



The Struggle for Balance: Policy Borrowing and Continuous Reform in the Practice of English Language Teaching in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries

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Abstract

As Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries contend with issues of identity, language loss, and the attrition of local culture and tradition, English is a requirement in most educational settings. While Arabic is still the primary language of personal and social communication, English is the lingua franca in many educational, economic, and technical interactions in much of the Arab

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world, particularly in the GCC. Therefore, even though the region's native language is Arabic, English language education is a dominant feature in both the K-12 and tertiary education systems despite the noticeable differences in how education ministries articulate and implement English language education in curriculum and policy. This chapter examines the political, cultural, and social influence that English language education has had in the GCC by exploring the historical context of English language education in the region, current policy developments, and the role English language education plays, not only in the lives of students but also in shaping the future of the individual countries in the GCC and the region as a whole.

Keywords

Language policy · Education borrowing · Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) · ELT · EFL · International education · Culture and identity

Introduction

The GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) have a long history of both being strategically important and, until the middle of the twentieth century, extremely isolated. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Portuguese held portions of the coast of Bahrain and Muscat in order to secure access to important sea routes. The Ottoman Turks added the GCC to their empire and by 1568 controlled the holy cities of Mecca and Medina (Peters 2005). With the decline of the Ottoman Empire, British influence in the region increased. Between 1820 (the Trucial States, most of the modern UAE) and 1915 (Ibn Saud, founder of Saudi Arabia), the British signed treaties agreeing to protect all of the GCC countries, in order to secure its trading routes. When the GCC states gained independence, British influence and the importance of the English language remained. Although there are current political tensions between some of the GCC countries (Bahrain, UAE, and Saudi Arabia have cut off political and economic ties with Qatar), for the purposes of this chapter we will refer to them as “GCC” countries or states.

The oil embargo of 1973, which saw a 300% increase in oil prices, suddenly brought the GCC states to the world's attention, as Western and other industrialized economies realized how dependent they were on the petroleum resources of the GCC countries. The post-embargo surge in production played a key role in the spread of English in the GCC (Karmani 2005). The rapid increase in oil prices brought sudden wealth to the GCC states, transforming the region from one of the poorest in the world to one of the richest and most powerful. By 1975, Saudi Arabia had progressed from an obscure desert kingdom to a world financial power with its revenue increasing from \$2.7 billion in 1972 to almost \$25 billion in 1975. In a similar period, Dubai, UAE, was laying the groundwork for its transformation from a local trading center to an international commercial hub (Mansfield 2003).

Before they became wealthy oil exporting nations, education in the GCC was informal and based on religious instruction and an oral tradition. From these humble beginnings, GCC states have used their oil and gas revenues to fund an extremely rapid modernization agenda. Throughout the GCC, modern city states have developed using large numbers of expatriate workers to build the infrastructure and run their petroleum industries. With modernization has come the realization that diversification beyond petroleum is imperative for national sustainability once the petroleum inevitably runs out. As a result, all of the countries in this chapter have drafted national vision plans spanning decades, which focus on educating the local citizenry to replace expatriate workers in key industries and to prepare for a new diversified economy. One common response to the need for education is to reform the K-12 system and to import branch campuses of global education institutions (Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia) and creating academic clusters and “knowledge” villages in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Now, local students have multiple regional options for Western education predominately in English where they previously would have had to travel internationally (Ahmed 2010).

Historical Context of English Language Education in Gulf Cooperation Council

Bahrain

Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy and is the only island country in the GCC (Al Khater et al. 2016). The history of English language education in Bahrain goes back to the end of the 1800s when the first modern school opened. The school was established in 1892 with Arabic, English, Mathematics, and Christianity being the subjects taught. Ever since, the government of Bahrain has emphasized the importance of learning English.

In 1940, Bahrain established their first secondary school (Shirawi 1987). Arabic was the primary medium of instruction at the institution, but there was meaningful importance placed on English language skills and teaching, and although the government made English a significant component of the curriculum, there were some early struggles (Reilly 2012). Between the 1930s and 1970s, Bahrain encountered various complications due to their rapid school expansion. One of the issues the government confronted was a recruitment shortage of qualified local and expatriate teachers. The government also faced financial concerns. This resulted in a lack of facilities for students, as school infrastructure was either inadequate or developed at an unexpectedly slow rate (Shirawi 1987).

