Issues in English Education in the Arab World

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Edited by

Rahma Al-Mahrooqi
and Christopher Denman

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

RAHMA AL-MAHROOQI
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As European powers increasingly asserted their influence over the Arab world towards the end of the eighteenth century, many in Arab countries began looking towards the West to learn more about its military, economic, and technological resurgence. Of all the Western-inspired reforms that Arab leaders were to adopt over the coming centuries in the name of social and economic modernisation, it was perhaps those related to education that were to have the most far-reaching effect.

In the wake of the Allied occupation of Constantinople in 1918 and the carving up of the Ottoman Empire, education in the English-, French- and Italian-medium schools that already dominated a number of Arab-controlled towns and territories from Muscat to Stone Town and Cairo to Algiers, came to be complemented by tertiary institutions and universities established in the European model. Well-known examples include the transformation of the Syrian Protestant College into the American University of Beirut towards the end of 1920, the American University in Cairo founded by protestant missionaries in 1919, and the University of Rome supervised post-secondary institutions established after the Second World War in the Italian Trust Territory of Somaliland.

The importance the colonial powers and, to an extent, Arab leaders placed on promoting Western-style education systems that offered instruction in European languages for at least that part of the local population considered necessary to act as mediators between the rulers and the ruled, was not seriously challenged with the advent of Arab independence. In fact, while countries such as Somalia and Libya did seek a policy of Arabisation across their public services and education systems, education in French and English remained as sought-after as ever, at least for the children of local elites. A similar situation was also witnessed in the Arab Gulf with the discovery and exploitation of vast oil resources that allowed for the rapid introduction of government-funded education systems including public universities where English continues to operate

as the dominant medium of instruction. In short, English and, to a lesser extent, French, are still viewed by many across the Arab world as keys to modernisation and engagement with the international community.

However, despite the clear and important role English has continued to play across many of the nations of the Arab world, it does, nonetheless, pose a number of significant challenges. Many of these can be conceived of as involving reconciling post-colonial identity with the position the languages of former colonial rulers continue to play in the academies, media, businesses, and, quite often, ministries of Arab countries. These include issues of cultural preservation and identity, access to education, employment and social mobility, the heightened risk of individuals without access to the English language becoming marginalised within their own societies, and the potential for loss of native languages and cultures.

For example, proponents of the continuing role of English within post-colonial societies such as those found across the Arab world may quote Chinua Achebe's succinct account of linguistic appropriation and transformation:

> I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surrounding.

From this perspective, English is not so much a threat to a speaker's sense of cultural identity as a tool that can be employed in the assertion of that identity. On the other hand, there are those who highlight the language's potential to alienate people from their own cultures and beliefs while simultaneously defining those who have access to education and, therefore, to social, economic, and political power. With reference to the Arab world, the central role Islam and, by extension, Arabic play in the region may operate as a foil to the realisation of such eventualities. Despite the supposed "buffer" religion may provide against the potential for cultural deracination often evident in other expanding circle countries, the very centrality of religion to life across much of the Arab world does, in itself, open many of these societies to a different, and perhaps in some ways more problematic, set of challenges.

The dominance of English in the private and public universities of many countries of the Arab world raises a number of important issues for students, instructors, and policy makers. Among these is the possibility of incongruence between traditional Arab cultural and religious values and the Western values often assumed to be encountered when studying English. Hopkyns looks at the complicated nature of this relationship in

her exploration of the effects of English as a global language on learners' sense of cultural identity in the United Arab Emirates. In examining the "two sides to the English coin", the author offers some of the many benefits and potential pitfalls associated with the language's increasing centrality to higher education in the Arab Gulf.

As Hopkyns describes, English is often employed across the Arab world as a high stakes gatekeeper of educational and social success in contexts where the language itself is not used, outside of a handful of cities, for everyday communication. In this environment, it is conceivable that students of English might find it challenging to learn and retain a language that does not have a great deal of currency beyond their classroom walls. This challenge assumes greater importance when students from predominantly Arabic-medium secondary schools enter English-medium universities. Roche, Sinha and Denman examine the nature of this challenge from the perspectives of students and their teachers in foundation programmes in two Omani universities. Al-Mahrooqi, Denman and Ateeq then look at the struggles of a similar set of learners in their investigation of the factors influencing the adaptation of first-year foundation students in Oman to their new university surroundings.

Recent educational reforms in many countries of the Arab world have sought to promote learner autonomy and to make English classrooms more student-centred. However, for teachers and students often familiar with more traditionally teacher-centred classes where the learner is positioned as a passive recipient of knowledge, this transition raises a number of concerns in terms of educational expectations, suitable teaching methods, and even appropriate forms of assessment. Elsagheer takes a broad view of the nature of these challenges in his diagnostic study of the demands of teaching and learning English in the Albaha region of Saudi Arabia. Al-Mohammadi then builds upon this work by focusing on one specific aspect of these challenges – the demands of mixed-abilities classes in English language teaching in Oman.

