

**USING ENGLISH AS A MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION AT  
THE UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL IN SAUDI ARABIA:  
ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS**

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**Abstract**

*English is a global language and is used in educational institutions of English and non-English speaking countries. Its quality and its effect as a foreign language instruction at the undergraduate level in Saudi Arabia is a kind of challenge for the students as well as for the teachers. It is a fact that English is an internationally intelligible language and is used as a lingua franca in Gulf countries where Expat teachers and the students have different L1 (native language) and use English to communicate with each other. Taking EFL undergraduate students into consideration, English is the language which helps them to convey their message to the instructor and vice versa particularly in an atmosphere where Instructor is not Arabic. English is a common means of communication. Majority shows interest in learning English in order to communicate on an international, professional level. The basic function of English is communication. Speaking English allows one to opt for foreign universities, and an opportunity to work abroad where English is spoken. This piece of work focuses on the use of English as a medium of instruction in the English classes of undergraduate EFL students of Saudi Arabia, the communication problem faced by both teachers and the students. The paper also discusses the perceptions or points of view from both teachers and students towards giving preferences for using English or Arabic or both and their frustrations and positive responses in using English as a Medium of Instruction. The data was collected from 50 participants where 30 were students and 20 were teachers. Undergraduate students and their English teachers responded to a questionnaire which was administered to know their perceptions about using English as a Medium of Instruction and the effect of the Arabic on their English. The paper finally discusses some solutions according to the data perceived from teachers and students for using English as a Medium of Instruction and also gives some recommendations which will improve their English learning skill at the early stage.*

**Key Words:** English, medium, instructions, global language, usage, issues, solutions.

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## **Introduction**

It is a fact that English is an internationally intelligible language and is a lingua franca especially in Gulf countries where expats can't speak Arabic. It is the most influential language which helps one to convey his/her message to the instructor and vice versa particularly in an atmosphere where Instructor is not Arabic but a foreigner. Everyone needs to learn the language in order to get in touch on an international level. This language helps one to communicate with nearly all the people around the world. This is the language which is used everywhere whether Internet, websites, offices, newspapers, books and magazines, etc. It is the language of media. Wherever we are in any part of the world; English helps us in every way of life. It is the language of the world and performs a function of communication globally.

## **Function of English**

The basic function of English is communication. Speaking English allows one to continue studies in good universities of the world and an opportunity to work abroad where English is spoken. Education is important to improve your knowledge in any field but learning English improves the quality of life. You can live in many English speaking countries when you can speak English. What is important to know is that the English language is able to break the barriers, including cultural ones. Once we know the habits and customs of other countries, it allows us to understand ourselves and others. The English language allows us to know the people of other countries. We come to know about the similarities and differences across different people and different cultures via language. Crystal D. (2002: 7-10) claims that "Why a language becomes a global language has little to do with the number of people who speak it". English helps people to express different meanings. That is happening because English language not only has a lot of words with different meanings but also has different syntactic patterns which help the speakers to be more accurate in their expressions.

Any kind of information in the world, scholarly discussions, presentations, workshops, various fields of art, and technology are mostly presented in English. It has become a part of our daily life, no matter in which country we live, we are in it because of its global nature. Nowadays countries are getting more and more multicultural. Sometimes understanding and acceptance – as well as peace – between people, only depends on communication, which is almost impossible without a common language.

Coleman's (1966) reasons like, 'Because I like the language', 'To travel in different countries', 'To have a better understanding of the way of life in the country or countries where it is spoken', and 'Because I would like to live in the country' where it is spoken'.