To help deal with the shortage of locally trained teachers, the government founded a teacher training college; one for men (1966) and one for women (1967) (Abou-El-Kheir and MacLeod 2017). English was a core requirement at the teaching colleges. The increase of oil prices in the 1970s helped accelerate and expand the construction of facilities. The oil boom also aided the recruitment of expatriate educators, from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Shirawi 1987)

and “native” speakers, as the remuneration and benefits were financially rewarding to English-speaking educators and organizations (Karmani 2005). These fixes, however, did not alleviate many of the struggles students had with learning English, as the majority of students graduated high school ill prepared and lacking the academic skills to be successful learners at the post-secondary level (Abou-El-Kheir and MacLeod 2017).

To overcome these academic struggles, the Bahraini Ministry of Education (MOE) carried out various English language initiatives in order to better prepare their students for higher education. Starting in 2000, the Directorate of Curricula, a department within the MOE, devised an English language program to start teaching English from the third grade. This was an expansion of a policy implemented in 1996 where students studied English starting in grade four (Al-Sulaiti and Ghani 2001). In spite of this policy change, language standards were still not acceptable, as expected outcomes were not met. Therefore, beginning in 2004, English language teaching was introduced from the first-grade. The new curriculum was phased in over several years and by 2009 the program was fully implemented (Al Saleh 2008). The outcomes of this policy are not yet clear as students who studied English beginning in first-grade are now starting to enter into higher education.

At the post-secondary level, many institutions of higher learning in Bahrain use Arabic as their official language (Abou-El-Kheir and MacLeod 2017). Even so, Bahrain places great importance on English language education. For example, the University of Bahrain offers classes in Arabic, but for most technical subjects, English is the language of instruction. Students will use English as the primary medium of instruction throughout their studies if they are majoring in a technical or scientific field. Another reason for the prominence of English in higher education in Bahrain is due to the large percentage (21% as of 2012) of international students (David et al. 2017).

In spite of this, a majority of students who graduate from high school do not have the required English language skills to be successful at the post-secondary level. Incoming students who do not have the required English scores must study and pass an English foundation course prior to being admitted into their chosen program. However, faculty members at various institutes believe that many of these foundation language courses do not prepare students sufficiently enough. This results in many students, who do not have the necessary English skills, deciding on humanities majors, which are mainly taught in Arabic (Abou-El-Kheir and MacLeod 2017).

Kuwait

Unlike most of its GCC neighbors, Kuwait has existed as a nation in its modern form since the 1800s. Until the 1900s, like in other GCC states, education consisted of private, Quranic education. Private citizens established the first schools in 1912 (Safwat 1993).

From the earliest private schools, English was part of the curriculum possibly due to Kuwait’s status as a British Protectorate. As oil revenues increased, the

government took over the education systems with a basic curriculum focused on Arabic, Islamic studies, math, and English. In 1956, the government established the basis of the system that persists to this day. For higher education, Kuwait University was established in 1966 and for many years was the only domestic option for higher education within the country. Now, there are more than 12 higher education institutions. The vast majority is English medium (MOE Kuwait [n.d.](#)).

Kuwait introduced English language classes in a primary school in 1993. A major curriculum revision was completed in 2002, and the entire Kuwaiti curriculum, including English, was revised again in 2011 with emphasis on competencies and what students would be able to do when they completed their studies, while teachers rank the curriculum as well-organized problems persist. Nearly 80% of the students who took the Public Authority of Applied Education and Training (PAAET) English Placement Test in 2013 were unable to pass (Alotaibi et al. [2014](#)).

The new curriculum in Kuwait seems to be well received at the moment and many students and teachers see it as an improvement (Alotaibi et al. [2014](#)). However, the curricular changes on their own are not producing secondary school graduates who are prepared for tertiary education in English or to communicate effectively in English in the workplace. The main challenge seems to be for Kuwaiti authorities to preserve the positive aspects of the current reform while implementing additional changes in the ways that English is taught.

Oman

In 1970, the government of Sultan Qaboos, the leader of the Sultanate of Oman, took decisive steps to reform the national curriculum. The Ministry of Education was established and a rapid school building agenda implemented (Khan [2013](#)). As part of this reform English language education was introduced into the classrooms. Due to English's growing importance to the country, the government recognized the significance of focusing on English teaching in classrooms as an essential component in the development and success of education in Oman (Al-Issa [2002](#)). However, as in the rest of the GCC countries, the governing council was cautious about introducing English into the education system, as they wanted to preserve the important role that schools played in forming Omani values, culture, and national pride (Al-Sulaiti and Ghani [2001](#)). The acceptance of, and importance of the English language for the country's advancement, not only at the education and scientific level, but also for the job market, is acknowledged. This is evident from the curricular changes that have been implemented regarding ELT, and from the substantial funding of English language education in the country.

