

Perspectives on English in the Middle East and North Africa

A research initiative – part of the British Council's
English for the Future programme in MENA

Perspectives on English in the Middle East and North Africa

A research initiative – part of the British Council's English for the Future programme in MENA

ISBN 978-0-86355-696-8

© **British Council 2013** Brand and Design/C563
10 Spring Gardens
London SW1A 2BN, UK

www.britishcouncil.org

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 5 |
| Acknowledgements | 7 |
| The new role of English as a global language in promoting interfaith and co-existence | |
| <i>Dina Al Kilani</i> | 9 |
| 1 Summary | 11 |
| 2 Introduction | 13 |
| 3 English in the MENA region | 15 |
| 4 East and West in dialogue | 17 |
| 5 Dialogue in English: a perspective | 21 |
| 6 Conclusion | 31 |
| 7 Methodology and technical notes | 33 |
| References | 35 |
| The value of English as a social structure: a theoretical view on implications in the MENA region | |
| <i>Dr Nancy Okhail</i> | 37 |
| 1 Introduction | 39 |
| 2 Language as a social structure | 41 |
| 3 The changing value of English | 45 |
| 4 Attitudes to learning English | 47 |
| References | 50 |
| Signs of belonging: culture, identity and the English language | |
| <i>Professor John E Joseph, University of Edinburgh</i> | 53 |
| 1 Language and identity | 55 |
| 2 Cultural identity | 57 |
| 3 Talking nations into existence | 59 |
| 4 Language and cultural belonging | 61 |
| 5 Globalisation and English | 63 |
| 6 'World Englishes' | 67 |
| 7 Conclusion | 69 |
| References | 70 |

**'They think we're stupid': exploring discourse and identity –
the voice of the young Muslim woman living in the UK**

Dr Bróna Murphy, University of Edinburgh 73

1 Introduction..... 75

2 Identity and Muslim faith..... 79

3 Identity and perceptions 83

4 Identity, English and culture 87

5 Summary 89

References 90

English in our lives – a Lebanon perspective

Haissam Minkara 91

1 Introduction..... 93

2 Education in Lebanon..... 95

3 History of English education 97

4 The British role in English..... 99

5 Women in higher education 101

6 English in higher education 103

7 English in academic institutions..... 105

8 The rise of English in Lebanon..... 107

9 English in their lives 109

10 Conclusion..... 123

References 124

**The influence of English language skills on the lives
of people with disabilities across the MENA region**

Maha Kochen..... 125

1 Introduction..... 127

2 Research methods..... 135

3 Main findings..... 139

4 Recommendations..... 149

5 Limitations and conclusion 153

Acknowledgement..... 155

References 156

Appendices 159

English at work: perspectives from the MENA region

Nour Nasr 167

1 Introduction..... 169

2 English language and work..... 171

3 English in the MENA region..... 173

4 The research project..... 175

5 Results..... 177

6 General trends..... 181

7 Implications for language policy..... 183

References..... 185

Appendix..... 187

1

Introduction

The papers in this collection have been produced by both established academics and those at the very beginning of their careers. They were gathered together at a time of enormous upheaval in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Each of these facts has a bearing on the scope and approach taken in the papers individually as well as collectively, which has an effect on how they can be read.

The protests and demonstrations that started in Tunisia in December 2010 spread rapidly to other countries at the time when the MENA research team were gathering their data. As a result, it was not possible for many of them to conduct the full range of qualitative and quantitative assessments that they had originally planned. Others, in more strife stricken territories, had to withdraw from the process entirely. Naturally, this limited the ability of some team members to talk to some of the people they wanted to talk to and to review documents and data they thought might be interesting, but it was never the intention to produce in-depth, definitive research. The project's main aim was always to publish a set of papers in order to encourage discussion on how the English language may (or may not) be challenging perceptions of culture and identity in peoples and groups of the MENA region and in the UK.

The researchers have tackled a broad range of topics: interfaith dialogue; the influence of English on individuals' live chances; social inclusion; and English in the workplace. There are two papers that put these themes into context. The first is by Professor John Joseph, the Head of Linguistics and English Language at the University of Edinburgh. His is an authoritative voice. In his paper, he describes the development of cultural identity with regard to language and argues how English is being appropriated by the people that use it worldwide, including in the MENA region. The second paper is by Dr Nancy Okhail who investigates how people in MENA may be motivated to use English as a means to improve their personal circumstances or position in society.

The interfaith theme has perspectives from the UK and Jordan. Dr Bróna Murphy, a Lecturer in English Language Education at the Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh, sets out the perceptions of young Muslim women who have recently arrived from MENA on how they see themselves as Muslims living in a non-Muslim host country. In contrast, Dina al Kilani's piece is a presentation of the perspectives of Jordanian imams, religious scholars and students on matters of faith.

Haissam Minkara has put the people at the centre of his piece investigating how English has affected their lives; he lets their voices come through in the way he reports their stories. One of his subjects is Maha Kochen, herself visually impaired, who has written a challenging and thought-provoking piece on the influence of English on the lives of those with disabilities throughout the MENA region. She gathered experiences and opinions from 47 people with various degrees of visual impairment from 13 countries. All of her interviewees were of working age. Many of them are convinced that a good command of English either *has* or *will* help them find satisfying, purposeful employment.

English and employment is the topic of the final paper, which is written by Nour Nasr. She presents her findings on data gathered at regular intervals from advertisements placed in newspapers in Lebanon, Bahrain and Oman. Her focus was on the need for English as a requirement for employment. Her work is modelled on the large-scale longitudinal study carried out by Hamdam and Abu Hatab in Jordan.

So, when you turn this page and read each contribution, you will find much to stimulate thought. We hope you enjoy reading them.

Hamish McIlwraith

Editor

2

Acknowledgements

It takes a lot of hard work by a lot of people to create a collection of papers. So I, along with the British Council, would like to thank Sakinah Ismael, Minoo Asdjodi, Nedal Swelhi and Karthik Gopalan for all their contributions. Dr Brona Murphy's research has been funded by a British Academy research grant over a two-year period (2010–12). Haissam Minkara would like to thank Dr Nagla'a El Emary of the BBC Arabic service in London and all the BBC staff in Beirut in advising and supporting him in the creation of the short documentary piece that accompanies his paper. He would also like to pass on his thanks to Dr Samer Annous, Dr Souad Slim, Georges Sukkar, Hanane Menhem (all of The National Center for Educational Research and Development of the Lebanese Ministry of Education), and Ibrahim Farah and Samar Mikati (of the American University of Beirut). Maha Kochen was advised and supported by June Jackson and Dr Mona Khechen who provided her with invaluable feedback throughout the progress of the study. Dina al Kilani would like to thank the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in Amman, the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies, the British Embassy Amman and Jordanian fellow Chevening scholars.

The new role of English as a global language in promoting interfaith and co-existence

Dina Al Kilani

1

Summary

In this paper I analyse the role of English in promoting interfaith dialogue and peaceful understanding between the East and West, in particular between the Arab Muslim world and the West. There have been several attempts to show that English has an impact on fostering intercultural relations through increasingly popular social networking sites, which have helped connect people (particularly younger generations) from different parts of the world¹. However, little systematic work has shown its impact on promoting *true* (i.e. apolitical) interfaith dialogue between these two particular parts of the world or on fostering co-existence. I do not claim to provide definitive answers to this specific subject matter, but I will show how English has been used by some actors of both worlds in interfaith and intercultural activities.

¹ 'Bridging Babel: New Social Media and Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding', 2010 Undergraduate Fellows Report, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs (<http://repository.berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/UGFNewSocialMedia.pdf>), accessed 20 May 2011 See also Graddol, D (2006) *English Next*. British Council UK

2

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges to the world today is that of interfaith and intercultural relations in general. Given the history of conflicts between the East and West, and the collective memory of grave injustices on both sides, the followers of the Bible-based faiths (or the so-called Abrahamic religions²) are weighed down with the burden of that history. There are more recent world events, for example, the escalating violence against Christians in Iraq and Egypt and discrimination against Muslim communities in certain Western countries especially since the 9/11 attacks, that have shaped the perceptions of Muslims and Christians, which sometimes seems to promote division rather than unity and peace.

The MENA region, and mainly the Arab world, has witnessed tremendous political, social and economic struggles and divisions over the last 70 years. International and intranational relations, therefore, is a subject that most people of this region find themselves drawn to as a matter of fact because their own conflicts are so much part of it. In order to overcome the region's present problems and establish a better future for it, one must learn more about the international systems and cultures, mainly how peoples conduct themselves in this world. At present, most young Arabs and Muslims feel let down by the international community's failure to establish mutual understanding, tolerance, acceptance and peace in the region³. But, at the same time, many feel that 'now' is the time for this part of the world to change from within so that it becomes more integrated with the international community; the Arab Spring is just its spark.

However, to say that this region needs to do more to challenge its problems and moderate and engage with the outside world does not invalidate the suggestion that 'the others' should do more to make this engagement succeed. In the aftermath of September 11, much of the Muslim world has been affected by the Anglo-American war on terror. This has resulted in religious discrimination on both sides, which has escalated to disastrous proportions. It is only now that Muslim worship and religious rituals seem to have increasingly come under the spotlight in some Western countries and elsewhere⁴.

Not surprisingly, tensions in Muslim–West relations have escalated following the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. The majority in the Muslim world would ask if this is, in fact, a war between the West and Islam. Since then, both have tended to adopt an unprecedented intolerant and sceptical approach in dealing with 'the other'. This seems to apply more for Muslims especially in the wake of the US military campaigns that are perceived as imposing 'democratisation' and 'liberalisation' on the MENA region. Moreover, with the rise of ideological extremism⁵ and Al Qaeda's aggression in the West, hatred towards Muslim people has inflated especially since mainstream

Muslims, those who are moderate and rational with inclusive attitudes towards non-Muslims, have not done enough to counter the extremist messages by those manipulating their religion.

Dialogue⁶, therefore, whether faith-based or culture-based is important to eliminate the notion that Islam is in continuous confrontation with the religious or secular West⁷. Such dialogue should not in any way aim to view other religions or cultures in terms of incorrect beliefs or theological practices. Rather, it should aim to focus on presenting each other's arguments and learn to embrace new virtues that provide the basis of learning, understanding and cohabiting with each other. Thus for dialogue to unite us and not divide us (in this globalised, yet deeply divided world), certain tools must be available to all parties to achieve satisfactory outcomes. A lingua franca or a 'link language' is an important tool⁸. In this context, the link language that has established its position in the world of communications (among other modern international languages) is, in all spheres, the English language.

