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Mira Al Hussein, Christina Gitsaki

6 Foreign language learning policy in the United Arab Emirates: Local and global agents of change

In an effort to highlight the multitude of local and global forces that can facilitate and shape foreign Language Learning Policy, this chapter provides a historical exploration of foreign language policies in a rather idiosyncratic context, that of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a country where the indigenous locals are the minority and where the rulers of the country have embraced the global as a means to empower the local and usher the country in the era of modernisation and globalisation. English language teachers/experts and institutions have long been welcomed to the UAE to empower the nation in its quest of constructing a knowledge-based economy and becoming a regional and world leader in education, although recently with the advent of the Arab Spring, a discontent with the English language and its hegemony at the expense of the Arabic language has been evident in the region. This chapter looks into the agents, processes and causes of the rise of English in formal education in the UAE and its struggle to survive the current political climate.

6.1. Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is one of the Gulf Arab countries. The UAE comprises seven Emirates (i.e., Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujeirah, Ras Al Khaimah, Sharjah, and Um Al Quain) and as a country it has witnessed an incredible transformation from being primarily a pearl-trading economy to being an oil-producing economy, and now a global player in business and tourism over the past three decades. This development to an economic giant in the region has witnessed an influx of migrants in the country where a recent census (2010) found that Emiratis comprise only 11.5% of the estimated 8.25 million people living in the UAE (see www.dubaifaqs.com/population-of-uae.php). In order to meet the demands of this rapid modernisation and globalisation, the UAE has long implemented educational policies that actively promote bilingualism among its citizens. Today, the ability to speak English is critical for all Emiratis and expatriates alike in the UAE as the country is home to over 200 nationalities from across the globe. The proliferation of English as a second language in the UAE has undergone a number of phases of growth and suppression fuelled by explicit but also hidden societal, political and cultural agendas. This chapter delves into the past and present of educational policies in the Arab Gulf and the UAE and provides a critical perspective of the endogenous and exogenous forces that helped shape the current foreign language policy in the UAE.

6.2 The establishment of formal education in the Arab Gulf

Formal education and the teaching of foreign languages are not new, post-colonial phenomena in the Arab Gulf. The traditional institutions of the *kuttabs* “were the precursors of the modern elementary schools” (El-Sanabary, 1991: 12) in the Gulf, wherein students memorised the Qur’an and were taught basic arithmetic and literacy by men who were known as *mutaw’as*; men of religion (lit. “men who were made to submit to God”). Formal schooling as we know it today, and contrary to what is commonly known, was introduced to the then integrated geographical region of the Arab Gulf between 1875 and 1920 by the Ottoman Turks in the western region of modern day Saudi Arabia (El-Sanabary, 1991). These schools instructed students in Turkish, and catered mainly to the male children of Turkish civil servants posted in the area, as well as the children of the local wealthy Arabs (El-Sanabary, 1991). Turkish was viewed as a foreign language, despite being the language of the governing dynasty that ruled over the Arab world. As such, the restrictive nature of the Turkish schools that opened up in the area, admitting pupils based on criteria of ethnicity and wealth lingered in the psyche of the Arab masses, who may have regarded these schools as vehicles of discrimination and exclusivity as they catered to the privileged fractions of society.

In attempting to contextualise the history of formal education in the UAE, it is important to examine the relationship between the British Empire and its former protectorates, and the diffusion of knowledge, systems and policies from the ‘centre’ to the ‘periphery’. Given the absent interest of the British to invest in the development of its protectorates along the Arabian coastline, much of the capital poured into the development of education came from local merchants (Davidson, 2008), who imported models of formal schooling along with their staff from other Arab countries that were directly or indirectly colonised by the British, such as Palestine, Egypt, and Jordan. The relationship between the empire (centre) and its formal colonies (periphery) reflected political and economic interests that did not stretch farther to encompass the Trucial States, whose economic importance until the 1960’s laid merely in its strategic geographical location along the trade routes, connecting Britain to India. Enamoured by the scientific advancement of Britain, its political supremacy and economic dominance, the Arab populace may have conceived specific images of British systems of inculcation that were able to produce the successful agents of the empire. As Whitehead (1988: 215) stated:

Most colonial schooling certainly mirrored schooling in Britain, but there is ample evidence to suggest that this was more a reflection of local demand on part of the indigenous peoples themselves, than an indication of any deliberate British policy to colonise the indigenous intellect.