With every challenge, however, comes opportunity, and a number of contributors highlight ways in which teachers of English in the Arab world can respond to some of the many demands placed upon them by developing their professional understandings and pedagogical practices. Kay Gallagher, for example, highlights the positive impact that classroom-based action research can have on the professional development of pre-service teachers in the United Arab Emirates, while Al-Bulushi discusses how the use of graphic organisers in an Omani grade eight English class

not only enhances learners' writing performance, but also improves their attitudes towards the writing process.

Enhancing students' English communicative skills was one goal of Al Shabibi's examination of question types used by teachers in the Omani primary education system. Al Shabibi argues for teachers to focus on the types of questions they use to increase the amount of genuine communicative language available in the classroom. Still within the primary classroom, Al Ruqeishi looks at teacher perceptions of alternative assessment tools for grades 5-8 and finds that these have the potential to develop teachers' sense of reflection and students' awareness of their learning, even if there are some major hurdles to implementing these forms of assessment in Oman. Derbel and Al-Mohammadi then offer support for adopting an integrated skills approach to teaching English in the Arab world that incorporates strands of the four core language skills, the target culture, and the cultural backgrounds of students.

Encouraging learner autonomy is one way in which students can be empowered to develop their English-language proficiency and to eventually participate in an increasingly globalised workforce. Chirciu examines teachers' views on the value and means of promoting learner autonomy in Oman, with the conclusion that both teachers' cultural backgrounds and exposure to professional teaching discourse influence these perspectives. Chirciu and Mishra next take a broader view on learner autonomy that encompasses the ways in which it is realised in the interrelational space of the classroom. Their "crystal ball" calls attention to the complex dimensions of learner autonomy, learner-centeredness, and the nature of the teacher-learner relationship within a local Omani university. Al-Mahrooqi, Denman and Al-Maamari then examine the value of textbooks in the government school system. Their analysis of the government-produced books used in Omani public schools offers a number of suggestions for improving these books to help them more fully contribute to the development of higher levels of English language proficiency among Omani school students.

Finally, Nur's overview of the changing status of English in Sudan both explores the ways in which the language was introduced by the colonizers as a bridging language between the rulers and the ruled and, in the south, was employed in missionary schools as a tool of "enlightenment". Within this social and historical setting, Nur explores what the new policies towards English in both Sudan and newly-formed South Sudan mean for the people of these countries, and how these policies may affect social cohesion, cultural values, economic development, and interaction with the outside world in the future. A similarly broad

perspective is taken by Bawazeer in her examination of issues related to the learning and teaching of English in Saudi Arabia. The questions posed by these two authors, in many ways, permeate throughout the entirety of this book, and remain ones that, to this day, elicit no easy response.

CHAPTER ONE

A CONFLICT OF DESIRES:
ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE
AND ITS EFFECTS ON CULTURAL IDENTITY
IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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Abstract

The unique status of English as a global language leaves little choice but to learn it to some degree. However, the question arises as to whether this, consciously or subconsciously, also involves learning about English native-speaker culture and, if so, how this affects learners' culture and identity. The Arab world's long and complicated history with English-speaking nations, its unique culture and native language, its currently extremely large expatriate community, its youthfulness, and the fact that it is a region undergoing rapid change, make the issue of cultural identity particularly relevant and pressing in this part of the world. This chapter discusses the above issues in detail before presenting female Emirati university students' attitudes and beliefs regarding learning English and its effects on their culture and identity. These perspectives were gained through a qualitative study using an open-response questionnaire with thirty-five students and a focus group with a further five students. Following content and thematic analysis of the data and discussion of the findings, suggestions are given in order to address issues highlighted by the study.

Keywords: English as a Global Language, Arab learners, cultural identity

1. Introduction – Two Sides to the English Coin

One only has to open one of the many local Gulf region newspapers from the UAE to Qatar, from Saudi Arabia to Oman, to see a consistent theme running through the headlines with regard to the English language. 'Cultural identity in danger in the GCC' declares the *Gulf News* (Khamis, 2013), 'Forum to promote the Arabic language' announces the *Khaleej Times* (2014), 'Teach us English but without its cultural values' states the *Saudi Gazette* (Al-Seghayer, 2013) to name just a few. It is clear from local media and public discourse that the relationship between local cultural identity and English as a global language is far from harmonious.

Whereas, in the past, English was but one language among others, it is now, without dispute, in a category of its own. The success of the British colonial empire and the subsequent rise of American industrial and technological power have combined to create a situation in which English, uniquely, has come to be accepted as the symbol of a modern technologically advanced society. It is true to say that "whereas once Britannia ruled the waves, now English rules them" (Phillipson, 1992a, p. 1). As a result, English now boasts fluent and semi-fluent speakers of around 1.35 billion people (Payack, 2008, pp. 150-157) making it, as Morrow and Castleton (2014) say, "the Walmart of the language universe" (p. 313). It is the only language spoken on all populated continents, and fifty-two countries have English as their official language. As English plays an important position in many educational systems around the world, with the Arabian Gulf being no exception, "it has become one of the most powerful means of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 81). This globalization of English does not appear to be slowing down, in fact quite the opposite. In the future, the English language "seems set to play an ever more important role in world communications, international business, and social and cultural affairs" (Graddol, 2001, p. 26). Such a powerful language cannot fail to affect its speakers on multiple levels.

