


## Research

# EMI in the Saudi Arabian context

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## Abstract

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has recently made significant changes to its tertiary education programs, aligning itself with other nations in the Middle East and North Africa by adopting the practice of English Medium Instruction (EMI). However, EMI is not without drawbacks. In the UAE and Qatar, for example, researchers have reported on the potential adverse consequences of the policy. This study seeks to explore KSA university students' and instructors' attitudes toward EMI, with a significant focus on broader social and cultural perceptions, while also addressing pedagogical issues. This approach contrasts with the predominant focus in the existing literature, which primarily emphasizes pedagogical aspects. A mixed-method approach is utilized in which students were surveyed quantitatively, and instructors were interviewed. The study does not reveal any evidence of broader social and cultural concerns such as those reported elsewhere; however, the findings do indicate student resistance to a monolingual approach, whether English or Arabic. Thus, by taking into consideration the findings presented here and in other studies, in conjunction with relevant theoretical suppositions, this study substantiates the benefits of a mixed-medium approach combining English and Arabic.

**Keywords** EMI · Social and cultural factors · Higher education · Saudi Arabia · Teacher perceptions

## 1 Introduction

Saudi Arabia has made major changes to its tertiary education programs, aligning itself with other nations in the Middle East and North Africa by adopting the practice of English Medium Instruction (EMI). EMI can be defined as “[t]he use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English” ([34], p. 19). The Saudi government, in recognizing English as the global *lingua franca*, is implementing EMI because progress is believed to be dependent on promoting English proficiency among the populace [38]. Additionally, the government supports the understanding that monolingual foreign-language teaching best facilitates the acquisition of additional languages [15]. As Zoghbor notes, the “English language is in high demand in industry” and is a “passport to a global world” (2023, p. 91).

One of the goals of Vision 2030, a reform for modernization launched in 2016, is to enhance educational outcomes and better prepare students for the job market by increasing the use of English as an instructional language within Saudi higher education. This initiative aims to equip students with the necessary language skills for global competitiveness while maintaining pride in their Arabic and Islamic identity. Numerous studies have been conducted on the pros and cons of EMI in the Gulf context, and there is evidence that students and teachers have mixed feelings about such an approach [3, 7–9]. However, the implementation steps taken by the Ministry of Education for this policy have encountered certain

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challenges. Some researchers contend that this approach “seems to adopt a ‘weaker Islamization’ stance” ([23], p. 5). Consequently, various voices—whether advocating for an ethnoreligious state or a civically conscious social order more akin to Western models—are competing to define society and the “imagined community” inside it. Similar discussions about competing in globalization are also taking place [44].

Prior research on the topic tends to concentrate only on pedagogical issues, such as whether EMI enhances learning or if teachers and students have adequate support. However, little attention is given to how broader social, political, and cultural factors determine whether EMI is a viable basis for education. In this article, we take the case of Saudi Arabia into consideration. It is argued that failure to reflect on broader issues, or to only perceive EMI from a pedagogical standpoint, increases the likelihood of outcomes that are at odds with the goals of Vision 2030. Our aim mirrors that of Zoghbor [48] for the UAE, which similarly explores the role of institutional, political, and cultural factors in the effectiveness of EMI.

This study envisions EMI in Saudi Arabia from a rhizomatic perspective to emphasize the complex and usually unintentional social and cultural effects of learning (see [22]). Instead of considering the phenomenon of using English in the instruction from a top-down, policy-focused approach, attention is instead given to the complex nature of language, to sociopolitical forces and language practices, and to aspects of culture and identity. Consequently, there is focus on the diverse and usually unanticipated consequences of EMI. This will provide a more holistic perspective.

## 2 Background

Teaching English in Saudi Arabia serves the pragmatic goal of Vision 2030 to equip individuals with essential language skills. However, the use of English has unintended effects. Across the Gulf states, there is domain loss in the native tongue. Numerous studies conducted in the Arab world, according to Habbash and Troudi [29], have demonstrated that teaching exclusively in English can result in linguistic-cultural dualism, in which English is seen “as a symbol of technology and modern life, travel, and employment, while Arabic is educationally marginalized and is seen to represent tradition, religion, and worse, backwardness” (p. 62). Also, in a qualitative study on the views of 500 students on EMI performed by Findlow [26] in higher education institutions in the UAE, respondents stated that they perceived Arabic as being demoted to being useless and that Arabic culture was portrayed as “other” while English was a language for modernization. Another study demonstrates that emphasis on English as an instructional language renders Arabic “second-class status” ([29], p. 71). Many academics fear that English could jeopardize Arabic [14, 45, 46].

