

# Bilingual Communication Dynamics in Saudi Colleges: Non-Arab Speakers' Perceptions

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**Abstract**—This qualitative study examines the language barriers faced by non-Arabic-speaking professionals working in Saudi higher education institutions, where Arabic is the dominant language of the workplace despite English being the medium of instruction. Drawing on thematic analysis of interviews with 15 expatriate employees across various roles, including faculty members, nurses, and researchers, the study explores their perceptions of linguistic exclusion, the challenges of navigating Arabic-dominant communication, and their coping strategies. The findings highlight a strong preference for English as a lingua franca and recommend bilingual workplace policies to enhance inclusivity, well-being, and productivity for linguistic minorities in multilingual institutional contexts.

**Index Terms**—Arabic, communication, English, language barriers, workplace

## I. INTRODUCTION

In multilingual academic settings, such as Saudi colleges, where Arabic is the dominant local language and English is the medium of instruction, navigating bilingual communication is a crucial aspect of daily workplace interactions. English has established itself as a prominent global lingua franca, facilitating communication across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts (Al Tale, 2023; Baker & Ishikawa, 2021; Galloway & Numajiri, 2020; Toomaneejinda & Saengboon, 2022). It enables effective interaction in multilingual settings. Useche et al. (2018) describe the working environment as comprising all systems, conditions, and situations that affect an employee's ability to perform tasks. Similarly, Bushiri (2014) characterizes it as the total interplay of forces, actions, and both current and potential influences that shape workplace performance. Hence, employers and employees work together in the workplace, giving their best to support the institution's growth and advancement. Communication among them is vital for achieving the institution's goals. If it is positive and constructive communication, it will lead to better achievement of goals. If the case is the opposite, the chance for productivity will be less.

In bilingual and multilingual workplaces, people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds interact with one another. During their interactions, linguistic and sociolinguistic miscommunications do occur. Canagarajah (2020) argues that contextual workplace interactions are needed in changing settings and task structures. If the dominant language for the majority group in the workplace is used in workplace conversations where there are minority groups with different native languages, those minorities, who find difficulty in fully comprehending those conversations, will undergo stress, tension, and fear of not following up on the updates given in their workplace. These emotions will affect their well-being. The lack of comprehension will also affect their productivity at work. Wahid et al. (2024) state in their study that the more coworkers can communicate without hesitation, the better the chances of establishing harmony in the workplace.

The present study employs a qualitative approach to examine the challenges faced by non-Arabic-speaking employees in Saudi higher education institutions, where Arabic is the dominant language of workplace communication. It explores their perceptions of Arabic usage in professional settings, their emotional responses to linguistic barriers, the strategies they use to overcome these challenges, and their suggestions for improving comprehension of oral and written communication for non-Arabic speakers within these institutions.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language serves as a core component of both individual and collective identity, influencing how people express emotions, share experiences, and interact with others. As Paris and Alim (2017) argue, the marginalization of an individual's language can amount to the marginalization of their identity, as language, literacy, and culture are inextricably connected. Miscommunication becomes particularly pronounced in multilingual contexts, where interlocutors often struggle to engage in effective two-way communication due to language barriers (Rabbani et al., 2017; Ramlan et al., 2018; Kim & Mattila, 2011).

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These language barriers are frequently encountered by foreign employees who do not comprehend the dominant language in the workplace, which can result in misinterpretations, reduced performance, and work-related stress (Javadpour & Samiei, 2017; Valitherm & Rahman, 2014). In such cases, even everyday tasks, such as attending meetings or understanding memos, can become sources of confusion and tension, particularly when coworkers or managers lack proficiency in a shared *lingua franca*.

In the current era of globalization, described by Elliott and Urry (2010) as "the golden age of mobility," individuals from diverse national, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds often collaborate within the same professional environment. This multilingual reality has prompted scholars to examine how language policies and practices can either support or hinder effective communication (Tikly, 2004; Coleman & Capstick, 2012). According to Tickoo (2006) and Adriano et al. (2021), the presence of multiple languages in the workplace demands thoughtful language planning and policy to avoid miscommunication and marginalization.

A growing body of research explores the experiences of marginalized employees in host countries. For example, Alabi and Šarkiūnaitė (2021) examined how foreign workers struggle to adapt due to linguistic and cultural barriers, while Salleh et al. (2021) found that language differences negatively affect work performance and communication. Gonçalves (2020) further observed that institutional language policies often privilege the dominant language, reinforcing inequality and limiting participation by non-native speakers. In such environments, communication is most effective when it is two-way and uses accessible language, as emphasized by Salleh et al. (2021).

