Language policy in higher education in the United Arab Emirates: proficiency, choices and the future of Arabic

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Abstract

This article explores the linguistic tension resulting from the English-medium instruction policy at a state university in the UAE. The article is informed by a critical theoretical approach that views language policy from the vantage point of both Arabic and English. It argues that, contrary to the stated national and institutional goals, the current language policy and its implementation are depleting the linguistic capital of the nation. Data drawn from multiple sources show that English-medium instruction is incompatible with the students' low levels of proficiency in English; that the implementation of the institution's bilingual policy is geared towards the development of English only; and that a monolingual conceptualisation underpins institutional practices, thus contributing to Arabic language loss in the education domain. The article proposes that higher education in the country be linguistically diversified in order to achieve the goals of higher education and to protect the linguistic rights of local citizens.

Keywords English-medium instruction · Arabic language · Higher education · Language policy · Bilingualism · Linguistic rights

Introduction

The UAE is a linguistically and ethnically diverse country. Its population is estimated at 9.54 million—the majority of people are voluntary immigrants, and Emirati nationals only account for 11.48% (Global Media Insight 2018). Arabic is the official language of the state and of communication in all federal authorities, while English is the dominant lingua franca and the medium of instruction in all public and private institutions of higher education.

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The university under study, referred to as AREN University hereafter, is a public institution that offers free education to UAE nationals only. While the university is mandated to implement an English Medium Instruction (EMI) policy, its institutional documents express a strong commitment to developing students' bilingual competence in Arabic and English. For example, its graduates are expected to be fluent in English and Modern Standard Arabic. They are also expected to know the academic and professional conventions of both languages. To facilitate the transition of the medium of instruction from Arabic in public schools to English in tertiary education, AREN University runs a one-year English foundation programme, referred to as 'foundation year' hereafter.[1]

A brief review of the literature that addresses language-related issues in tertiary education in the UAE reveals a scholarly concern with certain themes. The most prominent is the students' limited proficiency in English and its causes, with a strong association between Arabic-medium education and the linguistic and pedagogical challenges encountered in tertiary education (Mouhanna 2016; Rogier 2012; McGlennon 2015; Morrow 2017). Other common themes are educational reforms, bilingual education and Arabic-language loss (Weber 2011; Wilkins 2010; Al-Issa and Dahan 2011; Findlow 2006; Tabari 2014). The pedagogical tensions created within the classroom due to the epistemological, cultural, political and professional paradigms that underpin 'Western' and 'Arab-Islamic' educational traditions have also received considerable scholarly attention (Weber 2011; Freimuth 2014; Hatherley-Greene 2012; Shaw 1997). In addition, many publications have focused on the threat that English poses to the linguistic, religious, cultural and social identities of local students and their resistance to Western values (Diallo 2014; Holes 2011).

Most of these contributions approach language in education with English as the focal point. The Arabic language, however, is discussed as a barrier to developing students' English, as a symbol of identity, or as a linguistically diminishing background. In addition, the data reported, except in research that addresses attitudes and perceptions, are derived from English-language test results, and Arabic-language test results are rarely reported. Moreover, this body of research tends not to discuss issues of language rights and linguistic inequality. Consequently, some language issues are continually foregrounded while others are backgrounded. In an age in which policy decisions are data-driven, the issues that receive considerable scholarly attention tend to be addressed when educational reform is implemented, while the issues that receive little attention remain unremarked. This situation calls for an alternative research approach that goes beyond problematisation. Instead of the one-sided, post-policy, English-only approach, this article proposes that research in bilingual contexts adopts a mutually inclusive research approach that allows for the simultaneous evaluation of learners' proficiency in both languages and discusses the role of languages in education based on the resources provided, time allocated to instructionc and functions given to each linguistic code.

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[1] Since the beginning of this article in 2017, the foundation year has been abolished at all public universities, and EMI has been adopted in public schools for all subjects except for Arabic, Islamic and social studies.

Against this backdrop, this article makes several contributions. It aims to counter the one-sided research approach that views each language in isolation from the other. By adopting a *bilingual research orientation*—the alternate consideration of students' proficiency in both Arabic and English and the reporting of the results of tests taken in both languages—an equal voice is given to the concerns surrounding each language when it performs an adjacent function within higher education. Furthermore, instead of generating a research discourse that leads to competition between the two languages, and eventually to an 'either or' language policy, it is proposed that the outcomes of bilingual education be evaluated against bilingual inputs such as the resources, spaces and functions provided for each language. This will allow for the critical evaluation of policy decisions and implementation strategies, as well as of their effectiveness in achieving their stated goals. This article also addresses a gap in the literature by considering the linguistic rights of local citizens who constitute a minority in their own country. Lastly, the linguistic debate is placed within a knowledge production framework that questions the learners' capacity to produce new knowledge in view of their proficiency levels in both Arabic and English.

Research methodology

This article uses a case study research methodology to question the extent to which the EMI policy is supported by students' proficiency levels in English at a state university in the UAE, and the impact of this policy on the students' academic and professional competency in Arabic. This two-pronged perspective places language policy within the wider linguistic milieu of the UAE, thus providing a context within which the links between language policy, language proficiency, language rights, language shift and knowledge production can be explored. The article adopts a critical theoretical approach that questions the taken-for-granted assumptions about language policy and implementation strategies (Pennycook 2001) within and outside of the classroom, thus making it possible to sketch the long-term implications of EMI not only for the Arabic language, but also for the quality of education and the future of knowledge production in the UAE.