² 'Religion [as defined in the Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics] is concerned with the worship of transcendent or supernatural beings whose existence is outside or above the realm of the normal, which is mortal and temporal. In its most historically important and ethically demanding form, monotheism, as exemplified in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religions, the religious concern is concentrated onto a single God who is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient, the creator of the universe'. McLean, I and McMillan, A (2003) *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics*, Oxford University Press, UK. p.460

³ Here I refer to the failure by the UN, US and EU efforts to resolve the Israel–Palestinian conflict and revive the peace process; the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan; and Western support for the long standing dictatorship regimes in the Arab region, to name a few

⁴ See 'Post 9/11, Americans say Muslims face most discrimination' by Jana Moore. The Christian Science Monitor, 11 September 2009 (www.csmonitor.com/USA/2009/0911/p02s19-usgn.html), accessed 20 May 2011 Also, see Muslims in Europe: How restive are Europe's Muslims? *The Economist*, 18 October 2001, Paris, Berlin, Madrid and London, from the print edition (www.economist.com/node/824394), accessed 20 May 2011

⁵ Ideological extremism here covers religious and political extremism. An example of political extremism could be seen in the rise of neo-conservatism in the United States

⁶ Dialogue is 'an exchange of ideas or opinions on a particular issue, esp. a political or religious issue, with a view to reaching an amicable agreement or settlement'. (Confusion over Pope's letter saying interfaith talks impossible, 24 November 2008, 18:12 EST. blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2008/11/25/confusion-over-popes-letter-saying-interfaith-talks-impossible/), accessed 1 May 2011

⁷ Culture, as Edward W Said put it: 'First of all it means all those practices, like arts of description, communication, and representation that have relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realms ... second, almost imperceptibly, culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has known and thought ... In times, culture come to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates 'us' from 'them', almost always with some degree of xenophobia. Culture in this source is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that, as we see in recent 'return' to culture and traditions ... They were not like us and for that reason deserved to be ruled'. (Said, Edward (1997) *Culture and Imperialism* (London, Vintage). p.xxi–xv) Secularisation: the detachment of a state or body from religious foundations. (McLean, I and McMillan, A 2003 *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics*, Oxford University Press, UK. p.481)

⁸ McArthur, Tom. Ed. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992

3

English in the MENA region

English language usage in many parts of the world and in the MENA region particularly is closely linked to the long-standing British trade interests in the twentieth century. Following the end of British colonialism, links to the English language were retained through its integration into the majority of the states' public schools. This is rather unusual considering that the language of the former colonial power was rejected in the wake of declaring national independence⁹. (There is a parallel example in Modern Turkey after the demise of the Ottoman Empire where Arabic was rejected as an official language.) However, in the case of Arab countries, attitudes towards English have remained generally positive. English has always been perceived as a facilitator of, rather than a hindrance to, the process of nation building as it was then recognised as the primary lingua franca or the link language¹⁰.

When speaking of languages in the context of the Arab world, one must discuss the region's relation with the Arabic language. Arabic language is closely connected with the prominence of Islam in the Arab region, and is seen as a symbol of unity among its peoples¹¹. In this globalised world and with the endorsement of English and its use in several interpersonal and intra-national functions in some of the Arab countries, many perceive this as a threat to the Arabic language. However, this had never been the case in the time of colonialism, when English and other foreign languages dominated the official regulatory functions in some of the colonised Arab countries (e.g. French in North Africa and the Levant and Italian in Libya).

English has always served several important roles in the Arab world. As a region that heavily relies on international trade for most of its countries, and on international aid for others, English is essential as a means of transborder communication. English has assumed the role of 'the' language of communication through trade partnerships, diplomatic relations, military co-operation with English speaking countries, such as the United States and Britain, and their provision of human and technological expertise to the region. This means that English has shifted from being the second language to become the first language of many Arab individuals, especially to those who have better access to English education systems whether in-country or abroad. This appears to be threatening the majority of the people in the region who have limited access to English language education¹². Just as non-native English speakers seek to acquire foreign languages to communicate with others, native English speakers realise it is important to learn other foreign languages as well. Examples of this include those working in the field of diplomacy and politics. It is also important in countries where immigration contributes a huge part of its formation, e.g. the United States in the West and the Gulf countries in the East¹³. In a period of swift change, English remains the preferred language of use in all aspects of international communication amongst peoples.

⁹ Ostler, Nicholas. *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World*. Harper Perennial: London, 2005

¹⁰ Graddol, D and Meinhof, U H (1999) 'English in a Changing World L'anglais dans un Monde Changeant. AILA Review (www.aila.info/download/publications/review/AILA13.pdf), accessed 30 April 2011

¹¹ Although the majority of the Muslims around the world are non-native Arabic speakers, yet they most make the attempt to speak and understand some of its basics to deal with their prayers and reading the Quran, which was revealed in classical Arabic

¹² This is according to the survey conducted for the purpose of this research. Please refer to section 'Dialogue in English: A perspective' of this paper, section on accessibility to English

¹³ Sigsbee, L David, Why do most of the Americans speak only English? America.gov. Archive 19 January 2010 (www.america.gov/st/peopleplace-arabic/2011/January/20110119132916x0.9541394.html?CPrss=true), accessed 1 May 2011 Also see Cooper, Robert Leon. 'Chapter 5: Status Planning.' *Language Planning and Social Change*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989. p.99–121

4

East and West in dialogue

English nowadays plays a larger role in performing dialogue among parties of different cultural and language backgrounds. Given the political, religious and cultural tension between the MENA region and the West, this section focuses on the impact of English in encouraging greater interfaith dialogue between these two regions. Post 9/11, calls have increased from within the Muslim world for defending Islam against the attacks against it and from the extremists' ideologies that have put the Muslim nations into a crisis with the West¹⁴. On the other side, reactions of some of the western countries to the 9/11 terrorist attacks raised unprecedented attention around the world, provoking aggressive acts against these countries and sometimes against non-Muslims living in the MENA region. This resulted in an increasing gap between the two worlds. Such reactions ranged from verbal to physical. The anti-Islamic statement made by President Bush in his reference to a 'crusade' against terrorism rang alarm bells for Muslims. The term crusades has tragic and immense influence on Muslims as in July 1099, when Christian crusaders from western Europe attacked Jerusalem, the third holiest city in the Islamic world after Mecca and Medina, massacred its inhabitants, and established states in Palestine, the Lebanon and Anatolia. The crusades were disgraceful but formative events in Western history; they were devastating for the Muslims in the near east¹⁵. These negative encounters have forced both sides to take measures to enhance and reframe dialogue with emphasis on religious dimensions to social and cultural diversity. Some countries in Europe affected by such attacks (like Britain, for example) launched special programmes to counter extremism in and outside its territories to support efforts of moderation and dialogue. In the aftermath of the 7/7 London bombings, the Home Office launched a 'Scholars Roadshow', which included prominent British scholars, to engage with younger Muslim communities with the aim of challenging extremists' ideologies and preventing terrorism. This implies that these countries and other secular western countries found themselves encountering a wave of Islamic religion after having changed into a more secular society.

Outside its territories, Britain supported two big initiatives in Egypt and Jordan to strengthen the capacity of religious institutions in their efforts to promote the true principles of Islam to the Arab Muslims and non-Arab Muslim audience and to overcome misconceptions between Britain and the Muslim world. In Jordan, the British Council implemented a four-year training programme to a key group of Imams and preachers to equip them with a broad range of professional skills including English language, communication and persuasion skills and IT skills. The initiative was concluded with several exchange visits between the two countries (although translation was provided with the acknowledgment of the participants that their low ability in English was the biggest problem preventing their learning and active participation¹⁶). When interviewing a sample of those who took part in the English

language courses and the visits, almost everyone stressed the importance of more focused and specialised English language courses to reach out to a wider audience, especially in the West.

In Egypt, Britain also supported the establishment of an English language teaching centre at Al Azhar University through the British Council Cairo, with the aim of strengthening Al Azhar's role in engaging in international faith-based dialogue through equipping a group of students with language skills to debate religion and the role of Islam in the world. As a senior official at Al Azhar put it, the English language programme 'helps breed tolerance and respect for other cultures'¹⁷. So far, around 70 graduate students received the extensive tailor-made and general English language courses. Moreover, this initiative has a strategic element including establishing contacts between Al Azhar University and a number of organisations representing UK Muslim communities and with a number of UK universities including Cambridge, Leeds and Edinburgh. Through this partnership, Al Azhar established a joint scholarship programme whereby British Muslim scholars study at Al Azhar University and scholars from Al Azhar would attend a specially designed Islamic course in English at the University of Cambridge. And the fact that this programme was applauded by some of the local and international media, including Al Ahram Weekly and Reuters, implies the agreement on the importance of such initiatives to push the dialogue forward.

There are other interfaith programmes by the University of Cambridge that teach the traditions of the three Abrahamic religions through research and academic courses as well as running interfaith online discussions to a wide range of audience (government, press, academics, scholars, etc.) through their interfaith online platform¹⁸. The platform provides the options of translation between Arabic and English. In Egypt, the United States funded an English Language Training (ELT) programme for religious purposes at AMIDEAST, an ELT centre, also to help young Muslim religious scholars enhance their English language skills to engage in interfaith dialogue locally and internationally. The students were both male and female and from different cities across Egypt.

Looking globally, an interfaith dialogue movement has grown up in the form of several prominent international meetings and initiatives, bringing together leaders and representatives of different religious traditions from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds¹⁹. The majority of these initiatives, if not all, operate in several languages including English. The trend in such meetings is to provide translation services into several languages as, in most cases, English is the main language of discussions. The more the initiatives take an international outlook or attention, the more dependent on English language they become, especially in communicating, whether through media channels, internet and web pages, their publications and/or any online forums they hold²⁰.

¹⁴ See articles by Patel, E, 'Acts of Faith: the Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation', and by Mattson, I 'My Islam: Freedom and Responsibility' published in *Islamica Magazine*, issue 20, 2007, as examples on activism by Muslims to counter extremism especially among Muslim communities in the West

¹⁵ Armstrong, Karen (2003) *Islam: a Short History*. Phoenix Press, UK, p. 79–81 Also, Pope Benedict's famous Regensburg speech has haunted Christian-Muslim relations since it was delivered in 2006, describing Islam as a violent religion. Further reactions, for example, the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, banning the headscarf and other religious symbols from public places and schools in France, and banning the building of minarets on Mosques in Switzerland, to name a few. Muslims reactions exemplified in the alleged attacks on Coptic Church in Egypt, persecution of Christians in Iraq, bombings in London and Madrid, the Muslim–Christian violence in Nigeria, to name a few.

¹⁶ One example on how I personally was involved in one of the visits organised to improve understanding between Jordan and Britain and to open channels for collaboration between the two countries. A group of Jordanian religious media professionals visited the UK in July 2010. The purpose of the visit was to enhance awareness amongst the visitors, most of whom this represented their first visit to the UK, about the UK's multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society and allow them to explore how the Muslims are viewed and integrated in the UK society, challenges they face and be introduced to the UK's equal opportunities and diversity agenda. No doubt that English language proved to be essential in this visit to make the best out of its objective. For example, there was only one person out of the six visitors who spoke English and the rest did not. That made it difficult for them on many occasions to participate fully in the programme and engage in deep discussions with the other. Even establishing long-term contacts between both parts was unsuccessful due to lack of a common language as was told later by one of the participants in the visit. This was followed by another visit by a group of UK Muslim personalities, representing NGOs and media channels, to Jordan to expose them to an example of an Arab and Islamic society with its strengths and challenges and thus enable them to give a more accurate image of the realities of this society to their audience

¹⁷ Saleh, H, 21 September 2010. Islamic scholars cross cultural divide. Last updated; 21 September 2010 16:32 (www.ft.com/cms/s/0/1b3af876-c594-11d1-ab48-00144feab49a.html#ixzz1L195fSIE), accessed 2 May 2011

¹⁸ The Cambridge Interfaith Programme (www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk), accessed 5 May 2011

¹⁹ Some of these initiatives were born in the MENA region and others in the West. For example, the Common Word and the Amman Message launched by the Jordanian leadership and the King Abdullah's Interfaith Initiative by Saudi Arabia. Internationally, several organisations became involved in interreligious dialogue such as the United Nations Alliance of Civilisation, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Religious Dialogue, the World Muslim League, the World Muslim Council and the Middle East Council for Churches, to name a few.

²⁰ Dubai One TV channel has recently started broadcasting a weekly educative programme in English titled, 'Understanding Islam'. The first of its kind by an Arab operated TV network. The Dubai One TV channel has gained global outreach and has become very popular among the non-Arab expats residing in the United Arab Emirates.

5

Dialogue in English: a perspective

In a survey I conducted in Jordan to examine the dynamics of English usage in interfaith dialogue, I found that there was consensus among respondents of the significant role of English in interfaith dialogue between East and West.

