

Arab Society of English Language Studies

From the Selected Works of Arab World English Journal AWEJ

Summer September 15, 2017

English As a Medium of Instruction and the Endangerment of Arabic literacy: The Case of the United Arab Emirates

Ahmad Al-Issa, *Arab Society of English Language Studies*



arabworldenglishjournal-awej/375/

Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/>

English As a Medium of Instruction and the Endangerment of Arabic literacy: The Case of the United Arab Emirates

Ahmad Al-Issa

Department of English
American University of Sharjah
Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Abstract

Due to the rapid spread of globalization and the attendant ‘global English,’ the need for English is often accepted without much thought being given to native languages. Indeed, this is the current situation in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with English encroaching into all areas of society, and especially forcefully into the education sector, where English as a medium of instruction (EMI) is on the rise. At the same time, Arabic literacy, the ability to read and write in the language, is declining among UAE youth. Using a mixed-methods design, a study was conducted to gain insights into the use of Arabic by Emirati university students. The study examines how Emirati youth use their native language (i.e., Arabic) in their daily lives, their perception of their own reading and writing skills in Arabic vis-à-vis in English language, and the extent to which they can demonstrate their literacy skills in Arabic. Clear evidence emerged showing that while Arabic as a dialect continues to be spoken and used on a daily basis, Arabic literacy is unquestionably losing ground. This paper concludes with a call for a language policy in the UAE that will give Arabic its due in schools and wider society.

Keywords: Arabic literacy, bilingualism, global English, medium of instruction, language policy, United Arab Emirates

Cite as: Al-Issa, A. (2017). English As a Medium of Instruction and the Endangerment of Arabic literacy: The Case of the United Arab Emirates. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (2). DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol8no3.1>

Introduction

Currently, our world tends to operate under the auspices of globalization, with its attendant language of global English. We seem to do, blame, or laud everything based on these two phenomena. Some people prioritize the importance of globalization as an integrative process, and view its spread of ‘sameness’ as something positive from which all will benefit—a perspective with which the present paper takes issue. Undoubtedly, many do reap the rewards of this model of interconnectedness, but for every nation, community, or individual that does, there will be many others that remain engulfed in poverty and will likely never derive benefit from globalization in their lifetime. Similarly, regarding global English, it can be argued that those who espouse the wonders of a language that all can understand and use to communicate with one another are often the same people who might wish to ensure that English remains the universal language and that its reach is extended further by whatever means necessary. Thereby, English “constitutes a key part of the vanguard of globalization” (May, 2001, p. 201).

One group of people likely to be particularly affected by globalization and global English is university students. After all, students typically want to feel as though they are engaged with the most recent developments and that they are taking part in activities considered modern, up to date, and trendy. Who more than teenagers and young adults during their college years will be most susceptible to the impetus and novelty of a contemporary concept such as globalization—and its supposed spur, global English?

Hence, this paper looks closely at Arabic, a language with a long and impressive history, but the usage of which, in terms of literacy, is fading (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2011). Specifically, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and other Arab Gulf countries, Arabic is not preserving its once prestigious place; instead, globalization and global English have emerged forcefully in the region and have put down resilient roots. Due to the rapid integration of the Gulf economies and societies into the “global markets and the massive influx of expatriates to staff all sectors of the economy” English has become central as the language of communication (Badry & Willoughby, 2016, p. 194). Furthermore, the role of English as a medium of instruction in many private schools and most colleges and universities in the UAE has undoubtedly had a detrimental effect on Arabic literacy (Cullinon, 2016; Carroll, Al Kahwaji, & Litz 2017). It is this role which has given English the current status of a gatekeeper to positions of prestige within the Emirati society. Although Arabic as a dialect continues to be spoken and used on a daily basis, Arabic literacy is losing ground among Emirati youth in the UAE. Therefore, there is a reason to be concerned about the endangerment of Arabic literacy, not least as, while many still do not believe in it, language loss does occur—“language death is real” (Crystal, 2002, p. ix).