Although the waves of English that are currently sweeping over the world in varying dimensions bring a rush of opportunity, progression and excitement in one sense, there is also a recognized "dark side of English" (Karmani & Holliday, 2005, p. 165). Considered by some to be a lingua frankensteinia (Phillipson, 2008, p. 250), or a "killer language" (Fishman, 1999, p. 26), English threatens to drown other languages and cultures in its path. Known as *yingyu weixie*, meaning "English language threat discussion" in China (Pan & Seargeant, 2012, p. 60), similarly themed discussions are also very much alive in countries such as Turkey (Atay &

Ece, 2009), Malaysia (Mohd-Asraf, 2005), Saudi Arabia (Alabbad & Gitsaki, 2011) and the United Arab Emirates (Findlow, 2006; O'Neill, 2014; Randall & Samimi, 2010) to name just a few. To many, globalization, and the spread of English that accompanies it, is seen as a new form of "western cultural colonialism" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 120) or "mental colonialism − the subtle push to emulate everything Western including the English language" (Suzuki, 1999, p. 145). As Qiang and Wolff (2005) powerfully describe, English in the eyes of many is "a modern day Trojan horse filled with EFL teachers/soldiers or missionaries, armed with English words rather than bullets, intent upon re-colonizing the world to remake it in the image of Western democracy" (p. 60). Rather than being a neutral language owned equally by all its speakers, Pennycook (2001) argues that "English is deeply embedded in a set of social, cultural, political and economic relations" (p. 158). In this sense, it is difficult to disentangle these elements from each other.

Although the "English threat" discussion is worthy of exploration in many areas of the world, it could be argued that, at this point in time, there is no region where attention to the growing disparity between English as a global language and cultural identity is more pressing than in the Arabian Gulf. This is due to a combination of distinct factors including the Arab world's long and complicated history with English-speaking nations, its unique culture and native language, its current extremely large expatriate community, its youthfulness, and the fact that it is a region undergoing rapid change. This is especially true given the dramatic spread of English in the sphere of education and everyday life in recent years.

This chapter will look at the complexity of English in the context of the Arab world both past and present. The concept of cultural identity in the age of globalization will then be explored before discussing the conflict of desires that can often be found when combining these factors. The study, which takes place at a large government-sponsored university in the United Arab Emirates, aims to explore four key research questions.

- What do the languages English and Arabic represent to Emiratis?
- How does English being a global language affect attitudes towards it?
- How does learning English affect cultural identity in the UAE?
- How can the teaching of English in the UAE be adapted to minimize its effect on cultural identity?

The methodology for the study, which involves forty female Emirati university students voicing their perceptions and beliefs through an open-response questionnaire and a focus group interview, will be explained in

detail. The data, which was analyzed through content and thematic analysis, will be presented before going on to a discussion of the implications for language teaching and learning in the region. The conclusion will summarize and reflect upon the findings in relation to the above research questions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 English in the Context of the United Arab Emirates – A Bubbling Volcano

Today's Arabian Gulf in general, but especially the UAE, could be described as the ultimate parallel universe compared to how it was less than five decades ago. These dramatic changes are a result of industrialization, urbanization, modernization, and perhaps most strikingly, globalization in terms of the English language and all that accompanies it.

Looking back in time, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Qatar all share similar but not identical histories with regard to the English language. Nineteenth century British interests in the region due to its convenient location for trade routes to India led to British rule for over 150 years (1820-1971) of what, at the time, was a mainly poor, thinly dispersed and disunited population of Bedouin tribes, pearl divers and traders. Over time, resistance to British presence in the Gulf started building, intensifying after World War II and the creation of the state of Israel by the United Nations. Support for Palestine led to a distinct sense of Arab nationalism, or "pan-Arabism" (Darraj & Puller, 2009, p. 31).

When oil was discovered in Abu Dhabi − then known as part of the "Trucial Coast" − in 1958, the atmosphere in the Arabian Gulf changed further. The post-oil Gulf began developing at a staggering pace. As Bristol-Rhys (2009) states, "Buildings seemed to appear magically, towns arose out of the desert, dangerous tracks through the desert were paved, schools and hospitals opened, and the people, scattered throughout separate territories that would soon coalesce into a nation-state, were suddenly catapulted into new lives with new expectations" (p. 107-108). Resentment towards the British intensified and, with the dizzyingly fast influx of petrodollars fuelling the economy, there was no need to prolong relations with Britain, which many perceived as exploitative (Al-Fahim, 1995, p. 42). By the time the British officially left the Trucial Coast in December 1971, "they left behind a jewel, glittering in the desert, which had just begun to transform itself into one of the most innovative,

successful regions in the world" (Darraj & Puller, 2009, p. 35). However, very few shiny success stories are without problems, and these problems often only become apparent with time.

