

Review research paper

## A SURVEY OF EMI AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL IN THE ARAB GULF: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

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**Abstract.** *While an abundance of fossil fuels has helped Gulf Arab countries develop rapidly over the past several decades, governments in the region have invested heavily in education, science, and technology relatively recently as a means to diversify their economies in order to ensure their continued growth. In the process, English, as the perceived language of science and technology, has been adopted as the medium of instruction (EMI) in most tertiary institutions. This paper describes how EMI has developed in these countries and the achievements and challenges to date. Recommendations to address these challenges are also given.*

**Key words:** *English medium instruction (EMI), science and technology, education, Gulf Arab countries, university, K-12*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Gulf Arab countries have developed rapidly over the past several decades thanks, in part, to an abundance of fossil fuels. While fossil fuels have helped the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Kuwait create three of the 10 largest sovereign-wealth funds in the world (Zaher 2020), for example, they, along with other Arab Gulf countries (Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar) have tried, relatively recently, to diversify their economies by focusing on education as a driving force. In the process, a majority of educational institutions throughout the Gulf have adopted English as the medium of instruction (EMI). We describe the development of EMI in these countries, examine how COVID-19 has affected EMI in the region, describe the challenges that have been encountered, and make recommendations to address these challenges.

### 2. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE POPULARITY OF EMI IN THE GULF

There are a number of reasons why EMI has become so widespread in the Gulf. On a practical level, given the tremendous linguistic and ethnic diversity found in the Gulf, English has come to serve as a unifying force where individuals from almost every

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Submitted December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022, accepted for publication February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023

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country in the world are able to communicate with each other. On a strategic level, these countries have embraced science and technology in their efforts to diversify their economies and governments have adopted EMI because English is perceived as the language of science. English is also given prominence in primary and secondary public school systems to help prepare students for EMI at the tertiary level (Mouhanna 2016). Over the years, there has been an exponential increase in the number of national and international colleges in the region where English is the medium of instruction. For instance, there are over 100 of these institutions in the UAE, approximately 100 in the Saudi Arabia, and 14 in Kuwait. There are also a number of foreign universities with campuses in the Gulf. The medium of instruction in almost all of these higher education institutions is English. In cases where a university has adopted Arabic as the medium of instruction (AMI) instead of English (as in the case of Qatar University), there are compulsory and elective courses aimed at advancing students' English proficiency levels.

There are a variety of reasons why EMI at the tertiary level has become popular globally. Key reason is that universities seek to internationalize in order to attract foreign students and increase revenues (Coleman 2006; Macaro et al. 2018). While this is a factor in the Gulf, there are other reasons why this is occurring in the region. First, governments across the Gulf have adopted policies promoting the employment of their local citizens in both the government and private sectors. In the UAE, for example, Emiratization has increased the importance of English for employment purposes. The same is true in other Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia where Saudization (officially known as Saudi nationalization scheme) is mandating a shift toward the hiring of more nationals in areas traditionally dominated by foreign workers. Higher education institutions, therefore, are making greater investments in EMI in order to enhance not only students' subject matter content knowledge, but also language and communication skills. Second, EMI is believed to help move students away from the more traditional rote-learning methodology used in AMI by providing students with the skills required to live and work more successfully in a world dominated by English (Mouhanna 2016). Indeed, the employability of graduates is central to the adoption of EMI. For example, it was found that the vast majority of Indian and Chinese graduates were unsuitable for employment in multinational companies as recent as 2005 because of weak spoken English skills (Graddol 2006). Finally, and no less importantly, many universities in the region aspire to become more visible globally by increasing their rankings. This, in most cases, requires a significant increase in publications. Because English is considered the language of research, universities strive to hire more faculty who can publish their research in high-impact international journals (Galloway 2017), all the while helping their students build their content knowledge and develop their English language skills. We briefly describe in the next section some of the factors driving institutions in the region to adopt different pedagogical approaches to EMI.