The data sources in this article include Common Educational Proficiency Assessment (CEPA) English results, published by the National Admission and Placement Office (NAPO),[2] International English Language Testing System (IELTS) results, institutional Arabic Placement Test results and institutional Arabic Language Learning Outcomes results. The article argues that the EMI policy, as implemented at AREN University, is creating linguistic tension. This tension refers to the competing, and sometimes contradictory, language priorities and outcomes with which learners, the institution and policy makers grapple as they work to align their policy

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[2] NAPO is one of the offices of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, which processes applications from national secondary school graduates in order to be admitted to one of the three public universities, namely the United Arab Emirates University, Higher Colleges of Technology and Zayed University.

promises with actual achievements (Liddicoat 2014). More specifically, the article aims to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent is the EMI language policy compatible with the students' proficiency in English prior to university admission, and to what degree does EMI improve learners' competency level in English after completing the four-year baccalaureate programme?
2. To what extent is the institutional bilingual policy supportive of academic and professional proficiency in Arabic?
3. What are the implications of the current language policy for the Arabic language, Arabic knowledge production and learners' linguistic rights in the UAE?

Literature review

The field of language policy and language planning (LPLP) deals with any language-related intervention, endorsed or imposed by official or unofficial authorities, explicitly or implicitly, by state actors, linguists, institutions, community members, families or other actors, with the goal of maintaining or changing the language itself or the linguistic behaviour of users, at a regional, national, domain or individual level, with a particular vision in mind (Ricento 2000; Ferguson 2006; Baldauf 2006; Hornberger and Johnson 2007). The literature distinguishes between macro, formal and state-backed language policies in which the authority of the state is deployed to manage the status of languages and their use by the people under its jurisdiction (Schmidt 2006), and the micro, informal practices of individuals, families and groups as they interact in professional and recreational settings (Pennycook 2001).

The global spread of English has generated much debate within the field of LPLP in an attempt to understand its causes and the subsequent inequalities it has created in communication, education, linguistic preservation and knowledge production (Ricento 2000; Ricento and Hornberger 1996; Graddol 1997; Phillipson 1992; Ammon 2001; Williams and Cooke 2002; Hamel 2007). More specifically, the adoption of EMI in historically non-English speaking regions has acted as a catalyst for bilingual research and the role of bilingualism in mediating the linguistic challenges resulting from language contact (Tollefson 1991; May 2014; Tollefson and Tsui 2004; Macedo et al. 2003).

De Swaan (2001) presented a three-layer hierarchical framework of the world's languages to explain the global demand for English. He placed the majority of the world's languages at the base of this constellation, identified twelve 'supercentral' languages (of which Arabic is one) at the next level, and allocated the top position to English, which is the only 'hypercentral' language. This hierarchical system was subsequently utilised to show that speakers tend to learn the languages that are located at the higher levels, with preference being given to English (de Swaan 2010). While this framework explains how the demand for English has been generated, it does not completely address how supply feeds the demand, how the demand conceals the potential for suppressing other languages, and how the demand contributes to language shift and English hegemony (Hamel 2007).

Another explanation is based on the inherent qualities of the English language. English is said to be a remarkable language and the tongue of the educated; as such, it is assumed to facilitate a better understanding of the world (Burchfield 1985). Moreover, the use of English allows educators to offer their students "certain patterns of thought and values" that facilitate a "better or truer way of understanding the world" than do other languages (Barrow 1990: 9). However, these claims have been contested. The discourse glorifying English has created a linguistic divide between native and non-native speakers, and has excluded other languages from various domains (Auerbach 1993). Phillipson (1992: 318) attributed the global domination of English to "structural and cultural inequalities" that exist between English and other languages, and the association of any language with 'good' or with 'bad' to power relations. One concern about this positive–negative representation of languages is that it may lead to discrimination against the speakers of these languages based on "overt language-related prejudices" (Macedo et al. 2003: 89).

Instead of this futile discourse, the ecology of languages adopts a critical stance to counter the impact of global English on other languages, with attention being paid to language endangerment, shift, decline, death and even murder (Fishman 1991; Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1996; Nettle and Romaine 2000; Krauss 1992; Yamamoto et al. 2008; Crawford 1996). It is suggested that the rapid or gradual shift from one language to another more dominant language begins with a period of bilingualism; eventually, the more dominant language takes over "the roles previously carried out by the endangered language" (Austin and Sallabank 2011: 1). For any language to remain vibrant, it must be spoken by a large number of people, be passed down from one generation to another and used as the medium of instruction (Yamamoto et al. 2008; Nettle and Romaine 2000; Krauss 1992).