A similar argument is put forth by Strinati (1995) (cited in Sweeting & Vickers, 2007) who suggested that dominated groups tend to accept the ideas, values and authority

of the dominant group due to the widespread belief that knowledge produced in the West is superior, and the only way towards advancement is to emulate Western systems of knowledge-production. Therefore, a comparison between the particular *centre* (i.e., Britain) and the *outlier-periphery* (i.e., the UAE) is prevalent in the following sections of this chapter, often highlighting the nature of the cultural influence of Britain on the UAE. It is also worth noting that knowledge consumption from the centre was not limited to the English language, nor was it confined to the replication of systems, models and policies of education, as more officers from the UAE were trained at the prestigious Sandhurst Military Academy than from any other country outside of Britain (BBC, 2014).

Historically speaking, formal schooling is an evolutionary by-product of formal exclusivity that has appealed to the masses in the West, where it originated in its current form. A wealth of literature that seeks to explain the expansion of mass schooling in the developed countries often links the phenomenon of mass schooling to the evolution of social needs and problems. It is thought that formal schooling expanded in society either to solve problems of social integration or to maintain the dominance of the privileged class in society (Meyer, Ramirez, & Soysal, 1992). Despite the existence of forms of mass schooling prior to the industrial revolution in Western Europe (Boli, Ramirez, & Meyer, 1985; Sosyal & Strang, 1989), it is likely that the economic benefit in the function of mass schooling as an instrument of socialisation was conceived during the period of mass industrialisation. Formal schooling may have gained wide acceptance due to it serving as a preparatory ground for factory work, as it was believed that “the social relations of the school would replicate the social relations of the workplace, and thus help young people adapt to the social division of labour” (Bowels, 1971: 129). Industrialisation, it can be argued, has contributed to de-exclusifying schooling, such that it created a link between education and individual economic growth.

The correlation between economic activity and the rise of mass education and literacy rates in 18th century Britain is evident as the dissemination of practical and literary skills in schools seemed to have propelled the wheel of industrialisation and economic growth (West, 1978). Davidson (2008) examined a similar correlation between the growth of economic activities in the Arab Gulf—namely the pearling industry that brought certain merchants to prominence, thus enabling them to exercise considerable political power and influence through the financing of public projects—and the establishment by wealthy patrons of schools that were mainly staffed by Arab expatriates, offering subjects such as basic mathematics, geography and history. In addition to the economic catalyst, mass education was fostered by religious groups, who had provided the ideological and organisational foundation for a national mass education system in Europe, insofar as their existence legitimised the authority of governments and emphasised a national identity for the members of these religious groups (Sosyal & Strang, 1989). Analogously, the transition from the *kuttabs* to formal schooling in the UAE was aided by the acknowledged bearing of these religious schools,

whose formality and relevance were recognised by the local population. Hence, formal schooling may have appeared to be a natural transitory process through which the *kuttabs* were modified and reformed to respond to the changing socioeconomic conditions at that time, as opposed to being foreign, transplanted models. Thus, a number of formal, post-*kuttab* schools started operating in the UAE in the first few decades of the 20th century, the earliest of which were the Al-Tatweerya School (1907) in Sharjah, and Al-Ahmadiya School (1912) in Dubai. These schools, along with a few others, were the institutions under which most of the “UAE’s first generation of post-British rulers” were educated (Davidson, 2008: 636). However, Boyle (2012) states that the 1940’s were characterised by what Schneider (2003), (cited in Boyle, 2012), refers to as “marginal bilingualism” between the elite merchant and ruling classes, whereby functional skills in English were picked up through professional contact, in addition to the growing trend of sending male children of wealthy merchants to India for an education (Boyle, 2012).

