatives. In 2004, a Royal Decree supported the Ministry of Education's funding to introduce English from Grade 6, and in 2011, another Royal Decree launched the English Education Development program to introduce English at Grade 4 while also aiming to improve the quality of English teaching in secondary schools (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017). In the Saudi context, it is essential to examine how English language policies operate across education sectors, how internationalization is developed, and how national cultural identity is protected (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017). It is noticeable that the government initiatives reflect the complex negotiation between promoting English and protecting the national values, including the Arabic language and Islamic traditions. This is consistent with Saudi Vision 2030, which emphasizes

strengthening national identity and maintaining Arabic alongside social development (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

Language, culture, and identity are inseparable. Hopkyns (2020) refers to these three components as having the "domino effect" (p. 5), meaning an impact on one is likely to influence the others. The connection between language and culture is so profound that separating them would result in the loss of significance for either language or culture (Al-Seghayer, 2013).

Identity becomes a significant subject that requires careful examination when it is under threat (Hopkyns, 2020). In the Gulf countries, identities are characterized as "contexts of crisis" because English and Arabic are depicted in media and public domains, especially in education, where English holds more power than Arabic (Hopkyns, 2020, p. 9). This study set out to determine whether EMI affects the local cultural identities of middle school students at an international school in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

1.1. Significance of the Study

Despite extensive research in linguistics, the impact of English as a medium of instruction on the cultural identities of middle school students in Saudi Arabia remains understudied. This study is significant because it examines whether the dominance of English in international schools may lead to vulnerability in acquiring Arabic. Such insights can guide initiatives to safeguard Arabic language and culture in Saudi Arabia, particularly among younger generations who are at risk of losing their native language. The current study will also aid in managing language policies and curriculum planning.

1.2. Research Questions

The present study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the perceived advantages and challenges of employing EMI in international schools in terms of cultural identity development for Saudi students from the students' perspectives?
2. To what extent does exposure to EMI impact the preservation or transformation of traditional Saudi cultural values among middle school students attending international schools?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The current study employs two theoretical frameworks to explore the impact of implementing EMI on the construction and negotiation of local cultural identities among middle school students in foreign education schools in Saudi Arabia. The following section introduces the main concepts of both social identity theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. It explains how these two theories are applied to address the research questions within the context of the study.

2.1. Social Identity Theory

This study employs Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory (SIT) to explore the influence of implementing EMI on students' identity. The aim of this theory is to recognize the complex relationship between students' identity construction and the educational context. According to Tajfel's (1974) definition, social identity is "part of an individual's self-concept which derives from the edge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 69). This theory explains an individual's sense of belonging to a group and whether they have positive or negative feelings towards it (Harwood, 2020).

When individuals categorize themselves within a social group, such as a specific political party, sports team, or, as in the case of this study, an international school, they not only associate themselves with that group but also have their identities shaped by the characteristics of that particular group (Hogg et al., 1995). Therefore, this theory helps explore how students categorize and position themselves according to the educational environment of their international school.

2.2.Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

According to Vygotsky (1979), individuals build their self-consciousness through their interactions within a cultural and social environment. In Vygotsky's view, people do not construct their identities in isolation. Instead, they need to communicate with their social and cultural environment to shape their sense of self (Triutami & Mbato, 2021). Based on this sociocultural theory, identity construction is an ongoing process in which individuals perceive their roles and status in the world (van Lier, 2004).

The integration of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory into this study helps us understand how environmental factors, such as the curriculum taught in school and the learning environment, contribute to the negotiation of students' cultural identity.

These two theoretical frameworks complement each other to inform the investigation of the perceived advantages and challenges of EMI use among Saudi middle school students.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides an overview of key studies and perspectives relevant to five interconnected domains that are crucial to this study. It starts with background information and relevant studies on English as a global language, progressing to a discussion of literature concerning the use of English as a medium of instruction. Next, it discusses three interrelated concepts: language, culture, and identity. The section then focuses on the Saudi policy landscape and international schools in Saudi Arabia, offering an overview of their current status and ongoing research in this context.