English, Arabic and the UAE

In its less than 50-year-old history as a nation, the UAE has made significant progress. It is an economic beacon within the wider Gulf, a bastion of stability in an often-volatile region, and a country that welcomes people from all nations, races, cultures, and religions. Furthermore, it depends on its many expatriates to help carry out the countless jobs necessary to maintain the nation’s growth. Of a total estimated population of nine million, UAE nationals only make up about 20%; whereas, the foreign workforce in the UAE is thought to be about “90% of the working population” (Al-Khoury, 2012, p. 4). As it advanced, the UAE realized that it needed a language

other than Arabic—or, perhaps, in addition to Arabic—to enable communication among the many communities working and living within its borders. Hence, in order that the country might rapidly industrialize and modernize, “a certain discourse was framed around the importance of English” (Fussell, 2011, p. 27).

At some point, though, the need for a language of communication became the need for English, and, while Arabic is the official language of the UAE, there are people who “would argue that English has a *de facto* lingua franca status” (Randall & Samimi, 2010, p. 45). This is evident in many ways, including the fact that most of the country’s institutions of higher education teach in English and that English has become the gatekeeper to higher education in the UAE (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Cullinon, 2016). It is this implementation of English in higher education that continues to highlight the importance of English to the future and pushes Arabic aside. This powerful status of English in the UAE, as stated by Cullinon (2016, p. 65), “could have a dramatic effect on the native Arabic, as it takes a secondary role in academia and economy and could ultimately lead to Arabic being undervalued.”

For Emirati nationals, attending EMI educational institutions is often difficult (Moore-Jones, 2015) because English is not taught very thoroughly in the government schools that are available to UAE nationals, and are free of charge. In contrast, Arabs and other foreigners commonly send their children to private schools, and most of these utilize English as standard with British- or US-based curricula. There are a few French schools as well, but the focus over the past 15 years has been on EMI, with native speakers of English brought in to teach, and global English thereby proffered a place of prestige in UAE society overall. This has resulted in a negative effect on young Arabs’ views of modern standard Arabic (MSA), as Arabic is not at the forefront of education in the UAE. Furthermore, due to the need for English at the university level, Emirati parents are taking their children out of the public government schools and paying to put them in private schools, in order to ensure that they can attain the TOEFL or the ILETS score required by the university (see Solloway, 2016).

Indeed, all of this focus on English comes at the expense of Arabic literacy. The latter language is not ingrained early enough for young Arabs to become fully attached to it, or to attain the ability to gain fluency in reading or writing it. The problem is unambiguously articulated in the many recent newspaper articles that persist in lamenting the very poor state of Arabic in the UAE. This is not surprising since subjects such as engineering, business, architecture, and the sciences are all taught in English, while Arabic is consigned to the home or used in discussions about the family, religion, and other conceivably prosaic matters (see Al-Issa, 2012; Al-Issa & Dahan, 2011; Dahan, 2013; Troudi, 2007).

The focus on English has also impacted Arabic teachers. Currently, being an Arabic teacher is not considered a prestigious job—seemingly, only English carries social prestige (Bassiouny, 2014). In fact, Arabic teachers often complain that they are paid less and feel they have little support relative to their colleagues who teach in English (Badry & Willoughby, 2016). For example, while there are many outlets for professional development of English teachers in the UAE, the same cannot be said for Arabic teachers. It is perhaps due to this lowly position of Arabic

that English is able to command the lead as the language young Emiratis enjoy learning—that, and maybe the access that English offers to the fascinating world of Western pop culture.

The current study is an attempt to provide some empirical information about the status of Arabic literacy among UAE nationals. It seeks insights into how Emirati youth use their native language in their daily lives, as well as their view of their own literacy skills in Arabic.

The Study

This study was designed in order to obtain insight into how Emirati youth use their native language in their daily lives, as well as their view of their own literacy in Arabic. More specifically, the study sought answers to the following three questions:

- (1) To what extent do Emirati youth use their spoken Arabic in their daily lives? That is, which language, Arabic or English, do young Emirati nationals speak and with whom?
- (2) How do Emirati youth studying at an EMI university in the UAE feel about their reading and writing skills in Arabic and English?
- (3) To what extent can Emirati youth in this study demonstrate their writing skills in Arabic?

Research site and participants

The research site was an EMI university in the UAE, whose curriculum is American-based. The participants were 91 first-year students (43 males and 48 females, $M_{\text{age}} = 18.45$, age range: 17–20 years). Each student was enrolled in one of two introductory writing courses during the spring semester of 2016. All of the students identified as native speakers of Arabic and were UAE nationals. Only nine of the students (10%) indicated that they attended public high schools wherein the medium of instruction is Arabic, while 82 (90%) noted that they attended private high schools, wherein the medium of instruction is English.