The argument presented in this paper is situated within current debates on the internationalization of higher education by the use of EMI, with especial emphasis on mobility, nationalism, and the socio-economic status of students. This will serve as the basis for analyzing the perceptions of a group of university students and faculty regarding the use of English. While the study is focused on conditions in Saudi Arabia, the findings are also relevant to other educational contexts across the Gulf states, as well as to other developing regions. The study will outline the mixed methodology used to analyse the data. Finally, conclusions and recommendations will be provided.

### 2.1 Geopolitical policy shortcomings

English is a common medium of communication across the Gulf states. In the UAE, for example, there is concern over the sociocultural impact this is having on society. The status and prestige implicitly granted to English speakers can potentially lead to greater acceptance of views and opinions that undermine traditional values [1, 5, 43]. As a result, there is resentment toward the imposition of English-language policies, and this potentially causes resistance to the medium itself. Such findings are corroborated by Ahmadi, who noted that respondents “expressed fear of losing their culture” ([1], p. 13). Shifts in language behavior of people in the Gulf states can be the result of linguistic imperialism, which Canagarajah and Said define as “the imposition of a language on other languages and communities” ([18], p. 391). Historically, such impositions have resulted from colonialism, highlighting the strong connection between language, identity, and nationalism. Saudi Arabia is unique in this respect in the region. It has not been caught in colonial, imperialist, and neo-colonial interventions to the same extent as other Arab states. Nevertheless, the increased use of English in education, for some, gives rise to bitterness which can result in hostility toward the educational system. It can also negatively affect learning outcomes.

To better prepare students for university studies, a change in the school curriculum in Saudi Arabia was announced in 2004, which increased the number of English classes to two classes per week for primary public-school students. Other

factors also play a role in the implementation of such changes in the curriculum. Employers in the nation's top industries consistently say that Saudi university graduates are knowledgeable in their fields but lack proficiency in English, and criticism of Saudi higher education for turning out a workforce with inadequate English language skills is found regularly in the media [40].

As noted, the primary goal of EMI is to enhance the nation's international competitiveness. There are nevertheless several reasons for expecting the outcomes to be contrary to this aim. If students are resentful of the role the English language maintains in their culture as a result of its being imposed upon them in a unilateral, top-down manner, the use of English in the educational systems which furthers such imposition will only exacerbate this ill-feeling—presumably resulting in resistance to learning the language. This is intensified by insufficient institutional support and preparation for students. When students are not adequately prepared to adapt to tertiary education where the English language is the medium of instruction, teachers are faced with a dilemma: either stick with EMI, and risk failing to impart the required content knowledge; or contravene the policy to help students learn what they need to learn. In practice, teachers in Saudi Arabia are doing the latter [33].

Teachers and students resist the imposition of EMI in several ways. As Louber and Troudi [33] note, the imperatives of communication and agents' responses to them, produce bottom-up reconfigurations of the top-down policy directives. Policy is practically meaningless if it cannot gain any traction on the phenomenon it is intended to shape. All of the factors considered in this article would suggest that this is likely to be the case in Saudi Arabia. This resistance can also be observed in neighbouring countries. Of central concern is the risk that strict adherence to EMI can potentially lead to poor literacy in both Arabic *and* English. Those who favour the EMI initiatives presuppose that if the students have good literacy in one language, they have the capacity to transfer it to another. However, if proficient literacy skills do not emerge in either language, then the students are left struggling in both languages across many subject areas.

## 2.2 The context for EMI and attitudes in higher education in Saudi Arabia

Vision 2030 is based on three themes: "a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation" [42]. In Saudi Arabia, the push towards multilingualism and multiculturalism as part of Vision 2030 can be seen as creating a more rhizomatic educational landscape. This transformation does not follow a straightforward path but involves various interdependent factors, such as economic disparities, access to educational resources, and the maintenance of cultural and religious identities. A transformation, from monocultural and monolingual in an Arab context, where Arabic is the common tongue of the nation, to becoming multicultural and multilingual, where Arabic exists alongside English, is taking place. By 2030, the population of the Kingdom will reach 50 million, roughly split between Saudis and expatriates/immigrant workers [25], the majority of whom do not have Arabic in their linguistic repertoire. According to the government, this will globalize Saudi Arabia. Supporting such policies, the goal is internal coexistence. To achieve this, there is a call for giving English official language status [11]. Critics of the increased use of English contend that this could "threaten the religious and cultural heritage of the country" ([24], p. 142). Such reproaches challenge those responsible for change, calling instead for the need to establish a plan that will not jeopardize Arabic national identity.