3.1.English as a Global Language

Crystal (2003) states in his book *English as a Global Language* that a language becomes significant and global when it acquires a unique role that is acknowledged in every nation. English is considered the official language of 52 countries and the only language spoken across every continent (Hopkins, 2014). English has been categorized as "world English," "international English," and, more recently, "global English" since the 1920s, 1930s, and mid-1900s, respectively (Hopkins, 2014, p. 5). The previous terms are often used interchangeably, and they show the remarkable position of English.

An increasing body of literature has emerged addressing the global influence of English (Pennycook, 2001; Nunan, 2003; Guilherme, 2007; Johnson, 2009; Dahan, 2013; Ke, 2015). English is widely used in numerous educational systems globally and several studies have been done addressing language policies and linguistic practices in various countries.

Alzaben et al. (2019) examined the consequences of the widespread use of English as a global language in the Gulf countries. Findings suggested that efficient language policies should be implemented to support the preservation of Arabic as the primary language in the Gulf region. Despite the perceived importance of the Arabic language, its current status shows that it lacks the strength to continue its competitive stance against English as the world's language (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2011).

3.2.English as a Medium of Instruction

EMI can be defined as the practice of teaching academic courses apart from English itself in countries or regions where the majority of people do not speak English as their first

language (Macaro, 2018). For many countries, English has been the language of instruction in higher education since the 1960s (Crystal, 2003).

A large body of literature has been published on the impact of the implementation of EMI in education (Troudi, 2009; Troudi & Jendli, 2011; Rogier, 2012; Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Mouhanna, 2016; Al-Issa, 2017; Kuteeva, 2020; Hopkyns, 2023). In the context of Saudi Arabia, few researchers have examined EMI in higher education such as Al-Jarf (2008), Suliman & Tadros (2011), Shamin et al. (2016), Al-Kahtany et al. (2016), and Elyas and Al-Hoorie (2024). Some studies explored the parents' attitudes toward EMI (Al-Qahtani & Al-Zumor, 2016; Alabdulkareem, 2023; Mahmoud et al., 2024; Alotaibi et al., 2025), while others investigated the teachers' and/or the students' perceptions (Alqarni, 2023).

3.3. Language, Culture, and Identity

Many scholars have recognized the strong relationship that exists among language, culture, and identity (Suleiman, 2003; Jenkins, 2007; Hopkins, 2014). Language stands as a primary element of both culture and cultural identity (Ahmed, 2014).

Like the term 'culture', the concept of identity is ambiguous and challenging to define. Kouhpaenejad and Gholaminejad (2014) describe identity from a poststructuralist perspective as fluid, multifaceted, diverse, dynamic, variable, contradictory and subject to change. Identity is "continually reconstructed through language and discourse" (Kouhpaenejad & Gholaminejad, 2014, p. 200).

Alzaben et al. (2019) assert that there is an argument that suggests that in certain Arab Gulf countries, including the Kingdom of Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, and even the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Arabic may no longer retain its status as the official first language. It is evident that the usage of Arabic is declining in multiple domains such as commerce, industry, trade, and communication. This trend raises concerns about the potential scenario where Arabic might not retain its position as the primary language in one or more of these countries in the future (Alzaben et al., 2019).

According to Al-Issa and Dahan (2011), individuals often leave behind their native tongue in favour of a more admired or widely recognized language. This is indicated by the spread of English in the present era (Harrison, 2007; Patrick, 2004). Unfortunately, young individuals across cultures usually show minimal interest in preserving their cultural and traditional aspects, including their native language (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2011). Few studies have considered the effects of English on the cultural identities of students in the Gulf region (Said, 2011; Hopkyns, 2014; Hopkyns, 2020).

3.4. Saudi Policy Landscape

Several political and economic factors contributed to English education policy reforms in Saudi Arabia (Faruk, 2013). Over the last two decades, major government initiatives were implemented to expand English literacy across the country (Barnawi & Phan, 2014). In 2011, the Ministry of Education introduced the English Education Development program to teach English as a core subject from Grade 4 in primary schools (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017). In line with Saudi Vision 2030, education reforms need to be framed in addition to the commitments to strengthening national identity and Arabic language (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016). With this policy landscape, international schools that use EMI provide a key context for exploring how the promotion of English may challenge the maintenance of Arabic and cultural identity.