In Saudi Arabia, English has a status of a foreign language. There is a lot of prestige attached to it and the majority of students not all, show great willingness to learn it. It has been observed that most of the native Arabic speaking students in Saudi Arabia are very poor when it comes to basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing English. The use of English in classroom activities such as simple conversations amongst students, conversations of students with teachers, writing simple passages, assignments, paragraphs or essays, etc. becomes a challenge for most of them and one can easily find nativized forms or expressions in their language. This paper focuses on the use of English as a medium of instruction in the English classes of EFL undergraduate students of Saudi Arabia and the problems faced by both teachers and the students in using it as Medium of communication among each other. The paper also discusses the comments/points of views from both teachers and students towards giving preferences for using English or Arabic or both in EFL classroom and its effects. The paper finally discusses the issues and solutions for using English as a Medium of Instruction and also suggests some recommendations to overcome the problem of communicating in English.

### **Language and Cultural Identity**

Language has an important function in society in terms of communicating values, faith and traditions. Culture, tradition and values are shared and preserved by language. It is always bound up by a culture in different ways. Language reflects one's cultural identity. Now the point is when to use it and if its use is prohibited or banned that means the rejection of one's culture and identity in a social group.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. Use of English as a medium of Instruction at the undergraduate level of EFL students.
2. Issues in its use for both students and teachers.
3. Strategies used by students and teachers to overcome these issues.

4. Points of views from teachers and students about using English as a medium of Instruction and developing it as a skill.
5. Recommendations to solve the problem of communication and improving language learning skill.

### **Literature Review**

Cook (2001) mentions that Communicative Language Teaching and task-based methods have no necessary relationship with L1, 'yet... the only times the L1 is mentioned is when advice is given on how to minimize its use' (p 1). According to Stern (1983:341), 'The native speaker's 'competence' or 'proficiency' or 'knowledge of the language' is a necessary point of reference for the concept of second language proficiency used in language teaching'. The majority of SLA research has not minimized the role of the first language in second language acquisition, particularly in the 1970s when an influential faction saw transfer merely as a communication strategy, for example, Krashen (1982). Language behaviors are analyzed naturally in response to observable environmental circumstances and the measurable effects which they have on human interactions (Skinner, 1957). According to this view, language is considered as a complex human behaviour. The intricacies of language do not exist in advance or independent of human behaviour; instead the intricacies of language behaviour reflect the person's ability to respond orally to these complex intricacies which are ingrained in human experiences and interactions.

Boughton, et.al (1978) stated that in the foreign language classroom, development of writing skill is not primarily concerned but reinforcement of the teaching of particular structures which means to copy down sentences in order to establish patterns which have been produced by a teacher. While such an activity may have a general teaching purpose, it is distinct in intention from work that aims at teaching students to write effectively in English. Lado (1957) emphasized the significance of the native language, considering it a main cause of lack of success in L2 learning. He then proposed what has been known as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) as a way of explaining the role that L1 plays in L2 learning. According to this hypothesis, L2 learners' productive and receptive skills are influenced by their L1 patterns and that similarities and differences between L1 and L2 are important predictors of ease and difficulty of L2 learning. Arthur et.al (1980) showed that the presence of a non-native speaker alters

the behaviour of native speakers, changing their syntax and the information they provide. Ringborn (1987) points out that the learners use L1 as a tool both for composing and simplifying the complexity of the L2 writing task. The LI acts as a mediator and if some language is present, acquisition of the other language is easy (Chomsky 1969). When learners of second language want to write or speak in the target language, they tend to rely on the knowledge of their first language structures and patterns. If the structures are different then many errors occur in L2 that is interference of L1 on L2 (Deherts & Dllis, as cited in Bhella, 1999, p. 22).

### **Method**

This piece of work is based on the mere observations, interviews with EFL teachers (Foreign and Local) and students. A questionnaire was formed and distributed among the students of different levels starting from level one to level seven. Though, the questionnaire was distributed among teachers as well, to know their views about using English as a medium of instruction, why to use and why not? The place of data was classroom, campus and offices of staff members of King Khalid University and the whole process was done over a period of 8 months. The data was collected from 30 students who were native speakers of Arabic and 20 teachers teaching English to EFL learners. The focus was given to the problems faced and the strategies used by teachers and students and their opinions about using English as a mode of communication. Both speech and text (written part) was under focus throughout the work.