The analysis below is based on respondents' answers to the following questions²¹:

- How would you describe the role of the English language in today's world?
- Have you ever come across a situation where you had to discuss different religious views with non-Arabic speakers and how has English helped you in conducting a successful conversation?
- How would you describe the status of interfaith and intercultural dialogue between the Muslim world and the West?
- Are you aware of any interfaith and/or intercultural dialogue initiative between the Muslim world and the West which operate in English? How successful have these initiatives been in promoting interfaith understanding?
- How can the use of English help in facilitating greater dialogue among cultures and faiths?
- In your opinion, who should be advocating interfaith and intercultural dialogue?
- How accessible is the English language to those interested in promoting interfaith/intercultural dialogue?
- Is interfaith dialogue important in helping achieve peaceful co-existence?
- Is introducing inter-religious education in schools and colleges in both local and international languages (such as English) important to build for intercultural understanding?

How would you describe the role of the English language in today's world?

The majority (if not all) of the respondents believed English to be a very important language in today's world in every aspect. They described English as a 'global and international language', tagging it as a 'major requirement' to achieving 'consensus' in any communication, should all communicators understand the logic that comes with English both as a language mainly but also as a culture²². The idea of English being 'irreplaceable' was referred to in some responses and that very much supports David Graddol when he said that 'there is no reason to believe that any other language will appear within the next 50 years to replace English as the global lingua franca²³. Almost all referred to the essential role of English in 'bridging gaps' and 'facilitating' peoples' understanding of each other's cultures and history 'as a medium of communication across language boundaries²⁴.

Currently, English is closely associated to the process of modernisation and economic development for the Arab region²⁵. This includes technology and skills transfer from the developed market economies in the West and other parts of the world to the region. This is due to the fact that communications tools, information technology and software developments have largely been English based. It was not surprising, therefore, that the importance of English in allowing people access to information via digital media as well as being able to perform businesses internationally predominated in answers. Some highlighted the key role of English in facilitating access to 'quality education at the most renowned schools worldwide', i.e. those in North America, Britain and other English speaking countries in Europe.

The survey included supplementary questions to gauge the spread of English in a country like Jordan. The answers showed that an average of 96 per cent said they could speak more than one language (including English), 69 per cent feel more comfortable using English language for reading purposes, and 30 per cent use English as their primary spoken language (even though the majority of the respondents were Native Arabic speakers).

Have you ever come across a situation where you had to discuss different religious views with non-Arabic speakers and how has English helped you in conducting a successful conversation?

More than 90 per cent answered 'yes' they have been in such a situation, adding that their knowledge of English helped in getting their viewpoint across and rectifying negative stereotypes about each other's faiths and cultures.

'As a visually impaired person, I was miserable, isolated and not receptive ... because of English and the internet, I have become this open minded person ... before I was relying on audio media channels to know about what happens in the world and this had kind of driven my perceptions of 'the other'... English got me into the internet world and helped me to do my own research and establish contacts with some westerners ... I have become more tolerant and acceptable to other cultures.'

'Yes. A few years back I managed a project that aimed at enhancing the capacity of the Jordanian Ministry of Awqaf, Islamic Affairs and Holy Places. This entailed accompanying a group of senior Ministry staff and preachers on a visit to the UK to enhance their awareness of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious nature of the society there. The English language level amongst members of the Jordanian delegation was rather weak, which meant that, although we had a translator accompanying them on their meetings, I had to act as a translator whenever the need arose. Having good English and Arabic language abilities allowed me to undertake this task, despite the difficult nature of the topic.'

'Yes, it was a very interesting experience; especially at the beginning as I never had to discuss religion in English, until I was forced to develop and change my way of thinking and explaining my religion to non-Muslims who cannot speak Arabic. It was challenging at the beginning but then I started reading English

articles and enriched my vocabulary by doing so. Overall, I found it very helpful to be able to discuss this topic in English as it was the only language in common.'

A significant percentage of those responding 'yes' to this question were not Imams or religious scholars or even people affiliated to religious institutions. In fact, they were either Jordanian students or expatriates who spent enough time out of the region (mainly in English-speaking countries), or professionals whose jobs require constant dealings with foreigners. This is significant in the sense that intercultural or interfaith dialogue could have satisfactory outcomes through informal encounters not necessarily planned for the purpose of intercultural or interfaith dialogue, of course with the availability of a common language. Both the Imams and the officials at the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Jordan who received English language training through the British Council project in Jordan indicated that they did not have to use English when communicating beyond their classes. Most did not have enough opportunities to be in contact with non-Arabic speakers, in addition to the fact that interpretation had always been available at international interfaith meetings they had taken part in. Some, however, have expressed interest in taking more ELT courses in order to help them participate confidently in English-based interfaith dialogue.

How would you describe the status of interfaith and intercultural dialogue between the Muslim world and the West?

The most common answer to this questions was that interfaith dialogue or East–West dialogue is 'poor', 'unsystematic', 'limited', 'futile', 'irrelevant', 'fragmented' and 'not influential'. One interesting finding referred to the perception that interfaith dialogue between the two worlds is dominated by the 'politics of polarisation', in the sense that it is an unequal dialogue with the English speaking imperialist²⁶, resulting in the fear of this imperialist dictating and manipulating the content of the dialogue. This assumption is somehow interrelated with the belief that dialogue should focus not only on common things between religions and cultures but also on the political root causes behind the cause of tension between Muslims and the West²⁷. Therefore, English is also important for those assuming policy roles to bridge the gap and reduce political tensions.

Nevertheless, respondents argued that interfaith and intercultural dialogue has improved with time, though not in a structured way. They also say that the issue with the current dialogue is that it is largely performed by political entities from both ends, which leaves more space for imposing 'political agendas²⁸'. As far as the Arab countries are concerned, the most active actors in advocating interfaith and intercultural dialogue are either heads of states or senior officials with largely no theological background. The absence of the 'legitimate' religious powers and qualified civil society seems to suggest that the effort to improve dialogue between the Muslim world and the West and to extend it beyond conference rooms is somehow futile. Legitimate religious powers, in the eyes of the respondents, are those scholars with academic accreditation in theological studies.

In the view of many, the media – and particularly the English-speaking media – has not helped much in overcoming differences between the two worlds, resulting in

the two sides becoming more 'entrenched into their own faiths and cultures'²⁹. It is argued that because of the sensitivity of this subject, dialogue as a starting point should focus on the common things that make us humans live together peacefully, and that differences in beliefs should be discussed 'with respect'³⁰. One interesting point made was that 'the Arab world is much more open to hearing from the West than the West is to hearing from the Arab world'. Overall, respondents' arguments focused on the need for the West to know more about the cultures and faiths of the Muslim world and not vice versa. The Muslim world is more exposed to the cultures of the West due to the strong influence of the Western media productions and the internet in the region. Producing more religious and cultural documentaries and educative programmes in foreign languages and in English in particular can help address this issue³¹.

Interfaith/intercultural dialogue is vital for overcoming conflicts between the Muslim world and the West. There is a gap in understanding what Islam is all about, and the media is not helping to overcome this gap. At the same time we, as Muslims, are not making the effort that needs to be done to enhance awareness about Islam thus easing the path for radicals to commit violence in the name of Islam and to spread messages that do not reflect the teachings of Islam.

Are you aware of any interfaith and/or intercultural dialogue initiative between the Muslim world and the West which operate in English? How successful have these initiatives been in promoting interfaith understanding?

Around 58 per cent of the respondents said that they are vaguely aware of some the national and international initiatives. This question was intended to help me evaluate the success of activities supported by the West (i.e. the ELT and other interpersonal and IT skills provided to Imams and religious students in some countries of the region and other international interfaith meetings in helping those supposedly legitimate religious ambassadors to tackle the issue of misconceptions between religious and cultural traditions).

I participated in the Islamic Week which is a one week event that takes place in Lancaster every year during the month of March. This was the first time that I participate in such an event, and I have to say that it was amazing not only to introduce the culture of Islam to non-Muslim but ... also to learn about my religion and culture from a complete different perspective. After that event, I started listening to lecturers about Islam in English language as I thought it is a great way to break thinking patterns about things we take for granted and a great way to look at things differently.

While some respondents were aware of English-based dialogue initiatives, others referred to some of the national Arabic-based interfaith dialogue led by government and non-government entities. However, no respondent was able to speak of the effectiveness of interfaith initiatives. This could be attributed to the apathy of the respondents in the topic of interfaith subject in general. Also, some believed that these initiatives are politically driven rather than culturally or theologically driven;

this region had a long history of peaceful co-existence with the ‘religious other’ before international faiths-based dialogues were manipulated by political events.

How can the use of English help in facilitating greater dialogue among cultures and faiths?

The majority said that given English is a global language, it gives a common base for initiating any dialogue or communication in the international arena and in any field. For many of the Imams, English has broadened their horizons. It has enabled them to access the cyber world. Perhaps more surprisingly, among the responses were some who argued that it is not mastering a global language that matters; it is giving the people the opportunity and freedom to express themselves in an open environment. What qualifies people to be ‘well cultured’ is to open up to the others. This resonates with the argument that, in the absence of an open environment, quality education and critical thinking is scarce, hence a culture of intolerance in the society prevails.

However, and regardless of the political environment, the demand for English courses for religious purposes by Muslim scholars continues to rise. The implication of this is that, for English to play a greater yet more structured role in interfaith dialogue, ELT should be institutionalised and be part of a reconceptualised religious curriculum whether in schools or universities in both the Muslim and Western teaching environments. The Egyptian model of ELT courses for religious purposes could be a step to follow in several countries across the region to build strong institutional partnerships between credible bodies in both regions and worldwide and to facilitate an exchange of religious scholars in order to enhance their mutual cultural understanding.

There is a commonly held perception among a few about the importance of making sure the Arabic language (as the symbolic language of this region) is not replaced with English³². In some conservative parts of the Muslim world, people correlate language and culture in the sense that there are attempts to ‘westernise’ the Arab Muslim nations by changing attitudes towards English language and its usage in the Arabic context. This, they feel, results in an ideological confrontation of English and Arabic. In this context, it is worth referring to the TESOL Islamia initiative primarily concerned with the teaching of English as a second or foreign language to Muslim learners of English worldwide, launched in the United Arab Emirates. TESOL Islamia seeks to raise awareness of the sociocultural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic implications of the growing expansion of English and English language teaching in the Muslim world³³.

In your opinion, who should be advocating interfaith and intercultural dialogue?

Responses varied from professionals, open-minded religious leaders, school leaders, academics, youth and, more importantly, *people* who are aware of the cultures of both worlds. Although few saw that governments or political powers can lead genuine dialogues, many, for example, admired Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan in his international role as a model for promoting intercultural dialogue. He has

demonstrated great command of language; he is able to speak and think in English (as well as several other languages including French and German). In addition, being educated in English-speaking countries has allowed him to understand how to introduce an element of religious diplomacy alongside his political skills in resolving issues related to intolerance.

Results also revealed that the King and Queen of Jordan have played an important role in advocating intercultural dialogue. King Abdullah II reiterated on several national and international occasions the need to bridge gaps between Eastern and Western cultures. In almost every speech on a western platform addressing a wide range of Muslim and non-Muslim audiences, he speaks of fostering the culture of co-existence and acceptance of 'the other'. Furthermore, the Queen of Jordan has placed particular emphasis on the constructive role the media must play in promoting interfaith dialogue and co-operation to counter stereotypes. Being in her position and married to a king of a British background, and attending English and American style schools, many see her as being able to speak authoritatively on both Western and Eastern cultures. She launched a YouTube channel in English calling on young people to engage in a global dialogue to dismantle stereotypes of Muslims and the Arab world, intending that the world would 'know the real Arab world ... unedited, unscripted and unfiltered³⁴'. The initiative was designed to reach out to various audiences, but mainly the English-speaking world, to invite them to offer their opinions on the Middle East and to talk about stereotyped images they may have of Arabs and Muslims. She would then personally react to those opinions via her blog on the channel. The comments on the website – especially by non-Arabs – were in favour of the Queen's efforts. Many westerners have found it useful in having their prejudices reversed through exposure to information available to them in English. In addition, many suggested that the channel's material should be translated into Arabic in order to reach out to a wider audience across Arabic speaking countries. Not surprisingly, however, some believe that she does not represent a 'true' Muslim woman and quite a number of Arabs, mainly Jordanians, do not perceive her as a legitimate figure to speak out in the name of Islam, accusing her of being more western than a Muslim Arab.