Several researchers and organizational bodies have advocated that supporting minority groups to use their native languages meaningfully boosts social inclusion and promotes a strong sense of belonging. For example, Smolicz (1999) states that preserving native languages is vital for maintaining cultural identity in multicultural societies. Regmi Banjara (2019) also emphasizes the importance of using one's mother tongue in fostering community integration. In addition, international bodies such as UNESCO (2023) and the Council of Europe (2019) called for multilingual policies that support linguistic diversity as a cornerstone of social cohesion. Moreover, the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (1996) emphasizes that including all languages is crucial to promoting equality and enabling full cultural participation.

However, in many institutions, including those in Saudi Arabia, Arabic is the main language of communication, even in workplaces with multilingual staff. Alnasser (2018) observes that while Arabic holds constitutional and cultural authority, English has become functionally significant, particularly in education and commerce. In response to the coexistence of Arabic and English in higher education, several Saudi institutions have adopted bilingual communication strategies to serve their diverse academic communities better. For example, universities like King Abdulaziz University and Alfaisal University often share administrative information in both Arabic and English. This shows a wider effort to support international faculty and non-Arabic-speaking staff in their academic settings (Alnasser, 2018; Iqbal, 2014).

Despite these efforts, language barriers persist in Saudi workplaces where Arab and non-Arab employees interact regularly. English is often used within academic departments, but Arabic tends to dominate administrative communication and informal exchanges (Iqbal, 2014). Although translation services and bilingual personnel provide some support, their effectiveness is inconsistent. Afiliani et al. (2024) note that tools like Google Translate often misrepresent meaning due to their limited understanding of cultural and contextual nuances. As a result, some non-Arabic-speaking employees often feel pressured to learn Arabic to manage workplace communication more effectively.

Unfortunately, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) higher education context, such as Saudi Arabia, opportunities for sustained English communication are often confined to classroom settings. Outside of academic spaces, Arabic continues to prevail in day-to-day interactions, creating a linguistic imbalance that can hinder both the productivity and inclusion of non-Arabic-speaking staff (Alnasser, 2018). Alabi and Šarkiūnaitė (2021) argue that effective communication enhances productivity and reduces workplace conflict, yet many existing studies overlook how these issues unfold in Saudi higher education institutions.

Although previous research has addressed the impact of language barriers on foreign employees, a significant gap remains concerning how non-Arab professionals in Saudi higher education navigate these challenges in environments where Arabic dominates, despite English being the medium of instruction. This qualitative study thus aims to fill that gap by investigating the lived experiences of non-Arab employees who work in a linguistic environment that does not match their communicative competence.

### *Research Questions*

1. How do non-Arab speakers at different colleges in Saudi Arabia perceive the use of Arabic or English in oral and written workplace communication?
2. What challenges do non-Arabic-speaking employees encounter when engaging with Arabic in oral and written workplace communication?
3. What strategies do non-Arabic-speaking employees use to overcome these challenges?
4. What suggestions do non-Arab speakers offer for improving comprehension of work place communication in Saudi higher education settings?

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Research Design

The researchers in this study employed a qualitative research design, which is well-suited for exploring individual's personal and complex experiences. It offered valuable insights into how non-Arabic-speaking employees in Saudi higher education institutions perceive and address language-related challenges in their daily communication and sense of inclusion. This qualitative approach was particularly suited to understanding the nuanced linguistic challenges and coping strategies of participants in a multilingual work environment where Arabic dominates day-to-day communication despite English being the formal medium of instruction. The study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach, allowing themes to emerge inductively from participants' responses without being guided by a predetermined theoretical lens.

#### B. Participants

TABLE 1  
AN OVERVIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS

No. of participants	Workplace	Profession/ Position	Years of working in Saudi Arabia	L1
15	King Khalid University, King Saud University, Hail University	Assistant Professors, Lecturers, Nurse Researcher	5-22 years	Bengali, Urdu, Kashmiri, Tagalog, English, Romanian

This study applied purposive sampling to recruit participants from a range of professional and linguistic backgrounds. The group consisted of 15 expatriate employees, assistant professors, lecturers, nurses, and a researcher, all of whom worked in major Saudi institutions. Their years of experience in higher education in Saudi Arabia ranged from 5 to 22 years. Their native languages were Bengali, Urdu, Kashmiri, Tagalog, and Romanian.