Data collection and analysis

The study used a modified version of a mixed-methods design, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This method was used in order to help get a broader understanding of the collected data. The first phase of the study used a questionnaire, which was completed by 91 Emirati students. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with 14 students. Those who were interviewed volunteered and were chosen based on their willingness to meet with the researcher to discuss their Arabic literacy further.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire contained 11 items, divided into three main sections: spoken language, reading, and writing. The beginning of the questionnaire collected background information on the respondents including: gender, age, nationality, native language, type of high school attended (i.e., public or private), and the language of instruction in high school (i.e., Arabic or English). The rest of the questionnaire was divided up in order to answer the three research questions that guided the study. Questions 1 through 7 were Likert-type statements, while 8 through 10 asked students to

explain their responses. Finally, question 11 asked participants to respond to a prompt in writing, both in English and Arabic (see Appendix A).

Prior to finalizing the questionnaire, an earlier version was piloted with similar subjects. This was done in order to determine how much time was needed to allot for the final questionnaire distribution. Participants in the pilot were asked to inform the researcher of any questions or statements they found difficult to comprehend. Based on the feedback of the pilot group, and an outside reader, some minor adjustments were made to the final version of the questionnaire. The final version was then distributed to all students enrolled in two introductory writing courses during the spring 2016 semester.

The interviews

The students, who participated in the interviews, were a voluntary sample. The group included eight female students and six males. Before the interviews began, I went over a consent form, which I had sent to the participants earlier. The interviewees all signed the consent form during the meeting.

The interviews began with general questions mainly about their use of Arabic and English in their daily lives and in what capacity. This was followed by questions about what type of high school they attended, and how strongly they felt their Arabic literacy was in view of studying at an EMI institution. The interview questions evolved from the three research questions of the study.

Findings

Language use: speaking Arabic and English

The first two items on the questionnaire sought to understand which language, Arabic or English, these young Emirati nationals spoke and with whom. As outlined in Table 1 below, the participants indicated a mixed response.

Table 1: *Language Use: Speaking (N = 91)*

Speak to	All the time		Sometime		Never	
	Arabic	English	Arabic	English	Arabic	English
Parents	79%	10%	21%	52%	0%	38%
Siblings	57%	9%	40%	67%	3%	24%
Relatives	74%	7%	25%	57%	1%	36%
Friends in university	19%	33%	69%	66%	12%	1%
Friends outside university	31%	24%	55%	67%	14%	9%

Seventy-nine percent (n= 72) of the students claimed that they spoke Arabic all the time with their parents. They also use mostly Arabic when communicating with their relatives with 74% (n=67) of those surveyed. Despite that finding, 52% (n=47) of the participants claimed they “sometimes” spoke English to their parents, while 57% (n=51) also used English “sometimes” when speaking to relatives. When we look at which language they use with their own siblings, the numbers drop substantially. Only 52 students (57%) indicated that they speak Arabic all the time with their siblings, while 60 students (67%) of the participants indicate that they “sometimes”

speak English with their siblings. With regard to interactions with siblings, a small percentage of students (3%) revealed that they “never” speak Arabic with their brothers and sisters.

As expected, from students studying at an EMI institution, a majority of the participants used English quite a lot at the university. Thirty-three percent (n=30) of students claimed to “always” use English with friends at university, while only 19% (n=17) students indicated they used Arabic all the time. Using Arabic or English “sometimes” was consistent for both languages, with Arabic being chosen “sometimes” by 69% (n=63) and English at 66% (n=59). Only one student indicated that he/she never used English with friends in the university. When speaking to friends outside the university 31% (n=28) of participants claimed to use Arabic “always” with friends, while 24% (n=22) indicated they used English “always”. Those who used Arabic and English “sometimes” were almost evenly divided between 69% and 63%. With regard to this particular question 9% (n=8) claimed to “never” speak English with friends outside the university.

Reading and writing preferences

Item 3 on the questionnaire sought to understand which language these participants preferred to read and to write in (see Table 2).