The transition from Arab medium instruction in elementary and secondary education, where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), to EMI in higher education, -including a year of instruction via the Preparatory Year Program (PYP)- is insufficient and consequently puts many students at a disadvantage instructionally. It can also be demotivating. "Passing the PYP is a mandatory prerequisite for students to be permitted to enrol in undergraduate education" [9], so there is pressure on students to pass their PYP exams. The introduction of English at the elementary level has not proven adequate [4]. Access to the best teachers, materials, and classes has always required more substantial investment, so parents who are economically advantaged are able to send their children to better schools as well as finance private lessons, English camps, and the like. They have also in many cases acquired English themselves, something which supports language learning among their children. Parents who struggle economically find it difficult to keep pace. Now, they have an added problem of Arabic literacy to contend with.

## 2.3 Socio-political obstacles

Numerous studies have demonstrated that many university students lack the confidence to pursue tertiary-level studies in a foreign language, perceiving English instruction as imposing added complexity in addition to the challenges of going from secondary to tertiary education [6, 15, 28]. Their level of proficiency in English does not give them a sufficient foundation to master subject matter taught in the English medium [28]. This is also noted in other Gulf states. Ahmadi

described “the bitterness most Qatari students express [toward EMI]. ... They see it as an obstacle to earning their Arabic degrees that will result in a higher paying salary” ([1], p. 13). These socio-economic dimensions are exacerbated by the fact that EMI outcomes vary according to students’ socio-economic and educational backgrounds [47]. An EMI policy is therefore most likely to benefit the upper socio-economic strata of society, conferring access to qualifications and knowledge that will in turn make it easier for economically advantaged learners, in due time, to have successful careers. The potential of education to promote social mobility, greater societal equality, and a genuinely meritocratic order will consequently be undermined.

This push toward an ever-expanding use of English education introduces several changes. For one, the early introduction of English has produced an unprecedented number of bilingual children in Saudi Arabia, which some may perceive as a positive outcome. This is more prevalent in middle- and upper-class families. It has implications for equity in that well-off families are able to invest in their children’s education in a way that those of lesser means cannot, which increases societal stratification. At the same time, Mansory [35] notes that there are now parents who disapprove of exposing their children to Arabic, a paradoxical linguistic trend that has been extreme in Saudi Arabia. This further contributes to creating a linguistic hierarchy that affects social standing and access to opportunities and has the potential to create an environment in which discriminatory practices can thrive. This was highlighted by Wanphet and Tantawy [47] who found that EMI outcomes varied according to students’ socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Consequently, there is a risk that EMI policies exacerbate inequalities by penalizing students who are least able to obtain supplementary assistance. Comparing current educational reforms and views toward EMI in Saudi Arabia to the rhizome perspective highlights the complexities of these transformations. The rhizome approach emphasizes the importance of flexible and inclusive policies that meet the different requirements of all stakeholders. Such a strategy can help to balance English absorption, improve educational outcomes, and preserve Arabic identity.

### 3 Method

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to explore the emotional and psychological effects of EMI on Saudi female undergraduates. The use of qualitative data from these interviews complements the quantitative survey data, providing a fuller picture of the EMI environment. All of the participants are female and have Arabic as their first language. Data were collected through two primary methods: a survey administered to students and semi-structured interviews conducted with faculty members. Each method was chosen for its ability to address specific aspects of the research questions.

#### 3.1 Instructor interviews

*To gain qualitative insights, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with five faculty members to gain insights into their opinions on EMI. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their ability to explore issues in greater depth and facilitate the elicitation of valuable contextual detail. The use of semi-structured interviews helped ensure that the interviewers were able to obtain data of relevance to the study, while providing the flexibility to explore unexpected topics raised by the informants. Thematic analysis was used in analysing the qualitative data. This approach involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data [17].*

Interviews with faculty members were conducted in English. As the interviewer shared the same L1 with the faculty members, they were asked to choose which language they desired, and all chose English. It is important to note that all of the faculty members interviewed for this study had experienced EMI in their own master’s level studies and had IELTS or TOFEL qualifications. They therefore all had a solid foundation in English. One faculty member came from the Department of Law, while two others came from the Science Department, and an additional two from the Computer Science Department. All of the instructors responded to the email indicating that they would like to participate in the study. The interviews took between 15 and 20 min. All of the faculty members have tenured teaching positions, have been granted either a Ph.D. or a master’s degree, and obtained their graduate degrees in a Western country where English is the majority language.