Davidson (2008) discussed the establishment of an Education Department by the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Rashid, in 1958 upon his succession; a venture that served to shift the power of knowledge-dissemination from the hands of the wealthy merchants, whose endowments financed the earlier schools, to a state-sponsored apparatus of legitimation and grounding nationalism. Sosyal and Strang view the consolidation of schooling into nationally controlled schools as a political shift towards the establishment of a nation-state:

The creation of educational systems has often been described as central to the state’s nation building. Its mass character brings the entire population under the aegis of the state as members of the national polity and prepares them to undertake the roles necessary to enhance the external power of the state. In this context, education becomes a duty as much as a right. (Sosyal & Strang, 1989: 279)

According to Davidson (2008), that is when English was first introduced in the national curriculum, and with the discovery of oil and the diversification of occupational needs, the importance of formal schooling increased. The expansion of education and the establishment of various institutions in the UAE were certainly aided by foreign investment in the education sector, often to cater to specific groups. The Shah of Iran, for instance, had established an Iranian school in Dubai to provide education to a large number of children belonging to the city’s well-established Iranian merchant community. A number of wealthy Indians had also invested in local education by establishing schools that catered to the Indian population of Dubai (Davidson, 2008). The discovery of oil in Dubai in 1966 brought in many foreign workers, prompting Varkey to open the first private school that catered to the growing Indian community (Davidson, 2008). Today GEMS have 46 schools in the UAE offering a range of curricula such as British, American, and Indian.

Boyle suggested that “the arrival of large numbers of English speakers coincided with the coming of wealth and an improved standard of living for the indigenous

people,” which created a positive attitude towards the English language (Boyle, 2012: 320). Thus, English Language Teaching (ELT) gained a foothold in the region as a service industry created to respond to the increasing global demand for English. When the present day Ministry of Education in the UAE was formed in the 1970’s, English was initially introduced in Grade 7. English instruction was introduced in Grade 4 in the 1980’s and in Grade 1 in the 1990’s (Layman, 2011). Furthermore, English was established as the language of instruction in federal institutions of tertiary education in the UAE. In the late 1980’s, the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) were established as the second set of federal institutions providing post-secondary education to UAE nationals in English, which diverged from the existing model of the UAE University that had initially taught almost exclusively in Arabic, but has since revised its policy on the language of instruction (Findlow, 2006).

6.3 The rise of English in the UAE

The history of taught foreign languages in the Arab Gulf intersected with the cultural and political encounters in the region that had come under the rule of the non-Arab Ottoman Empire, eventually transitioning to British protectorship. However, English as a taught language did not set foot in the region with the coming of the British; rather it was the missionary schools that were sanctioned by the Ottoman Empire. The mission schools secured permission to operate schools in areas with Christian populations, gradually extending their outreach by establishing schools that were not exclusive to any religious groups. The first one in the Gulf was a school for girls founded in Bahrain in 1892 by the “Arabian Mission, an affiliate of the Protestant American missionaries” (El-Sanabary, 1991: 14) followed by other schools in the region for boys and girls. The non-exclusivity of these schools could have flourished had it not been for their emphasis on teaching Bible studies which resulted in the local people viewing these schools as surreptitious offshoots of colonialism, despite their English-language offerings that had appealed to the elites (*ibid.*).

The proliferation of English in the Arab Gulf had for a lengthy period of time been wrought by the shifting political interests, and dominated by economic needs. ELT policies and the mushrooming of ELT centres in the region can perhaps be traced back to the change in the political direction of ELT-providing countries, particularly Britain, following the independence of the Arab Gulf States from British protectorate rule. Prior to that, contact between Britain and the populations of the Arabian Gulf was negligible, and no British officials were stationed in the area until the early 1930s, following the construction of a landing strip for the Imperial Airways in Sharjah (Boyle, 2012). Although incidents of contact between British officials and indigenous populations increased, communication often took place in Arabic; a language the British ensured their appointed officials to the Gulf were fluent in (*ibid.*). The growing geopolitical interests of the British in the Arab world, particularly the Arabian Gulf,