Some scholars argue that EMI policy in Saudi Arabia lacks a strong foundation. For instance, Louber and Troudi (2019) suggest that the language policy was established without sufficient analysis or evaluation and without consulting major stakeholders like teachers and parents or involving them in the decision-making process. Similarly, Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2017) contend that policy reforms were implemented without clear justifications or reasons.

3.5. International Schools in Saudi Arabia

International schools, despite originating in Europe, have witnessed global expansion over the last few decades (Hayden & Thompson, 1995). They are initially established to fulfil the educational needs of expatriate children worldwide (Brummitt & Keeling, 2013). For instance, there was a demand for international schools in Saudi Arabia when the number of expatriates residents with their families has increased (Badawood, 2003). Saudi students were not allowed enrollment until 2009 when the Saudi Ministry of Education implemented a law that permitted Saudis to attend these schools (Alhudithi, 2020).

These schools distinguish themselves by offering a curriculum distinct from the national curriculum of the host country, often adopting American-based or British-based curricula (Walker, 2004). In these international schools that adopt EMI, the curriculum is designed to incorporate materials and texts from Western contexts (Elyas & Picard, 2010).

Al-Areify (2011) conducted a comparative study to investigate potential differences in cultural identities between Saudi high school students in international schools and their counterparts in public schools. Findings showed a negative impact on the cultural identities of high school students attending international schools.

Arubaiy'a (2023) investigated L1 attrition and lexical disfluency in the spoken Arabic of 36 Saudi children attending international schools. The study explored the impact of English exposure as a second language on the Arabic oral production of L1 Arabic speakers. Results revealed a statistically significant difference in language attrition, with higher attrition observed in international school students.

This research aims to address a significant gap in the literature concerning the impact of implementing EMI on the cultural identities of middle school students in Saudi Arabia. There is a lack of studies examining this specific population and context using a qualitative approach. The present study explores an important topic that has not been studied enough, which helps fill an important gap in the existing research.

4. METHODOLOGY

The researcher utilizes a qualitative research methodology to examine how EMI influences the cultural identity of middle school students. Benefits of qualitative research include considering different interpretations or understandings of a particular situation rather than a single truth. Therefore, qualitative researchers explore these multiple realities to get a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under study. This methodology is particularly suitable for the current study because it helps investigate students' cultural identity and examine the impact of their schools' educational environments. It also recognizes and embraces the complexity and diversity inherent in human experiences (Creswell, 2014).

The following section introduces the study participants. The research tools used are then discussed. This study employs two research instruments: semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The rationale behind selecting these research tools is explained in the subsequent sections. The procedure for data analysis is then presented.

4.1. Participants and Context of the Study

The research participants are four female students attending an international middle school. The participants volunteered to take part in the study. The school is located in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. It implements American diploma curriculum. The school is a girls-only school and serves students from KG to Grade 12 (girls and boys are separated). The student body is mixed, including Saudi and other nationalities. All subjects are taught in English and only three subjects are taught in Arabic which are Islamic, the Arabic language, and KSA social studies.

Saudi teachers teach Islamic studies, Quran, and Arabic, while most other subjects are taught by expatriate teachers. Main subjects such as English, math, and science are taught by native English-speaking teachers.

The participants are Saudis and their mother tongue is Arabic. They have studied together in the same school since KG until the time of this study. Now, they are 14 years old, and all are in Grade eight. Language use at home is mixed and depends on who they are speaking to.

4.2.Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted individually via Zoom and then transcribed. Interviews lasted for 30 minutes per participant. Interviews were conducted before the focus group discussions. This sequential approach was chosen to create an environment where participants could talk freely without worrying about what others might think or being influenced by each other's answers.

Interviews were semi-structured to cover the key themes and to ensure consistency. As a data collection tool, interviews were selected to offer participants opportunities to elaborate, clarify, and provide examples of their perceptions and experiences regarding the use of EMI in their schools. The choice of semi-structured interviews was ideal because it enables participants to openly express their views of the world without being restricted by structured questions to adopt a particular viewpoint (Duff, 2008).