EMI: definition, aims and challenges

As a term, EMI remains problematic, ill-defined and fluid (Schmidt-Unterberger 2018; Hamid et al. 2013). This ambiguity is linked closely to the fact that EMI has been implemented in various educational phases, in countries with dissimilar political, historical, linguistic and ideological backgrounds, in wide-ranging academic disciplines; and in learning environments that are becoming increasingly internationalised (Walkinshaw et al. 2017; Dearden 2014). A widely circulated definition states that EMI is "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English" (Macaro et al. 2018: 37). This definition fails to take the theoretical underpinnings of EMI into consideration, as well as its context-specific complexities (Dafouz and Smit 2014). The lack of conceptual clarity has raised questions about the mismatch between the strong support that EMI receives from policy makers on one hand, and the numerous practical challenges EMI poses for learners, teaching staff and societies on the other (Dearden 2014; Chapple 2015; Hu et al. 2014; Kung 2013; Hamid et al. 2013; Fenton-Smith et al. 2017).

While some authors claim that the *central* aim of EMI is content learning, casting the development of students' proficiency in English as a by-product, others believe that EMI combines content learning and implicit English-language instruction (Dearden and Macaro 2016; Walkinshaw et al. 2017; Schmidt-Unterberger 2018; Brown and Bradford 2017). The conclusions of empirical studies that have investigated whether EMI improves (directly or indirectly) the English-language skills of learners in different parts of the world are mixed (Costa and Coleman 2013; Lei and Hu 2014; Lo and Lo 2014; Mustafawi and Shaaban 2019). Lei and Hu (2014) demonstrated that EMI was ineffective in terms of improving students' English proficiency. Other studies have shown significant improvement in speaking, little to no improvement in reading and limited to no improvement in writing (Knoch et al. 2014, 2015; O'Loughlin and Arkoudis 2009; Yoon 2018; Serrano et al. 2012). Even studies that acknowledge some improvements in students' academic writing have shown that the grammatical accuracy, the complexity of the writing, coherence and cohesion, spelling, the knowledge of academic vocabulary and the citing of sources do not improve (Storch 2009; Al-Khasawneh and Maher 2010; Al-Mahrooqi et al. 2015; Van Rinsveld et al. 2016; Mustafawi and Shaaban 2019; Umair 2011).

With regard to the comprehension of content, the literature provides ample evidence of the academic challenges experienced by students who study through the medium of English as opposed to their L1 (Lo and Lo 2014). Hellekjær (2010) revealed that Norwegian and German students experienced difficulties with comprehension, and that Norwegians encountered more challenges than did their German counterparts. Airey and Linder (2006) revealed that Swedish students learning via English asked and answered fewer questions and that they could not follow the lectures and take notes simultaneously. Other studies in European, Asian and Arab contexts have indicated that students are challenged by new vocabulary and by the academic content of lectures (Hellekjær 2010; Kung 2013; Ellili-Cherif and Alkhateeb 2015; Al Zumor 2019).

UAE-based research has reported similar challenges (Hatherley-Greene 2012; Freimuth 2014). Rogier (2012) pointed out that 38% of Emirati students failed to gain an overall 1 band in IELTS over the course of the four-year degree programme, 65% of the students did not achieve the desired increase in reading, 51% in writing, and 48% in listening. Another study showed that, even with front loading in the first and second years, students had not developed their English-language skills to satisfactory levels (Craig 2007: 250). Furthermore, UAE students do not achieve the international levels on the IELTS scores: 72% of UAE students receive a score of band 5 or lower, and only 12% score a band 6 or above (Morrow 2017).

Thus, it is the goal of this article to examine whether the implementation of EMI in the UAE is compatible with the learners' levels of proficiency in English prior to university admission, and the degree to which EMI improves learners' English-language skills over the four-year baccalaureate programme at AREN University. The article also investigates how EMI impacts on L1 attrition, with particular attention being paid to the resources dedicated to the use of L1 within and outside of the classroom.

Language policy in higher education in the United Arab Emirates:...

221

Table 1 NAPO applicants' average CEPA scores by year

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Overall	150.8	153.4	151.6	157.3	158.5	160.5	160.6	159.9	160.0	160.7	163.6

Source: NAPO Newsletter, Issue 16 (2013)

Table 2 NAPO applicants' average CEPA scores by year and education zone

Education zone	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Dubai	160	162	164	167	166	169	169	169	169	172	175
Sharjah	152	156	154	159	162	162	163	162	162	164	166
Abu Dhabi	154	157	155	160	161	163	161	161	162	162	165
Umm Al Quwain	153	153	153	159	160	162	164	162	161	164	165
Ajman	149	151	150	156	158	160	159	158	156	157	161
Ras Al Khaimah	149	151	148	155	157	159	160	157	157	157	159
Al Gharbia	143	144	143	151	150	153	154	153	152	152	159
Fujairah	147	150	145	152	152	155	155	155	155	155	157
Sharjah East	145	148	143	151	152	155	154	156	154	153	155

Source: NAPO Newsletter, Issue 16 (2013)

Results

English-language proficiency among high school graduates

The National Admission and Placement Office in the UAE requires that high school graduates score ≥ 180 points on the CEPA to qualify for direct entry to any public university. Students who score ≤ 180 points are placed in the foundation year. To exit this programme, students must achieve an overall band score of ≥ 5.0 on the IELTS; failure to do so will lead to dismissal from the academic institution. According to NAPO (NAPO Newsletter 2013), the average CEPA score of national applicants from 2003–2013 was < 180, as shown in Table 1.

NAPO asserted that improvements were noticed in all education zones in the UAE, although Dubai topped the list with an average CEPA score of 175, as shown in Table 2.