## 3.2 Student survey

The study used a quantitative research method by conducting a structured survey to understand students' attitudes toward EMI and related issues. The goal of the student survey was to obtain a broadly representative picture of students' attitudes toward EMI and associated issues. Using a survey was considered the most appropriate way to obtain such data in light of the ease and convenience it provided in obtaining data from a large sample, and in analysing the data once collected. The survey administered to the undergraduate students was developed to investigate the research questions, focusing on their perceptions of the implementation of the EMI policy. Socio-economic status was an important factor to investigate, since accessing English early on in one's education, or attending a particular kind of school, can aid in achieving academic success.

The survey was taken by 180 students from the Sciences and Computer Sciences departments. The survey was developed in English and then translated to Arabic. To ensure the validity of the translation, two colleagues in the English department were asked to back-translate the translated survey. A pilot study was carried out to assess reliability, and to ensure that the results were relevant to the research questions. Both criteria were fulfilled.

Respondents for the survey were sampled randomly by sending emails. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," allowing for a nuanced understanding of student opinions.

The survey consisted of ten questions, designed to explore various dimensions of EMI:

- Questions 1 to 4: Focused on the effects of EMI on students' understanding of course content, probing whether EMI enhances or hinders their academic performance.
- Questions 5 to 7: Examined students' perceptions of the EMI policy's implementation at their institution, assessing whether the policy is effectively communicated and supported.
- Questions 8 and 9: Investigated students' beliefs about how EMI influences their current and future opportunities, both academically and professionally.
- Question 10: Explored students' attitudes toward English in relation to their national identity, assessing whether they perceive EMI as a threat to their cultural and linguistic heritage.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Teacher's perspectives

This discussion of the findings from the interviews is organized according to the interview questions, and the topics that the interviewees themselves raised.

#### 1.1.1. What is your motivation for teaching in English other than the EMI Policy?

In response to the first interview question, the interviewee from the Law Department (LD1) stated, "I am not preparing the students for the test if I exclusively use Arabic in class. I'm making every effort to avoid using Arabic to help the students' English." This emphasis on tests and exams was echoed by the interviewee from the Computer Science faculty (CS1), who stated:

Given the nature of computer science, I encourage my students to express themselves in English. They must be able to communicate in the language. Exams, texts, and lectures are entirely in English. . . . If I have trouble articulating something, I'll switch to Arabic. I answer requests from some pupils to clarify certain sections in Arabic.

The interviewee from the Science Department (MSC1) similarly indicated that they use such a dual-medium approach, teaching primarily in English, but switching to Arabic when necessary for clarification or engagement: "I mostly teach in English, but I also utilize Arabic to help the students comprehend the material and to keep them interested during the lesson." Importantly, in SC2's case, this approach appeared not to be simply a matter of convenience, but to arise from explicitly formulated ideas about the value of dual-medium learning to the acquisition

of the primary content, stating, "I believe that teaching Arabic and English together helps the students comprehend the material and the subject matter."

Articulating motivation arising from the instructor, rather than consideration of the students, the interviewee from the Science Department (PSC1) stated, "I love the language. I was taught in English by an English instructor, and I'm passionate about passing that passion on to my pupils by instructing them in the same language."

#### 2.2.2. Are the classes taught in English harder to understand? Why?

The second interview question delved into instructors' perceptions of the potential challenges of EMI for students. MSC1, CS2, and PSC1 all focused on potential mismatches between the complexity of the content and the students' language proficiency. MSC1 stated that "the students' language proficiency and the complexity of the subject matter" plays a role in the difficulty of EMI classes; while PSC1 stated, "The pupils' academic level may not match the curriculum's complexity." LD1 concurred with this judgement, but expressed a greater sense of constraint and frustration with the outcomes of such a situation:

Some students struggle to understand the content of the subject, and that might make it harder to understand the lesson, because they are learning [both] English and the content [simultaneously]. We cannot help them because the exams come from the university that are ready to apply. We cannot adjust them based on the students' level.

This frustration provided the basis for a topic that was not anticipated in the interview framework, but which the interviewees brought up themselves: measures that should be put in place to address these difficulties.