The interview guide was created based on Kvale's (1996) question types: introductory questions, follow-up questions, probing questions, specific questions, direct questions, and indirect questions. Participants were given the option to conduct the interviews in Arabic or English to ensure language was not a barrier to expressing their thoughts. This was done to make them feel comfortable during the interviews. All questions were derived from the study's two research questions.

The interview questions were adopted and adapted from Hopkyns (2014) and Hopkyns (2020). This decision was made because these studies investigated the influence of English on the cultural identities of Emirati students which closely aligns with the aims and objectives of the current study within the Saudi context. To further assess the validity of the interview questions and their effectiveness in the present study, a pilot study with one participant was conducted. The participant is from a different international school than the main participants of the study and does not know them. Some questions were paraphrased and revised to make them clearer before they became part of the final study questions. Interview questions have been included in appendix A.

4.3.Focus Group

The second tool for data collection was the use of focus group discussions. These discussions were facilitated through WhatsApp to allow easy access and convenient communication with participants. The reason is because face-to-face meetings might be challenging for young students. All four students who participated in the interviews were also part of the focus group. The number of participants is acceptable because, according to Wilson (1997), focus groups usually consist of four to twelve participants. The focus group discussions lasted for six weeks, with two questions discussed per week.

The focus group was beneficial for this study for two reasons. Firstly, participants have greater power and control in focus group discussions than in interviews. Focus groups create supportive environments, foster in-depth discussions, and encourage interaction among all members (Thomas, 2008). Secondly, focus groups are beneficial for Gulf Arabs (Thomas, 2008) because they represent a culturally recognizable form of discussion (Hopkyns, 2020).

The focus group questions and topics were adapted from Al-Issa (2017) and Alqarni (2023) due to their relevance to the current research objectives. Questions were organized according to the research questions. The questions were structured following Krueger's (1998) five-category framework. The framework includes an opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending question. The focus group discussion questions are added to Appendix B.

4.4. Ethical Considerations

Since research participants are minors, consent forms were obtained from both the participants and their parents. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all individuals involved in the study.

4.5. Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was conducted on the texts and recordings in this qualitative study. This method helps in finding common themes across different parts of the collected data. This study followed the six-step framework for thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This framework was selected because it offers a simple, straightforward structure for conducting thematic analysis. The steps are the following:

- Becoming more familiar with the collected data.
- Creating initial codes according to the transcripts.
- Identifying potential patterns.
- Pointing out different themes.
- Creating and labelling themes.
- Writing the final report.

The implementation of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions helped gather valuable, detailed insights into the use of EMI in schools. Thematic analysis helped identify recurring themes in the data. The research approach that utilized in the paper offered valuable perspectives regarding the integration of EMI in educational settings.

5. RESULTS

This qualitative study investigated how adopting English as a medium of instruction influenced the local cultural identities of middle school Saudi students attending international schools. The investigation sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceived advantages and challenges of employing EMI in international schools in terms of cultural identity development for Saudi students from the students' perspectives?
2. To what extent does exposure to EMI impact the preservation or transformation of traditional Saudi cultural values among middle school students attending international schools?

Data were analysed in relation to the research questions and the two theoretical frameworks employed in this study: social identity theory (SIT) and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. This section presents the findings from both individual interviews and the focus group. Key themes were identified using thematic data analysis. Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed separately in MAXQDA. This software was chosen for its Arabic language support and for its prior use in similar studies, such as Alqarni (2023).

Initial coding was conducted, followed by focused coding. The key themes that emerged from the coded data were then used to categorize and organize the findings. Direct quotes from participants were incorporated to support the identified themes and to provide readers with a firsthand perspective on the data (Denscombe, 2010). The selected quotes were chosen from the most frequently mentioned categories to make sure that they accurately represent the viewpoints of the participants.