and the need to maintain their monopoly on the trade routes, created a need for Britain to reach out and ‘converse’ with the populations of the Arab world through its BBC Arabic broadcast, which was inaugurated in 1938 (BBC, 2007). The first direct penetration of the British Council in the Gulf had started with the establishment of the English Language Centre at the King Abdul Aziz University in Saudi Arabia in 1975, expanding later to other Gulf States. The opening of the first British Council office in Dubai was not all that well-received by the federal government of Abu Dhabi, which may have been influenced by the prevailing negative sentiments towards the perceived “cultural imperialism” flagshipped by the British Council at the time. In an attempt to appease the leadership, the British Council started offering Arabic courses to expatriate communities in the UAE (see British Council website). In recent years, the influx of migrant workers to the UAE, with South Asians constituting the majority of the migrant population, has brought a varying set of languages and cultures to the region (Boyle, 2012). Consequently, this has created a hindrance to communication between the growing communities of expatriates from different backgrounds. Thus, the federal government of the UAE took the initiative to cater to the growing non-Arab communities by establishing the first English-language radio station, Dubai FM 92, in 1972 (Hilotin, 2002). This was followed by the launching of Channel 33, a Dubai-based TV station that aired foreign programmes, mostly in English, along with Abu Dhabi’s 2nd Channel (Ayish, 2013), and the publishing of *Khaleej Times* in 1978, the first English language daily newspaper in the country.

The move towards regulating media through provision may have stemmed from a post-colonial mistrust, and a pressing need to control the content of information produced and disseminated in English. Nonetheless, the demand for English in the UAE has profited greatly from the agency of government and its role in propagating the idea that in order for the country to reap the benefits of globalisation and fully participate in the global market economy, it is essential to train the populace to speak the language of international business. Clarke (2007), drawing from the literature of Findlow (2006) states that the UAE has “accommodated globalisation” by incorporating English within its policy of linguistic dualism that views English as the language of “business, modernity, and internationalism,” thus relegating Arabic to the constrained domain of “religion, tradition, and localism” (Clarke, 2007: 584).

6.4 English schooling: Private and exclusive

If integration was the purpose of mass schooling and formal education, differentiation was the principle behind private schooling worldwide. In Britain, exclusivity in its different forms continued to appeal to the social elite, whose orientation toward private education may have sustained the idea of the availability of better education that can accelerate upward social mobility and the accumulation of wealth. In the Gulf, private schooling is synonymous to more English and, in turn, more English

entails better career prospects and social status. Such views are indicative of the widely spread perception that private schools attract students from affluent families and provide the breeding ground for networking with the elites.

Unequal access to ELT programmes through differentiation in private offerings that are only affordable to a certain fraction of society, argues Gaffey (2005), plays a major role in the reproduction of existing social structures and facilitates the maintenance of social inequalities. Therefore, English has been marketed throughout the Arab Gulf region, and perhaps globally, as a branded commodity, which has increased the demand for it, transforming the language into a marker of status and class within certain societies. Although this phenomenon has not been adequately examined in the many studies focusing on the status of ELT in the Gulf region, many reports have alluded to the evident preference of many parents in the UAE to sending their children to private schools where the level of English taught is relatively stronger (KHDA, 2011; Kenaïd, 2011; Nazzal, 2014; Pennington, 2015a). Perhaps one of the many reasons why parents prefer private English schools has to do with the perceived prestige that the English “brand” bestows on its consumers. Schneider (2003: 246) stated that:

For the indigenous population a command of English gradually turns into an asset, opening roads to higher status or specific commercial options. Thus, knowing English becomes an ability, which sets off an indigenous elite; and, therefore, a process leading to a positive attitude towards the use of English is stimulated. The identity of the English-knowing locals is enriched in a fashion not unsimilar to that of the English immigrants they associate with: certainly their self-perception at this stage remains that of members of the local community, but at the same time their ability to communicate with the Europeans opens their eyes to aspects of another world-view and gives them an extra edge of experience and competitiveness within their own group.