In 1986 Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) was founded in Muscat (the capital), with English being the medium of instruction (EMI), in order to prepare Omani students to become as competent as students in developed nations (Fahmu [1992](#)). Additionally, since most academic research is accessible in English, the introduction of EMI at SQU was so that students could be current with the latest research in science and technology. English is not only the dominant language of science and

technology in the twenty-first century, but it is also the language of engagement with the international academic community, and for this reason it was deemed essential to make English the language of instruction at SQU (Al-Mahrooqi 2012). Since the establishment of SQU, Oman has seen an increase of new public and private universities.

However, even with significant government support, three decades after ELT was added to the curriculum in Oman, there were still significant areas that needed to be developed as students still had considerable issues with their English language usage (Al-Issa 2007). This had negative implications on the national development of education in Oman. An analysis of facts and figures revealed that students graduating from high school still lacked fundamental English language skills. This in turn adversely affected local students seeking admissions not only to foreign universities where English is the medium of instruction (Al-Jardani 2012), but also to local universities such as SQU, without first passing through a relatively long foundational English program. It also had a negative effect on students' future job prospects. For these reasons, as well as the system being outdated, the Omani government felt the need to significantly transform the education system in order to modernize it according to the needs of the twenty-first century.

Consequently, in 1999, the government introduced the Basic Education System (BES). Part of the BES reforms includes introducing English language teaching from the primary level starting in Grade 1. One of the significant features of BES was the incorporation of language learning technology (multimedia, audiovisual aids, PowerPoint presentations, etc.) in order to generate student interest in learning English (Al-Issa 2005). With the introduction of BES, the General Education System (GES) was phased out. At first, there was strong resistance from many teachers and administrators, who were not only financially benefitting from the former system, but were also "comfortable" with the old one (Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi 2012). Gradually though, and as the GES was gradually replaced resistance started to wane. The BES is still relatively in its early stages, so it is difficult to assess the success of the program at this stage, but initial results appear to show English language education in Oman moving in the right direction.

Qatar

Qatar has a brief history of foreign language teaching, and as a relatively new country, Qatar's education system as a whole is comparatively new. Before oil exports transformed the economy, beginning in the 1950s, Qatar had no formal education system. Some children learned basic literacy in *kuttabs*, informal schools located in mosques or private homes, taught by literate men and women in the community. The first official school, for boys, opened in 1949 with one teacher and 50 students. The Qatari government began supporting the school starting in 1951 and by 1954 three additional boy's schools were opened featuring a curriculum of Islamic studies, Arabic, arithmetic, English, and geography (MacLeod and Abou-El-Kheir 2017).

In 1956, the Department of Education was formed and the first school for girls was formally established. By the time Qatar achieved independence in 1971, the number of girls and boys in formal education were approximately equal (MacLeod and Abou-El-Kheir 2017). The government system grew to 66,159 students in 207 schools by 1995–96. By 2001, there were over 100,000 students in the K-12 system in Qatar (Rostron 2009). By 2016, this had increased 2.5 times to over 260,000 students (UNESCO Institute for Statistics n.d.). Similarly, post-secondary institutions have increased from 1 in 1971 – Qatar University – to over 20 in 2018. All except Hamad Bin Khalifa University use English as the medium of instruction.

Qatar launched the English for a new era reform with the Rand Corporation as the lead consultant in 2002 and established the Supreme Education Council (SEC) to oversee a rapid and highly ambitious reform project, which established English as the medium of instruction in SEC schools and promised parents school choice. The EFNE was initially popular, but their initial enthusiasm declined quickly under harsh criticism for its failure to increase Qatari students' scores on international tests of achievement like the PISA and TIMSS. It was also seen as privileging English over Arabic and thereby contributing to the erosion of traditional Qatari culture. Rand Corporation's contract with Qatar was not renewed in 2013 and Arabic once more became the medium of instruction (Khatri 2013). In 2016, the Supreme Education Council was abolished with a new Ministry of Education and Higher Education taking its place. While much of the former curriculum and standards remain in place, Qatar is in the midst of another large-scale educational reform (Nasser 2017).