#### 3.3.3. Measures that should be put in place

PSC1 argued that ESL teaching needs to focus more extensively on speaking and real-world communication, stating that "this must assist the pupils in speaking openly... It should cover at least a portion of communication." While this approach appears to focus on the difficulties the students encounter, LD1's response alluded to the challenges it presents for the instructors. LD1 suggested the implementation of ESL-specific qualifications for students to help them integrate into EMI, and ensure that they are adequately prepared, citing the approach of foreign universities: "To ensure that all students are on the same level, private universities and/or overseas universities require TOFEL or IELTS testing. The university should require that too. That would help make it easy to teach. By providing support, the aim is to facilitate a smoother learning process."

#### 4.4.4. How much time do you spend preparing classes in English compared with those in Arabic?

The only interviewee who indicated that preparation for EMI classes takes longer than for classes in Arabic was MSC1. This instructor emphasized that "It takes me a while to prepare, not because of the English, but rather because of how poorly the students understand the language. I make a lot of effort to keep the language and the ideas simple."

#### 5.5.5. Do you believe that teaching EMI would affect the students' cultural identity? If so, in what way?

While the interviewees' responses to this question, and their reasoning in connection with the topic, varied quite significantly, they all appeared to agree that EMI does not present a threat to Saudi cultural identity. Most clearly, this is expressed by LD1, CS1 and MSC1. MSC1 stated, "Students won't lose their sense of cultural identity, in my opinion. Only scientific reasons are given in the book. In Saudi Arabia, not all places speak English. Most of the time, students speak Arabic at home and with their friends." LD1 stated, "No, I don't think that they will lose their sense of identity, as long as they are aware of the two contexts when they use English and when they use Arabic. We are preparing students for global opportunities."

PSC1 concurred with this view to some degree, but in fact went further, arguing that EMI can boost Saudi cultural identity: "The academic setting should boost the cultural identity. [But] It is not a problem that English is used only in the academic setting. The awareness of the language can greatly aid the kids' sense of cultural identification." As with LD1, MSC1, PSC1, and CS2 emphasize the importance of delimiting English to specific contexts. The idea that such exposure to a different language can boost one's own cultural identity, however, appears a distinct view. That this is expressed by



an interviewee who claims to be “passionate” about the English language, indicating that positive engagement with a different language and culture may strengthen one’s own cultural identity.

## 4.2 Students’ perspective

Student respondents demonstrated a broadly favourable attitude to the use of English in the classroom. A total of 65.5% of the students indicated that they could follow the English lectures without difficulty. This is true even though 56.7% of the survey participants did not receive additional English-language education and 85% attended publicly sponsored schools. The students also have a broadly favourable attitude to their teachers’ use of English, with 65.4% indicating that they perceive their teachers to be good communicators in English. Only 12% of the respondents disagreed with the claim that they are able to follow lectures in English without too much difficulty (Table 1).

These findings present some heartening insights, not least because of the importance students appear to place on the English language. Some 70% of respondents perceived themselves to be learning English in their course of studies. No respondents expressed disagreement with the idea that their English language skills would be important for their career. The average score for responses to this question was 4.72. Given that a value of 5 indicates strong agreement with the statement, this indicates the strength of the perceptions among students of the importance of English to their professional prospects. These perceptions appear likely to explain attitudes toward Arabic as a medium of instruction. About 60% of respondents disagreed that Arabic medium instruction should be implemented, 20% were neutral, and 20% agreed (8.3% of them agreeing strongly) (Table 2).

The findings on the association between the age at which students began learning English and their general attitude to EMI are not conclusive. The scatter plot presented in Fig. 1 below shows a slight negative relationship between the age at which students began learning English and their attitude to EMI, but there is no clear and definitive trend evident. Indeed, omitting the respondent with the most negative attitude to EMI, in the bottom right, removes even this slight trend, making the plot follow a flat line. Some respondents who began learning English relatively late demonstrate positive attitudes to EMI, and some who began early demonstrate negative attitudes.

Findings simultaneously indicate that many students do not feel positive about the idea of EMI. The average composite score for general attitude to EMI was 25 out of a possible 40, indicating levels just above neutral. Similarly, average attitudes to the prospect of English-only or Arabic-only lectures were both negative. Additionally, counterbalancing the perceptions of the professional importance of English discussed above, respondents agreed that they are worried that the Arabic language, and Arab culture, are compromised by the increased use of English in Saudi Arabia. Of the sample, 25% strongly agreed with this, and 28% agreed, for a total of 53%. Some 21% were neutral, and 21% disagreed (6% strongly).