6.5 English language policy in the UAE

Today the UAE education system is regulated by both local (i.e., Educational Zones, Educational Councils) and federal (i.e., Ministry of Education) entities. Public K-12 schools accept only local Emirati students and the curriculum is delivered in Arabic while English is taught as a foreign language. Once Emirati students graduate from high school, they have to participate in a federal English exam, the Common Education Proficiency Assessment (CEPA), coordinated by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MoHESR). Students who score 180+ on their CEPA examination (equivalent to the B2 level of proficiency on the Common European Framework of Reference – CEFR) can enter directly into the undergraduate programmes of one of the Federal Higher Education Institutions where Emiratis receive free education and the curriculum is delivered in English. Students who score less than 180 on their English CEPA examination are required to attend an intensive English language course in order to improve their English language proficiency. This academic bridge course is

delivered by the Federal Higher Education Institutions and Emirati students can exit the course by scoring 180+ CEPA or a Band 5+ on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Apart from the Federal Higher Education Institutions, the UAE has 76 Private Institutions of higher education where the medium of instruction is English. According to the Bureau of Statistics, in 2013-2014, there were 35,692 Emiratis studying in private universities in the UAE (see uaestatistics.gov.ae), while every year over 15,000 Emirati students across the country take the IELTS test in an effort to meet the requirements for entering one of the higher education institutions (federal or private) in their home country. In present day UAE, English language proficiency has become for Emiratis a pre-requisite to pursuing higher education in their own country.

Despite the increasing emphasis on English language teaching and learning across all educational sectors, Emirati students' performance on standardised exams (both local and international) has been poor. In 2013, only 20% of Emirati high school graduates achieved the required English proficiency threshold for entry into undergraduate degree programmes (Gjovic & Lange, 2013). This was an improvement from the previous year where only 16 per cent scored 180+ on the CEPA exam. In fact, during the first ten years of the administration of the English CEPA exam, scores have steadily increased (see Table 6.1).

Tab. 6.1: Average CEPA-English score, by gender and overall (source: Gjovic & Lange, 2013: 4).

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Female	152.7	156.0	154.1	159.4	160.3	162.5	162.3	161.6	161.9	162.6	165.5
Male	147.4	149.1	147.5	154.3	155.8	157.9	158.3	157.5	157.5	158.1	161.0
Overall	150.8	153.4	151.6	157.3	158.5	160.5	160.6	159.9	160.0	160.7	163.5

However, Table 6.1 also shows that the average English language proficiency of Emirati high school graduates remains low (e.g., the descriptor for CEPA 160-169 is: emerging proficiency, conversational) and the CEPA administrators recommend a further 3-4 semesters of English study to reach the minimal level required for academic study.

In an effort to cater not only for the growing expatriate community, but also for the English language needs of the Emirati students, private English medium schools have flourished. According to the Dubai Statistics Centre, in 2010 nearly 55% of Emirati students attended private schools in Dubai (Layman, 2011), while Lewis (2009) reported 29% of Emirati families chose private education in Abu Dhabi. In 2012-2013 there were 225,659 Emirati students attending public schools across the UAE and a further 107,702 attending private schools and with each year the number of Emiratis in private schools is increasing (see uaestatistics.gov.ae). What was initially a state

policy to introduce and emphasise English in the K-12 system through to the tertiary level soon became a national choice for the financially able. KHDA released a report in 2011 that examined the reasons why Emirati parents are increasingly opting to send their children to private schools. The report surveyed 75 parents in 10 different private schools in Dubai. Half of the surveyed parents indicated that private schools offered better quality learning, while 22 per cent pointed out that better English language instruction was a determining factor (KHDA, 2011).