The issues are evident: a highly ambitious reform was mostly unsuccessful due to its rapid implementation and inadequate preparation of the new system for teachers, students, and families. It is not yet apparent if the new reforms will be more successful. Qatar's primary strength remains its willingness to invest in education and adhere to their 2030 National Vision plan to move away from a fossil fuel-based economy. Only time will tell if this latest educational reform will be successful. The challenge, as it is with most of the GCC, is reconciling the education system, modeled largely on Western examples – particularly in higher education – with the countries traditional Islamic heritage. Qatari tradition values adherence to cultural, religious, and societal norms, while Western education models emphasize questioning authority and developing the creative solutions needed for technologically advanced economies (Rostron 2009; MacLeod and Abou-El-Kheir 2017). In a country where the natives only make up a very small minority of the country's population (Qataris make up only around 12% of the inhabitants) (Hillman and Eibenschutz 2018), this balance is critical for the country's education success.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

English language teaching (ELT) in Saudi Arabia can be traced back to the 1920s. Although researchers differ on the exact date, the literature generally agrees that ELT was introduced in 1927 when the Directorate of Education was established (Al-Seghayer 2005). In the early years, ELT in Saudi Arabia did not have immediate

objectives. Rather, English was taught as an elective subject, and was not given the importance it is today. It was not until the late 1950s that English became part of the education curriculum in schools. Over the years, ELT has become more integrated into the education system, and other subjects have started being taught in English. In the early 1970s, in large part due to the vast oil revenues generated, the government was able to introduce a series of large-scale education reform programs (Al-Seghayer 2005).

The introduction of English into the education system was fuelled by the need to educate the population for jobs in which English communication was necessary. As with much change, however, there was initial resistance by many segments of the population who questioned the validity and importance of the English language. There was also a fear that the introduction of English would negatively affect cultural practices and religious beliefs. Today though, English is highly valued, not only for employment and educational purposes, but also as a lingua franca for everyday communication within the Kingdom (Mahboob and Elyas 2014). The high esteem of English, and western education overall, in Saudi Arabia is not only evident by the development of English education inside the Kingdom, Saudi Arabia also sends the highest percentage of students to study abroad among GCC countries and supports one of the biggest national scholarship programs in the world (David et al. 2017).

Like other subjects in the sciences and humanities, ELT in the Kingdom has become a core curriculum subject at the primary, intermediate, and secondary levels of education, as well as in higher education (Elyas and Picard 2010). Initially, English was only compulsory starting in middle school. In the early stages, the Saudi government was strictly against teaching English at the primary school level, as they were concerned that teaching English at the lower levels would negatively impact students' abilities and desire to learn Arabic. However, in 2010 the education system underwent significant reforms and it was decided that English language teaching would start as early as primary school (Alrashidi and Phan 2015). At the university level, even non-English (or scientific) major students, who will not study any of their content courses in English, are required to enroll in English language courses as part of their degree requirements. Some universities, such as King Fahad University, use English as a medium of instruction for all their taught programs (Mahboob and Elyas 2014). Many vocational and technical institutes, as well as military academia, have also included English in their programs of study (Elyas and Picard 2010).

The English language curriculum is centralized and is controlled by the Ministry of Education (ME) and General Presidency of Girls Education (GPGE). The ME and the GPGE also assign and distribute ELT textbooks to intermediate and secondary students throughout the country (Al-Seghayer 2005). English language education at private schools is also carried out under the supervision of the government. The English curriculum, syllabus, and books chosen for use in Saudi are heavily influenced by local traditions, customs, and beliefs (Al-Seghayer 2005).

One of the main issues that exist in the Kingdom is the lack of trained teachers to carry out curricular objectives, which requires that educators and professors have a

good command of both spoken and written English. This coupled with inadequate assessment tools to measure the deliverables and student outcomes at a national level remain to be topics of concern (Faruk 2013).

United Arab Emirates

The Emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Fujairah, Umm Al Quain, and Ras Al Khaimah (formerly part of the Trucial States) have a long individual history, but the United Arab Emirates is a young country, which was formed on December 2, 1971 when the British withdrew. A hereditary Sheikdom or ruling family rules each of the Emirates. They are semi-autonomous and with the exception of Dubai, which primarily relies on trade and tourism, rely on oil revenue; most of which comes from the federal government in Abu Dhabi. Although the UAE generates a huge amount of wealth through oil exports, it faces a number of inter-related educational challenges in its K-12 system as it attempts to position itself for success after the oil is no longer its primary economic catalyst. In 1971, at independence, the UAE had few schools. The people were mostly tribal people, nomadic Bedouins, and the rates of illiteracy were high (Alwraikat and Simadi 2001, p. 52).