Alongside such dynamic change came the need for a huge number of workers to make such a transformation possible. Workers from Western English-speaking countries, Asia and other Arab nations, were needed for construction, shop work, teaching and business. These workers, mostly using English as a lingua franca, quickly outnumbered the native population to the point where Emiratis now only make up approximately 10% of the population (Findlow, 2006, p. 23). As the workers tend to be on relatively short contacts, there is a constant influx and efflux of this population resulting in Emiratis living amongst constant demographic change. Al-Kitbi (2008) states in the Gulf News article, 'Prevent being side-lined', "Demographically speaking, we have become a minority in our homeland. This has seriously threatened the stability of our society, while its values and mother tongue are adversely influenced by these demographic shifts" (p. 3). There is a sense that the situation as it is cannot continue. Khondker's (2010) article 'Wanted but not welcomed' sums up the conflicting attitude towards expatriate workers that is felt in today's Gulf.

In conjunction with the mounting discomfort associated with being a minority in one's own country are the negative feelings surrounding the highly publicized and distressing events of 9/11/2001 and its aftermath which have caused a deep rift between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds which, although diffused significantly, is still felt over ten years later. This reality has created what Findlow (2005, p. 285) describes as "a schizophrenic cultural climate". At the same time as English is gaining more and more ground in the Gulf, so, Findlow continues, is "sensitivity and mixed feelings about the pace and direction of modernization and globalization and resentment at the sheer numbers of foreigners on Emirati soil" (p. 296).

English has now become standard in both the formal realms of education and non-formal realms of leisure, tourism and daily life in the Gulf leading to serious concerns about the future of Arabic and local culture. As Said (2011) states, "Some quarters are claiming that the Arabic language is at the beginning of its death and will soon have no speakers, if English continues to be promoted over Arabic, in the media, through domestic South Asian maids and nannies, and in the education system" (p. 179). Ahmed (2011) adds that "the imported education and rampant spread of, and emphasis on, English, accompanied by a relatively American pop culture, is beginning to sideline Arabic resulting in the linguistic and

cultural loss of those who identify with it" (p. 120). This loss is perhaps felt more deeply due to the contrast between Arabic and English in terms of what the languages represent. As Harris (1991) states, "English is not just a language, any more than Islam is just a religion" (p. 90). Mohd-Asraf (2005) adds that Islam is "a way of life, with its own worldview; a way of looking at the world that is different − on some fundamental issues− from that of the Western world" (p. 104).

The above factors combined serve to exacerbate the fragility of cultural identity in the region. The question which can be heard over and over again in formal and informal discussions across the Arab World is, as English grows and grows, will there be a point where it takes one step too far? Is there a tipping point, so to speak? Is English turning into a bully rather than a friend? If so, as Fishman (1999) warns, "A bully is more likely to be feared than popular" (p. 31). As Morrow and Castleton (2011) point out, "Each of us has drawn a line in the sand at one time or another, saying, 'This far and no further' with regard to the retention of something we cherish" (p. 331). If and when this will happen in the Gulf remains to be seen. In the meantime, the volcano continues to bubble.

Although far from showing full resistance, reactions to these concerns can be seen across the Gulf. For example, there are now calls in the UAE to revive Arabic and reduce the effect and impact of English, not only in the education system but in the everyday lives of Gulf Arabs. The UAE government's high-profile "Emiratization" campaign aiming to reduce its reliance on foreign workers by training and encouraging Emiratis to enter the work force in the private as well as public sector is one such motion (Kirk, 2010, p. 11). Also, in 2008, the UAE government felt it necessary to reaffirm that Arabic is the "official language of all federal authorities and establishments" (Al Baik, 2008, cited in Badry, 2011, p. 91), which highlighted feelings of linguistic insecurity. In addition to this, 2008 was declared "the year of national identity" by the president of the UAE while several conferences and symposia were organized to discuss ways to reaffirm cultural security. The 2012 Qatar University conference on Arabic and identity and the 2014 Gulf Comparative Education Society (GCES) symposium entitled "Locating the National in the International" raised awareness of the issue. Certainly the "English threat" seems to be felt more intensely as English gains more and more strength in the region.

2.2 Cultural Identity in Today's Globalized World

Before further exploring the relationship between English as a global language and cultural identity in the Gulf, it is important to be clear on the

definitions of the terms involved. Although language is a relatively easy concept to define, culture and identity certainly are not.

According to Williams (1976, cited in Hawthorn, 2000, p. 63) *culture* is "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language", making it "notoriously difficult to define" (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, p. 13). One can talk about *high culture* (intellectual and artistic achievements) and *anthropological culture* (the whole way of life of a people including artifacts, practices, social structures, technologies, languages, myths, rituals, stories and economic systems (Young, 1996, p. 37) or, like Lado (1986, p. 52), "the ways of people" . *Popular culture*, which refers to something "belonging to and reflecting the interests of a dominant group or class" (Hawthorn, 2000, p. 64), is a third type. True to the complicated nature of *culture* though, we find that even the three seemingly clear definitions above are still far from ideal. Most of the controversy is centered on the second of the above definitions (people who share "a whole way of life").

