

The Students' Perceptions of Arabic and English as a Medium of Instruction in Jordan

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Abstract—This research paper investigates students' perceptions of whether English or the indigenous language (Arabic) should be used as a medium of instruction in English learning centers at the pre-intermediate level. This argument which is of both sides (Arabic or English should be used as a medium of instruction) has been investigated through students' responses. While there has been a great deal of research into students' perception of EMI in education, this study offers deeper explanations, from a psychological perspective, of why students prefer EMI despite the difficulty, which would negatively affect their attitudes toward English. In this study, the researcher employed a questionnaire survey to elicit some data from the participants studying in the EFL centers to present substantial evidence, represented by this study's findings, consulted, and supported by psychology-based explanations. Among the main findings is that although the participants of this study hold positive attitudes toward their native language (Arabic), they prefer to use English to Arabic as a medium of instruction. This study also found that awareness associated with business plays a key role in this preference.

Index Terms—Arabic, awareness, difficulty, English, EMI

I. INTRODUCTION

EMI is defined as “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (Dearden, 2014, p.2). This term has been so widely used over the past twenty years in EFL/ESL research, where English is used in teaching different subjects, including English communication skills. In Jordan, there are many language learning centers where students enroll in different level courses to learn English communication skills for different purposes (traveling abroad, pursuing higher education, or applying for jobs requiring good levels of English skills) in Jordan. At the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels, instructors usually draw on Arabic (students' native language- the indigenous language) to teach English skills as they have low English language proficiency. This research paper investigates pre-intermediate level students' perceptions of whether English or the indigenous language (Arabic in this context) should be used as a medium of instruction in the EFL classroom-the basic level. This study aims to examine both sides of the argument in the literature, which have been highlighted in many studies, regarding which medium of instruction should be used in the EFL classroom. Accordingly, the paper tries to present substantial evidence, represented by this study's findings, which supports either of these two sides. To do so, the researcher conducted small research using a questionnaire survey to elicit some data from the participants studying in EFL centers -the basic level in Jordan. The data collected is mainly concerned with students' attitudes, beliefs, and awareness of English and Arabic. This study thus highlights those notions as important factors helping form students' perceptions about EMI in such EFL contexts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ducker (2019) defines the term ‘English as a medium of instruction’ as “the teaching and learning of content or academic subjects in the English language in situations where English is not the majority language”. Implementation of English as a medium of instruction is one effective path for competitiveness and internationalization in education (Byun, 2011; Tsou & Kao, 2017). However, many researchers argued that when the mother language is used, students access more advantages than do students who learn academic subjects using only the second or foreign language (e.g. Miti, 1995; Pattanayak, 1991).

In many non-English speaking countries around the world, English is used as a medium of instruction. This has resulted in many research-based arguments over the appropriate medium of instruction that should be used in education. In this regard, different researchers argue in favor of bilingual education as it can overcome many problems associated with monolingual education. Thomas and Collier (2003), for example, maintain that dual education is an effective strategy for both primary and secondary levels of students. They assert that students in bilingual settings gain more advantages than those who are in settings where English is only used as a medium of instruction. That is to say, bilingual students, besides acquiring high proficiency in more than one language, can develop different ways of how to solve problems from different perspectives. This in turn helps them achieve more academic success than monolinguals do. Additionally, by using two languages in an academic setting, they learn not only to recognize but also to value other people's experiences and backgrounds. In the same context, Spolsky (2004) argues that many educators including many

congressmen in the U.S believe that bilingualism has an important role in pushing learners to respect, and consequently can conserve their native identity (self-concept).

Many researchers (e.g. Kalra, 2015) highlighted psychological factors that would negatively affect students' perceptions of learning English. For example, Kalra (2015) explained why students do not like to learn English. In this regard, she says that "most of the students start learning English without getting information about its importance, as a result, they are least interested in learning the language and treat it not only as an unnecessary subject but also as the most difficult one" (2015, p. 213).