Table 2: *Participants' language preferences for reading and writing (N = 91)*

Q3	Arabic	English	Both
I prefer to read in	9%	57%	34%
I prefer to write in	9%	71%	20%

The findings from this question reveal that a majority of the participants 57% (n=52) prefer to read in English. While an even larger majority at 71% (n=65) prefers to write in English. Only 9% (n=8) of participants preferred to read or write in Arabic. There were some who could do both, for example 34% (n=31) indicated they favor both languages for reading, while 20% (n=18) revealed a preference for writing in both languages.

Literacy skills in Arabic

Items 4 through 7 on the questionnaire sought input from the participants on how easy or difficult they found Arabic literacy to be in their lives. The four questions asked about their personal abilities with regard to reading, writing, and comprehending Arabic, see Table 3.

Table 3: *Participants' self-assessment of Arabic literacy skills (N = 91)*

Item	Easy	Somewhat difficult	Very difficult
Q4 When I <i>write</i> in Arabic I find it	32%	56%	12%
Q5 When I <i>read</i> in Arabic I find it	64%	33%	3%
Q6 Writing a formal letter in Arabic ...	23%	42%	35%
Q7 Reading an entire book in Arabic ...	42%	35%	23%

Those completing the survey indicated by a wide majority that it is “somewhat” or “very” difficult to write in Arabic at 68% (n=61). When it comes to reading in Arabic the participants had less difficulty manifested in 64% (n=58) noting that it was “easy.” However 36% (n=33) indicated

that reading in Arabic is “somewhat” or “very” difficult. When it came to writing a formal letter in Arabic, 77% (n=70) noted that they would find that task “somewhat” or “very” difficult, with only 23% (n=21) indicating that it would be “easy.” Finally, when asked about their comprehension of an entire book in Arabic, 58% (n=53) of participants indicated they would find that task “somewhat” or “very” difficult, while 42% (n=38) thought it would be “easy.”

Participants' beliefs about the importance of Arabic literacy

Questions 8 through 10 sought participants' personal beliefs about writing and literacy in Arabic. Question 8 asked if participants felt confident or not writing in Arabic, and then left a space for them to indicate why that was the case, or not. Question 9 then asked if participants saw the ability to write in Arabic as being important to their futures, while question 10 asked if they believed that all Arabs should be able to read and write in Arabic. See Table 4.

Table 4: *Participants' beliefs about the importance of Arabic literacy (N = 91)*

Item	Yes	No
Q8 I feel confident <i>writing</i> in Arabic	39%	52%
Q9 I believe that being able to <i>write</i> in Arabic is important for my future	66%	25%
Q10 I believe it is important for all Arabs to <i>read and write</i> in Arabic	88%	3%

More than half of the participants (57%) indicated that they did not feel confident writing in their native language of Arabic. Some of the comments they wrote in included: “I haven’t been taught enough classical Arabic words in order to express myself properly,” and “writing in Arabic is difficult because of grammar rules, it makes it hard to know words.” One of those interviewed, Hassan, indicated that “studying mostly English in high school, makes it hard for us to have a strong ability with Arabic.” Despite the large number of participants who indicated difficulty writing in Arabic, 73% (n=66) believed that having the ability to write in Arabic would be very important for their futures, with only 27% (n=25) disagreeing with this statement. Some of those agreeing with the need for writing skills in Arabic wrote, “Arabic is my native language and it is important that I be able to master it, and not just focus on my English skills.” Another student wrote, “It is very important to keep my mother language alive, especially when our generation cares more about English than Arabic.” Those who disagreed about the importance of writing in Arabic indicated, “I think English is more important,” and “companies are moving towards English, Arabic won’t be needed as much.” One of the interviewees, Fatima, argued, “English is now the global language, no one will ask us to use Arabic in our future jobs.” In addition, 97% (n=88) of those surveyed claimed that they believe it is important for all Arabs to be able to read and write in Arabic, only 3% (n=3) disagreed. Some of the comments in favor of all Arabs being literate in Arabic included, “the Arabic language is the Arabs’ heritage; it is what makes them who they are. Being able to read and write Arabic will support our knowledge about history and religion;” “Arabic is our language and everybody should give it attention and value;” and “Arabic would no longer exist if we stop reading and writing in it.” One who disagreed with this point wrote in “communication is through content, not the language it is done in.”