**Table 1** Survey questions

Q	Statement
<b>Effects of EMI in Relation to Course Content</b>	
1	Your teachers are good communicators in English
2	You can follow lectures in English without too much difficulty
3	You have difficulty understanding classes given in English, compared to those in Arabic
4	If subjects were taught in Arabic, learning contents would be easier to understand
<b>Perceptions of the EMI Policy Implementation of the School</b>	
5	All lectures and classes should only permit the use of English
6	Your teachers use both English and Arabic during the lectures
7	It would be better if the lectures were only in Arabic
<b>Beliefs about EMI in Relation to Current and Future Self</b>	
8	Your English language skills will be important for your career
9	You feel that you are learning English by attending lectures in your foundation year program
<b>Attitudes toward English in Relation to National Identity</b>	
1	You are worried that the Arabic language, and Arab culture, are compromised by the increased use of English in Saudi Arabian society

**Table 2** Survey Responses

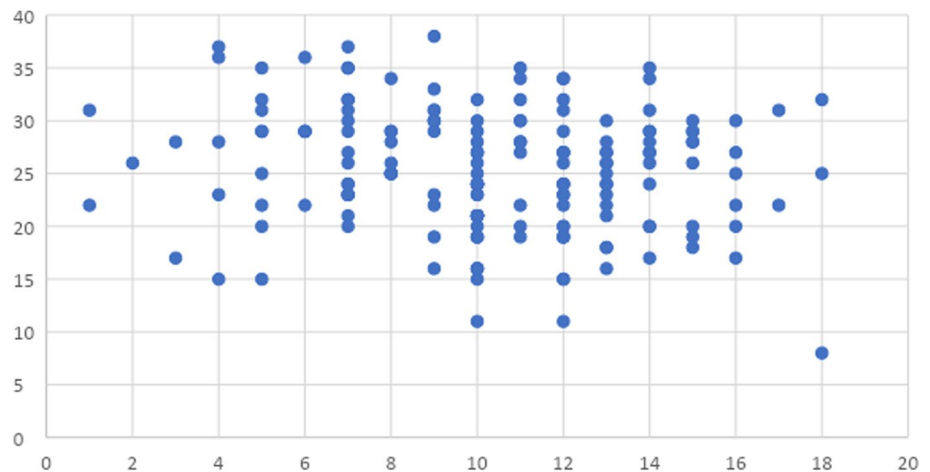
Q#	Statement	Avg	1	2	3	4	5
1	Your teachers are good communicators in English	3.7	3% (6)	2% (3)	21% (37)	31% (56)	43% (77)
2	You can follow lectures in English without too much difficulty	4.0	2% (3)	11% (20)	22% (39)	41% (74)	24% (44)
3	You have difficulty understanding classes given in English, compared to those in Arabic (Reverse coding)	3.6	9% (16)	12% (22)	26% (46)	31% (56)	22% (40)
4	If subjects were taught in Arabic, learning contents would be easier to understand (Reverse coding)	2.4	22% (40)	31% (46)	26% (46)	12% (22)	9% (16)
5	All lectures and classes should only permit the use of English	4.1	8% (14)	15% (27)	23% (42)	26% (47)	28% (50)
6	Your teachers use both English and Arabic during the lectures	0.9	28% (50)	26% (47)	23% (42)	15% (27)	8% (14)
7	It would be better if the lectures were only in Arabic (Reverse coding)	2.5	18% (32)	34% (61)	32% (58)	9% (17)	7% (12)
8	Your English language skills will be important for your career	4.5	2% (4)	7% (13)	19% (34)	29% (52)	43% (77)
9	You feel that you are learning English by attending lectures in your foundation year program	2.6	10% (15)	41% (63)	26% (40)	14% (21)	10% (15)
10	You are worried that the Arabic language, and Arab culture, are compromised by the increased use of English in Saudi Arabian society (Reverse coding)	3.4	10% (15)	14% (21)	26% (40)	41% (63)	10% (15)
		4.7	0	0	2% (5)	22% (40)	75% (135)
		3.8	2% (4)	8% (14)	20% (36)	50% (90)	20% (36)
		3.9	1% (1)	17% (29)	23% (39)	32% (53)	27% (46)
		1.1	27% (46)	32% (53)	23% (39)	17% (29)	1% (1)

**Avg. English favorability: 3.1**

Reverse coding was applied to certain questions to maintain consistency in the interpretation of the Likert scale, where higher values represent more favorable attitudes towards English medium instruction