What is considered significant here is that "the average high school graduate is now *nearly ready"* for direct entry (NAPO Newsletter 2013: 2, emphasis added). Moreover, the newsletter identifies a wide discrepancy in English proficiency between high school graduates who live in Dubai and those who reside in the other Emirates. The NAPO Newsletter affirmed that, based on the CEPA range descriptors shown in Table 3, "the average student… is one semester closer to being ready to enter college" (NAPO Newsletter 2013: 3).

As Table 4 shows, however, only a minority of applicants score ≥ 180 points on the CEPA. Although 20% is indeed a significant improvement in comparison

Table 3 CEPA range descriptors

CEPA range	CEPA descriptors
90–139	Random
140–149	Extremely low English ability (Beginner)
150–159	Low, at-risk
160–169	Emerging proficiency
170–179	Intermediate
180–210	May be ready for direct entry to English-medium tertiary study

Source: NAPO Newsletter, Issue 16 (2013)

Table 4 Percentage of candidates by CEPA Band

Band	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
90–139 (%)	18	7	14	24	11	11	7	8	7	6	9
140–149 (%)	27	14	24	21	20	16	15	15	17	17	14
150–159 (%)	26	22	27	20	26	24	25	23	25	27	25
160–169 (%)	19	21	17	21	23	25	23	24	24	21	20
170–179 (%)	8	10	10	14	15	17	16	16	15	16	17
180–210 (%)	3	4	8	8	11	12	14	11	12	16	20

Source: NAPO Newsletter, Issue 16 (2013)

to only 3% in 2003, the question of what happens to the remaining 80% of applicants who do not meet the English-language entry requirement is overlooked.

The NAPO Newsletter claimed that these results "provide evidence" of the effectiveness of the reform efforts in delivering "concrete results" (NAPO Newsletter 2013: 2). But while the failure to equip students with appropriate levels of English is often attributed to public schools that teach through the medium of Arabic, it was confirmed that almost 65% of UAE's private school graduates who study through the medium of English, were incapable of direct entry into university (Hoppe 2017).

English-Language Proficiency Among University Students

An internal report prepared by AREN University (personal communication, 10 October 2016) used the IELTS scores and sub-scores since 2010 to assess graduating students' English-language proficiency levels. The IELTS scores and sub-scores for the 2010–2011 cohort, shown in Table 5, indicate that the students' scores were highest for listening but lowest for reading and writing. While students at three colleges achieved an overall score of ≥ 6.0, students at two colleges achieved an overall score of 5.5 and 5.8. In fact, none of the colleges achieved 80% or above in any of the scores and sub-scores.

In addition, Table 6 showing the overall percentages for four university cohorts indicates that the majority of the students scored < 6.0 band score, and that less

Table 5 IELTS Scores and Sub-scores for the 2010–2011 Cohorts

College	Overall	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing
College 1					
Mean	6.2	6.1	5.8	6.6	6.0
% ≥ 6.0	69	53	45	85	61
College 2					
Mean	5.5	5.4	5.1	6.0	5.5
% ≥ 6.0	25	25	8	67	33
College 3					
Mean	6.1	6.2	5.8	6.7	5.8
% ≥ 6.0	70	61	38	92	39
College 4					
Mean	6.2	6.0	5.6	7.0	5.9
% ≥ 6.0	64	49	31	93	53
College 5					
Mean	5.8	5.7	5.4	6.2	5.7
% ≥ 6.0	47	49	23	77	44

Table 6 Overall percentages of four university cohorts

Cohort year	No. of colleges	Overall percentages of scores and sub-scores of 80% or Less	Overall percentages of scores and sub-scores of 80% or above
2010–2011	5	70	30
2011–2012	4	50	50
2014–2015	6	72	28
2015–2016	4	60	40

Table 7 English-language proficiency amongst AREN university students

Year	Number of students	5.5 Overall scores	5.0 Overall score
2014–2015	547	170 (31%)	24 (25%)
2015–2016	550	211 (39%)	55 (10%)
Total	1097	381 (35%)	79 (7%)

than 80% of the students achieved a ≥ 6.0 band score for each of the scores and sub-scores.

The internal report used an IELTS overall band score of 6.0, the university's requirement for admission to the master's programme, as a yardstick to measure undergraduate students' English-language proficiency. Data from the 2014–2015 and 2015–2016 cohorts reveal that 42% of the students did not obtain an overall IELTS score of 6.0 by the time they had completed their four-year undergraduate degree programme, as shown in Table 7.

Table 8 Average IELTS score gains over a four-year period amongst sample students

Gains in IELTS Points	1.5	1.0	0.5	0	− 0.5
No. of students	2	11	16	14	6
Percentage (%)	4	22	33	29	12

Table 9 Arabic-language placement test results

	Arabic for natives	Heritage Arabic	Arabic as a foreign language
Overall Score	50% or above	40–49%	39% or less
Reading	544 (81.3%)	88 (13.1%)	37 (5.5%)
Writing	618 (92.3%)	28 (4.1%)	23 (3.4%)
Total/placement	598 (89.3%)	52 (7.7%)	19 (2.8%)

To gauge the extent to which students' English-language skills had increased over a four-year period, the report measured the average score gains via the random sampling of 49 students who had overall IELTS scores ranging from 4.5 to 7.0. The results, as shown in Table 8, show that an improvement on the score is not always guaranteed, and that decreases in the score also occurred.