#### C. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were employed for data collection, allowing study participants to provide open-ended responses while maintaining consistency across all interviews. All interviews were conducted in English and took place in formats chosen by the participants, including Zoom meetings, WhatsApp audio messages, and written responses. On average, interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. A pre-designed set of guiding questions was used to prompt discussion among participants on their experiences with workplace communication, their perceptions of Arabic and English language use, and suggestions for improvement (See Appendix). All interviews were audio-recorded (when permitted), transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to protect participant identities.

#### D. Data Analysis Procedure

The researchers analyzed the interview responses using thematic analysis. This analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, which comprises six phases: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and final reporting. This analysis enabled the systematic identification of patterns in participants' communication challenges, emotional responses, and coping strategies within Arabic-dominant institutional environments. The researchers conducted manual coding, and themes were developed inductively to ensure they were closely aligned with the data.

#### E. Trustworthiness

To ensure and enhance the reliability and credibility of the study findings, the researchers employed some validation strategies. They reviewed the transcribed responses carefully to confirm their accuracy and consistency. Additionally, triangulation was employed by analyzing data collected in various formats (audio and written) and from participants with diverse professional backgrounds. These steps are deemed to strengthen the depth and rigor of the analysis. Furthermore, the researchers maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to critically examine their positionality and reduce the potential influence of personal bias on data interpretation. To further maintain objectivity, the study deliberately excluded non-Arab employees whose native language is English, ensuring that any preference for English among participants reflected communicative needs rather than alignment with their first language.

#### F. Ethical Considerations

The researchers conducted their study by ethical research guidelines. All its participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights prior to participation, and each provided informed consent. Participation was entirely voluntary, and individuals were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. To protect confidentiality, all data were securely stored, and the participants' names were kept anonymous. Moreover, the names of the institutions involved were withheld to prevent any potential identification of participants or workplaces.

#### G. Researcher Positionality

Recognizing their position as multilingual academics with firsthand experience in Saudi higher education, the researchers were motivated to conduct this study. Their knowledge of the region's sociolinguistic context helped shape the study's focus and guided the analysis. This insider perspective added depth and relevance. However, they remained

aware of the potential for bias. To address this, they practiced ongoing self-reflection, kept a reflexive journal, and ensured that the participants' voices guided the interpretation of the data.

Notably, the research team included both a Saudi academic and a non-Arabic-speaking expatriate academic. This collaboration is viewed as a strength, as it provided a balanced perspective and further reduced the risk of cultural or linguistic bias in the interpretation of findings. The study thus aimed to represent the lived experiences of non-Arabic-speaking employees authentically without imposing the researchers' assumptions.

#### IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This section presents the thematic analysis of responses from 15 non-Arabic-speaking employees working in Saudi Arabian colleges. The results are organized around the study's four research questions and supported by selected participant quotations to illustrate key themes and lived experiences.

##### A. *Language Use in Workplace Communication*

The majority of participants (80%) reported using English as their primary language of communication at work, while 20% indicated that they occasionally switched to Arabic. Regarding language preference, 90% favored English, while 10% preferred Arabic. These findings address Research Question 1, which explores the perceptions of non-Arab employees regarding workplace communication.

Most participants described English as more accessible and practical for both academic and administrative tasks. Notable comments included:

"Language barriers lead to different challenges, so sometimes I drop the idea of resolving the problem."

"I find the practice of Arabic at the workplace challenging and sometimes even misleading."

"I avoid such issues by strictly keeping conversations focused on job duties and related topics. This provides the comfort of safe, solid ground, where everything is clear since we all follow the same rules and regulations."

##### B. *Communication Barriers Due to Arabic Dominance*

A significant 90% of participants reported that Arabic's dominance in the workplace posed communication challenges, while 10% did not view it as a barrier. The challenges included difficulties in understanding announcements, emails, administrative forms, attendance lists, and meetings conducted exclusively in Arabic. This theme responds to Research Question 2. Reported barriers were not only linguistic but also emotional and social in nature. Several participants mentioned feelings of exclusion in their responses such as:

"People should be multilingual, especially when they work in a workplace. Non-Arabs should try to learn Arabic simultaneously, and the students and staff should also try to learn English in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

"I do not feel included when Arabic is used during meetings or discussions."