Mentioned below are the questions from the questionnaire administered to teachers and students and their views on the issues regarding this work. The comments or the points of views which were found more relevant to this work were therefore taken into consideration for the analysis.

### **Framework of Analysis**

The questionnaire administered to the students and the teachers is given in Appendix 1 and 2. Following are the points of views given by teachers and students in the questionnaire which was administered. The answers from all the teachers and from all the students for each question have been summed up below. Let us begin with teachers:

**1. Do you think that it really improves students' learning skills if Arabic language is banned in the English class?**

Majority of the teachers' mentioned that it really improves EFL learning because students get more FL (foreign language) exposure to learn. If it is not banned, it discourages students from learning a new language. They produce ungrammatical sentences and teacher corrects their sentences and this way they learn. The students seem trying their best to learn English and use different sources which they will not use if Arabic is used. When a teacher pretends to understand English only, this enables them to speak in English only, no matter whether correct or incorrect sentences. However, few teachers suggested that a little knowledge of Arabic will help the instructor to explain the lesson. They didn't find it preferable to ban completely. They think that students won't respond. They can be motivated to speak in English and this will enable them to develop their learning skill.

**Q2. Do you think that it is better to be bilingual (knowing Arabic as well) in teaching English? Why or why not?**

In response to the above question, it was claimed by some teachers that to some extent, it is good as it can facilitate FL classroom especially when it becomes very difficult for teachers to make students understand. Whereas majority of the teachers believe that it is better to speak in English only, because if we switch to their mother tongue (Arabic), the learners take advantage of it and prefer to use it more. We have enough aids to use in the classroom, and to make them understand. The course is taught in English; the papers are examined in English then why should one be bilingual. The students struggle a lot to communicate their ideas in English when they know that the teacher can't speak their mother tongue (Arabic). It is good to be multilingual but for teaching in English it is not necessary to be bilingual or multilingual.

**Q3. Which problems do you face while teaching English to students?**

The major problem faced by the teachers is the communication problem because of the level of students, poor educational background and lack of motivation to learn the language. For example, the students seem concentrating more on the subject than learning the language as a whole. They have all the time their first language in their mind that is why Arabic words and letters are found in their essays or any piece of work which is difficult for a teacher to understand.

**Q4. What do you do OR can be done to tackle such problem?**

In reply to this question, the responses were like it can be tackled with more exposure to L2 and practice. Students can be motivated by making the classroom interactive and particularly by rewarding them after each presentation or any activity related to language. The measures which can be taken into consideration to solve these issues include exposure to the language in their early classes instead of exposure at the college level. They are so dependent on their mother tongue that they cannot differentiate between the two. The system needs to be changed. By system, we mean English should be introduced at an early stage. We need to tell them that English and Arabic are two different languages and the mixing of two will confuse them as it does. They can take the help of L1 but in a proper way (positive interference). They use dictionaries, translators and write a message which they want to convey to their instructor. This way they improve their vocabulary and they get encouraged if they speak or write in English. The help of a context and the content words is taken to understand their text.

**Q5. Do you have any recommendation about using English as a medium of instruction in English class?**

It is recommended that through different teaching methods and strategies, English can be used as a medium of instruction. More and more exposure should be given to the students towards using L2. The efforts must be taken by the school teachers from preparatory level. They must teach them in English only. Ample time should be given to have discussions in English. They should be encouraged for speaking a single sentence even if it is full of mistakes. Gradually, they will speak correct sentences and will be able to correct their speech. All the teachers (Local and Expats) should use only English as a medium of instruction if we really want them to learn language. Even if the teacher understands Arabic (their mother tongue) to some extent, he/she should pretend that he/she doesn't understand anything in their language. This will enable them to speak in English only.

**Q6. Do you think that exposure to English right from the Preparatory level will help them a lot?**

Their response was that it will definitely help them and improve their level. For example, the students of other countries where English is introduced right from beginning do not face any communication problems. In addition to this, this was also claimed that with time they will develop proficiency in the language. If they can't reach the level of excellence but at least

they can speak and understand the language and fulfill their academic need.