The report concluded that a significant number of graduating students had not achieved an overall IELTS band score of 6.0, and would thus not be eligible to commence a master's degree programme at the same university from which they were about to graduate.

Arabic-language proficiency amongst high school graduates

Neither the AREN University nor the NAPO documents refers to an Arabic-language admission requirement. Since no data are published by NAPO, the Arabic Language Placement Test results from 2015–2016 will be used to illustrate levels of proficiency in Arabic amongst students that were newly admitted to AREN University.

The placement of students in one of the three Arabic-language tracks (Arabic for natives, heritage Arabic and Arabic as a foreign language) is determined by an internally developed test consisting of writing a short text (250–300 words) and a reading comprehension section. 40% of the overall score is assigned to writing, whereas 60% is reserved for comprehension. Students who obtain an overall score of 50% or more are placed in the Arabic for natives, those who earn an overall score between 40% and 49% follow the heritage Arabic track, and those who attain an overall score of 39% or less attend the Arabic as a foreign language track. Table 9 shows the results for 669 students who sat the Arabic Placement Test in 2015–2016. The majority of the students were placed in Arabic for natives, and only a minority was placed in the heritage Arabic and Arabic as a foreign language tracks.
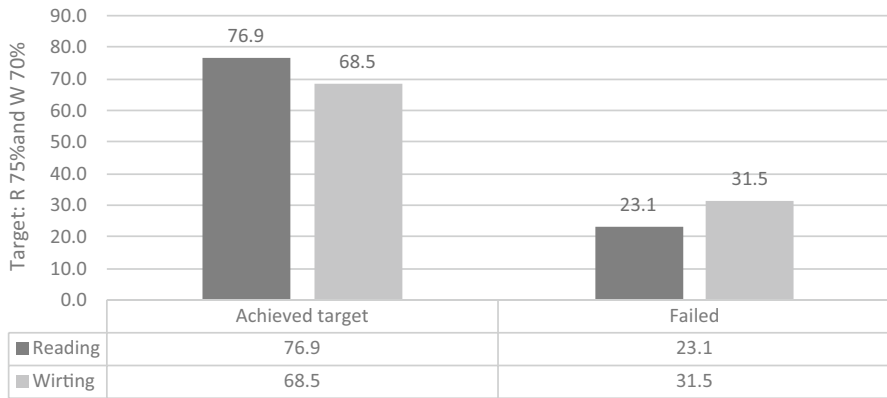
Fig. 1 Arabic reading and writing assessment results, Fall 2013

Arabic-language proficiency amongst university students

To develop their skills in Modern Standard Arabic, AREN University students are required to take one basic language course in the first year of their studies, and one academic/professional language course in the final year of their university education. To evaluate students' proficiency in Arabic, I will consider the results of the Arabic Language Assessment Reports for the year 2014–2015.

In Fall 2013, the reading and writing skills of a sample of 108 students were assessed. A multiple-choice question final examination was used for evaluation of reading with a focus on comprehension and critical reading skills, while a written quiz was used for writing. As Figure 1 below illustrates, 76.9% of the participants achieved the reading target and 68.5% reached the writing one.

The second assessment measured the reading, writing, listening and speaking skills of 121 students in the spring of 2014. Reading was evaluated via a multiple-choice question comprehension and critical reading test, while writing, listening and speaking were assessed by using an academic research paper of 1000–1500 words, an in-class audio-visual assignment and a professional oral presentation, respectively. The results in Figure 2 below show that only 59.5% of the students met the reading and writing targets while 85.1% and 71.9% achieved the speaking and listening targets, respectively.

Discussion and implications

English versus arabic: access, choices and equity

The data presented above demonstrate several challenges with the existing language policy. To begin, most of the national students did not meet the 'direct entry' English-language requirement. With scarce Arabic-medium tertiary education
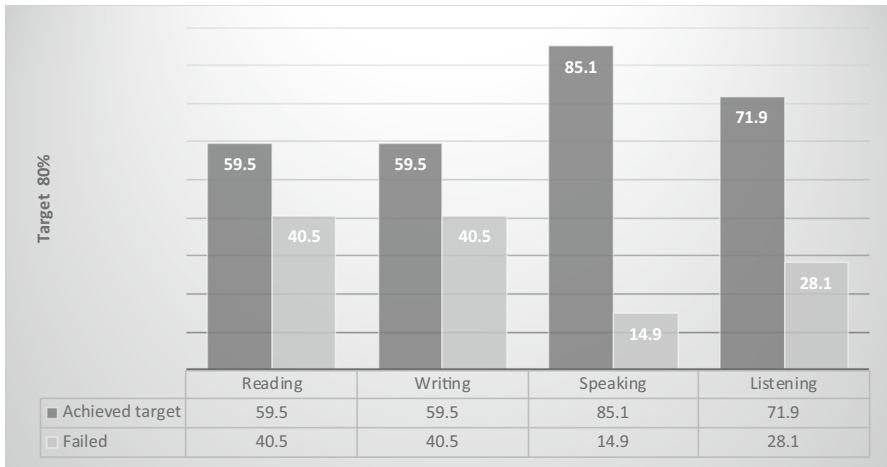
Fig. 2 Arabic reading, writing, listening and speaking assessment results, Spring 2014