Nevertheless, many researchers maintain that monolingual education is an effective resource for learning. For example, several researchers called for employing English as an effective alternative to the mother tongue language, Hamid (2010) argues that despite the high costs of using English in education, it should be used as a medium of instruction for the purpose of helping students have active roles in the world. That is, he believes that when students have high levels of proficiency in English, they become more qualified to compete in the global world where English is considered the language of communication. He (Hamid, 2010) thus believes that they cannot access that world unless they have a high command of English. Other studies (e.g. Senapati et al., 2012) employed psychological approaches to examine if the medium of instruction can affect learners' cognitive processes. The researchers (Senapati et al, 2012) found that those participants who used only English as a medium of instruction achieved much better results than their counterparts who only used their native language (Odia). This is because (according to these researchers) the foreign-medium instruction (English) promotes the cognitive flexibility which in turn helps develop cognitive processes. Furthermore, many studies examined students' and their parents' attitudes in developing countries. For example, in Zimbabwe, not only students but also their parents have more positive attitudes toward English than their native language. This shows their awareness of English status, which serves as a trigger to learn and use English as they believe that learning and speaking English proficiently is one way to secure a better job (Ndamba, 2008).

On the other hand, other researchers argue for the indigenous languages to be used as a medium of instruction. Truong (2012), for instance, maintains that policymakers should prioritize using the native language over English as a way of boosting students' talents because through the indigenous language, students can develop their talents. Thus, the native language is considered the most trusted way to succeed and achieve more prosperous results as it can help students more deeply understand the content. Also, Babaci-Wilhite (2013) emphasizes localizing learning. This can be achieved through using the student's native language rather than a foreign language, and accordingly, (put a comma after accordingly) the content of the material should do with the culture of that native language in a way that satisfies the needs of the local community. This would help people value their indigenous language by weakening the belief that success cannot be achieved unless English is employed as a medium of instruction.

Accordingly, based on reviewing the literature, this study attempts to present substantial evidence, based on students' perceptions, which indicates which language is more effective and preferable for students than the other.

III. METHODOLOGY

There are many EFL centers in Jordan, where people of different levels enroll to learn the English language for different purposes. The participants, therefore, learn English for various purposes in this study. Some aim at traveling abroad, pursuing higher education, or applying for jobs that require good levels of English skills. The researcher surveyed those students who were at the pre-intermediate level in Jordan to investigate their perceptions of which medium of instruction should be used.

The thirteen-item self-report questionnaire was administered in the classroom to all the students in two sections. The participants in the present study are 14 students at the pre-intermediate level. The Arabic (the native language of the participants) version of the questionnaire was distributed to these students so that they can better understand and respond to these items. Two questionnaire sheets were excluded as they were not sufficiently answered and some answers to some items were irrelevant. The questionnaire is designed to elicit specific data concerning attitudes, beliefs, and awareness. The questionnaire is a mix of open- and closed-ended items. The open-ended items are mainly included in the questionnaire to compensate for interviews to interpret students' preferences and attitudes toward English and Arabic, being used as a medium of instruction. Before the questionnaire of this study was distributed to the participants, and for the reliability and validity of the current study, it had been remodified and revised by two TESOL/EFL instructors to ensure that all the items are fully understood by the participants.

This research paper investigates the following research questions:

- 1-What are the student's attitudes toward English as a medium of instruction in EFL centers in Jordan?
- 2-Does difficulty affect students' attitudes toward English-medium instruction in Jordan?
- 3-Which language do the participants prefer to use as a medium of instruction: English or Arabic?
- 4-Does a learner's attitude toward one language affect his/her attitude toward the other (Arabic and English in this context) in Jordan?
- 5-What is the role of awareness in students' motivation?

IV. DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

This section analyzes and discusses the participants' data collected using the questionnaire. In their answer to item 1 in the questionnaire [Tell me about one experience where you liked or hated learning English], most participants talked positively about their experiences in learning English and using English as a medium of instruction. For example, one participant says (I like speaking English when I explain a problem before my classmates). However, two out of ten participants reported that they have some bad experiences with using English in talking about technical issues in their life: (I sometimes get confused because I cannot understand exactly what the teacher says) and (Sometimes I cannot express what I have in mind). These dislikes that those respondents expressed to this question are related to difficulties that they confront. Their responses to this question demonstrate that they attempted to improve their English.

But, despite the difficulties some students face, they still prefer to keep using English as a medium of instruction. This is shown clearly in their answer to the second item in the questionnaire. [If you had a choice, which language would you pick as a medium of instruction (English or Arabic) in the classroom? Why?]. That is, all of the participants, including who those face some difficulty using English, preferred to continue learning the course content using English. Item 12 and 13 are included to check students' preferences. Four students answered Yes to questionnaire item number 12 [Do you think that you would get better grades if Arabic was the medium of instruction?]. With regards to item 13, four out of twelve answered that if Arabic were used as a medium of instruction, they would achieve higher grades or they can understand the curriculum content better, which indicates that these students face some difficulty understanding the content and instruction. Therefore, they think Arabic intervention in this situation would be so positive, helping them achieve better results as they think that they will overcome all the obstacles.