The Ministry of Education was formed in 1972 and established a four-tier, primary, and secondary education system. However, schools continued to use a wide variety of approaches and methods mainly imported from other countries. It was not until 1985, when the first National Curriculum Project expanded nationwide, that a unified Emirati public school system emerged (Ridge et al. 2017). In the 1990s, the MOE and UAE University developed a new English curriculum for all grade levels.

This was followed in 2007 by the “Madares Al Ghad” (MAG, Schools of Tomorrow) initiative that introduced English as the medium of instruction for science and mathematics with additional hours of English. In 2010, the Abu Dhabi New School model was introduced with bilingual Arabic and English instruction. In 2012, the Mohammed Bin Rashid Smart Learning Program (MBRSLP) was launched in Dubai with the goal of enhancing education with technology by providing all students and teachers with tablets/laptops by 2019. However, in a decision similar to Qatar and for similar reasons (backlash from parents and others; lack of qualified teachers) the MAG was rescinded and the MOE returned to an Arabic medium of instruction curriculum with revised streams and courses (Ridge et al. 2017).

While the K-12 system was undergoing continuous cycles of reform, the higher education sector was also undergoing tremendous growth and development. From the establishment of UAE University in 1977, followed by the Higher Colleges of Technology in 1988 and Zayed University in 1998, there are now dozens of public and private, local, and international branch campuses in the UAE. Most of these institutions use English medium of instruction to prepare graduates both to work with a largely expatriate workforce and for a post-petroleum future (GovUAE n.d.).

English Language Education Policy and Foreign Policy Borrowing in the Gulf Cooperation Council

As noted, the development of the GCC states since the discovery of oil took place with incredible rapidity. Within a generation, the population boomed and the cities were transformed into modern metropolises. As a result, as discussed in the Historical Context section, the K-12 school systems in the GCC expanded from the kuttab system to limited schools to national systems within a 10- to 20-year period. As Kuwait was the first of the GCC countries to experience oil wealth, it was the first to undergo the growing pains of trying to quickly develop an educational system from scratch; however, all of the GCC states share similar characteristics and have experienced similar growing pains and issues in their K-12 and tertiary systems. These commonalities are:

1. Until the mid-1990s, the emphasis was the K-12 system. Today, the emphasis has shifted to higher education. In K-12 systems, the English language training is required and English is the official language of the vast majority of higher education institutions in the region (Wilkins 2011; Khoury 2017).
2. GCC countries spend a great deal of money on education. In 2017, they spent approximately \$150 billion on education (Arabian Business 2017).
3. That spending has not yielded a strong return on investment as their individual K-12 systems have been in a nearly constant cycle of rapidly implemented reform followed by underperformance, followed by a rapidly implemented new reform initiative. Additionally, all of the GCC states struggle to attract their citizens into the teaching profession and therefore, heavily rely on expatriate teachers to educate their young people (Abou-El-Kheir 2017).
4. A large percentage of students are graduating from the K-12 system without the skills and abilities, particularly in English, to undertake tertiary education. This results in many students spending up to 2 years in foundation programs to develop their language, critical thinking, and study skills (Cooper 2015).
5. The GCC countries in general remain conflicted about the primacy of the English language for education and business. While employers indicate that they want innovative, creative employees, there is a detachment between the borrowing of policy and importation of international branch campuses and how to contextualize them to support the region's traditional Islamic and Arabic cultural values (Romanowski et al. 2018; Rostron 2009).
6. Despite the cultural conflicts inherent in importing foreign education systems and institutions, the GCC host more foreign branch campuses than any other region. This originated as a way to give young GCC students, particularly women, the opportunity to have a high quality of education without going abroad, but evolved into strategies to become regional education hubs (Coffman 2003; Al Tamimi 2017).
7. These branch campuses are an integral part of the GCCs' education plans to diversify their economies to prepare for the inevitable end of oil. Every state has a multi-year plan that emphasizes education reform and a national plan that accentuates the role of education in shaping the national future [Bahrain, Vision 2030; Kuwait, New Kuwait 2035; Oman, Vision 2040: Qatar, National Vision, 2030; Saudi Arabia, Saudi Vision 2030; United Arab Emirates, Vision 2021] (Koch 2017).