**Fig. 1** Scatter plot of general attitude to EMI vs earliest English learning



## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Students' and teachers' attitudes to EMI in tertiary education

The findings from the study provide numerous insights. The results corroborate the findings in the literature that EMI in tertiary institutions imposes additional complexity and difficulty for students [6, 15, 28, 48]. More than half of the students in our sample agreed that EMI presented difficulties that would not be present in a context in which they were being taught in their first language. This is consistent with findings from other Gulf States. Palfreyman and Al-Bataineh [39] revealed negative attitudes towards translanguaging practices among university students in UAE higher education. Carroll [20] attributed this negative attitude to the idea that educators themselves in the UAE and other Gulf States experienced formal education and training to teach in one language, namely English, despite the wide variation of languages in the community in which they live in. This presumably explains why more than half of the respondents expressed disagreement with monolingual EMI, with only 16% indicating that they were in favour of it. As the interviews with the teachers demonstrate, these views are already being implemented in practice, with teachers using Arabic when necessary, and students appearing to have inferred that this resource is available to them when necessary. These findings corroborate those of Louber and Troudi [33], who made similar observations.

However, the students also appear to be opposed to monolingual Arabic medium instruction (AMI). Only 20% of the respondents indicated a desire to implement an Arabic only policy in their tertiary education. While the study did not explicitly inquire about students' attitudes to mixed-medium instruction, the combination of disagreement with both English as the medium of instruction and Arabic as the medium of instruction suggests that this would be the preferable approach for the majority. One might infer that this compromise arises out of the students' assessment of their position. Teachers and students are aware of the importance of English for professional development and want very much to participate in globalization. Therefore, they want their education to provide them with opportunities to acquire proficiency in English. They perceive EMI as something which poses specific challenges and therefore, they want these challenges to be ameliorated using a mixed-medium approach. These findings correspond to those of Zoghbor [48], who argued that multiple competencies can promote Arab students' sense of agency over English, reduce linguistic and cultural anxieties, and enable them to retain their identity while learning in an EMI context.

Teachers are aware of their use of Arabic and the benefits it provides [2, 12, 21, 32]. They use it to cope with difficult material [21]. Most students perceive their teachers as effective communicators in English. One of the teachers stated that using Arabic keeps the students motivated to learn content. This is in line with the results of [16] study. Thus, the challenges which teachers face are many. For one, they need to be competent communicators in English. They also need to design their lessons so that students master the course content and, at the same time, improve their English. It is interesting to note that many practitioners report that preparing lessons in the English medium takes the same amount of time as it does in Arabic. This may be because many university teachers in Saudi Arabia attended a western university to finish their university studies. But because the EMI policy has only recently been implemented in higher education, we cannot presume that all faculty members experience their instructional preparation in the

English medium to be as easily carried out as the planning of lectures in Arabic. It is also noted that teachers reported that it takes time to adapt the curriculum to the students' levels of English proficiency. An important point to bear in mind with respect to these findings is that every instructor who was interviewed had either a Ph.D., or a master's degree from the United Kingdom or the United States. They all experienced EMI in their graduate education, and also had IELTS or TOFEL qualifications. They therefore have a solid foundation in English. Yet, not all instructors have equivalent qualifications or English language abilities. Such variation in instructor characteristics would of course impact on the findings.

## 5.2 Saudi culture and identity

Regarding the question of whether EMI will undermine Saudi culture and identity [24], the results present a nuanced picture. More than half of the students indicate concern about the erosion of traditional Saudi culture due to the increased emphasis on English in public life. However, as indicated by the interviewed teachers, the challenge is not the language itself but the books used in their courses. There is nothing antithetical to Saudi culture in the English language as a language, it is simply important to ensure that the way it is used, and the materials utilized in the instruction, are supportive of the values and norms the Saudi government wants to promote. In this respect, the findings broadly support Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi's [14] call for a responsible and balanced plan for integrating English into public life in Saudi Arabia. It is in this regard that the rhizomatic perspective is of value. Two aspects of the findings are specifically pertinent in this respect. As anticipated, the findings for this study show that students prefer a dual-medium approach that enables them to exploit the strengths of multiliteracies and exercise agency over the English language and its place in their curricula and in their lives. Additionally, the instructors all indicate that they make use of both languages in the classroom to promote learning and engagement. Both of these aspects indicate the operation of rhizomatic networks of decentralized self-organization in the theory and practice of EMI in the Saudi tertiary educational context.