"I, for one, always feel included and never excluded."

##### C. *Coping Strategies and Communication Tools*

In response to communication challenges, most participants (90%) reported using informal strategies. These included seeking help from Arabic-speaking colleagues, simplifying language, using gestures, and relying on digital tools like Google Translate and image translators. Only a few attempted to speak Arabic based on limited knowledge, while others admitted to withdrawing from interactions due to frustration. This theme responds to Research Question 3. Participant responses included:

"I seek help from bilingual colleagues."

"I use Google Translate or an AI interpreter/ Translator/ Image Translator."

"I use body gestures."

##### D. *Suggestions for Improving Comprehension*

When asked how to improve workplace communication for non-Arabic speakers, 80% of participants recommended bilingual communication, incorporating both English and Arabic in spoken and written forms. The remaining 20% suggested that non-Arabic speakers should focus on learning Arabic. Notable responses included:

"English should be used for teaching, communicating, and doing administrative work."

"In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, everyone, including staff, colleagues, and students, should be able to speak English, which is the global language."

"Translate everything into English."

"Every instructor should learn Arabic: this is possible theoretically, but it is very time-consuming and impossible for those with many tasks beyond everyday teaching."

These responses address Research Question 4. Most participants advocate for dual-language practices to bridge the comprehension gap. A few participants suggested overcoming the linguistic obstacles by learning the dominant language, Arabic. The institution could offer Arabic training sessions to teach basic Arabic to non-native Arabic speakers employed in colleges where Arabic is the dominant language.

A few participants also proposed language training initiatives for non-Arab employees. One suggested learning "important Arabic vocabulary," while another recommended "subsidized Arabic language courses for expats." A third

participant elaborated:

“Working here for 14 years, what I feel is that there should be at least some basic lessons for non-Arab speakers in universities... That would be a good way to train the non-Arab speakers and a way for us to be more involved in the workplace”.

## V. DISCUSSION

This study explored the linguistic communicative challenges faced by non-Arab employees in Saudi higher education institutions where English is the medium of instruction, but Arabic remains dominant in many workplace interactions. The findings highlight how these employees experience language barriers, their communication preferences, and the strategies they adopt to navigate a predominantly Arabic-speaking environment. These findings align with calls from scholars and international organizations advocating for multilingual inclusion as a pillar of social cohesion and identity preservation (Smolicz, 1999; Regmi Banjara, 2019; UNESCO, 2023; Council of Europe, 2019; Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, 1996).

The study findings offer valuable insights for developing more inclusive language policies in bilingual workplaces across Saudi Arabia. Most participants suggest using both English and Arabic in official communication, highlighting the need for a balanced, bilingual approach. Such a strategy supports more transparent communication among all employees and reduces dependence on informal solutions.

In workplaces with non-Arabic-speaking staff, using both languages can foster inclusion and efficiency. These practical steps are supported by Alabi and Šarkiūnaitė's (2021) research. It also aligns with Tickoo (2006) and Adriano et al. (2021), who advocate for language policies that support diverse linguistic realities rather than imposing a monolingual paradigm. Although Arabic is the official language, a linguistically diverse academic staff needs adaptive, responsive, and formalized bilingual policies. Employees should not feel stressed, anxious, or tense while working due to a language barrier in order to fully benefit from the diverse academic staff with diverse linguistic backgrounds. Effective communication is essential. It helps achieve high productivity in the workplace and fewer complaints.

Above all, in the 21st century, where English has spread worldwide, it is equally essential for smooth functioning in any workplace, especially in higher education, to learn the English language. Employers should ensure employees do not feel stressed out or excluded from the workplace due to language barriers. This study also emphasizes the need for two-way communication in delivering instructions, memos, and emails to ensure that messages are conveyed accurately. Two-way communication is very important for effective teamwork. Sharing ideas, providing feedback, and solving problems together is easier. Employees feel more involved and valued at the workplace without a language barrier.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the linguistic challenges faced by non-Arabic-speaking employees in Saudi Arabian higher education institutions, where English is the primary instructional language, and Arabic remains the dominant language in workplace communication. The findings reveal a strong consensus among non-Arab employees that English should also serve as the primary language of the workplace. Participants reported that exclusive reliance on Arabic often caused misunderstandings, feelings of exclusion, and frustration, all of which affected their job performance and satisfaction.