As the world becomes increasingly globalized and cosmopolitan, it is becoming less and less common to see groups of people sharing an identical way of life, but rather, as Spencer-Oatey (2000) points out, members of cultural groups tend to show "'family resemblances' with the result that there is no absolute set of features that can distinguish definitively one cultural group from another" (p. 4). For this reason, a broader less definitive or confining definition of culture is now more relevant. We must, therefore, move away from essentialism or the "tired old notion of culture" as Latour calls it (2008, cited in Dervin & Liddicoat, 2013, p. 4), and focus on a "small culture" or a non-essentialist view of culture where "culture is not a geographical place which can be visited and to which someone can belong, but a social force which is evident wherever it emerges as being significant" (Holliday, 2005, p. 23). As Dervin and Liddicoat state, "The focus has shifted from cultures as things to human beings as the social enactors of culture" (p. 6). Culture is constantly changing and leaking at the boundaries, it is not a static or neatly packaged block. When we talk of "Western culture" or "Emirati culture", for example, we must do so with the understanding that there are variations and fluidity within these categories.

As with culture, identity is also a complex concept. Identity can be defined as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2000, p. 5). There are many strands to a person's identity, which change due to social, linguistic and personal factors, making identity also fluid, dynamic, and

ever changing over time and space (Block, 2007; Kramsch, 1998; Norton, 2000; Pierce, 1995; Scotland, 2014; Suleiman, 2003). If we specifically look at "cultural identity", it can be defined as "the relationship between individuals and members of a group who share a common history, a common language and similar ways of understanding the world" (Norton, 2000, p. 19).

The intertwined nature of language, culture and identity is well recognized by scholars in the field (Al Dabbagh, 2005; Jenkins, 2007; Karmani 2005; Kramsch, 1998; Suleiman, 2003). As Kramsch (1998) states, "Language is the principle means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways" (p. 3). In this sense, it could be said that "language captures culture" meaning "losing a language is losing culture and losing culture is losing one's identity" (Said, 2011, p. 191).

2.3 Conflicting Desires

When we consider the background, the dynamic change in the last forty years, the demographics and the eagerness to progress, the Arab Gulf is perhaps now more than ever being pulled in two different directions. There seems to be friction between the desire to participate fully in the global market of today and to maintain local customs, traditions and religion. We can see this superficially in the mix of reproduced tradition and modernity that can be seen all over the UAE upon first glance. These examples include, as Clarke (2006, p. 227) mentions, "urban sculptures of coffee pots, pearl shells and sailing dhows, and traditional Bedouin 'tents' located in the marbled atria of hotels and shopping malls". On a deeper level, this "conflict of desires" could have serious effects on language, culture and identity in the region. As Said (2011) queries, "Is there a double-function for English, one of need and the other of resentment perhaps?" (p. 201).

Previous studies in the Gulf have investigated this query by looking into attitudes towards English. For the most part, these studies have found mainly positive attitudes towards global English. For example, Findlow's (2006) study between 1997 and 2000 examined linguistic-cultural dualism and how far this leads to the loss of linguistic-cultural diversity and whether there is resistance to such a process. The results showed that although there may be underlying ideological conflict between wanting to maintain heritage and opportunity associated with English, the climate (modernist, global, a strong economy, no evident material need for resistance) meant English was above all "enabling" (p. 33). Similarly,

Randall and Samimi's (2010) study in 2010 with the Dubai Police Academy showed no sign of any overt opposition to English in their questionnaire's open responses, apart from the word "unfortunately" used in relation to the fact that English is a global language.

A year later, Morrow and Castleton's (2011) study investigated a range of issues including attitudes towards the English language with volunteers from across the Arab world and found responses to be almost entirely positive. Regarding the future of Arabic, they found approximately 80% of participants were optimistic about the future of the Arabic language, while the other 20% were pessimistic. In Saudi Arabia, Hagler's (2014) recent study conducted in 2012 at King Saud University assessed students' attitudes to the West and found most (62% of males and 70% of females) held positive outlooks to Western culture and were curious and eager to learn more about it.

The previous studies mentioned, although all taking place in the Gulf and wider Arab world in the last fifteen years and investigating similar issues, vary in nature. It is interesting to see such positive attitudes revealed in the studies, especially in the face of the ongoing "English threat" discussion. In the Gulf, however, there is a climate of fast-paced change. With the recent and intensifying upsurge of attention given to the dangers of Arabic and cultural identity loss, it is important to explore current views and fresh perspectives on this ongoing issue.

3. The Study

The study, which examines the effects English as a global language has on cultural identity in the United Arab Emirates, seeks to answer four main research questions:

1. What do the languages English and Arabic represent to Emiratis?
2. How does English as a global language affect attitudes towards it?
3. How does learning English affect cultural identity in the UAE?
4. How can the teaching of English in the UAE be adapted to minimize its effect on cultural identity?

Participants in the study were forty female students aged eighteen to twenty-four years old studying English in the highest level of the Academic Bridge Program (ABP) at Zayed University, UAE. The ABP is an intensive twenty-hour a week English program which students take in order to prepare to study their chosen majors in the medium of English. Each level of the program has specific learning outcomes that students

must meet before they can progress to the next level. Depending on the level of English students have upon entering the APB, the program can last between one term (three months) to eight terms (two years). Participants were chosen from the highest level, Level 8 (IELTS Band 5-6), due to their higher language skills, meaning they could express their opinions well in English.