Students' ability to demonstrate literacy in Arabic

The final question on the questionnaire (question 11) clearly asked students to write two very brief paragraphs, one in Arabic and one in English, discussing their current major in the university and why they chose it. The findings distinguished between three groups of students:

- (1) Unable to write in Arabic: This group consists of 15 students (16%) who were unable to write a single word in Arabic; they only responded to the prompt in English. Their English writing skills, as manifested in their paragraphs, are excellent. Some of the responses given by members of this group included:
 - "I can't write in Arabic to save my life."
 - "To be honest, I haven't practiced Arabic in a very long time, and I apologize that I am not able to provide the Arabic portion."
 - "I am sorry, but I find it very difficult to write in Arabic."
 - "I can only write in English."
 - "I don't feel comfortable writing in Arabic."
- (2) Poor Arabic writing skills: This group consists of 39 students (43%), who attempted to respond to the prompt in both Arabic and English, but their Arabic writing was very poor compared to their English writing. The Arabic writing of this group suffered from several problems. Most notable are: spelling mistakes, grammatical errors, wrong word choices, coherence, cohesion, use of code switching (Arabic/English), literal translation from English to Arabic, and the insertion of colloquial Arabic.
- (3) Good Arabic writing skills: This group consists of 37 students (41%) who were able to respond to the prompt in Arabic and English with no serious errors in either language.

Discussion

This study sought to gain insights on young Emiratis use of spoken Arabic, as well as their views on their reading and writing skills. It also looks at the extent to which they can demonstrate their writing skills in Arabic.

Initially, when they responded to questions about who they spoke Arabic with, they seemed fairly strong and capable in their Emirati dialect when conversing with parents and relatives. However, even within their own families, many of these students found English encroaching into their conversations with siblings quite often, but even with parents and relatives in some cases. In fact, three percent of participants indicated that they never speak Arabic with their siblings. Although this study is not focusing on spoken Arabic, these findings are still a little disconcerting. One would imagine native speakers of Arabic would converse with their parents and families in their native language, but among this particular group of students, this has not been the case.

The findings regarding question 3 indicate that a large majority of the participants preferred to read in English (57%), but even more of them preferred to write in English (71%). Frankly, these results are quite stunning. The fact that Arabs, who are native speakers of Arabic, would claim that they prefer to read and write in a second language is troubling. It is a concern both for

them as Arabs, and it is a concern in terms of Arabic as a language of literacy. These findings reveal a preference for global English over Arabic as the language of literacy in the UAE. During the interviews, I was able to obtain more details about why students responded as they did to these questions. Many of them pointed out that English is the language of education, technology, and the internet. As Mohamed argued: "We need English these days, if we want to study or read things about our majors, we read them in English. I'm an engineering student; everything I want to read about is in English." They find all the things they need through the medium of English, while Arabic is very often put aside, used in the home and for religious purposes." Khadija pointed to this when she said: "I have the Arabic I need to converse with my family and to carry out my prayers. Other than that I don't need to read or write in Arabic very much, most of what we need is in English."

Responses to questions 4 through 8 revealed the ease or difficulty participants felt with regard to their own Arabic literacy. They were asked about their abilities in terms of reading, writing, and comprehending literary Arabic. For most of the students, reading was easier for them to manage than writing. Sixty-four percent of those surveyed indicated that they found reading in Arabic "easy," while 42% noted that they could read an entire book in Arabic easily. Although these results are quite positive, it is still concerning that 36% of those surveyed claimed that reading in Arabic was "somewhat" or "very" difficult. For native speakers of Arabic, we would not expect to find such high numbers who have trouble reading in their own language. One student I interviewed, Maha, noted: "Even though I can read in Arabic, I don't really choose to. Most of the things I want to read for university are in English, so I don't take time to read Arabic for fun. I guess that is how most students are; we only read what we have to."