Importing Foreign Education Institutions and Their Policies

The rapid modernization in GCC states includes a focus on female education. At the beginning of the new millennium, in line with local traditions in the region, GCC national females rarely had the opportunity to pursue higher education abroad. Hence, local study was the only viable option for the vast majority of the rapidly growing female student population. The growing demand for better quality locally based higher education intensified after the events of 9/11 due to students not feeling as safe to travel to the United States to study and so there was an urgent need for higher-quality tertiary education in the region (Coffman 2003). Over time, the emphasis on foreign branch campuses changed from having high-quality education for the local population to using branch campuses and importing education providers in order to diversify the economy and become knowledge hubs.

Today, no other region in the world is comparable to the GCC area in terms of the number of higher education branch campuses. In 2015, there were around 300 branch campuses operating globally. The two largest exporters of branch campuses are English-speaking countries, the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively. Of the 75 countries importing branch campuses, the largest single importer is the UAE. The fourth largest importing country in the world is Qatar. As of 2009, the UAE accounted for 25% of the world's branch campuses, while 6% were located in Qatar (Larsen 2016).

In the UAE and Qatar, the governments have set up free trade education zone clusters such as the Dubai International Academic City and Dubai Knowledge Village in the UAE; and Education City, part of Qatar Foundation, in Qatar. These education zones were set up to attract the best universities and colleges to the GCC region (Barnawi 2017). The attraction of free zones to foreign education institutions located within the zones is that they do not have to pay taxes or duties, and they are able to keep and remit their profits freely. In the early years, in order to attract foreign institutions to set up in these newly set up free zones, colleges and universities were not even obligated to comply with local accreditation standards (Noori 2016).

Today, leading institutions such as New York University, the Sorbonne Paris, and Michigan State University, among many others, have branch campuses in the UAE. Branch campuses of Texas A&M, Georgetown, Cornell, and Northwestern have a presence in Qatar. Other similar cases are mirrored in Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain (Barnawi 2017). There have been several initiatives in Saudi Arabia as well, where modern college buildings, with a capacity to house up to 3000 students, have been newly built. Under their initiative named "College of Excellence" (CoE), the Saudi government has extended invitations to several leading international education institutions to open branch campuses in KSA. Institutions such as Niagara College and Algonquin College, both Canadian institutions, now have campuses in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (Barnawi 2017). In the case of Oman, as of 2014 there were 26 private colleges and universities operating across the Sultanate. They were all associated with British, Australian, or American institutions, which is a Ministry of Higher Education prerequisite in an effort to maintain control of course quality (Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova 2014).

Romanowski et al. (2018, p. 23) argue that educational policy makers and those who implement reforms must “understand the role culture and context play in educational reform and begin to adapt rather than adopt educational policies and practices.” By engaging in policy learning, they conclude that instead of the culture fitting into the system, the system should fit the culture.

Challenges in English Language Education in the Gulf Cooperation Council

In most of the GCC states, the leadership views Western-style education as a formula to follow in order to develop the necessary critical, analytical, and creative skills that employers seek in their workforce (Romanowski et al. 2018). The large investment in education regionally has not yet yielded the improvements that GCC leaders have expected, as students continue to graduate with low English proficiency and lacking the communication skills needed to find jobs in a multi-national workforce (Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova 2014). On average in the GCC, 22% of all employees work for the government. Governments in the GCC are trying to get more of their citizens employed in the private sector both to replace a portion of the expatriate workforce and to get more of their citizens off of the public payroll. In Kuwait for example, public sector salaries take up nearly 50% of the countries’ annual budget (Fattah 2018).

To date, GCC countries’ reliance on Western policies and models and instruction in English has not increased educational achievement to desired levels, but it has stirred controversy based on fear of diminishing the importance of Arabic language, the loss of cultural identity, and the undermining of religious and traditional values (Romanowski et al. 2018). The two main challenges that GCC states are now facing in their education systems are:

1. How to boost student achievement, English language proficiency, and other necessary skills to succeed in the workplace.
2. How to preserve their traditional culture while merging traditional values with foreign education and modernization.