The research project involved the collection of qualitative data, "in the form of words rather than numbers" (Punch, 2009, p. 3). Due to the research questions seeking to explore in-depth opinions and experiences, two methods of data collection were used: open response questionnaires with thirty-five students and an hour-long focus group interview with a further five students. The paper-based questionnaire, which took approximately twenty minutes to complete, was given to the students on a voluntary basis in their classrooms with the permission of their teachers. The questionnaire included biographical information as well as eight open-response questions divided into four categories which matched the four research questions. The focus group interview, which contained fourteen questions ordered sequentially from light biographical questions at the beginning to deeper issues such as identity towards the end, took place during the students' midday break in the researcher's office. The interview was recorded with a digital voice recorder for the best possible quality.

Regarding sampling, the student sample for the questionnaires included three classes with around twelve participants in each making it a "cluster sampling" as the groups were already in existence and contained a cross-section of university students who plan to major in a range of subjects, with the most popular majors being international studies, media and human resources. The student sample for the focus group included five students from two different Level 8 classes. For this sample, teachers of those classes were asked to call for volunteers and suggest students they thought would contribute well in a focus group setting, making it a purposive sample in this case. Pseudonyms were used to protect students' identities and the abbreviations of "FG" or "Q" after these names indicate whether the participants were focus group members or questionnaire respondents.

The data from the focus group was transcribed verbatim by the researcher, which, as Denscombe (2010, p. 275) points out, can be laborious but is also very valuable, because it brings the researcher "close to the data". The data from the focus group and open-response questionnaires were analyzed using "content analysis" which involves examining the data for recurrent instances. As Wilkinson (2011) states, "these instances are then systematically identified across the data set, and

grouped together by means of a coding system" (p. 170). This was used in conjunction with "thematic analysis", which involves "searching for themes" (Rapley, 2011, p. 274) and noting patterns within the data. The themes were closely connected to the research questions.

Used in conjunction, questionnaires and focus groups are highly effective and complement each other in multiple ways. The open-response questionnaire made it possible to gain a relatively large number of perspectives without participants giving too much of their time and energy. The focus group, on the other hand, made it possible for the researcher to concentrate on a smaller number of participants in much greater detail and gain a window into the mind or "life world" (Kvale, 1996, p. 5) of the focus group members, providing particularly rich data. Using the two different methods of data collection enabled the researcher to use methodological triangulation (with-in methods). By looking at issues in more than one way, greater knowledge could be gained, specifically in terms of improved accuracy and accessing a fuller picture.

4. Findings

4.1 The Prevalence and Importance of English

The first section of the questionnaire and focus group aimed at assessing how far-reaching English was in the lives of the students. All the students named Arabic as their first language and English as their second. Only three students spoke an additional language (Tagalog, French and Korean), which perhaps testifies to the dominance of English as a second language in the region. The students had been learning English for an average of thirteen years starting in KG1 for most and they use English on a daily basis in one or more areas of their lives. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most common areas in which the students use English are when watching movies (97%), using the Internet (94%), traveling (89%) and emailing/texting (83%). The least common areas to use English were at home (29%) and with friends (40%) as can be seen from Table 1.

When asked if English was important to them, all but one student said "yes" (97%). The most common reasons were the fact that English is a global language, wanting to connect with others, the fact English surrounds them due to the large expatriate community, and the fact that it was necessary to get a job.

Table 1: When the students use English

When students use English	Yes %
Movies	97%
Internet	94%
For traveling	89%
Email/texting	83%
Music	74%
Outside class time at university	57%
With friends	40%
At home	29%

4.2 Feelings about English and Arabic

The second section in both the questionnaire and the focus group schedule sought to gain perspectives on how English is viewed in relation to Arabic and also in its own right. Firstly, the participants were asked to name five words that they associated with the languages English and Arabic. This provided a strong picture of what the languages represent to them.

For the questionnaire responses, the five most popular words or word groups mentioned in association with English were: *global* or *international, entertainment (movies, music, internet), university* or *studying*, *communication*, and *travel*. For the first three categories, over half the participants made these associations with English as can be seen in Table 2. From the focus group, similarly, the words *international, simple* and *freedom* were mentioned. In contrast, for Arabic the five most commonly associated words in the questionnaire responses were: *culture, religion, first language, poems*, and *history*. All but one student wrote "culture" as a word associated with Arabic, which underlined the strong connection between their native language and culture in the eyes of the students. Religion also appeared in almost all the students' responses due to it being the language of the Holy Quran. In the focus group, Arabic was associated with *a sea of words, the primary language in the Middle East, complexity*, and *Islam*.