The British Council is one of the institutions that plays an important role in promoting intercultural interaction. They have excelled in the field of embracing diversity and connecting cultures through various aspects of its work worldwide. In Jordan, the British Council runs several projects that have an intercultural and interfaith dialogue dimension targeting Jordanians from all walks of life (e.g. Connecting Classrooms, International Inspiration and Belief in Dialogue) and engaging with national academic, governments and civil society institutions.

Overall, the importance of an institution's role versus an individual's was not argued heavily in the responses to the survey. However, people seem to be more captivated by individuals who could influence the dialogue via a common language and cultural background. Often, the balance between the communicative competence and the substance is what is likely to determine who is 'legitimate' and who is not to advocate faith or culture-based dialogue. Nonetheless, the question of whether language can

ever be 'neutral' (i.e. boundless to culture) could be relevant in this case and can reinvigorate debates surrounding the ideological and cultural influence of English in an Islamic or Arabic context.

How accessible is the English language to those interested in promoting interfaith/intercultural dialogue?

English, by far, is the main and preferred link language between the Arabic-speaking world and farther afield. It has become usable in several domains in the majority of the Arab countries. For example, it is the working language of the international organisations based in the region, EU, UN and its agencies, World Bank and its other sister entities. Furthermore, the English language is obligatory as a primary and secondary school subject in public schools in most of the Arab countries. In the majority of the region's private schools, English is the main language of instruction in subjects such as history, mathematics, science and art. It is also widely used as the language of instruction in universities and colleges. Of course, the reason for this use of English is to prepare for a generation to be part of a culture of knowledge economy and not necessarily to prepare a generation to debate interfaith co-existence.

I wanted to know what influences people in deciding to take English language courses. I surveyed students in one of the prominent ELT centres in Jordan. The results showed that 21 per cent said it was for studying purposes, 54 per cent for job related purposes (mainly in finance and banking, marketing and IT sectors) and 65 per cent for improving their English proficiency in general. It is possible that the latter 65 per cent of the respondents were thinking in terms of improving their dialogue with 'the other' and their realisation of the importance of English in this regard. It could also simply be a matter of following a social status or trend.

Probing further, I asked if English is widely accessible in Jordan. More than 52 per cent believed that in general, English language learning is either 'very accessible' or 'somewhat accessible' as it is an easy language to learn due to the influence of media. English usage is evident in various media sources including newspapers, television, radio, and more importantly internet and social networks. Others believed that it is 'not accessible' or 'not as it should be' especially to those in less fortunate communities, who could be more interested in the topic. The view seems to be that quality English language teaching is centred in the big cities and in most cases people have to travel to those cities in order to get access to adequate English learning – quite a costly undertaking for many. Around 67 per cent of those surveyed said they had to pay for the courses from their private funds (supported by the parents) and 28 per cent said the costs were paid for by their employer as the courses are expensive.

Some respondents argued that English is not sufficiently accessible to Islamic organisations in the region despite a feeling that those who do speak English are often the most enlightened. The implication is that there could be a role for ELT centres along with main educational institutions to offer tailor-made English language courses.

Is introducing inter-religious education in schools and colleges in both local and international languages (such as English) important to build intercultural understanding?

Respondents were in favour of this proposition: 47 per cent said it is 'Extremely important'; 44 per cent 'Important'; 9 per cent as 'Somewhat important'. Religious education in the majority of the Muslim countries is being taught as a separate module and in most cases it reflects the national religious situation, with a little consideration of the wider faith structure of its minorities. Another issue is that religious education could be more rigid in some countries than the others. Such an educational environment leaves some people behind as the world changes around them. The Arab education system lacks quality and modernity. Modern languages, including English, and critical thinking (which is the process of applying reasoned and disciplined thinking to a subject³⁵) are essential elements to eradicate 'educational poverty' (especially in the field of religious studies), which is prevalent in the Arab world³⁶.

Therefore, in an ideal liberal education environment, religious studies can be reconceptualised and reintegrated neutrally as part of other schools modules, especially in primary and secondary education. As Anna Halsal and Bert Roebben put it, it is important that:

... solid information (learning about the religion of others), is combined with learning the skill of respectful conversation (learning from the religion of others) so that young people are encouraged to achieve a personal moral and spiritual synthesis through the learning process (learning to understand my own existence in relation to ultimate questions-learning in religion³⁷).

Such a complex approach suggests the development of a much more challenging dialogue and way of looking at things. English, as a global language of communication, could take the effect of this beyond borders.

-
- ²¹ Please refer to the 'Methodology and technical notes' section at the end of this paper for more information on the nature of the sample, the survey design and data collection.
- ²² Consensus in this context meant 'more precisely, people reach conclusions, arrive at new beliefs, as a result of reasoning, they reason to new conclusions or to the abandonment of prior beliefs. Reasoning in this sense is reasoned change in view'. As for logic, it is people's ability to acquire basic principles to help them reason better when formulating a certain argument to communicate a set of thoughts. Harman, G (Aug., 11, 2000) *The Logic of Ordinary Language*, Princeton University, p.1–3
- ²³ Graddol, David (1997) *The Future of English? A guide to forecasting the popularity of the English language in the 21st century*. The British Council, UK
- ²⁴ Cooper, Robert Leon 'Chapter 5: Status Planning.' *Language Planning and Social Change*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989. p.99–121
- ²⁵ The Role of English in the 21st Century: English Teaching Forum Online. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Office of English Language Programs; Volume 39, Number 1 by Melvia A. Hasman (cs.bilgi.edu.tr/~hobbittr/english/CS_COMP_149_Role_English_21st_century.pdf), accessed 8 June 2011 Also see Hill, C, Loch, K, Straub, D W, El-Sheshai, K, 'A Qualitative Assessment of Arab Culture and Information Technology Transfer' *Journal of Global Information Management* (6:3 Summer) 1998, p.29–38 (www.irma-international.org/viewtitle/51314/), accessed 8 June 2011
- ²⁶ Muslims and the West: The need to speak up. *The Economist*. 11 October 2001 (www.economist.com/node/813660?Story_ID=813660), accessed 20 May 2011
- ²⁷ For more on this, please refer to the report by the Abu Dhabi Gallup Center on Measuring the State of Muslim–West Relations: Assessing the 'New Beginning', launched on 28 November 2010. Section 3 – Exploring the fault Lines: Politics, Culture, Religion
- ²⁸ In his article on Islam, Muslim Politics and Democracy, Prof. Anoushiravan Ehteshami argues that 'as the debate itself [of Islam and Democracy] since 9/11 has been increasingly shaped by the priorities of the Western actors, whose traditional interests in the Muslim Middle East are now being driven by concerns about the international stability, Muslims have tended to adopt an even more sceptical posture' (Ehteshami, A. (August 2004) *Islam, Muslim Politics and Democracy, Democratisation*, Vol. 11, No. 4, p.90–110
- ²⁹ Examples on this trend are very much felt across Muslim minorities residing in Europe especially in the aftermath of 9/11. (Muslims in Europe: How restive are Europe's Muslims? 18 October 2001 | *Paris, Berlin, Madrid and London* | from the print edition (www.economist.com/node/824394?Story_ID=824394), accessed 20 May 2011
- ³⁰ Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, November 2010, Measuring the State of Muslim–West Relations: Assessing the 'New Beginning', section 5 – Muslims' Voices on the Meaning of Respect. Page 52 reads the west should 'abstain from desecrating Islam's holy book and Muslim religious symbols, treating Muslims fairly in policies that affect them and portraying Muslim characters accurately in popular media.'
- ³¹ The 'Understanding Islam' programme by Dubai One TV Channel mentioned in the paper earlier is a good example in this direction. This was also one of the recommendations by the 'Towards a Renascent Islamic Project', the Fourth International Conference on Moderation organised in Jordan by International Forum for Moderation (IFM) and The Moderation Forum for Intellect and Culture (MFIC).
- ³² Symbolic in the sense that the Arab Muslim world has had a long-standing historical, cultural, and religious attachment to Arabic language as being the language of the sacred religious text of Islam (the Quran), from which influence on policymaking is formatted.
- ³³ TESOL Islamia.org (www.datadubai.com/United_Arab_Emirates/Dubai/Education_in_Dubai/English_Language_Teaching/16914-1579.html), accessed 30 April 2011
- ³⁴ YouTube – Queen Rania's Channel (www.youtube.com/user/QueenRania), accessed 10 February 2011
- ³⁵ Critical thinking as defined by the Open University (www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/critical-thinking.php), accessed 9 June 2011
- ³⁶ Salem, P. (Autumns 2009) Aid for Education is our best Weapon against Militant Islam. *Europe's World*
- ³⁷ Halsall, A. and Roebben, B. (Fall 2006) Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogue through Education, *Religious Education*. Vol. 101, No. 4

6

Conclusion

When asked if interfaith dialogue is important in achieving peaceful co-existence, remarkably, 81 per cent answered 'Yes'. This echoes the notion that interfaith dialogue is becoming an important aspect for enhanced relations among different nations worldwide. Dialogues should share the aim of promoting better understanding and co-operation in addressing various issues of importance to humanity. In particular, it is becoming clear that people from both worlds still have faith in dialogue, whether through structured or spontaneous methods. As this paper is written, there is a new generation emerging in both sides (but especially in the Arab world) that is keen to live in harmony with the other. Conflicts (whether political or religious based) should never inhibit dialogue. As the Bosnian Grand Mufti Mustafa Cerić put it, 'some people say from conflict and misunderstanding comes understanding'³⁸.

On one hand, interfaith dialogue should aim to reconcile the religious East with both the secular and religious West, but on the other, the readiness of both societies for dialogue, regardless of the medium used, is still questioned. For some, conspiracy theories prevail. The phenomenon of globalisation, mobility of populations and cultural hybridity, has implications to develop a common language in order to peacefully co-exist. The English language, as a global medium of communication, is generally regarded as having played a positive role in promoting such dialogue. It provoked new consideration of English in different contexts. English as a link language and as a vehicle for diplomatic activities, political influence, cultural exchange or even business expansion, makes it an important commodity in the arena of trading ideas and values. Yet the less consistent perceptions of its neutrality as a second or link language is a subject that remains sensitive especially in the Muslim Arabic world where the Arabic language is undoubtedly associated with religion and culture. However, to say that the English language has made a difference in initiating interfaith and intercultural dialogue between the East and West is a fair thesis.

³⁸ Is Pope Benedict's Regensburg speech now history for Muslims? 6 November 2008 20:38 EST (blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2008/11/07/is-pope-benedicts-regensburg-speech-now-history-for-muslims/), accessed 29 April 2011

7

Methodology and technical notes

I focused on studying the status of dialogue between the Arab Muslim world and the West. This decision was based on consultations with a sample of scholars and professionals (for example, a Sharia Professor based at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, The Royal Institute of Interfaith Studies in Jordan and an opinion polling and research expert). Therefore, perceptions came mainly from an Arab–Muslim audience and some were gathered from non-Muslims and from a Western audience.

For the purpose of this research, it was not sufficient to rely mainly on the review of academic articles as the majority of the interfaith articles and books are more theology focused. A more extensive review was conducted of the education, cultural, political related surveys, in addition to country specific reports, news reports and documentaries. Fieldwork involved mainly distributing questionnaires and conducting one-to-one interviews. The questionnaire was prepared in two languages, Arabic and English (most of the surveyed people preferred to use the English version, and the Arabic version was used mainly by Imams and religious officials at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs).