What becomes especially worrying is how many of these students indicated that they would find writing in their native language of Arabic "somewhat" or "very" difficult, 68% (n=61). This is a very high percentage for a small group of young people, and it gets worse when asked how they would feel if given the task of writing a formal letter in Arabic. At this point 77% (n=70) of all those surveyed indicated this would be "somewhat" or "very" difficult. Question 8 sought to understand how confident participants felt about their writing in Arabic. Here again the results revealed a major gap in students' abilities to write in their native language, with 57% (n=52) indicating that they did not feel comfortable writing in Arabic. Many of them wrote in that they had spent so many years studying in English that they had never developed strong skills in Arabic writing. Others pointed out that they found Arabic to be a very "difficult" language and one that had so many grammar rules that it became impossible to learn. When I interviewed participants, they made similar comments. For example, Khalid mentioned: "I spent many years working on English; they kept telling us how important it was. But unfortunately, we did not concentrate on our Arabic, it is like we thought because we speak it, we know it. But now I see that is not the reality." Fatima indicated something related: "Everything was English, from the time we were small they were teaching us English. They said we had to be strong in English for the future. I did not work on my Arabic very much, now I see that my Arabic is weak and I am not happy about that."

Despite the participants' apparent struggles with Arabic literacy, the majority of them, 73% (n=66) do believe that it is important for their futures to be able to write in Arabic. Most of their

comments for why they believe this is important include such factors as: it is our mother tongue, we need Arabic to read the Quran, we will lose our culture and language, and we must preserve our identity. These are all important factors and the students' comprehension and appreciation of these issues makes it disquieting that despite their understanding of the importance of Arabic literacy, the majority of them do not have that literacy. Those interviewed, who believed in the need for Arabic literacy for their own futures included comments such as: "I am an Arab, and I should be proud of my language. I should be able to use it all the time, reading and writing. Those who are forgetting their Arabic are losing their heritage and even their identity as Arabs. I need Arabic for my future." And "We must hold our language, it is our mother tongue, if we don't use it, maybe it will go extinct. I want to work in the UAE; I should be able to read and write my language." - Khadija

Finally, 97% of all participants indicated that they believed that it is important for all Arabs to be able to read and write in Arabic. This is in spite of their own lack of strong Arabic literacy skills. In this section, they continued to bring up the importance of Arabic to Arabs, to their heritage, history, culture, and traditions. As Noora stated in her interview: "our Arab heritage is in our language; we must keep it and save our culture." Tarek voiced a similar point: "Arabic is our language, it is our future, we cannot let it just go away. We have to be able to read and write our own language. Why should we lose our language for English?"

These students realize that Arabic literacy is an important part of maintaining a tie to their Arabic language, not just the dialect that they speak. They are aware that literacy is an important aspect of understanding their mother tongue; however, despite their strong belief in maintaining Arabic literacy, most of them do not have the confidence at this time in their own literacy skills. Only 3% disagreed that all Arabs need to be able to read and write in Arabic. Their comments all centred on the place of global English and how English is now the language of the future. It is rather sad that even this number of students have surrendered to the belief that the world needs English, but without any attempt at protecting their own language from possible extinction. To be sure, they are all confident in their speaking abilities in Arabic, unfortunately, the same cannot be said for their Arabic literacy. It makes us wonder what the future holds. If this age group is already in the midst of a loss of Arabic literacy, what does this bode for the next generation? If these young people become parents, who are not fluent in Arabic, what chances will their children have to be competent and literate in Arabic?

Perhaps the most concerning issue in this final section of the questionnaire, were the fifteen students (16% of the total participants) who were unable to complete the section in Arabic. Unfortunately, none of them volunteered to be interviewed, so I was unable to obtain any further in depth knowledge about why they ended up unable to write a simple paragraph in Arabic. However, the comments they wrote in question 11 pointed to a lack of practice or any pressure upon them as children to focus on their Arabic literacy skills. This backs up my earlier claim that the introduction of English so early in the lives of these young people is taking a toll on their ability to gain fluency in Arabic.

Those who were poor writers in Arabic, 43%, definitely have many issues to overcome if they are to become "good" writers in Arabic. This particular group of participants revealed a

rudimentary ability to write in Arabic, and produced extensive errors in their paragraphs. Their errors ran the gamut from simple spelling mistakes to major grammatical errors; in addition, they were unable to choose correct words in order to make their case, while also lacking coherence and cohesion. Furthermore, there was evidence of code switching (Arabic/English), translating literally from English to Arabic, and using colloquial Arabic instead of MSA.

Finally, only less than half of all participants (41%) were able to write coherently and correctly in Arabic. This result is quite concerning for a group of native speakers of Arabic living in an Arab country. The fact that so few of them are capable of writing correctly in their native tongue is certainly something that should be studied further. It would seem that there must be more that can be done in order to ensure that Emiratis do not lose their literacy in Arabic.