in the country, these students will either be denied access to higher education or will be forced to improve their English and re-apply. In this situation, proficiency in English becomes the criterion that determines success or failure in obtaining access to higher education. By making higher education available only in English, a powerful two-fold message is communicated to the learners and the community: the first explicitly affirms the strong ties between knowledge acquisition and English, making English a must-have language and *the* measure of success, while the second implicitly suggests no obvious relationship between Arabic and knowledge acquisition, making Arabic dispensable and irrelevant to success. This process of inclusion and exclusion reflects the perceived values associated with each language (Phillipson 1992). Consequently, English is likely to consolidate its status due to the social, educational, political and economic forces that are shaping its use (Ferguson 2006), while Arabic is likely to continue to decline because of the absence of similar powerful forces supporting its use. Within the educational domain in the UAE, the adoption of EMI in public schools and universities except for Arabic, Islamic and social sciences subjects is the result of top-down decisions made by official authorities (Yamamoto et al. 2008). Spolsky (2008: 4) referred to this as language management and suggested that it is one way through which the patriarchal authority, that assumes to know what is best for the user, exercises its power. In today's neoliberal, globalised world, this 'best' is defined in terms of economic gains, with little regard for social, national and cultural implications (Shohamy 2003). Learners who are attached to their cultural and linguistic identity, but who also want to gain access to education and employment opportunities, find themselves stuck between an 'either or' choice and fear becoming double-losers (Ferguson 2006). Although the forces of reality compel learners to adhere to EMI, the extent to which this is a free or a 'pre-conditioned choice' (Macedo et al. 2003: 127) must be questioned.

In multilingual contexts, decisions about language policy have been linked to the moral and ethical foundations of a just community that places the well-being of the

individual at the forefront of its priorities, and which allows individuals the freedom to define what is meaningful in their own lives for themselves without having to place this right in juxtaposition with the 'good' and without having to pay penalties in the form of disadvantages over which individuals have no control (Schmidt 2006; Kymlicka 1989). Accordingly, some argue that the responsibility of providing individuals with equal opportunities and the right to determine their own destinies lies with the state, which has the power and the resources to "provide equally effective support for the structures of each component ethnolinguistic community making up the country" and, by extension, the development of an inclusive language policy that supports multiple languages (Schmidt 2006: 106). In the UAE, however, the extent to which the current language policy provides equality of opportunity and support for its indigenous ethnolinguistic community is questionable. As is, it forces UAE nationals to study in an underdeveloped second language and, in the process, offers them little choice to learn in their L1. Furthermore, while ample support is provided for English, such as the provision of the foundation year, limited resources are allocated to enhancing teaching and learning in Arabic. It is often argued that the maintenance of one's mother tongue and the dominant language need not be in conflict (Crystal 2000). In theory, this is commendable; however, in reality, the language policy of the UAE provides no alternatives to studying via the medium of English, and consequently, the learners' ability to avoid such a conflict is literally impossible.

At this point, a distinction between the linguistic rights of the local citizens and those of the voluntary immigrants must be made, particularly when linguistic rights are linked to territory, ethnolinguistic identity and citizenship (Tollefson and Tsui 2004). The voluntary immigrants who constitute the majority of the UAE population are temporary residents who have no path to naturalisation (De Bel-Air 2015) or access to public education. Thus, one understands why they invest little time and effort in learning Arabic, and why they opt for private English-medium education. What is difficult to understand, however, is why UAE nationals who will most likely continue to live and work within the territorial boundaries of their country must be educated via a second, deficient, non-national language even at a public institution that is dedicated solely to their education. Moreover, the availability of public and private higher education exclusively in English is creating a "stable diglossia" (Ricento 2006: 13) that lowers the status of Arabic and relegates its domains to local uses, while elevating the status of English and extending its domains to what is perceived to be quality education.

In addition to this local-foreign dichotomy, the data from NAPO reveal a national socioeconomic disparity that seems to have an impact on students' English competency. The figures in Table 2 above in particular show that students who come from the city of Dubai are more likely to meet the English-language requirement and to be more successful in higher education than are students who come from other cities in the UAE. Even though the UAE has the highest number of private international English-medium schools in the world, with a total of 593 schools (Cook 2017), these private schools are not distributed equally across the UAE's education zones; the majority (185) are found in Dubai, and as few as seven are located in Umm Al Quwain (Ministry of Education School Statistics 2016–2017: 4). Proficiency in English in this diverse educational landscape might become a tool for constructing and

transforming inequality between the economically privileged and the less-privileged learners (Shin and Kubota 2008). In addition, these linguistic-educational inequalities might eventually be transferred to other sectors (such as the workplace) and, ultimately, nationally (Pennycook 2001; Tollefson 1991). Furthermore, the association of English proficiency with access to higher education while excluding any role for the Arabic language is consolidating "the power of the English language and its speakers" (Shohamy 2003: 283) while restricting the power of the Arabic language and its speakers. Such inequalities compelled Al-Issa and Dahan (2011: 3) to describe the role of English in the UAE as 'nefarious' because it will ultimately replace the educational and social functions of Arabic.