### 3. PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES TO EMI

Belhiah and Elhami (2015) describe two main pedagogical perspectives that inform the implementation of EMI. The first one is communicative language teaching (CTL), which argues that the best way to learn English is by having learners interact with others as often as possible. It is important that communication and interaction take place in

meaningful contexts so that language acquisition is supported. In the context of the Gulf, EMI gives students the opportunity to use English in a variety of communicative settings, from educational interactions with faculty, peers, administrators, and service providers to daily life interactions in shops and entertainment venues. It is, however, important to note the cultural factors play a role in the successful implementation of CTL; not all cultures in the Gulf, for example, allow for assertive, student-centered (Dunnette 2015) and open interaction between genders or disparate ethnic communities, which may limit the extent to which individuals are able to benefit from CTL.

The second approach is content and language integrated learning (CTIL), which is widely used at the primary and secondary level and becoming more common at the tertiary level. CTIL stipulates that courses be run in English with the goal of mastery in the content area together with teaching English language skills. Described by Dearden and Macaro (2016, 456) as “an umbrella term for academic subjects taught through English,” EMI is argued to embrace CTIL due to its incorporation of both content and language learning (Brown and Bradford 2017). Coyle, Holmes, and King (2009) identify four dimensions of CTIL that benefit both teachers and students:

1. Content: Integrating content from across the curriculum through high quality language interaction.
2. Cognition: Engaging learners through creativity, higher order thinking, and knowledge processing.
3. Communication: Using language to learn and mediate ideas, thoughts, and values.
4. Culture: Interpreting and understanding the significance of content and language and their contribution to identity and citizenship.

CTIL often requires collaboration between content and language instructors. This was the case at a science and technology university in Abu Dhabi where Wyatt et al. (2021) found that science and math instructors that teach first-year students reported that their collaboration with English faculty helped them more effectively meet the linguistic needs of students. These findings built on an earlier study (Wyatt et al. 2018) at the same university in which science and math instructors worked closely with English instructors for a semester to deliver lessons involving reading to freshman students in order to help them overcome linguistic barriers. Evidence suggests that such collaboration yielded more engaged and successful students in these courses. Both of these studies demonstrate what Williams, Beachboard, & Bohnin (2016) assert, namely, that content instructors often share the responsibility to develop students' English language proficiency in addition to their primary task of developing their students' discipline-specific skills and knowledge. One area in which there has been much discussion concerns ‘which English’ to adopt in the Gulf. Dorsey (2018) notes that due to their early arrival in the UAE, for example, the British played a significant role in making British English widely accepted. The presence of the British Council and its role in language teaching, as well as language testing via IELTS, also contributed to the status of British English in the region. However, Dorsey (2018) also highlights that the number of British expatriates living in the Gulf is significantly lower than a number of other expatriate communities. Indians, for example, make up approximately 50% of the population of the UAE and their presence has impacted the use of English across the country. The increased number of US-affiliated firms in the Emirates has also ensured that the influence of American English is widely felt. One indication of this influence is the decision by the Abu Dhabi

Education Council (ADEC) in 2014 to adopt American English as the standard for English instruction in the public schools (ADEC 2015 in Dorsey 2018).

It is also not uncommon to see US-educated faculty at universities. The profile of faculty across the Gulf, however, suggests that there is a significant mixture of English accents, which may be a challenge for some students. In a study investigating students' perceptions about English accents in Oman, Buckingham (2014), for example, found that students were more at ease with speakers from the UK and native speakers of Arabic. Interestingly, Buckingham (2014) notes that instructors from Anglophone countries constitute a minority of the faculty in university English departments. Our own anecdotal experiences also suggest that students in the UAE prefer to listen to instructors with either a native English accent or an Arabic accent with which they are more familiar.

#### 4. ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

While EMI in the Gulf has received more attention recently, the literature on EMI in the region is still relatively limited. A survey of EMI achievements and challenges in each Gulf country follows.

##### 4.1. United Arab Emirates

Research in the UAE broadly points to positive effects of CLIL-based EMI on students' academic performance. For example, Younes (2016) found that students' overall linguistic proficiency in English improved *pari passu* with content learning. Their written assignments also revealed enhanced lexical dexterity, but concern was noted about students' limited understanding of Arabic, a theme that runs through much of the research on EMI in the Gulf. Belhiah and Elhami (2015) likewise discovered that the CLIL-based EMI approach improved students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English. However, the improvement was not enough for them to satisfactorily develop their knowledge of the subject.