Conclusion

In the course of a study carried out at an EMI university in the UAE, written input was sought from 91 UAE nationals and native speakers of Arabic who were all in their first semester. The students first completed a questionnaire and were then asked to write a brief paragraph, both in Arabic and in English, about why they chose their majors. The results were both astounding and, frankly, very sad in some cases. Out of the study's ninety-one, native Arabic-speaking college students, fifteen were unable to write even one sentence in Arabic. Their comments included: "I don't read or write Arabic," "I can't," and "I never learned." Unfortunately, none of these 15 students volunteered to be interviewed. Several of the participants, who could not write in Arabic, did claim that they had the reading skills in Arabic to maintain their religious duties. Some scholars believe that Arabic can be saved through Islam. Fishman (2002) for example argues that "[The] staying power of sanctified languages within bilingual repertoires (Arabic and Islam) do not come and go the way quotidian vernaculars do. They may wax and wane, but due to the sanctity attributed to them, they do not disappear" (p. 23). Yet, as suggested by some of these responses, many young Muslims evidently do not believe that they need to have familiarity with the written word of Arabic, even to read the Quran.

It is an unfortunate fact that "monolingualism (preferably in English) is seen as a practical advantage for modern social organization while multilingualism, in contrast, is viewed as a characteristic of 'premodern' or 'traditional' societies" (Coulmas, 1992, cited in May, 2001). Concurrently, though, scholars such as Canagarajah (2013) are undertaking to "rediscover the South Asian tradition of translingual communication and cosmopolitanism that was historically practiced but increasingly suppressed by monolingual ideologies entering the region" (p. 18), and it is this type of rediscovery and return that the UAE needs to employ with respect to its official language. It is entirely possible to maintain Arabic literacy and usage while simultaneously relying on global English to facilitate communication.

As the language policy of the UAE moves toward more schools and universities using EMI, and global English asserts itself as the language of progress and prestige, it will become increasingly difficult to help young Arabs focus on and choose to study Arabic. In the Gulf region's educational systems, there is much less attention given to academic Arabic proficiency than the efforts poured into English. As Lin and Martin (2005) found, university staff already face the dilemma of helping students maintain their [Arabic] literacy, while being caught up with the

“parents’ overwhelming desire for global English” (p. 6). However, young UAE nationals are being done a disservice if the country’s educational focus remains on English at the expense of Arabic literacy.

Long term, the onus will be on policy makers and educators to be willing to work toward the creation of a nation of bilinguals, multilinguals, or “plurilinguals,” to use Canagarajah’s (2013) term. However, this can only happen when the country’s overpowering obsession with global English is dispelled. Certainly, English is important as a central means of communication in a world characterized by globalization, but such functionality does not account for Arabs in the UAE forsaking literacy in their native language. I conclude by calling for a language policy in the UAE to help its young people become proficient not only in English but also in Arabic (and hopefully in other languages as well). The possibility for bilingualism certainly exists in the UAE, but policy makers need to act on this and facilitate a plan that will give Arabic its due in schools and wider society.

Finally, as with all studies, there are usually limitations and this study was no different. Using interviews for a study is sometimes seen as a limitation. This occurs because there can be issues with the objectivity of interviews. However, using both quantitative and qualitative methods provided the types of data required in order to answer the research questions. Another limitation may be the sample size, which might be considered small, and which did not allow to compare between those who attended private schools versus those who attended public schools. Furthermore, the location at one institution with students studying in an EMI institution may have had some impact on the outcomes and the ability to generalize the findings to other students in different types of institutions of higher learning in the UAE. However, despite some of these possible limitations, the approach utilized for this study has merit and can be modified for use for further investigations.

Dr. Ahmad Al-Issa is a Professor of Applied Linguistics and the Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the American University of Sharjah in the UAE. He is a member of many academic organizations and a recipient of several international research grants. He has published many articles and book chapters, and presented papers and workshops on language, culture and communication in many parts of the world. He is the co-editor of the book, *Global English and Arabic: Issues of language, culture and Identity* published by Peter Lang.