At the same time, they acknowledged the importance of Arabic in the local context. They expressed a growing recognition of the need for balanced use of both Arabic and English in workplace interactions, especially in formal communications such as meetings, memos, and institutional announcements. This dual-language approach was viewed as a practical way to support linguistic diversity and ensure that employees from different language backgrounds could fully contribute to the institution's work.

In addition to advocating bilingual workplace communication, several participants expressed a willingness to learn Arabic. As noted in the findings, suggestions included acquiring essential Arabic vocabulary, providing subsidized Arabic courses for expatriates, and offering basic language lessons tailored to non-Arab staff. These proposals demonstrate a proactive approach to integration and collaboration.

This willingness to learn Arabic indicates that language training programs can do more than improve communication. They can also help foster mutual respect, support cultural integration, and enhance relationships among colleagues from diverse language backgrounds.

### *Implications, Limitations, and Recommendations*

This study investigated the linguistic challenges encountered by non-Arabic-speaking employees in Saudi higher education institutions, where English is the medium of instruction, and Arabic remains the dominant language of the workplace. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the findings reinforce Kraimer et al.'s (2003) assertion that language barriers in professional environments can create multidimensional challenges. When employees are not proficient in the dominant language, they may struggle with job-related communication. However, employee meaningful engagement becomes more feasible when a common language facilitates interaction across linguistic boundaries.

Based on these insights, the researchers recommend that Saudi higher education institutions take deliberate steps to reduce workplace language barriers. Specifically, English, already the medium of instruction, should be adopted more

broadly as a shared language for workplace communication, especially in institutions employing staff from diverse linguistic backgrounds. A shared linguistic medium allows for more inclusive, respectful, and effective communication across teams.

Saudi higher education institutions are also encouraged to implement official bilingual communication policies, thereby ensuring that both English and Arabic are used in oral and written interactions. Such policies can improve administrative coordination and be inclusive regarding institutional communication. To support these efforts, the researchers suggested training sessions for administrative and support staff to strengthen their competence in written and spoken English, particularly in professional and academic contexts.

These recommendations also reflect a commitment to linguistic equity. As Paris and Alim (2017) argue, equitable language practices not only enhance communication but also recognize and validate the diverse identities of staff members. Promoting language inclusivity is thus both a practical and ethical imperative for institutions that aim to foster diverse and collaborative academic environments.

This study contributes to the expanding literature on language use in multicultural workplaces by highlighting the lived experiences of non-Arabic-speaking professionals in Saudi academia. However, the study has several limitations. First, the study focused solely on Saudi higher education institutions where English is used as the medium of instruction. Future research could extend this inquiry to other Arab higher education settings to assess the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, examining workplaces outside the academic sector, such as hospitals, companies, and industrial sites, would provide a broader view of how language barriers affect non-Arabic-speaking employees across different fields.

Second, while the qualitative research design provided rich and detailed insights, it also limited the generalizability of the findings. Further research could adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data to offer a more comprehensive perspective. Third, the study involved a relatively small sample, 15 participants from four colleges, which may not fully represent the broader population. Thus, expanding the sample size and including a wider range of institutions across different regions of Saudi Arabia would help strengthen the validity of future research.

Finally, this study employed a cross-sectional design, with data collected over a single academic semester. Longitudinal studies are recommended to examine how language practices and policies change over time and how such changes impact workplace inclusion and institutional performance. Comparative research between institutions that use English as their primary language of communication and those that continue to rely primarily on Arabic could also provide valuable insights into effective strategies for managing multilingual work environments.

#### APPENDIX. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your profession/department?
2. How long have you been working in Saudi Arabia?
3. Do you speak/ understand Arabic?
4. How do you communicate with your coworkers?
5. How do you perceive the use of Arabic in oral and written communications at your workplace?
6. Have you ever faced a language barrier at work? How do/ did you handle it?
7. Do you ever feel that language differences led to misunderstandings or challenges in a professional setting? How did you address or resolve them?
8. How do you convey your messages when language is a barrier?
9. Do you think language diversity in the workplace adds value, or do you find it more challenging? Why?
10. What tools or resources are most helpful in overcoming language barriers at work?
11. What suggestions do you have to enhance comprehension of workplace communications for non-Arabic speakers in Saudi Arabia?
12. Do the staff feel included at the workplace when instructions are communicated in Arabic, both orally and in writing?

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