Interestingly, Mouhanna (2016) found that faculty favored EMI due to its contribution to the internalization of higher education in the country, as well as the utilitarian function English has as a *lingua franca*. At the same time, however, he reports that students' limited language proficiency and inability to effectively engage with the curriculum negatively impacted faculty's academic practices. Indeed, faculty felt obliged to modify their pedagogical practices to cater to the needs of the students and often adapted course content as a result. Aspects of these findings are echoed by Ayish (2020), who found that most students at an engineering university in Abu Dhabi believe they will benefit professionally by developing their English language skills. However, they also feel ambivalent toward studying engineering in English because doing so makes their learning that much more difficult.

##### 4.2. Qatar

In 2002, Qatar instituted EMI in K-12 as part of an educational reform movement. In 2012, however, Arabic was reinstated as the language of instruction in K-12 schools and in social sciences courses at Qatar University because only about 20% of the students were able to meet learning outcomes in math, science, and Arabic during this period.

Mustafawi and Shaaban (2019) found that the negative attitude of stakeholders, the limited English proficiency of many teachers, a lack of preparedness for EMI instruction, and the manner in which reforms were introduced played a role in the unsuccessful implementation of EMI. They suggested that adopting a bilingual system “accord[ing] Arabic the high status it deserves as a mother tongue and [that] gives English a major role in domains that will help Qataris fully participate in the modern world and join a knowledge-rich globalized workforce” is necessary to address the challenge of incorporating EMI at the university level (Mustafawi & Shaaban, 2019, p. 232).

#### **4.3. Saudi Arabia**

The language of instruction in Saudi public schools is Arabic, but English is taught as a subject to students beginning in grade 4 (Zumor 2017). Currently, however, a majority of students entering university lack adequate proficiency in English (Al-Nasser, 2015), while a compulsory one-year intensive English study is often not enough to ensure academic success. Not surprisingly, Al Zumor (2019) found that students’ learning of scientific content was affected negatively. Students also revealed that they suffered from stress, anxiety, fear, and embarrassment because they were required to learn through English. As a result, their academic performance decreased. Al Zumor (2019, 74) argues that “EMI deprives the students of their basic rights to effective understanding, communication, interaction, discussion and inquiry”, and recommends “ensuring quality English education in the foundation year and examining the option of “additive bilingual education.” Shamim et al. (2016) say Saudi universities should provide institutional support including a simplified curricular content; however, this, they note, limits the amount of learning taking place during a particularly important stage of university education. The authors contend that the lack of a clear language policy in the country allows the “creeping in” of EMI “through the back door with all its ensuing challenges and adverse effects on students’ learning (44).” They call for an urgent language policy with a clearly stated implementation plan.

#### **4.4. Bahrain**

In 2008, Bahrain instituted the Education Reform Project to compel educational institutions to implement advanced technology in order to deliver up-to-date knowledge to students. Instruction was to be given in English. In the same year, Bahrain Teachers College was established to train educators to meet the new requirements and prepare teachers to provide students with advanced skills in English. To achieve this objective, the Educational Leadership Programme was created and adopted EMI to train school leaders and postgraduates. A study investigating students’ perceptions in this programme showed that the participants had an overall positive attitude towards EMI (Al-Wadi 2018); however, they felt they were not fully prepared to take their courses in English. They also felt restrained from engaging in conversations that required them to express their opinions on issues. In addition, students who were administrators in public schools, indicated their EMI experience did not contribute to their ability to fulfil job requirements because Arabic was used in the workplace. They preferred, therefore, to pursue their education in Arabic.

#### 4.5. Oman

English is given political, economic, social, and legislative support in Oman because it is considered a “resource for national development and as a means for wider communication within the international community” (Ministry of Education 1987, as cited in Al-Bakri, 2013, 56).

While Al-Bakri (2013) found that many Omani college students gravitated toward English for pragmatic reasons (e.g., securing better job opportunities), very few students reported that EMI improved their language skills or increased their confidence in their language ability. Indeed, many lacked the requisite linguistic skills to study their subjects effectively, and it was difficult for them to participate in classroom discussions. In addition, students found the university’s new EMI assessments particularly challenging because they were accustomed to rote memorization and simple recall of facts on written exams. As a stopgap, some students indicated that additional support from a language school would help them solve their problems.