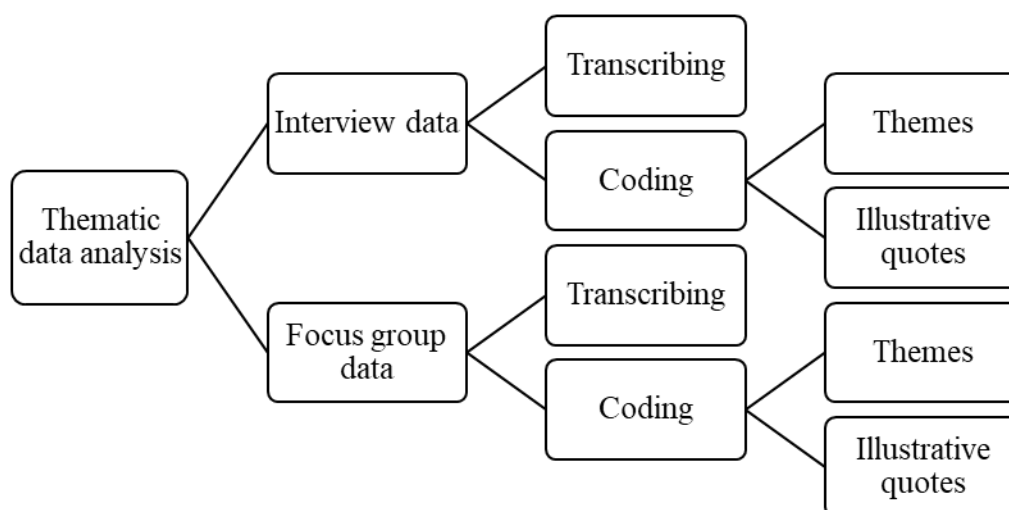


Figure 1: Data analysis procedure (adapted from Hopkyns, 2020)

5.1. Interview Data Analysis

It was necessary to review the interview data several times to identify common patterns more thoroughly. Similar categories were merged to reduce the number of themes. The following key themes were identified.

Importance of English

Participants stated that being in school where English is used as a medium of instruction is useful for them because they recognized the importance of English proficiency when they go to college. For example:

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| <i>Dina</i> | <i>Studying math and science in English it is better for me to study it in English, all good majors in universities require fluency in English.</i> |
| <i>Lana</i> | <i>My dream is to study medicine and become a surgeon, and for me to achieve this, I need to be very good in English.</i> |

Exposure to Diverse Cultures

Participants mentioned that their exposure to English instruction enabled them to expand their cultural awareness and develop friendships with individuals from other countries. They mentioned some advantages like:

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| <i>Sarah</i> | <i>I feel like English has helped me understand multiple English-speaking countries, since every country has a different culture. plus, I have friends from all around the world and I definitely could understand their cultures from just speaking this language!</i> |
| <i>Lana</i> | <i>Learning in English has helped me understand different cultures because it has opened up a whole new world of literature, movies, music, and conversations.</i> |

Comparison of English and Arabic Language Learning

All four participants shared their excitement and enjoyment for their English lessons. They said that English classes are more engaging and fun. They expressed their preference for English over Arabic classes:

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|-------------|--|
| <i>Doaa</i> | <i>My school takes English very seriously especially when it comes to projects, which is why I love English projects. We usually do huge events for English subjects. For example, instead of doing the project inside the classroom, we do it outdoor which is way more fun and exciting!</i> |
|-------------|--|

Lana I prefer studying in English because it has a lot of activities and fun games. Arabic in my opinion is super complicated and we take the same lessons from elementary we just go deeper in the lessons which I don't really like and I think it's boring and not interesting at all.

Appreciation of Saudi Values

Participants reflected on how learning English has made them appreciate the Saudi traditions and values more by comparing them with other cultural practices they learned about through their English courses. Two of the participants made the following comment:

Sarah Learning in English and understanding other cultures has made me realize how much I appreciate the Saudi culture and values. In one way, Saudi culture always have family and relative gatherings, but other cultures this thing isn't common. And I'm so glad I'm Saudi for this reason!!

Lana We took a story in English class it was called (Apache Girl's Rite of Passage). It includes an all night dance. It even requires limited sleep and food and she also can't show any emotion and they dance around the fire for 10 hours. I remember we were really shocked in class so that's why I really appreciate that I'm Saudi and we don't believe or do that here.

Linguistic Symbolism and Identity

Participants had similar associations and perceptions regarding the English and Arabic languages. For instance:

Sarah When I hear the word Arabic I immediately think of the desert, camel, generosity, culture, and Quran, but when I hear the word English, what come to my mind is America, Netflix, global, communication, and Abraham Lincoln.