Fieldwork was originally planned to take place in a number of Arab countries; Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Egypt and possibly Yemen and Syria. However, the ‘Arab Spring’, started right after the fieldwork had commenced. It then became increasingly difficult to receive much help or responses from contacts in those countries affected by the upheaval. So in the end, it became in effect a Jordan case study. Information on the regional interfaith activities was extracted from internet resources. There was a random selection of Jordanians and non-Jordanians ranging from research experts, university professors, diplomats, students, graduates from Western universities (mainly the UK, USA and Canada), Imams and officials who received English language training, and a sample of people attending ELT courses at the British Council in Amman.

I targeted 50 general professionals (including scholars, professors, journalists, project managers, researchers, and graduates from British universities), and around 60 individuals attending English language teaching classes at the British Council in Amman. Thirty out of the 50 professionals responded, and 43 out of the 60 responded from the ELT classes. The most important result of the survey was the lack of sufficient critical answers to the analytical questions. There may be several reasons for this:

- a. Apathy in the topic of interfaith dialogue (although more than 65 per cent said they discuss religious issues with friends and contacts).
- b. Fear of contributing to public surveys or discussions about religious and/or political issues.

- c. People may think that the use of English is ‘normal’ in a young person’s world.
- d. Perhaps they were – deep down – antipathetic to the whole notion of English.

Demographically, the respondents were predominantly males and females aged between 15 and 50 living in cities. Data gathered from the fieldwork was documented using the questionnaires, whether this data was gathered from interviews or simply individuals completing the questionnaire only. Originally, I intended to use a variety of presentation methods including descriptive texts, comparative charts and tables. However, this had to be revised owing to unforeseen events.

The following table describes the respondents’ demographic characteristics (+/-):

| Gender | | Religion | | Nationality | | Age | |
|--------|-----|----------|------------|-------------|---------------|-------|-------|
| M | F | Muslim | Non-Muslim | Jordanian | Non-Jordanian | 15–35 | 35–60 |
| 58% | 42% | 90% | 10% | 93% | 7% | 60% | 40% |

References

Armstrong, K (2003) *Islam: a Short History*. Sheffield: Phoenix Press.

Cooper, R (1989) *Language Planning and Social Change*. Cambridge University Press.

Graddol, D (1997) *The Future of English? A guide to forecasting the popularity of the English language in the 21st century*. London: British Council.

Halsall, A and Roebben, B (2006) Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogue through Education. *Religious Education*. 10/4

McArthur, T (ed) (1992) *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McLean, I and McMillan, A (2003) *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics*. Oxford University Press.

Ostler, N (2005) *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World*. London: Harper Perennial.

Said, E (1997) *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage.

The value of English as a social structure: a theoretical view on implications in the MENA region

Dr Nancy Okhail

1

Introduction

There is little doubt that the English language is a dominant language in today's globalised world. It is the second official language in many countries and the lingua franca of many regions, including the Middle East and North African region (MENA)¹.

The spread of the use of the English language around the globe has become widely prevalent to the extent that it is now more commonly perceived as an international language that does not belong to a particular nation, or an ethnic group; where it has become more disconnected from its native speakers and their culture².

This points to the need to explore the effect of English language use in the MENA region where the first spoken language is mainly Arabic with its varying dialects and historical influences. English skills seem to be increasing in significance as features in the different aspects of social life; for example, many job opportunities are exclusive to applicants with English language skills, either by being advertised only in English or marking it is a necessary requirement for the job. In many social circles in the region, English represent a symbolic reference of association to certain classes in society. Some may feel it may facilitate intercultural dialogue, while others perceive it as a threat to Arab culture and Arabic language preservation. Whether it is perceived positively or negatively, the role of English language in the region seems to be gaining in significance.

In this respect, English can be seen as a form of social structure representing either an opportunity or a challenge that affects individual chances and choices. So, I will first lay the theoretical ground for the meaning of language as a social structure in general. This will be followed by an elaboration on the understanding of English as a form of capital exchangeable with the other socioeconomic forms of capital affecting actors' power relations. I will then discuss the different possible motivations and attitudes towards learning English as a second language in the MENA region.

There are many differences between countries in MENA in terms of history, culture, socioeconomic conditions and even ethnicity. Countries in the region could be differentiated in various ways. Economically, there are oil rich countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar, while others suffer far more difficult conditions. Politically, some of these are established monarchies while others are republics. Culturally, there are also significant differences; Egypt has a more homogenous population and long history that goes back thousands of years while other countries' borders were defined only in the last century and comprises different tribal groups and affiliations similar to Yemen and Libya. As such, I do not make generalised claims that encompass the entire region irrespective of differences as this would be beyond the scope of this article. However, in a region where the most common official language is Arabic, one cannot ignore the need to explore the increasing prevalence

of English, which is demonstrated in different features of the society, and understand what this prevalence represent to the people in the region.

English is perceived by some people as a necessary skill, or a means of communication; for many it is a tool for social integration and connecting to our globalised world, while for others it is a source of threat or a barrier to social inclusion. At times, it could be a vehicle of social transformation and improving people's conditions, while at others it could represent an obstacle for personal development and be a source of distortion for cultural identity. English can be one or all of these things together, but no matter which way it is perceived, it does not negate its prevalence and influence or the impact it has on our societies. It is one feature of our globalised world, just like the current upsurge in information technology and the internet. These may be seen as the greatest development of our times or the biggest distortion of authentic social relations, but whichever way they are perceived, this does not necessarily undermine their value and influence on today's life.

In this respect, my aim is not to examine whether English in the MENA region in particular has a positive or a negative effect. Rather, it is an attempt to analyse the modes of influences that English as a 'social structure' may have in society and its possible implication on people's attitudes and motivations towards learning it. But what does English as a 'social structure' really mean in the first place?

¹ Crystal, D (2003) *English as a global language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Widdowson, H G (1993). The ownership of English. IATEFL annual conference report, Plenaries 1993. Whitstable, UK: IATEFL

² Norton, B (1997) Language, identity, and the ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly* 3, 1, p.409–429. Skutnabb-Kangas, T (2000) *Linguistic genocide in education – or worldwide diversity and human rights?* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Csizer, Katat and kormos, Judith (2008) Age-Related Differences in the Motivation of Learning English as a Foreign Language: Attitudes, Selves, and Motivated Learning Behavior. Volume 58, Issue 2, June 2008 p.327–355.

2

Language as a social structure

Human behaviour has mostly been explained in social sciences (especially sociology) in terms of the interaction between agency and structure. There is no consensus among social scientists about the exact meaning of these two concepts, and their relations to each other remain elusive³. But to put it simply, agency refers to the ability of people (social actors) to make choices about their actions, attitudes and dispositions. Structures are everything external to agents/actors that affect their practices by either representing a challenge to their choices or provide opportunities for their fulfilment⁴.

These structures can be objective, subjective, physical or social. For example, when a person cannot fly on his own because of not having wings, this is a representation of a physical objective structure. When a person cannot enter a class because he or she believes will not be accepted due to his or her different ethnic background, this is a representation of social structure. The latter example could be subjective or objective depending on the analysis of the actual attitude of the class towards him or her. Following this example, the interaction between agency and structure determines actors' power relations in society and ability to make choices and act upon them. When structures influence actors positively, they are perceived as capital which may take different forms: economic, cultural or political, lending power to people who accumulate them⁵. From this perspective, language is one of those forms of capital that determines power relations in society.

Any language in its simplest form functions as a means of communication. It helps people interact and reach a certain level of understanding. But, as any form of social interaction, it carries with it various forms of power. In other words, English language can be seen as a social structure and the agency of people in reaction to this structure determines their relations of power⁶. Following Reid and Ng, 'language is a communication medium for turning a power base into influence. But more than that, the creation of power and its maintenance or change can also occur in and through language' (Reid and Ng 1999: 119). Taking this standpoint means that there are some aspects of language that we need to first take into consideration in this discussion.

First, the focus here is not mainly concerned with grammatical accuracy or level of language proficiency. These are certainly important aspects of language and may signify and relate to levels of education and other socioeconomic factors. However, this is not a primary concern in the analytical angle adopted here. This follows Craith's argument that 'affirmations regarding the status of language or dialect do not necessarily refer to the grammatical structure and vocabulary of a speech form. Instead they are concerned with the symbolic status of the concept and the language as symbol acts as ... marker of social roles or situations' (Craith 2004: 401).

Second, and relating to the above point, language is seen here as a dynamic system rather than a static tool of communication that does not change as it integrates through social relations. Perceiving language as a static tool is like thinking of its functions as a catalyst in a chemical reaction which significantly influences the reaction, but its substance remains intact. Language as a dynamic system is a reflection of its nature; it is influenced and changes while it influences people's life in their everyday use of it. Recent studies emphasise, to increasing degrees, the dynamic nature of language and its development (Richard 2010: 431⁷). Ellis (2008) elaborates on this feature of language (especially second language, L2) and its complex dynamic nature by identifying 'a number of L2 acquisition processes which reflect cycles of dynamic system development, thereby allowing patterns to emerge: usage leads to change; change affects perception; perception affects learning; learning affects usage' (Richard 2010: 432). This view of complex and cyclical mode of language development does not entail chaos or arbitrariness but unpredictability which means that it is not determined by particular curricula or an intended language policy⁸. When perceiving English language particularly as a social structure, we should acknowledge its dynamic nature; it develops and changes over time while its value may rise and fall depending on the changing social conditions and context. As will be demonstrated in later examples and discussion, while English could have a high value of exchange in certain domains allowing actors to acquire economic gains or social status, in other domains it may prove to be completely insignificant where the dominant value of such domains would be for forms of social structures, for example, political authority.

Third, although the above point rejects the linear intentional aspect of spreading languages, it does not mean that interaction in any language is an apolitical neutral process. It is recognisable that language exchange is partly a political relation. The use of language to communicate is not a neutral, technical skill, although it is often treated as if it was. As Farrell (2006: 224–245) argues:

... because language is innately social it is also innately political in the sense that using language always entails taking a perspective on our world and our actions, on viewing some things as normal and some as not, some things as acceptable and some as not, some people as 'one of us' and some as 'one of them'. When people are communicating information ... they are also necessarily engaging in a political project ... They are routinely and often unconsciously making bids for what counts as legitimate working knowledge and who can say so. The success or failure of these bids will have material consequences – it will help determine who makes decisions in a workplace, who gets employed, what they get paid and whose opinion counts.

This also means that language does not only influence social order and power relations but contributes to reproducing them⁹.

Given this background, if we agree that language represents a significant social structure, what would then determine the form of influence English has on people in a region whose first language is Arabic? And what determines the value attributed to such influence?

³ Sewell, William (1992) A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation. *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (Jul., 1992), p. 1–29

⁴ It is important to note here that analysts from different schools of thought and disciplines have varied over a continuum of views between two extremes: those who believe that human practices are completely determined by external structures to others who think that we are free agents with freedom of choice. Two of the most notable theorist on this subject, Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, do not perceive agency and structure in isolation from each other but as two interrelated concepts that continuously affect each other.

