University of Leicester

A Conflict of Desires: English as a Global Language and its Effects on Cultural Identity in the United Arab Emirates

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1) Introduction

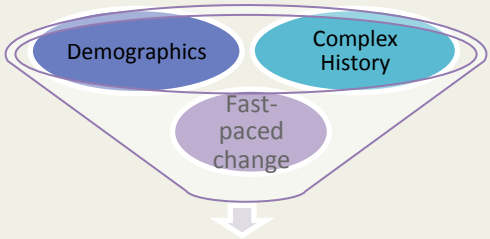
One only has to open one of the many Gulf newspapers to see a consistent theme running through the headlines with regard to English. It is clear to see from media and public discourse that the relationship between local cultural identity and global English is far from harmonious.

GULF NEWS	'Cultural Identity in danger in the GCC'	(January 12th 2014)
Khaleej Times	'Call to protect the Arabic language'	(December 18th 2013)
Saudi Gazette	'Teach us English but without its cultural values'	(January 29th 2013)

2) Background

The UAE's complex history with English-speaking nations, its extremely high expatriate population (90%), its youthfulness as a country and the fact that it is a nation undergoing rapid, fast-paced change added to the Intense focus on English in education and everyday life make cultural identity particularly relevant in the region

Global English +



Cultural Fragility in the UAE

3) Pilot Study

Research Questions

1) What do the languages Arabic and English represent to Emiratis?
2) How has learning English affected cultural identity in the UAE?

Approach and design

An **exploratory multiple case study design** using multiple methods of **qualitative data collection:**

- Open-response questionnaire
- Focus group

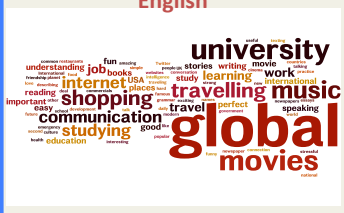
Participants

40 female Emirati university students, aged 18-24, studying in the Academic Bridge Program (an intense English program) at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi.

4) Findings

Q1. What do the languages English and Arabic represent to Emiratis?

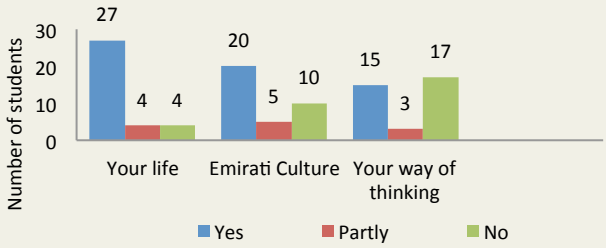
English



Arabic

Q2. How does English as a global language effect Emirati cultural identity?

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



A lot of teenagers, you can see them on Twitter, they speak only English. They feel embarrassed or ashamed of Arabic. They change their name. He's Mohamed, but he says, 'Hi, I'm Joey'.

Locals don't speak Arabic nowadays, they feel proud of their English.

English has a huge impact on our culture, both positive and negative.

5) Conclusion

- English and Arabic represent very different worlds. English represents the wider world, the future, education. Arabic represents culture, tradition, religion and the past. **Perceptions of the languages need to change, if Arabic is to be seen as important in the future.**
- Global English has had a **significant impact on Emirati university students' lives, Emirati culture,** and to a lesser extent, **identities.**
- English brings **opportunities, confidence, and the opportunity to communicate** with the wider world. However, there are concerns about the amount of English in the UAE, both in daily life and education which is seen to **marginalize Arabic, local culture and identity.** In this sense, **a conflict of desires** is very much present.