### **Analysis of the above data**

The above data included questions administered to the teachers regarding the use of English as a medium of instruction, difficulties faced by the teachers in communicating to the students focusing EFL classrooms. Their recommendations to tackle such situations. As per data, the teachers are aware of their difficulties and of students' difficulties in using English as a medium of instruction (EMI) and in order to overcome these difficulties, the most possible solutions suggested by the teachers emphasize upon more and more exposure to the English language and that too at the preparatory level, increasing motivation level of students and make them understand the value of English globally.

**Following are the questions administered to the students and the responses given by them.** It is important to mention here that most part of the data was corrected and then used in the paper because the students are very poor in the language.

#### **Q1. What do you think about using English as a medium of instruction?**

In response to the above mentioned question, majority of the students think that it is an excellent way to learn and develop listening and speaking skills. It is an international language and everyone should learn it. According to them, they try their level best to speak to teacher in English and teacher corrects them often when they make mistakes. But by practice, they will be able to overcome their difficulties. They can also go abroad for higher studies if they know the language. Though some students had this perception that they do need English as they can use Arabic everywhere since they are in Saudi Arabia. They don't have plans to go abroad then why to burden themselves with English. They also mentioned that all the subjects should be taught in Arabic. But we are trying to use English because we are left with no choice for our English subject.

#### **Q2. Does it improve your language when you use it?**

All the students replied that it does improve their vocabulary, speaking skills, listening skills and overall language skills. It takes lot of time to put words in to sentences. They do find difficulties in speaking and some of them said that they don't feel comfortable as they are aware of their mistakes, but they still

speak it, because it is their need [they need to use it] and they improve it by practicing daily.

**Q3. What is your motivation for learning the language? Why do you want to learn it?**

In reply to this question, the same answer was received that they learn it in order to go abroad for higher studies or to get a job.

**Q4. Do you prefer to speak both the languages in English class? Why or why not?**

Some of the students stated that it is easy for them to understand the language and helps them in memorizing and understanding the words. They feel comfortable and confident while speaking both the languages. In addition to it, they also mentioned that one has to be very careful in writing, we are so much dependent on Arabic, and we often write some Arabic words in English. On the other hand, some students revealed that they do not appreciate the use of both languages in EFL classroom. According to them, it becomes messy when they mix Arabic with English which results in confusion because they rely on their mother tongue. They prefer to speak only English in EFL classroom, no matter how many mistakes they make but the teacher is there to correct their mistakes and this way they improve.

**Q5. Do you want your English subject to be taught in English or Arabic?**

The answer was both Arabic and English. If a word cannot be found in English, then Arabic can be used. However, some students gave preferences to speaking English only.

**Q6. What are the problems which you face while using English?**

The response by the majority was overall communication problem. Some find difficulty in grammar, some in vocabulary; some are weak in pronunciation while others don't understand the meaning.

**Analysis of the Data**

The analysis of the above data showed that the majority of the students seem to be interested in the language because of its global nature and their need, but they are not being given opportunity to learn this language from the beginning. They prefer to use Arabic as well to understand L2 because they think that they can remember words better if they are taught in Arabic

also. They have this perception because they rely on Arabic and cannot get away from it until and unless they get the full command over English. On the other hand, some students learn it as a subject not as a language and that is the reason they don't have a good command over it. They are interested in getting scores for the subject to get the degree and not for the language itself. There are few things which hinder them from expressing their ideas in English is their shyness, their awareness about the level of the English, their dependency on Arabic and the limited use of English which keeps them limited to its access.

### **Discussion**

Both the students' and teachers' views on the use of English as a medium of instruction within and outside classroom, students' ability in writing and speaking this language, the difficulties faced by students in using EMI (English as a medium of instruction) and how they tackle this problem; and teachers' views upon using EMI, its advantages and disadvantages have been analyzed from the data. Finally, their preferences for English and/or Arabic as medium of instruction and their attitude and motivation were discussed.