⁵ Economic capital could be represented in financial accumulations, assets and other material wealth. Cultural capital is represented in social background, academic degrees or class. Political capital could be represented in official ranks or other types of authority

⁶ Gal, S (1989) Language and Political Economy. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 18 (1989), p.345–367

⁷ Richard, Johnstone (2010) Review of research on language teaching, learning and policy published in 2008. *Language Teaching*, 43, p.430–460

⁸ Ellis, N (2008) The dynamics of second language emergence: Cycles of language use, language change, and language acquisition. *The Modern Language Journal* 92.ii, p.232–249

⁹ Bourdieu, P (1991) *Language and symbolic power* (G Raymond and M Adamson, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

3

The changing value of English

As indicated earlier, the explanation of human practices in terms of the interrelation between agency, structure and the different types of capital is a simplification of the complexity of our social world. The way they influence each other varies greatly and can only be understood within the field or context in which they operate. The different types of capital actors accumulate over time do not have constant value at any time or social space. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explains the changing value of capital and how it lends actors power by using the metaphor of a card game. Bourdieu analogises the volume and structures of capital (types of capital) with the number of coloured tokens players have (red and yellow, corresponding to economic and cultural capital respectively). Bourdieu explains that it is not only the number of tokens that determines the power of the player, but also the composition of colours and their appreciated value in the different fields of the game. In a game where cultural capital has more value (for example, in the field of education), the more yellow tokens a player historically had (for example, number of academic degrees) the greater his or her power in that field and the greater his or her ability to accumulate more and other types of token (for example, economic capital)¹⁰.

This means that the different types of capital can be seen as currencies exchangeable with each other. However, their value appreciates and depreciates depending on the dominant power in the field of exchange. Taking again an example from the field of education, owning an expensive car (an economic capital) would not lead a person to earn a PhD degree (cultural capital), since the car value depreciates in a field of exchange dominated by academic achievements. Similarly, fluency in English (a cultural capital) may have a high exchange value when applying to a high paying job (economic capital) that requires that skill but may not have the same value of exchange in another field such as Chinese medicine.

In the Arab world, English appears to have a high capital value in many aspects of life reflected in the increasing use of English in everyday life and the growing rate of enrolment in English speaking schools and universities as well as English courses in various countries in the regions. Research has shown that there are various reasons for such a trend¹¹. This leads to the understanding of the different motivation and attitudes towards English language in order to explore why more people seeking to learn English in the region.

¹⁰ Bourdieu, P (1993). *Sociology in Question* (Nice, R Trans.), London, Sage Publications

¹¹ Schmidt, R, Boraie, D, and Kassabgy, O (1996). Foreign language motivation: Internal structure and external connections. R L Oxford (ed), *Language learning motivation: Pathways to the new century* p.14–87. Honolulu, HI: The University of Honolulu Press

4

Attitudes to learning English

As mentioned in the introduction, seeing language as a social structure means that it represents different things to different people depending on their social positions and their objective when they interact with or merely encounter this language. When we are researching a second language (L2) the attitudes towards it and motivations to learn it become more purposeful and distinct as opposed to mother tongue (or first language) which may unnoticeably be taken for granted as a natural aspect of socialisation. In this respect, some people intentionally tend to emphasise their knowledge of a second language – with even a particular dialect of it – to pursue particular objectives or reflect a certain image¹². Many young Arabs now would socialise in English (sometimes with a distinct American or British accent), signifying their foreign education, which creates reference to their social background where most of the upper classes of society receive private education in foreign and international schools. 'It was proposed that the more status a linguistic group is recognised to have ... the more vitality it could be said to possess as a collective entity' (Bourhis and Sachdev 1984: 98).

In this respect, the degree of importance of acquiring a language is dependent on purpose and motivation. Some groups may purposefully learn a second language with a specific interest in accessing a certain type of knowledge in that language while others may merely demonstrate their knowledge of a second language to acquire a certain symbolic status in society.

The systemic research study of motivations and attitudes towards second language acquisition is marked by Gardner and Lambert's (1972) ten-year research programme which distinguished this topic as a specialised area of research. In this study, they suggest a two dimensional model for motivation for second language learning, namely 'integrative' and 'instrumental' motivations¹³:

Integrative motivation is identified with positive attitudes toward the target language group and potential for integrating into that group, or at least an interest in meeting and interacting with members of the group. Instrumental orientation refers to more functional reasons for learning a language, such as to pass a required examination or to get a better job or promotion.

(Al Refai 2010: 5217)

Although Gardner and Lambert's theory gained prominence over the years with regard to the understanding of the motivation to learn a second language, several researchers cast doubt on the adequacy of their analysis due to the fact that they relied exclusively on this two dimensional model, since many other factors are seen to influence attitudes and motivation for learning a second language. Based on this, scholars call for the crucial need for a more contextualised study to factor the effect

of particular cultures and environments. Nonetheless, there were factors that proved to be common to most cultures. Among these there were four that were common to all groups: '(1) students learned a second language to travel, (2) to seek new friendships, (3) to acquire knowledge, and (4) for instrumental purposes' (Dornyei 1990: 46–47).

More advanced research asserts that the value attributed to second language learning could be based on both objective and subjective factors. Among objective factors could be the ability to access a job where the working language is English, while subjective factors means that some employers may place value judgments on applicants' professional competence based on his or her English language proficiency or accent even if it is not the working language or part of the job requirements (Molinsky, 2005). In both cases, the subjective and objective valuations of acquisition of English represent major factors that influence people's opportunities and hence socioeconomic conditions.

In the MENA region, many people seek to learn English for the immediate personal interests in order to gain more power in society such as access to job opportunities or affiliation with the upper social class of society where speaking English is one of their distinct features¹⁴. Others may use English for more public causes such as interfaith dialogue or engaging in dialogue for mutual cultural understanding with western communities.

Whether people are driven by a personal or a public cause, the different motivational attitudes towards learning English as a second language does not necessarily relate to a situation where the learner is in a country where English is the first language or in a regular direct contact with a community whose mother tongue is English. A second language learner may never be in contact with a British or an American person. Studies have also shown that the attitude towards a language or motivation for learning it does not necessarily reflect a respect or admiration of the culture of these societies or a desire to become like them. This is demonstrated in the different milieus and means of learning English as a second language.

The traditional means of learning language is through school or educational institutions in general. It was shown, however, that in some cases learning English in a classroom may lead to anxiety of learners especially when they have corrective feedback, this may influence their success in acquiring the language (Richard, 2010: 448).

Other means of learning is through pop culture, mass media with all its different forms of music, art, movies, computer games, etc. The fluency and proficiency of language through the different means of learning vary according to the level of exposure, the background of the learner and frequency of language use.

Most recently, a new term which was coined as 'MALL learning' (Mobile Assisted Language Learning). According to Richard (2010), 'the overview article by Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) set the scene for MALL as an emerging phenomenon which can encompass not only mobile phones but also ultra-portable laptops, handhelds, digital voice-recorders, MP3 and MP4 players, digital cameras and video-recorders.'

All these modes of acquiring different levels of proficiency and adaptation of English language depend highly on the purpose, motivation and attitude of the learner. Studies indicate that the success and eagerness of students (adult or young) in acquiring a second language depends to a large extent on the vitality of this language to the learners, i.e. the motivation and need for learning¹⁵. This reflects the relationship between the value of English and the degree of motivation to learning it. The more value English has in a certain social space, the more it enables people to exchange it with other forms of capital (cultural, economic, or political) in order to improve their conditions or acquire more power in society, and therefore, the stronger the motivation is to learn it.

¹² Giles, Howard and Johnson, Patricia (1987) Ethnolinguistic identity theory: a social psychological approach to language maintenance. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. Volume 1987, Issue 68, p.69–100, ISSN (Online) 1613-3668, ISSN (Print) 0165–2516

¹³ Noels, K A, Pelletier, L G, Clément, R and Valler R J (2003) *Why Are You Learning a Second Language? Motivational Orientations and Self-Determination Theory*. *Language Learning*, 53: p.33–64

¹⁴ Schmidt, R, Boraie, D, and Kassabgy, O (1996) Foreign language motivation: Internal structure and external connections. In R L Oxford (ed), *Language learning motivation: Pathways to the new century* p.14–87. Honolulu, HI: The University of Honolulu Press

¹⁵ Bourhis, R Y and Sachdev, I (1984) 'Subjective vitality perceptions and language attitudes: Some Canadian data', *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 3: p.97–126

References

- Al Rifai, N (2010) Attitude, motivation, and difficulties involved in learning the English language and factors that affect motivation in learning it, *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2/2: 5216–5227.
- Bourdieu, P (1991) *Language and symbolic power* (Raymond, G and Adamson, M translated.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P (1993) *Sociology in Question* (Nice, R translated.) London: Sage Publications.
- Bourhis, R and Sachdev, I (1984) Subjective vitality perceptions and language attitudes: Some Canadian data, *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 3: 97–126.
- Craith, M (2000) Contested identities and the quest for legitimacy. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 21/5: 399–413.
- Crystal, D (2003) *English as a global language* (2nd ed) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Csizer, K and Kormos, J (2008) Age-Related Differences in the Motivation of Learning English as a Foreign Language: Attitudes, Selves, and Motivated Learning Behavior. *58/2*: 327–355.
- Dornyei, Z (1990) Conceptualizing motivation in foreign language learning. *Language Learning*, pp. 45–78.
- Ellis, N (2008) The dynamics of second language emergence: Cycles of language use, language change, and language acquisition. *The Modern Language Journal* 9/2: 232–249.
- Farrell, L (2006) Labouring in the knowledge fields: researching knowledge in globalising workspaces. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 4/2: 237–248.
- Gal, S (1989) Language and Political Economy. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 18: 345–367.
- Gardner, R and Lambert, W (1972) *Attitudes and Motivation in Second-Language Learning*. Rowley, Ma: Newbury House.
- Giles, H and Johnson, P (1987) Ethnolinguistic identity theory: a social psychological approach to language maintenance. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. 1987/68: 69–100, ISSN (online) 1613–3668, ISSN (print) 0165–2516.
- Molinsky, A (2005) Language Fluency and the Evaluation of Cultural Faux Pas: Russians Interviewing for Jobs in the United States. *Social Psychology Quarterly*. 68/2: 103–120.

- Noels, K, Pelletier, L, Clément, R and Valler, R (2003) Why Are You Learning a Second Language? Motivational Orientations and Self-Determination Theory. *Language Learning* 53: 33–64.
- Norton, B (1997) Language, identity, and the ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly* 3/1: 409–429.
- Reid, S and Ng, S (1999) Language, Power, and Intergroup Relations. *Journal of Social Issues* 55/1: 119–139.
- Johnstone, R (2010) Review of research on language teaching, learning and policy published in 2008. *Language Teaching*, 43: 430–460.
- Schmidt, R, Boraie, D and Kassabgy, O (1996) 'Foreign language motivation: Internal structure and external connections', in Oxford L R (ed), *Language learning motivation: Pathways to the new century*. Honolulu, HI: The University of Honolulu Press.
- Sewell, William (1992) A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 98/1: 1–29.
- Shield, L and Kukulska-Hulme, A (2008) Editorial. *ReCALL* 20/3: 249–252.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T (2000) *Linguistic genocide in education or worldwide diversity and human rights?* Mahwah, J N: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Widdowson, H (1993) *The ownership of English*. IATEFL annual conference report, Plenaries 1993. Whitstable, UK: IATEFL.

Signs of belonging: culture, identity and the English language

Professor John E Joseph, University
of Edinburgh

1

Language and identity

Identities, whether of an individual or of a community, are not a given. They have to be forged – created, transmitted, reproduced, performed – textually and semiotically, that is, through signs. Language being the ultimate semiotic system, every identity ideally wants a language of its own. Not a wholly new language, but at least some segment of the vocabulary that insiders can use to distinguish themselves from outsiders.

In recent years an emerging strand of research in linguistics has been concerned with how languages function as more than cognitive systems, and texts as more than squiggles on a page. Languages and texts are so fundamental to our day-to-day interactions with others that it is easy to take them for granted, and to imagine that they are simply tools for conveying ideas. In reality, our very sense of who we are, where we belong and why, and how we relate to those around us, all have language at their centre.

The recognition of this deep linkage of languages and texts with identity – national, ethnic and religious on the grand scale, but operating no less crucially on more local levels – unites a wide range of research. Some is aimed at understanding the nature of a particular identity from the inside, some at overcoming problems that arise when two or more identities come into conflict.