The view of those who oppose the adoption of unexamined and unmodified Western educational approaches in the GCC was well articulated by Dr. Khalifa AlSuwaidi who compared Western education to a penguin in the desert:

If penguins were able to live in the desert, then the borrowed Western educational systems would fit naturally in the GCC landscape, our children would coexist with it and it would be compatible with the nature and patterns of our region’s social life. (quoted in Romanowski et al. 2018, p. 20)

Large-scale social and economic change and educational reform requires long-term planning, pre-implementation, training and testing followed by pilot projects,

evaluation, and improvements. Then, it takes time for the system to develop and to be fine-tuned with restrained, data-driven improvements over time. Traditionally, GCC national leaders have not often accorded reforms sufficient time and patience before making changes, nor has policy development often been based on sound evidence from evaluations (AlKhater 2016). The challenge regionally is that there is major political and social eagerness to see fast educational improvements but the rapid changes often cause social strife. As a consequence, educational reforms have often been influenced or interrupted by ideological divisions, impatience, or societal pressure. Instead of regular on-going and participative evaluation, GCC countries tend to take the approach of punitive inspection. With peer review and knowledge sharing, education policy development would be evidenced based through every phase of the process, leading to more sustainable change (AlKhater 2016).

In short, the GCC states have attempted to accelerate the process of developing modern education systems, by spending a great deal of money to import foreign curricula, institutes, and educators. Unfortunately, through rapid and continuous reform, they have created K-12 systems which are in a near constant state of flux and which do not adequately prepare graduates for tertiary education or employment. Ironically, the use of education hubs to diversify the economy strategy appears to be working in the UAE and Qatar (UNESCO Institute for Statistics n.d.). At the same time, local students strive for years after graduating high school to achieve the English language skills that they need to thrive in the institutions their governments imported for them.

The Political, Cultural, and Social Influence Resulting from English Language

Many voices throughout the GCC countries are worried about the cultural transmission and linguistic concerns that are taking place with the “Englishizing” and transfer of education. This has created a controversy vis-à-vis protecting local culture, identity, and tradition (Ahmed 2010). GCC states today are experiencing a gradual loss of the use of Arabic.

Learning English and attracting world-class foreign academic institutions and campuses regionally is a big part of the GCC states’ strategies and educational reform initiatives. With time, English language education, to which GCC nationals are exposed to varying degrees from kindergarten through tertiary levels, has left a marked social and cultural imprint, as waves of local students who completed their education in this new era of reform reach adulthood. At Qatari universities for example, journalism students now need Arabic language classes, classes that are similar to what a heritage learner would undertake in order to elevate their Arabic linguistic abilities to a more acceptable professional level. Socially, younger GCC Arabs now also converse with each other using a mix of both Arabic and English, and predominantly in English when it comes to the more educated and wealthy national youth (Kirkpatrick and Barnawi 2017). They are often self-conscious of their lack of correct Arabic grammar, and while they usually take pride in their

English language skills, they often do not show that same pride in communicating skillfully in their own native Arabic (Abou-El-Kheir and MacLeod 2017). Another outcome is that as the majority of the populations are expatriate foreign workers, the need to communicate with them in English has left Arabic on its way to becoming a second language in the GCC region.

Some segments of society in GCC states see English as a threat that is overshadowing life in their countries and sidelining the Arabic language and national identities. This has triggered impassioned debates and controversy that has played out in society and politics (Ahmed 2010). On the other hand, Clive Holes (2011) details that English penetrated the Arabic spoken in the GCC region as early as the 1930s, since the discovery of oil in the region, and that GCC Arabs who knew little to no English decades ago did not know that some of the words they were using were borrowed from English. Today, this has evolved to code switching; the to-and-fro-ing between English and Arabic, with the English being spoken fluently and idiomatically, often with an American accent (Holes 2011). Holes rejects the notion that Arabic culture and identity are in crisis but rather claims that they are shifting.

Student Identity and Attitudes Toward Learning English in the Gulf Cooperation Council

As discussed earlier, language plays a key role in shaping a culture's identity. Accordingly, there are strong indications that identity and language are interconnected (Abou-El-Kheir 2016). In a study on the effects of English on Emirati cultural identity, Hopkyns (2016) found that Arabic and English were seen by the participants (students and teachers) "to represent two very different worlds, with Arabic being connected to home life and religion, and English being connected to education and the wider world." Abou-El-Kheir (2016) found that students in Qatar prefer to study in English, not because they believe that English, in contrast to Arabic, is associated with academia, but because many students find it easier to study in English and they also believe that the instruction they received in English is of higher quality.