6.6 English: A tool for inclusion or exclusion?

English in present day UAE has the ability to resolutely admit or deny Emirati students access to college degrees through language admission tests, such as the IELTS. Despite the lowering of the admission scores required to enter university, many students continue to struggle with English throughout their years of study. A quick scan of the entry requirements of the three prominent federal institutions in the UAE (United Arab Emirates University, Higher Colleges of Technology, and Zayed University) clearly demonstrates that English proficiency, not Arabic, is listed as a necessary criterion to gain admission to a national, state-sponsored tertiary institution. However, the scores required for IELTS at the federal institutions (IELTS band 5.0) are generally lower than the scores accepted at other foreign universities in the country (American University in Dubai accepts an IELTS band 6.5, while New York University in Abu Dhabi requires an IELTS band 7.5). The discrepancy in the English proficiency requirements at the tertiary level is an extension of the public/private school question that was addressed above. On a federal level, this discrepancy has meant that an additional budget would be set annually to fund the English foundation programmes, which aim to develop and improve English language skills before students can commence their undergraduate degree studies. In addition to being a challenging requirement, the extra year or two spent in these pre-degree programmes cause students to feel indignant towards English. In an attempt to bridge the gap between the K-12 system, particularly in public schools, and higher education, national initiatives were launched to reform what was perceived to be an outdated model of learning in schools that depended on rote memorisation and uni-directional instructions.

In 2007, the Madares Al-Ghad (Schools of the Future) were established as a response to a lengthy examination of the TIMMS and PISA results in which the UAE scored below international levels (Layman, 2011). The ensuing discussions at the decision-making level concluded that the problem lies within the inability of public schools to equip students with a functional level of English proficiency, disabling them from accessing a great deal of the world's knowledge in science and technology. In an effort to raise the standards in Mathematics, Science and English the Madares Al-Ghad (MAG) were put into operation in 2007. The initiative aimed to promote "the use of English as the medium of instruction in the core subjects of mathematics and

science, as well as in English” (Dubai School Inspections Bureau, 2009: 96). Initially a group of 47 schools from around the country were selected to participate in the MAG program and the Ministry of Education envisioned that the programme will be expanded to more schools. However after years in operation with moderate results, the program has remained largely stagnant.

Another significant step towards establishing a school program to facilitate the acquisition of English took place in 2010, when the Abu Dhabi Educational Council (ADEC), the regulatory body responsible for public and private schools in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, launched the New School Model initiative to reform public schools in the UAE. Hundreds of native English-speakers were recruited to teach subjects of English, Mathematics and Science to students of Grade 1 through Grade 3, while Arabic-speakers would teach the subjects of Arabic, Islamic Studies and Social Studies (Ahmed, 2010). The programme is currently in its seventh year of operation but only in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.

Both these programmes represent a significant investment towards modernisation in schools and the provision of teaching approaches and resources that can enhance not just the acquisition of English but also education in general. However, to date there have not been any systematic evaluations of these programmes at the federal level and the Emirati students attending public schools continue to struggle with English language examinations. Small-scale studies (see Layman, 2011) show that the benefits of these bilingual immersion programmes have been limited in the few years of their operation.

6.7 Perceptions towards bilingualism in the UAE

On a linguistic spectrum, the case of the UAE remains a unique one as observed by Moore-Jones (2015), who alluded to the interesting dichotomy between the professed linguistic identity of the country and the demographic reality that imposes a different linguistic dependency on and increases the demand for the use of English as a second language. It is often unclear whether the status of English in the UAE is one of an official second language or that of a foreign language whose learners could easily do without. In a 2008 poll published online by *ArabianBusiness.com* asking whether English should be adopted as an official language in the Gulf, an overwhelming 93% of the 1,021 respondents stated that English does have some place in the Gulf, while two-thirds felt it should be adopted as an official language (Bowman, 2008).

