“Most of the Teaching is in Arabic Anyway”, English as a Medium of Instruction in Saudi Arabia, Between De Facto and Official Language Policy

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ABSTRACT

There has been much debate about the issue of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) and the place of English in the context of international education in general and in the Arabian/Persian Gulf region in particular. This study explores the use of EMI in an undergraduate engineering programme in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Using a qualitative approach to data collection by means of open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, this study explores the views of Arab expatriate teachers of scientific subjects, Saudi engineering students and preparatory year EFL non-Arab expatriate teachers on the use of EMI in their institution. The study sheds light on a certain gap in terms of actual classroom practices, between EMI as an official language policy and Arabic as de facto medium of instruction. Furthermore, the findings of the study suggest that the implementation of EMI may pose several challenges to both teachers and students.

KEYWORDS

Arabic, EFL, English As A Medium Of Instruction (EMI), Globalisation. Language Policy, Saudi Arabia

INTRODUCTION

It would be hard to dispute the tremendous impact of English in the world and its political, cultural and technological implications. In the fields of trade, technology and scientific research for instance, English has become a global “currency” (Graddol, 1997, 2006) and mastery of the English language is so vital in the academic and business arenas that it is “sought as a talisman of success and an entry ticket to the good life” (Holly, 1990, p. 16). It is also interesting to note that there seems to be a firmly rooted unquestioned assumption amongst many academics and students that it is somehow ‘natural’ to study in the medium of English. However, although there is much debate around this issue, research tends to show that the implementation of EMI can be problematic in terms of local language and values (Abu Zayd, 2000; Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2001; Troudi 2007, 2009) and students’ achievements (Marsh 2006; Brock-Utne, 2007; Al-Bakri, 2013), especially if such a language policy is implemented without considering the numerous implications for all educational stakeholders involved in the change of the language of instruction. In Saudi Arabia, which is the focus of this paper, and other neighbouring Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates, the use of
Arabic is being significantly reduced and affected (Troudi 2007, 2009; Raddawi & Meslem, 2015; Troudi & Hafedh, 2017). With this in mind, this study, conducted in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), empirically examined and shed light on EMI as a language policy in practice as perceived by a group of local practitioners and students.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Like in all other Gulf countries, universities in Saudi Arabia have adopted EMI for scientific subjects (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017) so the use of English is no longer limited to a discrete subject studied at school or university but is gradually taking a greater role within the education system. As a result, curriculum content, assessment and instruction are officially in the medium of English. Nonetheless, although English is widely spoken within the country, it has not reached the status of a second language and remains a foreign language for all Saudi students for whom the first and official language is Arabic and the language of instruction in state schools. It is also important to highlight that Saudi university students are all Arabic speakers, thus forming a rather homogeneous monolingual speech community. At the university where the study was conducted, the medium of instruction is English; however, no official curriculum seems to be in place and each department adopts a syllabus-based approach. Therefore, it has not been possible to put the official curriculum under scrutiny. As far as the teaching faculty are concerned, a wide majority of them are Arab expatriates mainly from Egypt, Jordan, Sudan and the Maghreb. Saudi nationals represent a minority of teachers but occupy all managerial and administrative positions. The university also recruits Western expatriates mainly for teaching the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) preparatory year courses.

EMI is being officially and gradually implemented across the country’s universities and appears to be posing a number of challenges including the recruitment of a qualified, proficient work force; it is also a source of concern in terms of students’ academic achievements and cultural identity. It is worth adding that EMI is, as described by Macaro (2015, p. 4), “a growing global phenomenon taking place primarily in tertiary education. It is also already being established as a potential engine of change in the secondary sector and it is not escaping the attention of those concerned with the primary section.” This description already applies to the situation in some Gulf countries where the secondary and primary private sectors are increasingly shifting to EMI. There has also been a recent shift to EMI in the public sector at primary and secondary levels in the UAE (Sanassian, 2011). A recent British Council survey of fifty-five countries confirmed this global phenomenon, with some countries such as Uzbekistan shifting to EMI (Dearden, 2014). Saudi Arabia is therefore following a global and, seemingly, irresistible and unavoidable educational trend.

ENGLISHIZATION OF EDUCATION

EMI relates to the continuing Englishization of education –often referred to as internationalisation– of non-English medium educational institutions (Kirkpatrick 2014; Le Ha & Barnawi, 2015). With respect to the Gulf countries in general and the KSA in particular, the push for more English in education is seen by policy-makers as enhancing “their political and economic connection to the rest of the world” (Le Ha & Barnawi, 2015, p. 546). This, of course, also relates to the central role played by English in the process of globalisation in the education arena as the teaching of English as a foreign language is deeply intertwined with this phenomenon by being not only the result of this process, but also an active facilitator (Loubser, 2016). Therefore, English and its place in the shift in the actual language policy of the country seem intimately linked to economic, financial as well as ideological considerations and driven by the ever-growing global economic forces. Nonetheless, as discussed later in this paper, even from a mere pragmatic perspective, the strategies adopted by most Gulf countries in terms of language education policy (LEP) are rather ineffective, because they do not realistically prepare students with the ability to work efficiently in their professional
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