There are many in Qatar who believe that Arabic as a language is associated with "familial and religious identity; the cornerstones of Qatari identity" (Abou-El-Kheir 2016). This is similar to Hopkyns' (2016) findings in the UAE where only 27.5% of the students surveyed used English at home or with friends. In the same study, Hopkyns (2016) asked Emirati students to name five words they associated with Arabic and five words they associated with English and what each language represented to them. The words that students most frequently associated with English were education (75%), entertainment (57.5%), communication (50%), global (42.5%), and job (20%). For Arabic, the words were Islam/religion (100%), first/mine (95%), tradition/history (67.5%), culture (37.5%), and family (32.5%). The Emirati student responses presented two very different worlds – one linked to modern themes (future), education, communication, and the greater world. The other, Arabic, is connected to the past and in a way to nostalgia, tradition, religion, and culture.

This theme is reflected in an experience Holes (2011) had when he met an Emirati student studying abroad in the United Kingdom. Holes asked whether “he ever read or wrote anything in Modern Standard Arabic” (academic Arabic), to which the student replied, “Never.” Since international business (and education) is often carried out in English, university graduates in Bahrain and other GCC states often find that they do not use Arabic regularly in professional or academic settings. This indicates that students in Bahrain and other GCC states are indeed “moving away from using Arabic as a normal means of academic communication, unless it is in a familial or local context.” (Abou-El-Kheir and MacLeod 2017, p. 25). They put forth that cultivating Arabic language studies and highlighting the importance of maintaining excellent Arabic communication skills could offset the prevalence of English over Arabic.

However, it is the link to tradition, familial, and religious identity that lead Qatari students, as well as other students and youth in the GCC, to believe that the present supremacy of English does not erode local culture nor the use of the Arabic language (Abou-El-Kheir 2016). This echoes Holes (2011) who maintains that the current dominance of the English language in the region does not signal the death of the Arabic language as a means of communication, but rather that the landscape of the use of Arabic is fluid.

Conclusion

The countries that form the GCC vary in size, resources, and approaches to reform and modernization. In each country, however, foreign expatriate workers make up the majority of their populations, with English being the common language of business transactions, education, and work. The region’s leadership see English as a key factor in their agendas to diversify their economies away from oil and increase the employability of their graduating national students. The rise in oil prices in the 1970s enabled the GCC monarchies to invest in various education initiatives to that end. GCC national students, products of a traditional educational system that values the acceptance of knowledge from authority without questioning and dependence on the teacher, need to learn more than just the English language. Traditional teaching and learning styles need to adapt as well in order to develop the critical skills required in a global workforce.

Leaders across the GCC acknowledge that traditional learning and teaching styles do not develop the critical, analytical, and creative skills that employers search for. A desire to see quick results has led to the rapid implementation of borrowed western education policies and models where the majority involved the adoption of the English language as a medium of instruction. Further policy developments led GCC governments, such as the UAE and Qatar, to set up knowledge and education free zone clusters to attract world-class education institutions to the region. The UAE today is the largest single importer of branch campuses in the world. Numerous prestigious universities from Australia, Europe, and the United States have branch campuses within its borders. These branch campuses aim to attract not only national

and local expat students, but also regional and international students. They market the opportunity to enjoy the vibrant lifestyle of the UAE while getting a quality Western education.

These initiatives to raise the level of education have come with negative social consequences, namely the fear of losing cultural identity and religious values through the weakening of the Arabic language, as traditional values and modernization struggle to strike a balance (Romanowski et al. 2018). GCC countries need to move away from uncritical educational borrowing and more effectively adapt borrowed approaches to incorporate important cultural elements in order to improve education and learning. Traditional approaches have not worked, and policy and curriculum borrowing has been largely inefficient. The GCC states need to find a middle ground and the patience to allow new reforms to develop and be improved rather than replaced.

Cross-References

- ▶ [EALD Students at University Level: Strengthening the Evidence Base for Programmatic Initiatives](#)
- ▶ [English Medium Instruction in Higher Education: The Role of English as Lingua Franca](#)
- ▶ [Imagined Communities, Identity, and English Language Learning in a Multilingual World](#)
- ▶ [Languaging and Translanguaging for English Language Teaching](#)
- ▶ [Postentry English Language Assessment in Universities](#)
- ▶ [Understanding English Language Learners' Pragmatic Resistance](#)

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