However, all the participants believe that it is useful that the instructor uses English in the classroom as they believe that learning English secures a better future, as shown through their answers to questionnaire item 4 [Do you think that it would be useful if your instructor uses English in the classroom?], which can be the main reason of why they have positive attitudes toward understanding the curriculum content using English instead of Arabic. Responding to item 11 [Do you think that the instructor should use only English or a mix of Arabic and English? Why?], some participants said that a mix of English and Arabic is better than only using English for the sake of achieving a better understanding of the content. Thus, it would be argued that these students have positive attitudes toward using English as a medium of instruction in such classes. These attitudes are attributed to the fact that they are aware of the fact that English is a global language, and they realize the benefits that they would gain in the future. In addition, they realize how important for them to speak English very professionally. In this regard, Eshghinejad (2016) maintains that "attitude to language is a construct that explains linguistic behavior in particular" (2016, p.2). This would explain why these students insist on preferring to use English to Arabic as a medium of instruction, despite some difficulties, associated with being English as the medium of instruction (EMI), that they face.

Although the participants did not prefer to use Arabic as a medium of instruction, they have a positive attitude toward the Arabic language. This can be demonstrated in their answer to item 10 [Do you prefer to speak in English or Arabic outside the classroom?], as most chose Arabic. This was expected since the center in which the survey was conducted is private, and the students realize that they enrolled in such centers because these centers offer high-quality education, aiming at improving their English skills, where the medium of instruction employed is English. Therefore, they realize that their enrollment in such centers is to qualify for higher competency. They thus see English as a requirement for improving their prospectus. This can explain why these participants prefer Arabic to English in their everyday communication and other social domains. This also demonstrates that they hold positive attitudes toward their native language.

They prefer English to Arabic as a medium of instruction although they have positive attitudes toward Arabic. This also can be shown in their answer to item 8 [what benefits do you think you would gain when you speak English well?]: (I can be more successful in my studies at university), (I can achieve better grades at university), (I can easily communicate with native speakers when I travel) and (I can get a good job with a higher salary). This indicates that they are aware of the fact that English is an international language, and they need to speak English well if they want to secure a better future. This can be supported by what the British Council team concluded in their report that "EMI is increasingly being used in universities, secondary schools and even primary schools" (p. 4).

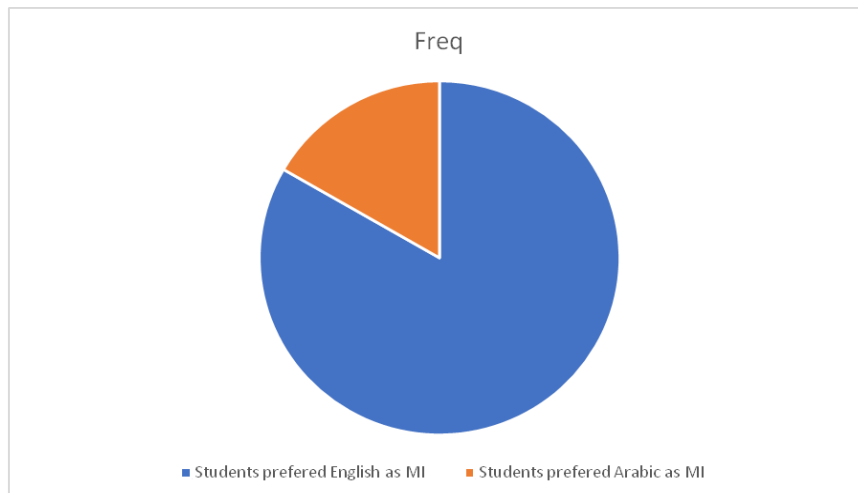


Figure 1 The Proportion of Students Preferring English to Arabic as the EMI in the Classroom

Awareness plays an important role in helping students have positive attitudes toward English, with the result that their awareness encourages them to use English as a medium of instruction. This explains why many students evaluated English as a medium of instruction positively although they face some difficulties. Thus, with regards to the source of positive attitudes toward English what motivates students and lets them have positive attitudes toward English is their awareness of the fact that they need to speak English well to have better jobs in the future and/or pursue their higher education in English-speaking countries. This demonstrates the interrelationship between attitudes, motivation, and awareness as factors encouraging or discouraging students from learning a language that they prefer (English). The researcher found that the difficulty that some participants face does not negatively affect their attitudes toward English as their awareness of mastering the English language helps them build positive attitudes toward English which in turn serves as a trigger to motivate and keep them motivated to use English as a medium of instruction, as the following Figure 2 shows:

Awareness → Positive attitudes → Motivation → English preference → Effective learning

Figure 2 Students' Psychological Aspects of Learning a Foreign Language

According to this Figure 2 above, students are aware of the importance of using English as a medium of instruction because of their belief that English is a global language and it is the language of communication all over the world. This in turn has led them to have positive attitudes toward English. This study agrees with Zainol Abidin et al.'s (2012) findings that attitude is an essential motive in language learning. This led them to success in learning English from their perspective. However, based on the findings of this study, positive attitudes toward a language are not sufficient to push students to choose that language as a medium of instruction. But this depends on what stands behind positive attitudes. That is, although the participants have positive attitudes toward Arabic, they do not prefer it as a MI. This study found that what motivates the participants to prefer EMI is education and/or business. This can be explained by the fact that students look at the English language as one important tool to have a better professional future. Accordingly, their motivation to learn the content using only English rather than Arabic is due to their awareness of English status in terms of business. Simply put, according to this study, while positive attitudes toward Arabic are attributed to sociocultural factors such as identity and culture, positive attitudes toward English are attributed to economic factors such as having a good job or traveling to English-speaking countries for education or business. This is what makes the participants prefer English to Arabic.

In light of the participants' responses, the students' positive attitudes toward English do not affect negatively their attitudes toward Arabic. That is, no attitude is held by the students at the expense of the other. That is to say, although the participants have positive attitudes toward English, attributed mainly to their awareness of English status in terms of jobs and education, they hold the same positive attitudes toward their native language (Arabic). This study thus agrees with Belete Beka's findings (2016) that while learners have positive attitudes toward their mother tongue, they do not like using their native language as a medium of instruction in the classroom.

In contrast to this study's findings, Kalra (2015) found that most of the participants in her study are not aware of the importance of English as a global language. However, this study agrees with Kalra (2015) that once students have sufficient awareness of a language, they can build positive attitudes toward that language.

V. CONCLUSION AND TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

This paper concludes that the participants' awareness of English status plays a key role in forming positive attitudes toward English (although some difficulties that they might have when using English as a medium of instruction). This

paper found that positive attitudes have different resources that can be of sociocultural or educational types. This can justify why the respondents have positive attitudes toward both languages (Arabic and English). In other words, having positive attitudes toward Arabic does not negatively affect their attitudes toward English or vice versa. In this paper, the data analysis shows that the participants are highly motivated to learn English and to use English as a medium of instruction, but what if another sample were taken from another center in Jordan, would we have the same results? And would students' awareness, attitudes, and motivation be the same? However, many measures should be implemented at the micro-level (classroom) and macro-level (governments and policymakers) to implement the best practices to teach English effectively. This paper recommends curriculum designers and policymakers that the content (e.g. topics and exercises) should be presented in different styles or methods so that they can meet students' needs at different levels. This can enhance motivation, especially for students having difficulty understanding the content using English.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. Conducting a study in which two samples are taken from different English learning centers employing rating questionnaires followed by interviews to examine more deeply the students' perceptions of the appropriate medium of instruction that should be used and applying a statistical test to see whether the mean difference between students' perceptions is statistically significant.

2. Conducting a study investigating students' and their parents' perceptions to examine if the parents affect their children's perceptions.

3. Conducting a statistical study to investigate if there are any significant gender differences between learners' attitudes toward English in Jordan, especially that many previous studies found that learners' attitude toward English is or is not gender-related.

Limitations

This study is only confined to one English learning center where the questionnaire is administered. The questionnaire is the only tool employed in this study.

APPENDIX. QUESTIONNAIRE

The translated version of the questionnaire:

1. Tell me about one experience where you liked or hated learning English?
2. If you had a choice, which language would you pick as a medium of instruction (English or Arabic) in the classroom? Why?
3. Which language is easier to use English or Arabic?
4. Do you think that it would be useful if your instructor uses English in the classroom?
5. Do you think that English can help you secure a better future?
6. Do you enjoy learning English? Why?
7. How well do you speak English?
8. What benefits do you think you would gain when you speak English well?
9. When do you feel that you understand the lesson better in English or Arabic?
10. Do you prefer to speak in English or Arabic outside the classroom?
11. Do you think that the instructor should use only English or a mix of Arabic and English? Why?
12. Do you think that you would get better grades if Arabic was only the medium of instruction?
13. With which language: English or Arabic as a medium of instruction do you think that you would get higher grades? Why?

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