Table 2: The words students associate with English and Arabic

	Most common words associated with English		Most common words associated with Arabic	
1	Global/ international	60%	Culture	97%
2	Entertainment (movies, music, internet)	57%	Religion (Quran, Islam, Muslim)	89%
3	University/studying	51%	First (language)	71%
4	Communication	34%	Poems	43%
5	Travel	26%	History	23%

It is clear that there is almost no overlap between how the languages are seen. In fact, it could be argued that the two languages represent opposite worlds. This is especially clear when we look at visual representations of word associations which were generated through the word cloud website *Wordle.net*. Word Cloud 1 and Word Cloud 2 show all the words mentioned by the students in proportion to how often they occurred. We can see "global" and "culture" leap out from the page and represent very different areas of life.

After reflecting on what the two languages represented, the students were asked specifically to comment on their feelings towards English as a global language. As can be seen from Figure 2, just over half had positive feelings. The most common reasons for welcoming English as a global language were that it helped them to communicate with people in other countries, everyone speaks it, and it is easy to learn.

One fifth of the students commented on both positive and negative effects. For example, Maryam pointed out the benefits of being able to communicate well when traveling but voiced concerns about the low level of Arabic, and interest in Arabic, Emirati children have these days. This point was raised again and again in various parts of the study, underlining its importance.

English Word Cloud

Arabic Word Cloud

Figure 1. Word clouds based on English and Arabic from participant responses

**Students' feelings about English as a global
Language**

no feelings
12%

negative
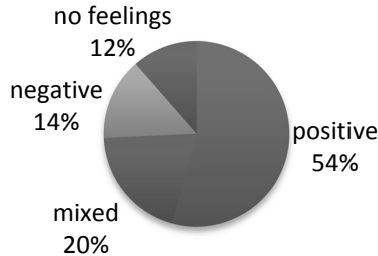14%

positive
54%

mixed
20%

Figure 2. The students' feelings about English as a global language.

> **Maryam (Q)**   *I think it's good because if you travel, you will be
> communicating with people using the English language. Also, it's bad
> because children are starting to lose interest in the Arabic language and
> most of them can't talk in Arabic.*

The remaining students had either no feelings or negative feelings
about English, with the most common feelings being those of resentment,
which Meera, Marwa and Shaima articulated. For example:

> **Meera (Q)** *I feel a little bit jealous because I want my first language
> (Arabic) to be the global language.*

> **Marwa (Q)** *Sometimes, I feel sorry for my language, which is Arabic. I
> feel it deserves to be the global language but Arabs let it down.
> Unfortunately, I hate the fact that English is the global language.*

> **Shaima (Q)** *To be honest with you, I feel like it's not a great thing. I don't
> know, but sometimes I think why are we learning English and no people
> learn our language.*

4.3 Effects of English on Lives, Culture and Identity

Moving deeper into the study, the students were asked to comment on
whether English had changed any aspects of their own lives, Emirati
culture or the way they think. These questions were asked in order to
gauge the impact English has on different layers of cultural identity. As
can be seen from Figure 3, the students responded differently to each
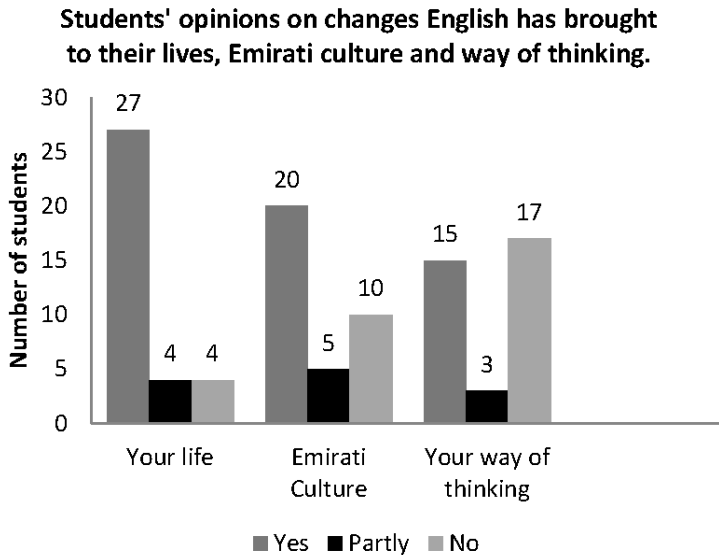question.

Students' opinions on changes English has brought to their lives, Emirati culture and way of thinking.

Figure 3. Students' responses to the question, "Has Global English changed: a) your life b) Emirati culture c) Your way of thinking?"

4.4 Effects on Individual Lives

Twenty-seven (77%) out of the thirty-five questionnaire respondents felt that English had changed their lives in some way, mostly for the better, in terms of boosting their confidence and independence, making life easier and aiding communication. Aisha and Zeinab view English as enabling as can be seen from their comments.

Aisha (Q) *My life has become easier than before because I don't need anyone to come with me to interpret me.*

Zeinab (Q) *I felt embarrassed when I talked but now I am more confident.*

4.5 Effects on Emirati Culture

When asked about whether English had caused changes to Emirati culture, twenty students (57%) answered with a strong "yes" and five stated they could see partial changes. The most common examples of how culture had changed included a change in attitude towards being more

open-minded and accepting of other cultures, changes in clothing, an increased use of English and decreased use of Arabic, a desire to be like English native-speakers and increased development in the country. Some of these changes were described in a positive light and some with a negative slant. Regarding Arabic loss, which was the most commented on change, Reema, Abeer and Afnan expressed the following concerns.