Students who meet the English-language admission requirement but fall short of meeting the baccalaureate English-language requirement (direct entry) will have to dedicate part of their time and effort to learning English while engaged in higher education. The current practice seems to view this as a one-sided language problem to which the provision of a foundation year is an ideal solution (I will return to this issue in the next section). That said, other trickle-down effects, such as the dedication of a great deal of human and financial resources to English-language teaching and the extension of the baccalaureate programme to seven years in some cases ought not to be overlooked. In fact, after having been ignored for many years, these very issues were highlighted in the official justifications for eliminating the foundation year. It was said that "remedial education [foundation year] eats up a third of the higher education budget" as well as being "a considerable additional cost to the government", and that it is "a burden on university students and their families" (Salem and Swan, 2014). To decrease costs and counter low proficiency in English, EMI was implemented in all public schools as of 2017. In the long term, this *may* resolve the English-related issues but is equally likely to cause further attrition in Arabic.

Foundation english, SLA and bilingualism

The EMI policy at this institution seemed to be based on the assumptions that the foundation year was sufficient to develop the students' proficiency in English for academic purposes, and that the students' Arabic had been developed adequately prior to tertiary education. Several theoretical models for second language acquisition and bilingual education programmes with varying degrees of attention to literacy development in the L1 and L2 have been proposed. Some models favour L1 support while the L2 is being developed (Slavin and Cheung 2005), while others advocate English-only approaches (Rossell and Baker 1996). Nonetheless, there is strong scholarly agreement that literacy development is best achieved when the L1 is used in conjunction with the L2 (Slavin and Cheung 2005), and that the simultaneous use of both languages is more conducive to academic achievement even after proficiency in English has been achieved (Rolstad et al. 2005).

The time-on-task theory, the threshold hypothesis, and transfer theory attempt to explain the effectiveness of bilingual approaches. The time-on-task theory suggests that the more time the learners dedicate to learning a second language, the more proficient they become in that language (Porter 1996; Rossell and Baker 1996). Thus,

learners must be exposed to the L2, with the exclusion of the L1, for as long as possible. Empirical findings suggest that Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills develop reasonably quickly (Cummins 1981) within three to five years (Hakuta et al. 2000), while academic proficiency takes four to seven years (Hakuta et al. 2000), five to seven years (Cummins 1981), four to ten years (Thomas and Collier 1997) or four to eight years (Collier 1987). What is not contested by researchers is that the foundation year is far too short to develop English for academic purposes. As the data above illustrate, neither the foundation year nor instructing students in English for four years results in encouraging English-language scores.

The threshold hypothesis was proposed by Cummins (1976) to explain the influence of bilingualism, and consequently the level of linguistic competence in the L1 and the L2, on cognition and academic achievement. Cummins (1976) identified a lower threshold and a higher threshold. For him, bilinguals who attain low levels of proficiency in their L1 and L2 may suffer negative cognitive effects. However, if they acquire high levels of competence in their L1 or L2, they suffer neither positive nor negative effects. Bilingual subjects who develop high proficiency in both their L1 and L2 reap positive cognitive effects. The theory regards low levels of proficiency in both languages as semilingualism, and high levels of proficiency in both languages as additive/balanced bilingualism (Cummins 1979). The limited instructional opportunities for developing students' academic and professional skills in Arabic at AREN University leave learners short of achieving the higher threshold level, and the foundation year is far too short to develop their lower threshold proficiency in English. Some might argue that, in line with the linguistic interdependence hypothesis, the academic and literacy skills acquired in one language can be transferred to the other language. The theory makes a distinction between "surface aspects" that are specific to a given language and a "deeper conceptual and linguistic proficiency" (Cummins 2017: 106) that is mutual across languages. For this transfer to occur, however, *sufficient* exposure to both languages must exist (Cummins 1981; Thomas and Collier 1997). Again, AREN University's EMI model does not adequately develop the academic and literacy skills of the learners in either language; consequently, learners' deeper conceptual knowledge in the L1 and in the L2 is likely to suffer. What is evident is that while AREN University might be committed to bilingualism as presented in its discourse, it seems that such good intentions get lost in practice especially with the little consideration dedicated for the resulting monolingual biases (Kachru 1994; Sridhar 1994).

L1 attrition and knowledge production

AREN University makes provisions for the teaching and learning of two Arabic courses throughout the four-year baccalaureate programme. This minimal provision is based on policy makers' assumption that the students' Arabic-language skills are developed sufficiently prior to entering tertiary education. Indeed, the Placement Tests Results shown in Table 9 above reveal that 89.3% of the students who were newly admitted to AREN University had relatively high levels of proficiency in Arabic. Nevertheless, the degree to which these skills are stable and

immune to reduced proficiency must be considered within an overwhelmingly English immersion context within the institution. The students are not only taught academic subjects solely in English throughout their baccalaureate programmes, but are also expected to perform all manner of formal and informal communication in English. Let us take the faculty members with whom the students interact daily as an illustrative example. AREN University employs 640 faculty members who belong to 70 different nationalities. While 47.3% of the faculty come from Inner Circle countries (the USA accounts for 20.7%, the UK for 13.1%, Canada for 7.8%, Australia for 3.9% and New Zealand for 1.8%), only 26.6% come from the Outer Circle (Kachru 1985). English immersion can also be seen in all the institutional policies, procedures and forms, which are available in English only.