5.2.Focus Group Data Analysis

As described earlier, the focus group discussions were facilitated through WhatsApp, with participants either recording their answers using the voice notes feature or typing their responses. The following themes emerged from the analysis of the focus group discussion data.

The Importance of Arabic Literacy

Participants agree that reading in Arabic is an important skill so they can read the Quran, which is central to their religious identity. Doaa commented:

Doaa I feel that it is important for me to learn Classical Arabic because it helps me understand and read fluently in the Quran which is important and makes me feel closer to my religion.

However, they find the process somewhat challenging because the school focuses more on English. For example, although Quran lessons are only once a week, they still get cancelled as indicated in the following quote:

Dina We have Quran lessons every Thursday. We do reciting but the school sometimes cancels the Quran classes to teach us other lessons as make up class.

When asked if they can write in Classical Arabic and implement the correct Arabic grammar, all four participants stated that it is hard for them and one of them debated the necessity of writing in Classical Arabic:

Doaa I find Classical Arabic Grammar quite difficult because our school focuses more English Grammar than Arabic.

Lana I don't think it's important to write essays in Standard Arabic because we already write essays in French and English.

Participants emphasized the importance of handwriting skills in Arabic because some students lack this necessary skill:

Sarah *Our Arabic teacher commented that some girls don't have clear handwriting in Arabic, and it is hard to understand their handwriting.*

School Curriculum and the Arabic Language Instruction

Participants shared some suggestions regarding ways to improve Arabic language skills in their school. They had different opinions about whether the extra classes should be mandatory or not:

Sarah *I think the schools should add after school Arabic classes. This would help improve the Arabic skills for every student, but I'm not sure if they should make it optional or not.*

Attitudes towards the Globalization of English

Participants expressed their attitudes toward English as a global language. They talked about how it is used widely and gave reasons why it has become so popular:

Doaa *It is not surprising to see English everywhere. We use it worldwide in gaming and online communication and I wish Arabic was as famous as English.*

Lana *I think some people already think Arabic is weak and less powerful. I do wish it was stronger.*

Sarah *I am worried that Arabic would look like a weak language, but English has already spread throughout everywhere because it is used in technology and learning.*

Impact of English on Cultural Values

Participants commented on how English has impacted some aspects of Saudi values and local traditions like the way the young generation dress or behave:

Lana *I think now people are more into casual clothes. T.V and movies influenced them, so they copy western styles. Some boys don't like to wear the traditional clothing of our country just because they don't think it's important.*

Dina *Maybe it affected some like I know some girls changed their lifestyle and decorate their rooms like what they see in T.V shows.*

When asked about the holidays they like to celebrate, all participants stated that they enjoy celebrating Eid and the National Day. They also celebrate birthdays and some of them celebrate Halloween.

Sarah *I don't really celebrate founding or flag day just national day most of the time. We sometimes celebrate Halloween. My mom's dad side of the family usually do a dress up party the day of Halloween/ or in the same the month.*

Doaa *I LOVE celebrating Eid on both sides of my family, and I enjoy all of the activities we do! I love celebrating birthdays because I like surprising my friends and family.*

Dina *I enjoy celebrating the national day and the founding day because it makes me very proud of my culture and reminds me how great we are! We also do costume party. I'm not sure if it is still Halloween.*

Language Preference

All participant indicated that they use English regularly in their daily lives. However, when asked about the language use at home, participants had different answers. While two participants spoke only Arabic at home with parents and siblings and at family gatherings, the other two spoke both Arabic and English with their parents and siblings:

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| <i>Lana</i> | <i>I speak only Arabic at home and at family gatherings.</i> |
| <i>Dina</i> | <i>I speak Arabic but in a Qassimi dialect at home and at family gatherings. I speak English only with my maid.</i> |
| <i>Doaa</i> | <i>I speak English and Arabic at home with my parents, siblings, and nannies. Expressing my feelings in English is way easier. Honestly, I speak both English and Arabic at the same time.</i> |
| <i>Sarah</i> | <i>At home, I usually speak a mix of both. With my parents, Arabic, but with my siblings, English. With family gatherings, I speak English. I like to say what I feel in English too.</i> |

6. DISCUSSION

The following section provides a summary of the essential findings of the study. The discussion is structured to address the two research questions in order. Then, the implications derived from the data are presented.