The poll results are consistent with the results of a recent study conducted by O’Neill (2014) wherein 712 Emirati students at a federal university were asked, among other questions, to state their preference for a study language. The respondents were divided into sub-groups of those who came from an “Arabic-Medium” Public School (AMPuS) background, and those who have studied at “English-Medium” Private Schools (EMPrS). Although the majority of students (60.22%) stated a preference of

being taught in both English and Arabic, an interesting sub-group figure shows that 68.65% of AMPuS preferred to be taught in both languages over 41.09% of EMPrs. That is, students who had been educated in the “Arabic-medium” public schools showed an overwhelming preference to be taught in both languages instead of just Arabic. While there were no EMPrs who chose to study ‘Only in Arabic’, 0.33% of AMPuS expressed interest in studying ‘Only in Arabic’, which is a starkly lower percentage in comparison to the 2.64% of AMPuS who wanted to study ‘Only in English’. Likewise, the percentage of students who chose ‘Mostly in English’ was higher in comparison to those who opted for ‘Mostly in Arabic’ (O’Neill, 2014). In an earlier study conducted in 2006, Findlow (2006) analysed 340 surveys of students from across the three federal higher education institutions in the UAE. The study reports similar attitudes towards learning in Arabic and English, where only 22% of students stated they preferred to be taught in Arabic, while 50% chose English, and a further 28% indicated their preference to be taught in both languages.

Despite the evident preference of Emirati students towards learning in English, the national policy towards ELT has shifted from being receptive and welcoming to being cautious and often accusatory. This shift may be attributed to the constantly changing political landscape in the Arab world, which seems to directly impact policies in education. The significant rise in the number of Emirati students enrolling in private schools has curiously corresponded with growing sentiments that Arabic and national identity are at risk of being diluted by English, as English now seems to represent more than just a language that offers access to the global market. Pennycook (1994) examined the existence of a tension between two exogenous groups, which he referred to as the ‘Orientalists’, who celebrated the culture and languages of the natives while resisting local or ‘Anglicist’ demands for more English, because the former group viewed that access to the elitist English-speaking world would breed discontent and political disorder in the ‘colonies’. By extension, this view seems to be held by the political elite – native orientalist – who are attempting to limit access to English because of its perceived political overtones.

6.8 Political forces shaping UAE educational policies

The political influence on educational policy and reform in the Gulf has had its precedent in 1938, when around 400 prominent merchants tried to reverse their economic decline following the collapse of the pearling industry by imposing reforms on the ruler (Davidson, 2008). The most significant reform to have come out of this wave of political disorder was the injection of government funds to support the education system and contribute to the re-opening of Dubai’s schools, many of which had to close down following the collapse of the pearling industry (Davidson, 2008). Despite its short-lived success, it could be argued that the said incident may have informed future government responses to political unrest, wherein education would

become the first sector to be impacted, both negatively and positively, as a result of the need to restructure society.

In the Arabian Gulf, however, political repression was used in conjunction with social reform. A better case to illustrate the impact of the political environment on education is the post-9/11 pressure under which many Arab countries, particularly in the Gulf, had come to address the issue of public schools that were blamed for cultivating a violent worldview that may have motivated the terrorist attacks (Chughtai, 2004). Suhail Karmani, an ELT professional and founder of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Islamia, stated that:

After 9/11, there emerged a troubling view that teaching Arabic and Islam encouraged militant tendencies, whereas English was seen as promoting the values of freedom, tolerance, and democracy. Some Muslims will naturally feel that there is a conspiracy to destroy Arabic because of its obvious proximity to Islam. (Chughtai, 2004; *Al Jazeera*; Karmani, 2005)

Karmani was right in his predictions, as English was met with increased hostility following the Arab Spring.

6.9 English language teaching in the Arab Spring

A recent surge in scepticism towards ELT, which has been blamed for usurping the position of Arabic as the official language in the UAE, has incidentally coincided with the changing political climate in the region. Although a scattered number of scholars had alerted to the regression of Arabic in the early years of the turn of the millennium (*Al Jazeera*, 2004; Al Bahill, 2007), the collective lamenting of the ailing state of Arabic has witnessed a strong recurrence in the UAE media in the recent years, particularly in the years following the Arab Spring which started in 2010. Headlines were worded in a way to explicitly incriminate English, or implicitly hint to an existing form of cultural imperialism that threatens to erode Arabic: “English proficiency comes at a cost,” (Naidoo, *Gulf News*, 2011); “English language threatens Arabic,” (Al Lawati, *Gulf News*, 2011); “Lessons in English in UAE schools ‘violation of constitution’, FNC told,” (Issa, *The National*, 2013); “English language ‘seducing’ UAE pupils” (Pennington, 2015b; *The National*, 2014).