Indeed, language is one of the best examples of such a decentralized, self-organizing phenomenon. To economists, language operates in the same manner as a market. Every time any person speaks to another, information is created and passed between them thus setting up the overall structure of the system [31]. Language possesses a bottom-up nature that makes it difficult to apply top-down control methods. It gains its logic and meaning from individuals' actions as agents within the demands of mutual intelligibility. As Fritjof Capra [19], one of the complexity theorists argued, this type of complex phenomena cannot be controlled in a deterministic way, they can only be guided and influenced towards desired outcomes through creating adaptive frameworks.

## 5.3 Implication

### 5.3.1 Proposed alternative

The issue of the pedagogical superiority of monolingual or dual-language English as foreign language learning methodology is largely academic if there is a lack of sufficient preparation and support for students in the region to pursue university education in an English-medium context. The challenges to English-medium instruction listed in this article demonstrate not only that the approach is unlikely to be feasible, but also that it presents ethical and social justice problems that will have adverse long-term effects on perceptions of and attitudes toward the English language in these countries. Bottom-up, organic engagement can best be achieved by drawing on "a more flexible way of seeing the connection between language and identity ... with an emphasis on [student] agency" ([30], p. 5). EMI imposes an inflexible, single-language modality, giving students the options of either acquiescing to it or opposing it. It, therefore, undermines student agency. A dual-language model, in contrast, makes possible a wide range of flexible and creative responses, and gives students agency in the implementation of English. Theories of translanguaging hold that bilingual learners are active agents who are able to transfer knowledge from one language to another. They can combine not only their own linguistic features and language systems, but also the social practices and features that individuals "embody (e.g., their gestures, their posture), as well as those outside of themselves which through use become part of their bodily memory" ([27], p. 158). Pedagogical approaches that allow for the mediation of knowledge to take place in the L1 and English should help students recognize the value of their diverse linguistic repertoires. Thus, an "English-mainly" translanguaging strategy should be developed as an alternative to help students adjust to university life and improve their academic confidence [36]. As shown in earlier studies, a dual-language strategy would eliminate major drawbacks while also being in line with compelling new perspectives on culture, education, and critical literacy (e.g., [5, 13, 24, 37]).

## 6 Conclusion

There are a number of reasons to anticipate that a strict implementation of the EMI policy will produce results which will conflict with one of the objectives of Vision 2030, which is to promote English competence in order to increase the country's competitiveness. Increased top-down, unilateral promotion of the English language will only serve to deepen, for some, the resentment of the role English maintains in Saudi Arabia. It will also increase reluctance to learn the language. The lack of institutional support and preparedness for students will, moreover, serve to increase this opposition. Teachers will be faced with a dilemma if pupils are not adequately prepared and motivated to adapt to tertiary education conducted in English. Teachers will be presented with a choice: adhere to the policy and run the risk of failing to impart the necessary content knowledge or break the rules and by using some Arabic to assist students in learning what they need to learn. Evidence demonstrates that some Saudi Arabian teachers are already performing the latter [10, 33]. Such practices enable these practitioners to capitalize on the benefits of multiliteracies.

Multiliteracies-based approaches have been shown to promote student engagement by affirming the importance and value of the students' own cultures, values and beliefs [41]. This promises to alleviate, to some extent, the sense of marginalization that underpins resistance to English. Multiliteracy approaches have also been shown to promote critical thinking and higher-order cognitive skills, benefits that are likely to be especially valuable in a context of generally deteriorating literacy. Research has shown that English medium instruction, and a greater emphasis on English learning in primary education, has in fact resulted in a decline in general literacy in the region, irrespective of language [5]. A multilingual, multiliteracy approach empowers students to draw on their entire sociocultural repertoire in developing linguistic abilities and their understanding of the discipline. This fosters agency in learning, producing individuals with heightened critical literacy and the courage to safeguard their cultural and linguistic heritage.

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**Data availability** The data supporting the results of this study will not be publicly available due to the nature of the data collected. The interviews were conducted using the participants' voices, and releasing this data could potentially lead to the identification of the participants, compromising their confidentiality. No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

## Declarations

**Ethics approval and consent to participate** The survey data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. However, access to the data is restricted due to privacy concerns, as the dataset includes information that could potentially be used to identify participants. Aggregated data without identifying information may be shared upon request, subject to approval. This study was conducted in accordance with University of Jeddah approval. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Competing interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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