The first research question focused on examining the perspectives of students regarding the advantages and challenges of EMI employment in their school and whether it influenced their cultural identity development. Results revealed how important English is in the lives of the participants. They indicated its importance for their future when they go to college and how it allows them to be exposed to various cultures. Therefore, this collective agreement among participants explained how EMI contributed to shaping the educational priorities and future opportunities for Saudi students. These results are consistent with Al-Jarf (2008) and Hopkyns (2014) in which participants also emphasized the importance of English for their academic success and international relationships. Therefore, these results align with the UAE discussions about English as a “double-edged sword” because the benefits of English education can coexist with concerns about the heritage language and identity (Hopkyns, 2014).

Also, participants mentioned the creative teaching methods used in English classes. This preference for English over Arabic reflects a broader trend which is clearly observed among the participants. English language education is perceived as more engaging and enjoyable compared to Arabic instruction which they considered boring and repetitive. These findings suggest that educators and policymakers need to improve the Arabic curricula and methods of instruction.

Additionally, participants said that Arabic literacy is important for them for religious purposes. However, they mentioned facing difficulties in becoming proficient in Classical Arabic because their school focuses more on English subjects. This finding is concerning for the status of Arabic as a language used for literacy and for these young Arabs whose native language is considered Arabic. Students experience challenges trying to manage the requirements of the school and the needs to maintain their cultural and religious identities. These results reflect those of Al-Issa (2017) who also found that Arabic literacy in the UAE is “unquestionably losing ground” (p. 3). These similar findings could be due to the fact that English occupies most instructional time and academic literacy practices while Arabic is only symbolic and is linked to Islam and heritage.

Participants in the study noted that some students struggle with handwriting skills in Arabic, and they suggested including additional classes. This finding highlights a lack of focus on Arabic literacy in international schools. Therefore, it is recommended to implement effective language policies to assess the quality of the Arabic language lessons offered in those schools.

The second research question explores the degree to which the exposure of EMI impacted the preservation or alteration of traditional Saudi values among participants.

One of the important themes was the participants' appreciation of Saudi values. They explained how the exposure of other cultures through English education made them proud of their own culture and traditions. Despite this appreciation, English still affected their lifestyle choices and celebration preferences while engaging in Western holidays like Halloween. So, while EMI contributes positively to cultural appreciation, it also influences some aspects of their cultural values. This finding was supported by Al-Areify (2011) whose study indicated a negative impact of international schools on the cultural identities of high school students.

In the individual interviews, participants were asked to mention five words associated with English and five with Arabic. Consistent with the findings of Hopkyns (2020), the most common words associated with the English language by participants were "United States/America", "global", and "communication". Arabic was primarily linked with "Quran" and "Islam". Therefore, Arabic is perceived to symbolize religion, while English represents its global nature. This result implies that participants are aware of the significance of Arabic to their Muslim identities.

Regarding language use at home, some participants predominantly speak Arabic at home and family gatherings. Others use both Arabic and English when talking to their families. Moreover, an interesting finding indicated that participants prefer to express their feelings in English. These findings suggest that exposure to EMI shapes language preferences among participants of the study.

In conclusion, results showed both positive and negative impact of EMI on the identities of students. Findings indicated that there is not much influence from the implementation of EMI on the students' religious or cultural values. However, employment of EMI has huge impact on the students' Arabic literacy and language preferences.

6.1.Implications

The results of this study have important implications for language educators and policymakers. Badry (2011) suggests that to ensure Arabic stays an essential part of the identity of the young and future generations, we should invest enough time and effort in improving Arabic education as we do in teaching English. Another suggestion by Badry (2011) includes extending the duration of Arabic lessons, especially in international schools where Arabic is treated as an additional subject. It is also necessary to improve and revise the quality of the Arabic language curricula. Arabic needs to be integrated into engaging activities like artwork and competitions to motivate students.