More recently, Al-Bakri (2017) investigated students’ development of writing skills in English at an EMI college. He found that the EMI policy adopted at the university often lowered the expectations pertaining to writing skills; the students were only asked to collate information from different sources without careful integration of information to support an argument or critically evaluate the information gathered. In addition, students were not required to produce lengthy term papers, which is typically an important task assigned to university students. These lowered expectations negatively impacted the development of students’ writing skills.

According to Mohammed (2019), the lack of success attained in EMI at the tertiary level can partly be attributed to the K-12 system in the country. It was found that the teachers’ exam-oriented approach to teaching and concern with following a rigid syllabus caused them to rely more on summative assessment rather than formative assessment, which contributed to a disconnect between EMI policy and effective language development.

#### 4.6. Kuwait

Like other diglossic Gulf countries, Kuwait has witnessed English rise in prominence as a lingua franca used in business, daily communication, and schools. However, while a policy to promote the use of EMI in public universities has been in place since the early 1990s, Kuwait has been relatively slow to institute educational reforms that would bring about widespread use of EMI. For example, most public schools use Arabic as the medium of instruction and still teach English as a foreign language for only several 45-minute periods per week (Alazemi 2020). Consequently, students entering tertiary education are ill-prepared to transition to an EMI environment. Part of the challenge, according to Alsafran et al. (2020), is that parents value the idea of their children learning in English, but they perceive EMI as a pre-cursor to cultural, religious, and identity loss. Nonetheless, there has been growing pressure to adopt EMI in government schools, mostly coming from an increase in the number of EMI private schools and universities across the country (Alsafran et al. 2020). Such institutions are perceived as offering a better quality education that is more aligned with the needs of the world economy than what is available in government schools.

## 5. IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON EMI IN THE GULF

The rapid shift from face-to-face classroom instruction to remote learning (synchronous and asynchronous) during the pandemic affected EMI students and higher education institutions in a number of ways. Some issues that emerged and that were compounded for EMI students in particular due to language and communication challenges include: inequality and inaccessibility to adequate devices and Wi-Fi; inadequacy in content coverage in certain fields including STEM and medicine where hands-on learning and laboratories are essential; lack of quality communication as teacher-student and student-student relationships are difficult to build and sustain online; technical difficulties; issues with instructors' and students' technological literacy; reduction in student engagement; a dependence on recorded lessons; and challenges redesigning content and student performance assessment (Abu Talib et al. 2021).

However, the immediate move to remote learning has presented EMI educators and institutions an opportunity to learn from the challenges and take advantage of the benefits to transform EMI learning. Abu Talib et al. reported that remote learning exposed students and teachers to current and relevant technologies, thus, increasing flexibility for students and faculty, the use of modern communication techniques, and the speed of curriculum reform including updating instructional approaches (2021). Additionally, moving to an online learning format may contribute to students' development of lifelong learning skills. Deveci (2021) explored the effect of the pandemic on first-year undergraduate students' lifelong learning skills at an EMI university in the UAE. The findings showed that their overall lifelong learning scores increased significantly, indicating that students were able to enhance their learning strategies and plans during the pandemic.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Implementing EMI in the Gulf has been fraught with challenges. While results have been mixed, several lessons can be drawn from the way countries in the Gulf have instituted EMI. First, it is essential to design context-sensitive EMI curricula by creating engaging material that sufficiently explores content while integrating support for language acquisition and academic literacy. For example, encouraging close collaboration between language and content specialists is necessary in order to develop programs that more effectively address content and language goals (Williams et al. 2016). Second, it is important to recognize the impact that COVID-19 has had on students generally and those attending EMI institutions in particular in order to create a more robust technical infrastructure and training support. For example, it is helpful to consider how a more learner-centered and technology-enhanced blended learning experience can benefit students in EMI settings. Third, aligning policies and practices in the K-12 system can go a long way in helping EMI students at the tertiary level succeed academically. Implementing EMI in the Gulf will likely be that much more successful if these lessons are considered.

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