The fact is English is very important and is used as a medium of instruction in all English speaking countries, but when it comes to Saudi Arabia, of course students use this language as a medium of instruction but their preferable language is Arabic. They take the help of dictionaries, google translator to convey their message to their teachers. However, it is not the case with every student, there are exceptions as well. Some students speak and write well and no traces of Arabic in their speech or writing can be found.

On the basis of interaction with teachers and students, they both share the view that it drives them crazy when they don't understand each other. When students are not able to communicate properly in English, they immediately switch to their mother tongue and this frustrates teacher and the same thing happens with students when teacher speaks in English and students don't understand it fully. According to teachers' view, most of the students do not take it as seriously as they take other subjects. They want to pass this subject or to get good grades and they don't pay attention to the language itself. This indicates that they are taking English as a subject, not as a language. Because treating it as a subject, they focus on the things like exercises, vocabulary related to the text, etc which are there in a course but how to improve their skill they don't pay attention at all.

In Gulf countries especially in KSA, English is not given that importance; it is used as per need. All the subjects are taught in Arabic in the institutions except the subject English, if taught by Foreigners then it is taught only in English and when taught by Locals, most of the part is taught in Arabic to make them understand better. But after questioning both foreigners and the local teachers, Arabs say that they use Arabic in the English classroom to make things comprehensible to the students. And students also know the fact that the teacher is Arabic speaking so they prefer to speak in Arabic. According to them, students seem more interested when they are taught in Arabic whereas Foreigners say that they try their level best to communicate in English. Whether it is writing or speaking, they take the help of teachers to make their text or speech comprehensible. But the point is that they are left with no option except English and in that case they improve. They further added that they sometimes deliberately behave as if they don't understand anything at all though they can comprehend some words in Arabic or even sentences as well, but they pretend that they didn't get it. The reason behind it is that they don't want to motivate the students to use Arabic. If the student comes to know that teacher can understand Arabic, then he/she takes advantage of using it and when a student knows that the teacher doesn't understand Arabic, then he/she tries best to make her text comprehensible.

Here the question arises for using Arabic or not. However, everyone is proud to use his/her mother tongue in different situations whether formal or informal but in the context of classrooms of Saudi Arabia, it is recommended by teachers that during English class, only English should be used by rule and if possible, no Arabic should be appreciated. Our mother tongue is our identity but to rely on it is not a good idea.

### **Conclusion**

It is concluded that this work found out many issues with both teachers and students in using English as a medium of instruction in classroom. The problem lies with the whole system of education in Saudi Arabia. If the English language is introduced right from the beginning like in other countries, no problem of speaking or understanding it will occur. There will not be a question of losing mother tongue. So, it is suggested "*instead of banning its use (use of Arabic) in the EFL classrooms, English should be introduced at the preparatory level*". More and more they are exposed to the language, they will reach the excellence level and neither students nor teachers will have to struggle using it as a medium of instruction.

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### **Appendix**

**The following questions asked to teachers and their answers are given below:**

- Q1. Do you think that it really improves students learning skills if Arabic language is banned in the English class?
- Q2. Do you think that it is better to be bilingual (knowing Arabic as well) in teaching English? Why or why not.
- Q3. Which problems you face while teaching English to students?
- Q4. Do you prefer to speak both the languages in the English class? Why or why not?
- Q5. Do you have any recommendation about using English as a medium of instruction in English class?
- Q6. Do you think that exposure to English right from the Preparatory level will help them a lot?

**The questions asked to students and their answers are given below:**

- Q1. What do you think about using English as a medium of instruction?
- Q2. Does it improve your language when you use it?
- Q3. What is your motivation for learning the language? Why do you want to learn it?
- Q4. Do you prefer to speak both the languages in the English class? Why or why not?
- Q5. Do you want your English subject to be taught in English or Arabic?
- Q6. What are the problems which you face while using English?