> **Reema (Q)** *Yes, English has a huge impact on our culture, both positive and negative impacts. Positive because it kind of developed our country and improved it, and negative because nowadays almost all of children's first language is English, which makes it hard for them to learn Arabic or even speak it. And, I'm afraid that our first language may disappear with time.*

> **Abeer (Q)** *I see some Emirati people starting to keep English as their mother language and I really don't like it because it shows the other cultures we don't care about our language and that is wrong.*

> **Afnan (Q)** *Yes. Locals don't speak Arabic nowadays, they feel proud with their English.*

This negative cultural change with regard to Arabic loss was also commented on during the focus group. As Shamma, Reem and Nouf stated:

> **Shamma (FG)** *Some girls when they talk Arabic, they add some English words. The person who listens to them is sometimes confused or the person doesn't know the meaning.*

> **Reem (FG)** *I think the English language affects the Arabic language negatively because the Arabic language is about to be abandoned. It's possible to go to a hotel or somewhere and there are no Arabic speakers there. It affects us. We should be proud and introduce our language to the outside world. Like in Germany, if you went to Germany, France, Turkey, they speak in Turkish and they want you to know their language but in the UAE, they don't. They are covering their own language, they are always showing their English. It's a negative effect. And in some schools they ask the parents to speak with the English language with their children and a lot of children I know, some of them can't speak Arabic properly. They speak English better and they prefer the English.*

> **Nouf (FG)** *Also my cousins. They are really so young but they can't speak Arabic maybe because they spend almost all of their time at the school and with their nanny. So they speak English a lot. So that's bad for them when*

they grow up. There will be no Arabic language, it will disappear by that time.

These comments signify a general concern about society as a whole, especially in comparison to other nations, and a personal concern if we consider the case of Nouf's younger cousins, for example.

After Arabic loss, the influence of Western culture on national dress was the next most common example of cultural changes connected with English. Amal shared a personal example of removing her hijab (a veil that covers the head and chest worn by Muslim women) after becoming closer to her English-speaking foreign teammates during football practice. She seemed a little uncomfortable sharing this with the other Emirati focus group members:

> **Amal (FG)** *It affected me a lot because I am a football player. My team players, not all of them are local, some of them are Filipino and American. Before I didn't speak much English so I moved my arms around a lot so they could understand me. After that I didn't wear my hijab because it's difficult to train with hijab. They give me songs to listen to so all my songs on my phone are English. It's okay.*

4.6 Effects on Identity

When asked about the impact of English on their identities, which was defined by the researcher as how you see yourself in the world and how you think, the students' answers were divided. Around half (51%) felt their identities had changed and around half (49%) felt they had not. Nada and Sara commented on using English to express feelings and the effects it has on ways of thinking.

> **Nada (Q)** *Yes, when I want to express my feelings, I express them by talking English, it is more confident when I talk, more than Arabic.*

> **Sara (Q)** *Yes it does. It affects on the way we think and talk. It affects on us as students and all that we think is how to write it and say in English. I think now Emirati people think like foreign people.*

Identity is also connected with the names we are given. In the focus group, Reem gave an example of young Emiratis wanting to use English over Arabic and Anglicize their names on social media sites, thus distancing themselves from their Arabic identity.

Reem (FG) *A lot of teenagers, you can see them on twitter, they speak only in English. They feel embarrassed or ashamed if they write in Arabic, and some of them change their names to Joey, he's Mohamed, but he says "I'm Joey" but he keeps his Emirati family name so we can know he's Emirati. It affects negatively because we should be proud of our language.*

For those who felt English had not affected their identity, reasons were that English was only a language and a tool for communication. Maitha articulated this well.

Maitha (Q) *No, I don't think so. I still think in the same way even if I use other languages. I just translate my Arabic words.*

4.7 The Future of English

The final section of the questionnaire and focus group aimed to determine thoughts and perspectives on how English should be taught in the future. Issues such as the preferred nationality of English teachers, the context of English courses and the most desirable language for university education were explored.

The students were first asked if they had preferences regarding the nationality of their English teachers. A range of nationalities was provided as options, including English native-speaker nationalities, their own nationality, other Arabic-speaking nationalities and other European and Asian nations. There was also a space for students to include other choices. As can be seen in Table 3, there was a strong preference for native-speaker teachers especially from the UK, USA and Canada. Interestingly, the fourth most popular choice was Emirati teachers over Australians. German teachers came next with India, China and Egypt being relatively unpopular choices.

In the focus group, students were asked the same question. With similar preferences emerging, the students were able to elaborate due to the focus group setting. The main reasons given for wanting a British, Australian or North American (BANA) English teacher were the accents of the teachers and the perceived notion that BANA teachers have "exact" or "right" English, as can be seen by Batool and Amal's comments below. Shamma added that in the future she approved of Emirati teachers replacing BANA teachers.