Another suggestion is by Taha-Thomure (2019) who stressed on the importance of improving the quality of the Arabic language teachers. There is a significant gap when comparing the highly skilled English teachers and less qualified Arabic teachers hired in most international schools (Taha-Thomure, 2019). Furthermore, it is necessary that families are aware of the importance of the Arabic language because home environment plays a crucial role in strengthening the Arabic language skills among individuals through "family language planning" (Seymour, 2016, p.9).

The Saudi Vision 2030 stresses on the importance of preserving the Arabic language as it is part of our national identities:

We will endeavor to strengthen, preserve and highlight our national identity so that it can guide the lives of future generations. We will do so by keeping true to our national values and principles, as well as by encouraging social development and upholding the Arabic language (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p. 17).

By implementing these recommendations, we can work towards preserving the Arabic language and cultural heritage for current and future generations in Arab countries.

7. CONCLUSION

This section concludes the study by providing a summary of the main research findings. It discusses the significance of the findings and their contribution. Then, the limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed.

This study aimed to explore the effect of EMI on the local cultural identities of Saudi middle school students. The results demonstrated valuable insights into the complex nature of language, culture, and identity. Findings also revealed the challenges students encounter in these schools while trying to maintain their cultural and religious values. Although EMI is often characterized as "one size fits all," educational policy, this approach does not necessarily meet the needs, abilities, and preferences of all learners (Hopkins, 2020, p. 197).

This study has contributed to the field of EMI by highlighting concerns regarding the influence of EMI within the Saudi context. Findings from the present study confirm existing research that was previously conducted targeting different populations.

7.1.Limitations

A number of limitations need to be mentioned regarding the present study. Firstly, it was conducted at only one international school in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Another limitation is the small number of participants. Due to time constraints during the study, there was limited opportunity to recruit a larger number of participants which could affect the representativeness of the sample size. The study was conducted at one school. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to other schools.

Based on these limitations, several recommendations for future research can be proposed. First, it would be beneficial to conduct this research across multiple regions in Saudi Arabia. Another suggestion is to explore the perspectives of both male and female students attending international schools to gain more comprehensive insights into the cultural implications of EMI on Saudi students.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

"Hi, first of all, thank you for being part of my study. I am very interested in how students learn English and how English as a global language can be part of who they are. Your views and answers are important, so please take your time to answer openly and freely. This interview will last for about 30 minutes and this zoom session is recorded."

Stage One: Narrative

- Can you please start by sharing your experience of how you initially began learning English and what motivated you to continue studying in English?

Stage Two: Prompts

- Can you share something you really like about studying in English at your school?
- How do you think learning in English has helped you understand different cultures?
- Can you think of a way that learning in English has made you appreciate or understand your traditional Saudi values more?
- How do you think studying in international school where English is taught most of the time will help you in the future?

Appendix B: Focus Group Discussion Questions

- What do you think about this statement: It is not important for all Arabs to read and write in Arabic. Please explain.
- How do you feel about reading or writing in Classical/Standard Arabic? Do you think you can write a short story in Classical/Standard Arabic?
- Do you think schools should work on improving students' literacy in writing essays in Arabic? Or do you think it is unnecessary?
- If there's one thing you could suggest making your school better for improving the skills of Arabic language for students, what would it be? [imagine you're a decision maker at the school and that you have power to make decisions].
- If you were given the choice, do you prefer to be taught your English subjects by English native speakers (like American teachers or British teachers) or by an Arab teacher? Why or why not.
- What do you do at your school to show that you are proud of your Saudi culture?
- What language should we speak at home? English or Arabic? Why? What about family gatherings? Please explain.
- You know that English is a global language and spoken worldwide in every continent. Are you worried that the spread of English could make Arabic weak or less important? Share and explain your thoughts.
- What are your thoughts on the popularity of English TV shows and music today? Do you believe people prefer them? If so, why? Could you share examples of TV shows you watch and the language they are in?
- What are your thoughts on writing diaries? If you do write diaries, could you please share the language(s) you typically use?

English as a Medium of Instruction and its Effect on Local Cultural Identities

- Do you believe that English has influenced the lifestyle and behavior of the younger generation in Saudi Arabia, including their fashion choices and social behavior?
- What holidays do you celebrate? Share your favourite holidays.

AUTHOR'S BIO

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