Researchers have been analysing how people's choice of languages, and ways of speaking, do not simply *reflect* who they are, but *make* them who they are – and, in turn, how the languages themselves are made and remade in the process. Enough pieces of the puzzle of identity have been assembled for a coherent picture to begin emerging.

If communication were the only function of language, we could expect all mother-tongue speakers of English or any other language to sound more or less the same. The differences in regional and social class dialects can only be obstacles to efficient conveyance of a message. But dialect differences exist everywhere, so it is rational to suppose that this is not a 'design error' in human language. The differences too fulfil a function. They signal social belonging.

Suppose you stop me to point out that my shoelaces are untied. You are communicating more than just the fact embodied in your message. By expressing concern for my wellbeing, you are creating a social bond. Simultaneously, in the way you speak – your accent, how you address me (*Oi pal/mate/love/guv* versus *I beg your pardon*), your word choice and even your intonation patterns – you communicate information about yourself.

A slight change of intonation can change your concern into ridicule, and turn my interpretation of you on its head. As speakers of English we have been through a lifelong socialisation that leaves us instinctively able to interpret one another's background, where we come from, our level of education, our trustworthiness, and our aspirations.

Telephone conversations, where visual clues are lacking, make it evident that we also communicate information about our gender, age and race. Studies suggest that we make up our minds about these things within hearing a syllable or two. Even in emails and text messaging, research indicates that readers are able to pick up on very subtle signals in messages from strangers, and to construct an identity, an image, of the sender based upon them.

The members of a community, however defined, instinctively develop ways of sending and interpreting signals that do not merely show, but actually create, maintain and perform the bonds they have with one another. Some prominent researchers on the origins of language (Dunbar, 1996; Dessalles, 2007) have proposed in the last few years that this was the main impetus for the evolution of language: the need not merely to transmit messages, but to identify potential allies and enemies.

2

Cultural identity

Identities are manifested in language as, first, the categories and labels that people attach to themselves and others to signal their belonging; second, as the indexed ways of speaking and behaving through which they perform their belonging; and third, as the interpretations that others make of those indices. The ability to perceive and interpret the indices is itself part of shared culture. Every individual has a repertoire of identities of various kinds – some combination of national, ethnic, religious, generational and gender identities, together with those relating to social class, sexual orientation, profession, and various levels of sub- and supra-national belonging.

The term ‘cultural identity’ is sometimes applied to some or all of those just named above, while at other times it is reckoned to be a distinct category. On the one hand, culture and identity are never entirely separable: it is a defining trait of the concept of a culture that whatever beliefs, values, inclinations, tastes, practices and texts constitute it must also serve an identity function for those who participate in the culture. On the other hand, no group can be expected to be culturally homogeneous; the urge to tribalise is too deeply rooted in human nature; indeed, its ubiquity in animal behaviour testifies to how deep it runs in our evolutionary heritage.

So, for instance, within Islamic religious identity there are different ways of ‘being Muslim’ – in other words, a variety of Islamic cultural identities, subsumed under the umbrella of a religious identity that itself admits of variants, Sunni and Shia, and within the latter, Sufis, each with their distinctive practices and texts, even if most of their central beliefs are the same.

Cultural identities rarely carry great imaginative power unless they are textualised as national or racial/ethnic identities. People do not go to war for their culture the way they willingly die for their fatherland or their people, or other ‘imagined communities’ which they perceive as being naturally constituted, rather than just arbitrary, contingent cultural constructs (Anderson, 1991). And yet, it is not provable that any race or nation is a ‘natural’ entity; all are at least partly constructed, and at the same time, as Mary Catherine Bateson has pointed out, ‘Everything is natural’ (Bateson, 1995). Gender identities might seem to be directly linked to the physical configuration of a reproductive organs; and yet, people are readier to accept that an individual is a ‘woman trapped in a man’s body’, or vice-versa, than they are that someone is a Japanese trapped in an Ethiopian’s body.

Language is a practice – the systematic signifying practice of a particular group – through which texts are made. Language is itself also a text, inasmuch as those who share the practice of a particular language inevitably discuss what is the right or the better way of saying something, make certain expressions taboo, and otherwise engage in the sort of metatalk about the language that gives it a kind of social and cultural reality. The very concept of ‘a language’ arose historically only after, and in conjunction with, the practice of writing. In the modern world the culture of language has been centred around two particular types of texts, the lexicon and the grammar; such is their power that even scientific linguists, led by Chomsky, have ended up projecting these two text types into the brain, as modules of mind that supposedly have a physical (hence universal) basis. However, in doing so, these linguists have closed their eyes to the metaphorical nature of their projections and the fact that they are based on cultural textual artefacts.

3

Talking nations into existence

The title of the influential book *Imagined Communities*, by the anthropologist Benedict Anderson, refers to his concept of the nation as something not essentially ethnic or even institutional. It is a network of sorts, but one whose members will never all meet or communicate with one another. What binds them together is their shared belief in their membership of the community.

From Anderson's perspective, English and the other European national languages emerged in the 16th century 'as a gradual, unselfconscious, pragmatic, not to say haphazard development'. This allowed him to treat them as givens, upon which the concept of a nation subsequently gets built. But work by historians and linguists has turned up reams of evidence that these languages were constructed very deliberately, from what was previously a patchwork of local idioms, differing from one another so much that villagers from 40 miles apart might have trouble communicating, especially if a river or mountain separated them.

People who occupy contiguous territory and see themselves as having common interests tend to develop, over long stretches of time, ways of speaking that are distinctive to them. It marks them out from those who are either not geographically adjacent to them or are perceived as having rival interests. Before the 16th century these interest-territories were relatively small in extent – a shire or parish or at most a town. Creating a national language was a deliberate way of manipulating the symbolism of local belonging in order to create and manifest loyalties on a grander scale.

It is not simply the case that identity is built upon language; the reverse is also true. One of the first obstacles to be overcome in establishing a national identity is the non-existence of a national language. The 'nation-state myth' takes the world to consist naturally of ethnically homogeneous groups who occupy the territory of their ancestors, govern themselves and have a language that is uniquely theirs.

Whether Scots is part of 'the English language' or a distinct language is not a fact given in advance, nor even one that a linguist could establish scientifically. English, like every national language, is a cultural construct. Britain was until very recent times a patchwork of dialect groups, linguistically very diverse. The English language as we know it was collectively constructed by clerks of the Courts of Chancery within a relatively short period in the late 15th century, but even that is just part of a much bigger story. Every national language has its own comparable history which linguists are continuing to recover through a combination of archival research and textual analysis.

Once the national languages came into existence, their invention was promptly forgotten. The people for whom they represented national unity inevitably came to imagine that the language had always been there, and that such dialectal difference as existed within it was the product of recent fragmentation, when in fact it had preceded the unification by which the national language was forged.

In the words of the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1990), national languages 'are the opposite of what nationalist mythology supposes them to be, namely the primordial foundations of national culture and the matrices of the national mind. They are usually attempts to devise a standardised idiom out of a multiplicity of actually spoken idioms, which are downgraded to dialects.'

Forgetting that languages and nations were invented was the crucial step in turning national, ethnic, religious and linguistic identities from contingent historical creations into essential categories for which people are willing to lay down their lives. Imagining the language as something naturally occurring rather than constructed gave it the ultimate power that a system of symbols can possess: namely, banality. The less we are aware of the identity function of language, the more deeply it gets ingrained in us.

4

Language and cultural belonging

Silverstein (2003) has developed an approach to the analysis of the ‘indexicality’ of language that attempts to capture how cultural meanings – whether on the level of national identity, ethnicity, class, gender or any number of other factors – are encoded in and interpreted from utterances. He regards linguistic communication as containing a vast complex of indices, operating on various levels, from those of word meaning to the pragmatics of communicative ‘face’, to the various forms of micro- and macro-social indexing that constitute linguistic identity. His contention is that these levels are not positioned either haphazardly or even on a par with one another, but are ordered hierarchically.

If I use a non-standard English word in speaking with you, a swear word for instance, it indexes my relationship to you in a particular way, as a friend or as an enemy (depending on the word and the context). But this speech act also has immanent within it the potential for me to be indexed by others for what my pronoun choice says about me, and so on, at a potentially endless number of levels. This structured indexicality produces ‘registers’, ‘alternate ways of ‘saying “the same” thing’ considered ‘appropriate to’ particular contexts of usage’ (Silverstein, 2003, p. 212), and within which culturally specific meanings are ‘enregistered’ (for a particular application, see Agha, 2003; also Agha, 2007).

Blommaert (2007) has contested Silverstein’s approach on the grounds that it focuses too much on the linguistic sign, rather than on the social institutions that transmit and reproduce the orders of indexicality. Indexical order cannot explain why an individual’s linguistic behaviour is regular enough to be identifiable as his or her own. For Blommaert (2007, p.117):

‘Register’ can be characterised as follows: clustered and patterned language forms that index specific social personae and roles, can be invoked to organise interactional practices used for typifying or stereotyping. Speaking or writing through such registers involves insertion in recognisable (normative) repertoires of ‘voices’.

The current debate among linguistic anthropologists is to what extent these indices are precise and fixed or ‘constitute a field of potential meanings – an indexical field, or constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable’ (Eckert, 2008, p. 453).

5

Globalisation and English

For Wilhelm von Humboldt in the first part of the 19th century, the grammatical structure of a language provided its 'inner form', and determined the intellectual power of the people who speak it. Although he devoted much of his life to studying what is particular to every language of the world, Humboldt implicitly took the ideal of language to be Greek. English had undergone too much mixture for his taste, compromising its inner form and hence diluting its creative and expressive power. Not only did it lack the future tense of Greek, but taking on two ways of expressing future events, one with will and another with going to, seemed an extravagant waste of mental energy.

What Humboldt could not deny was that languages change with succeeding generations. If not – if they are maintained in a 'pure' form by institutions devoted not merely to slowing change, but to stopping it altogether – they become the dried husk of a classical language, no longer the living mode of expression of a people experiencing and shaping their world.

From today's perspective, the mixedness, the 'promiscuity' of English has been part of its success as a world language, says Humboldt. The process of being learned and reshaped over centuries by people from various nations who came together in these islands left English with a relatively large lexicon and small grammar. That, in turn, may have made it easier for people from still further-flung nations to learn. No language is easier to learn than any other as a mother tongue, but adults are better able to master words than precise sound differences or grammar.

But changes in the last decade or two have reopened the question of how good the prospects are for the English language carrying on in anything like its present form through to, say, the end of the next century. The present status of English is bound up with what is popularly known as 'globalisation'. As economic historians point out, globalisation is not the unprecedented, innovative development it may appear, but a return to the conditions that prevailed internationally prior to the 19th century. Then, strict protectionist measures were introduced that persisted in stronger or weaker form until the 1990s, when the pendulum swung significantly in the free trade direction.

Shortly before the first great wave of international protectionism, in 1873, President Grant, in his Second Inaugural Address, declared his belief that the day was just around the corner when the world would be unified by having English as the language of all humanity, under a single government and a single army. The reasons he thought made this inevitable are the same ones cited today: unprecedented developments in transport and communication, in the form of rapid steam-powered travel and the telegraph.

Fifty years later, the world had changed; economic and cultural boundaries were shored up in the wake of WWI. Although the perception that English would be the universal language had diminished, its importance as the language of both the British Empire and the USA held steady. An interesting book from this period is *Pomona, or, the Future of English*, published in 1926. Its author, Basil de Sélincourt, was a linguistic 'vitalist', believing that languages are organisms in the truest sense and must evolve naturally, with the vitality of their evolution being directly connected to the spiritual vitality of their speakers.

De Sélincourt thought American English would be the language's salvation and its future, providing the necessary vitality to compensate for a spiritually exhausted England. He feared, however, that the further spread of English would result in the meanings of words losing their vital connection to the Anglophone soul: 'the adopted language would tend to be debased, since men of different schemes of experience would use the same words in different senses, so step by step obliterating their true sense and leaving them flavourless' (p. 41).