The topic of ELT took centre-stage in the UAE Federal National Council (FNC) agendas and discussions, as well as the recommendations made to the government. The help of the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowment was enlisted in campaigning to preserve the Arabic language. Friday sermons appealed to the public by glorifying Arabic and linking its preservation to piety: “Preserve Arabic to achieve piety,” (Dajani, *The National*, 2013); “Arabic is the language of the Quran,” (Dajani, *The National*, 2014). Reports on the onslaught faced by Arabic due to the ‘infiltration’ of English has been lengthily reported and discussed in the print media, as well as

the hashtag social media that chose to bring English to the forefront as one of the important reasons contributing to the potential loss of national identity and culture. An alarm-inducing report was recently published in the *The National* warning that Arabic is now at risk of becoming a second language in the UAE (Pennington, 2015b). The report quotes Dr. Muhamed Al Khalil, Director of Arabic Studies at New York University in Abu Dhabi, cautioning that by being taught in English, students essentially learn to internalise and subsequently reproduce acquired knowledge in its language of instruction, which will ultimately reduce Arabic to a foreign language (ibid.). The same idea was advocated by Anwaruddin (2011) in his article questioning what he perceives to be a hidden agenda in teaching English as a second language, whereby he states that “second language learners develop an empathy and fondness for the culture of the people who speak their target language (English) and that English teaching methods encourage learners to think like the native speakers” (p. 53), thus, hinting to the impending and eventual loss of culture and identity. The intertwined relationship between language and culture, and the embedded ‘cultural imperialism’ that transpires through language learning have been discussed at length in the works of Canagarajah (1999) and Phillipson, the latter of whom observes that this relationship “dates from a time when language teaching was indistinguishable from culture teaching, and when all learners of English were assumed to be familiarising themselves with the culture that English originates from and for contact with that culture” (Phillipson, 1992: 195).

The hostility with which English has come to be viewed in the post-Arab Spring days is not unique to the UAE. McBeath (2013) remarks that the post-Arab Spring environment in neighbouring Oman has been characterised by a subtle form of defiance against symbols of cultural imperialism, namely the university’s English Language Centre that witnessed an unprecedented increase in absenteeism during the tumultuous political period following the Arab Spring. Canagarajah (1999) had theorised this phenomenon in stating that it is not possible, in fact, to isolate the classroom from the society, because the classroom is a nucleus, representative sample of the larger society. The swelling discontent with the perceived cultural imperialism and its linguistic extension in the post-Arab Spring period culminated in the introduction of a mandatory Emirati Studies course, taught in Arabic, to all students of public and private higher education institutions (*The National*, 2012).

6.10 Conclusion

The history and current status of English Language Teaching in the UAE conflates exogenous and endogenous factors that continue to shape language policy in the country. The economic forces of globalisation have hastened the evolution of the relatively young country, positioning it as a major commercial hub in an otherwise chaotic region. In order to sustain its economic growth, the UAE leadership has

focused on empowering nationals through providing them with tools of bilingualism by which to access global and regional markets. On the other hand, no language is ever skimmed of its cultural and political associations, and in the case of English, its not too distant link to its colonial patrons has lingered in the minds of periphery communities.

The contested status of English in the UAE today is due to its complex ability—perceived or real—to alter the cognitive environment and behaviour of its speakers, who are constantly reminded that in speaking a language other than their native tongue, they are contributing to the loss of their national identity. Navigating the linguistic minefield of political identity has hampered the ability of decision-makers to adopt a consistent policy towards language learning, such that a quantifiable linguistic dualism has not been functionally and effectively achieved on a national level. It is not always possible to predict the direction to which language policy is geared in the country due to the constantly changing political environment in the region that continues to impact educational policies meant to cultivate a specific type of ‘good citizenship’.

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