References

- Al-Issa, A., & Dahan, L.S. (Eds.). (2011). *Global English and Arabic: Issues of language, culture, and identity*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang.
- Al-Issa, A. (2012, February 9). Arabic must be the focus in pursuit of 'true' bilingualism. *The National*. Retrieved from <https://www.thenational.ae>.
- Al-Khouri, A. M. (2012). Population growth and government modernization efforts: The case of GCC countries. *International Journal of Research in Management & Technology*, 2, 1-8.
- Badry, F., & Willoughby, J. (2016). *Higher education revolutions in the Gulf: Globalization and institutional viability*. Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge.
- Bassiouny, R. (2014). *Language and identity in modern Egypt*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.
- Belhiah, H., & Elhami, M. (2015). English as a medium of instruction in the Gulf: When students and teachers speak. *Language Policy*, 14, 3-23.
- Canagarajah, A. S. (2013). *Translingual practice: Global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Carroll, K., Al Kahwaji, B., & Litz, D. (2017). Triglossia and promoting Arabic literacy in the United Arab Emirates. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, DOI: 10.1080/07908318.2017.1326496
- Crystal, D. (2002). *Language death*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Cullinon, M. (2016). Critical review of ESL curriculum: Practical application to the UAE context. *International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, 8, 54-68.
- Dahan, L. (2013). Global English and Arabic: Which is the protagonist in a globalized setting? *Arab World English Journal*, 4, 45-51.
- Fishman, J. A. (2002). 'Holy languages' in the context of societal bilingualism. In W. Li, J. Dewaele, & A. Houston (Eds.), *Opportunities and challenges of bilingualism* (pp. 15-24). Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Fussell, B. (2011). The local flavour of English in the Gulf. *English Today*, 27(4), 26-32.
- Lin, A. M. Y., & Martin, P. W. (2005). From a critical deconstruction paradigm. In A. M. Y. Lin & P. W. Martin (Eds.), *Decolonisation, globalisation: Language-in-education policy and practice* (pp. 1-19). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual matters.
- May, S. (2001). *Language and minority rights: Ethnicity, nationalism and the politics of language*. Harlow, Essex, UK: Pearson Education.
- Moore Jones, P. J (2017). Linguistic Imposition: The Policies and perils of English as a medium of instruction in the United Arab Emirates. *Journal of ELT and Applied Linguistics*, 3, 63-72.
- Randall, M., & Samimi, M. A. (2010). The status of English in Dubai. *English Today*, 26(1), 43-50.
- Solloway, A. J. (2016). English-medium instruction in higher education in the United Arab Emirates: The perspectives of students (Unpublished doctoral Dissertation). University of Exeter, UK.
- Troudi, S. (2007). The effects of English as a medium of instruction. In A. Jendli, S. Troudi, & C. Coombe (Eds.), *The power of language: Perspectives from Arabia* (pp. 3-19). Dubai: TESOL Arabia.

Appendix A

Questionnaire on Arabic Literacy

Gender M F
 Age _____
 Major _____
 Your native language: _____
 Years in the UAE: _____
 Years of education in Arabic: _____
 Years of education in English: _____

Q1 I speak ARABIC to	All the time	Sometimes	Never
Parents			
Siblings			
Relatives			
Friends in university			
Friends outside university			

Q2 I speak ENGLISH to	All the time	Sometimes	Never
Parents			
Siblings			
Relatives			
Friends in university			
Friends outside university			

Q3	Arabic	English	Both
I prefer to read in			
I prefer to write in			

Q4: I find it difficult to *write* in Arabic. Y N

Why or why not, please explain:

Q5: I find it difficult to *read* in Arabic. Y N

Why or why not, please explain:

Q6: I can *write* a formal letter applying for a job, in Arabic, with no major errors. Y N

Why or why not, please explain:

Q7: I can *read* an entire book in Arabic and understand everything. Y N

Why or why not, please explain:

Q8: I feel confident *writing* in Arabic. Y N

Why or why not, please explain:

Q9: I believe that being able to *write* in Arabic is important for my future. Y N

Why or why not, please explain:

Q10: I believe it is important for all Arabs to be able to *read and write* in Arabic. Y N

Why or why not, please explain:

Q11: In the following section, please write 2 very brief paragraphs, one in Arabic and one in English, about your current major in the university and why you chose it.

If you are willing to be interviewed, please include your first name, mobile number, & email address below:

Name: _____

Mobile: _____

Email: _____