Against this background, the offering of only two Arabic-language courses brings the likelihood of maintaining the pre-university proficiency levels of the students into question, much less the development of their professional and academic skills in Arabic. In fact, Figures 1 and 2 above demonstrate a decline in the percentage of students who met the reading and writing skills targets. In addition, the two Arabic courses are isolated from the academic content in the disciplines, which means that the students are not exposed to the disciplinary lexicon or to the syntactic richness and complexity of academic texts in Arabic. These circumstances provide a breeding ground for attrition to occur. In the context of this article, language attrition is understood as "the declining use of mother tongue skills by those in bilingual situations" in which the dominant language—English—replaces the mother tongue (Lambert and Freed 1982: 1), as well as the decrease in users' competence in their L1. AREN University students who acquire their disciplinary knowledge in English are likely to know the lexicon of their discipline in English but not in Arabic. To compensate for this lexical deficiency, these students infuse their speech with English words and phrases (Palfreyman and Al-Bataineh 2018). For academics, translanguaging is regarded as a natural linguistic phenomenon amongst bilinguals (Garcia and Li 2014) but this 'naturalness' should be questioned when the speech community in the UAE, particularly the students, strongly opposes language mixing (Al-Bataineh and Gallagher 2018).

It should be clear at this point that the academic community in which students spend most of each day for at least four years is not paying sufficient attention to the Arabic language. From a symbolic affirmation perspective, these practices might be interpreted as signs of lack of "consideration and respect", which Patten (2001: 696) considered to be "crucial to developing a full sense of one's own worth and an undisputed sense of one's agency and identity". By allocating unequal resources and attention to Arabic and to English, by limiting the spheres of use of the Arabic language, and by making English the de facto language of work, the current language policy is promoting a gradual linguistic shift from Arabic to English (Patten 2001). In this regard, it is worth distinguishing between what Hamid et al. (2013: 10) referred to as the "planned and unplanned outcomes" of language policies, particularly when the latter outweighs the former. While it is true that the EMI/bilingual model at AREN University specifically, and in the UAE in general, is intended to enhance the learners' bilingual competence by improving their English and

preserving their L1, the unplanned outcomes of this policy indicate that the extent to which these goals are achieved is questionable.

A popular justification for the implementation of EMI is that qualified graduates will contribute to the knowledge-based economy and to knowledge production in various fields. Given the bleak reality of knowledge production in the Arab world (UNDP 2003; Maziak 2005), this is a legitimate ambition; however, it must be weighed against the actual linguistic capabilities and disciplinary literacy possessed by the graduates of AREN University. Disciplinary degree programmes are intended to socialise students "into domain-specific academic genres and registers" (Hellekjær 2010: 248), or what Shanahan and Shanahan (2012: 8) called "the specialized knowledge and abilities possessed by those who create, communicate, and use knowledge within each of the disciplines". This knowledge has its own specialised vocabularies, specific ways of thinking, and particular rhetorical conventions for negotiating meanings (Schmidt-Unterberger 2018). Moreover, the language used in the hard sciences, in the humanities and social sciences, and in the arts follow different language patterns for creating and interpreting texts (Halliday and Martin 1993; Fang and Schleppegrell 2008). Students must possess advanced literacy skills to navigate these intricacies of knowledge acquisition. When students' proficiency in English is barely at the threshold of literacy, the language itself is likely to hinder their ability to acquire knowledge and, more importantly, their capacity to produce new knowledge in English. Those students who have not acquired disciplinary skills in their L1 are unlikely to produce new knowledge in Arabic either. To overcome the above challenges, this article proposes that the current language policy be reviewed, and that more provisions be made for teaching and learning in Arabic.

Conclusion

This article examined the EMI language policy at a state university in the UAE. Using a case study methodology and a bilingual research orientation, the study drew on multiple sources of data to evaluate the extent to which the EMI is compatible with the students' levels of proficiency in English prior to entering university, and the degree to which the learners' English-language skills improved after four years of full immersion in English. The article also evaluated the students' proficiency in Arabic at the commencement of their university education and upon graduation. It demonstrated that the students' levels of proficiency in English upon entry were low, and they remained low following the completion of the foundation English year, as well as at the end of the four-year baccalaureate programme. The article showed that students enter the university with a set of Arabic-language skills that remain underdeveloped due to the limited opportunities for learning Arabic. The findings shed doubt on the effectiveness of the EMI model that is currently implemented at AREN University. It proposes that higher education in at least one public institution be provided for UAE nationals through the medium of Arabic, and that incentives to learning English be given. This will ensure a degree of linguistic balance in higher education, safeguard the well-being of Emirati citizens and their right to choose from a variety of mediums of instruction, and preserve the linguistic capital of the

nation. Although the challenges this article reports are in some way similar to those experienced elsewhere in the world where critical misalignments between policy and implementation practices exist (Mustafawi and Shaaban 2019; Hu et al. 2014), it is hoped that the implementation of the 'The Emirati School Model'[3] across the UAE education system will contribute to the elimination of some of the educational and linguistic challenges this article outlined.

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[3] The Emirati School Model is a new educational reform initiative. Launched in 2017, it aims to create a unified education system across the UAE to meet the objectives of the UAE Vision 2021 and the UAE Centennial Strategy 2071. In addition to teaching science and maths in English, this model is said to implement best international standards, adopt a modern unified curriculum and focus on enhancing students' knowledge, skills and personalities.

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