Over a period of several decades in the 20th century it appeared that change in English could be controlled from the centre – from institutions such as the BBC, the educational system, the press. It was always something of an illusion. A relative homogeneity reigned, but only because public voice was limited to a small élite. Into the 1970s, English language education in the post-colonial world was still an élite option, as indeed it was in the English-speaking world; only two per cent of the population could expect to attend university. By the 1980s, however, the expansion had begun which would lead us to today's 40 per cent university attendance. This spread of opportunity has been a great thing, something which future generations will mark as a major achievement of the late twentieth century.

And yet the expansion has brought real problems and tensions, not the least of which is that, in the post-colonial world, student bodies are no longer composed of a small elite aspiring to speak Oxbridge English. They value English, but increasingly they have rejected the imperial baggage that UK- or US-determined norms seem to them to represent. In part, the nightmare vision of Pomona has come to pass: the fabric of the English language rent asunder by too many people using it in too many different forms. Again, from the semiological perspective, that is indeed how it can appear, especially when you are in the Tesco off Russell Square in London and unable to understand what is being said to you by the checkout clerk who is a recent refugee, or perhaps even not so recent.

In the Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East and North Africa, globalisation has been connected with significant social changes, none of which lacks precedents in earlier history. For centuries, people from these lands have emigrated northward and westward – as well as to south of the Sahara, and eastward deep into Asia – usually without returning, which was a possibility only for a small, privileged pre-revolutionary élite. Their princely life in their homeland could never be matched by a middle-class existence in Europe or the New World.

For the emigrating masses the reverse was the case. Despite their abiding love for the homeland of their memoryscape, it was a place of relative constraint, limitations on education, on opportunity, and on whom one might associate with and marry. It may not have been a life of poverty or squalor, but one easily squeezed at the whim of a ruler or even of a corrupt local official. The comforts and chains of tradition stood in stark contrast to the modernity represented by the West.

What has changed with the globalisation trend of the last two decades is that, first, more of the children of the middle class went to Europe or the Americas for their university education and professional training, and, second, more of them have returned home. Adding to this trend, the expansion of overseas universities into the region has meant that a western education, in a western language, has been available without leaving the homeland. Increasingly, the language has been English, whereas in previous periods it was at least as likely to be French. The rise of English has been marked even in the former French colonies of North Africa, where the French linguistic heritage remains strong.

The result is that, throughout the Middle East and North Africa, European languages generally, and English in particular, are indexed for 'modernity', 'technology' and 'education', with all the associations – negative as well as positive – which those terms carry. Amongst the positive associations are those of democracy, even though there is no logical reason why that concept is not perfectly compatible with Arabic or any other language. We are dealing here with an indexation that is essentially historical, and based on a semiotics of difference: if the region's traditional cultures are associated with autocracy, paternalism and the like, and if Arabic is their traditional language of expression, then English will be perceived and felt as embodying the opposite features.

6

‘World Englishes’

When it comes to the use of English beyond those countries where English is the mother tongue of most speakers, the situation is not the same as for the immigrant in London. Yet we often act as though it were, as though English were our ‘gift’ to the world (which, however, we don’t really give, since we still expect to retain control over its norms).

A significant band of opinion holds that the English-language teaching establishment is engaged in ‘linguistic imperialism’, to cite the title of Phillipson’s influential 1992 book, and that people from outside the UK who come here to learn how to teach English, then return to their native land in the hope of ‘raising up’ the educational level of their countrymen, are in fact the running dogs of us imperialists, the enemy within. The Sri Lankan scholar Suresh Canagarajah (1999) is among many who argue that English-language teachers outside the traditionally English-speaking countries should adopt strategies of resistance, eschewing UK and US norms in favour of their own homegrown ones, and thus bring about appropriation of the language as something that belongs to them.

Again, this seems simply an acceptance of what ultimately is bound to happen in any case. Those who learn English well will be those motivated to do so because they feel that the language is part of them. The features that mark their English as different from yours or mine are the ones that embody their particular identity in the language. That makes the language theirs, which is a good thing – except that it does inevitably lead to fragmentation, of the sort I experience with my Tesco clerk in London.

The more one studies the history of languages, the harder it is to doubt that such fragmentation really is inevitable. Even when an elite maintained Latin in something like a classical form over 1500 years, the way most people spoke it developed into what we now call Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Catalan, Romanian and so on. We no longer think of these languages as ‘bad Latin’, but that is how they were perceived for the first centuries of their existence, and, in a sense, that is what they are – just as Latin itself was bad Proto-Indo-European, which may itself have started as bad something else, lost in prehistory.

English might well go the way of the Romance languages, but it might instead follow the somewhat different route of Arabic or Chinese. The difference between Mandarin and Cantonese is on the order of that between English and Swedish. Yet the cultural belief is maintained that this is ‘one language’, even if, to a linguist, it looks like a family of related languages. This is possible in part because of a writing system that is largely, though not entirely, idea-based. English too has a spelling system that is far from phonological, making it easier for many different dialects to be written in the same way. But Chinese also has a very unified culture, extending beyond China

proper to include Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and elsewhere, and it is the strength of that cultural belief that makes the linguistic unity a reality.

The same is true across the Arabic-speaking world. Hassaniyya, spoken by an estimated 2.8 million in Mauritania and in parts of Algeria, Libya, Mali, Morocco, Niger, Senegal and Western Sahara, is generally considered and referred to as an Arabic dialect despite not being mutually intelligible with other dialects. Its speakers do not even understand and are not understood by speakers of Moroccan Arabic, which itself has limited intelligibility with Gulf dialects. Here again, the existence of a unified language is nevertheless shored up by culturally maintained belief in a unified textual and grammatical tradition, represented by Fus'ha.

English does not benefit from such a unified culture – less and less so the further it spreads, as de Sélincourt perceived. If one were to ask, 'Does the English language have a future?', the answer would be, 'No'. The English languages have a future, or the English language family has a future, or indeed, if you prefer, the English language has many futures. All these statements are true because they recognise the ongoing differentiation of 'world Englishes', which, again, could be halted only by freezing English into a classical form – freezing it, that is, to death. Even then, it would, like Latin, overlay but not replace the Indian, Chinese, African, even European Englishes that are daily pursuing their own normative paths.

Finally, might not new technological developments change this situation, forestalling fragmentation by keeping people across the English-speaking world in constant communication with each other? Could Twitter be the salvation of the unified English language in the long term? These are unprecedented technologies. But that is exactly how things appeared to President Grant in 1873. The internet and Twitter keep people in contact, but also allow innovative changes to spread more quickly. They also provide sites that allow diasporic and even semi-imaginary linguistic identity communities to flourish – the Cornish language, for example, which reputedly became extinct at the end of the 18th century has a new lease of life through the hundreds who now use it daily online.

There are strong signs that, across the Middle East and North Africa, the internet has become a social force every bit as powerful as in Europe and the Americas. Indeed, it allows for the constant, real-time existence of a pan-Arabic language culture that extends across the globe, interweaved with a pan-English language culture that runs still further and deeper. It is important to remember, though, that the 'polyphony' which this suggests is not an unprecedented development, let alone a 'post-modern' one (whatever that means). In fact, the term polyphony was first used in this context in the 1930s by Bakhtin, to designate a condition of language generally: that dialects and voices are always intermingled, and always have been (see Bakhtin, 1981). No language can ever be 'pure' of the ongoing influence of the other languages with which it co-exists in the repertoires of bilingual speakers.

7

Conclusion

Whatever need drives us to want a shared language also drives us to embody who we are within that language, to ‘appropriate’ it as our own, a locus of our identity. Language is simultaneously public and personal, a means both of communication and expression. Its role as a locus of identity is no less strong, and it would be a mistake to underestimate it. Over the decades to come, we might need to start getting used to speaking of the English languages in the plural. It is the sort of devolution of linguistic norms that helps preserve a union, by making those in the periphery feel less under the imperial control of those at the centre. As for offering courses in Egyptian English to natives of Edinburgh, we’re not there yet. But there was a time not so long ago when the thought of teaching French in Rome would have seemed no less strange.

Recent events in the Arabic-speaking world have shown the power of communication via the internet. There is a general belief that the explosion of this new medium is leading to fundamental changes in English and other languages, whether in the form of language mixture or a weakening of norms – but change in the use of language has always been perceived as a weakening, regardless of whether there was any basis for the perception. The best established changes seem to involve the loss of long-standing cultural norms for differences in register between spoken and written language, with the internet bringing about a blurring of the distinction (see Crystal, 2001).

Yet as Skype continues taking over online time previously spent typing messages, it may be that this blurring will prove to be a temporary phenomenon. Wilhelm von Humboldt may have been wrong about many things, but he was right to see that, although languages are constantly undergoing change, the pace of really fundamental change is in fact extremely slow. In effect, the signs do not change anywhere near so quickly as our readings of them do. But, caught up in the whirl of even superficial changes happening at what seems like a daily – even an hourly – basis, it is easy to feel disoriented, as if culture, identity and meaning were all slipping through our fingers.

References

- Agha, A (2003) The social life of cultural value. *Language and Communication* 23: 231–273.
- Agha, A (2007) *Language and social relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Anderson, B (1991) *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. (2nd ed) London and New York: Verso.
- Bakhtin, M (1981) *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*, ed by M. Holquist, translated by Emerson, C and Holquist, M. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bateson, M (1995) 'On the naturalness of things', in Brockman, J and Matson, K (eds) *How things are: A science tool-kit for the mind*. New York: William Morrow & Co.; London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Blommaert, J (2007) Sociolinguistics and discourse analysis: Orders of indexicality and polycentricity. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 2: 115–130.
- Bourdieu, P (1991) *Language and symbolic power: The economy of linguistic exchanges*, in Thompson, J (ed) translated by Raymond, G and Adamson, M. Cambridge: Polity, in association with Basil Blackwell.
- Canagarajah, A (1999) *Resisting linguistic imperialism in English teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, D (2001) *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- de Sélincourt, B (1926) *Pomona: or, the future of English*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.
- Dessalles, J (2007) *Why we talk: The evolutionary origins of language*. Translated by Grieve, J. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dunbar, R (1996) *Grooming, gossip and the evolution of language*. London & Boston: Faber & Faber.
- Eckert, P (2008) 'Variation and the indexical field.' *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 12: 453–476.
- Hobsbawm, E (1990) *Nations and nationalism since 1780: Programmes, myth, reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Humboldt, W von (1999) *On language: On the diversity of human language construction and its influence on the mental development of the human species*. Transl. by Heath, P 2nd ed Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Orig. ed *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*, Berlin: Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1836).

Joseph, J (2004) *Language and identity: National, ethnic, religious*. Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Joseph, J (2006) *Language and politics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Joseph, J (2010) 'Identity' Llamas, C and Watt, D *Language and identities*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press p. 9–17.

Joseph, J (ed) (2010) *Language and politics: Major themes in English studies*. 4 vols. London & New York: Routledge.

Phillipson, R (1992) *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Silverstein, M (2003) 'Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life.' *Language and Communication* 23: 93–229.

**‘They think we’re
stupid’: exploring
discourse and identity
– the voice of the
young Muslim woman
living in the UK**

Dr Bróna Murphy, University of Edinburgh

1

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 19th century, a large Muslim presence has existed in Britain (Abbas, 2005). Around that time, small groups of Muslim seamen and traders from the Middle East began to settle, for example, around the ports of Liverpool and South Shields. Post-war saw the major growth of the Muslim populations in the UK with the arrival of Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Indians, for instance, to fill the labour shortage in industrial cities such as London, Birmingham and elsewhere (Abbas, 2005: 18–9). Since this time, the Muslim population of Britain has continued to increase. In 2005, it was recorded (Abbas, 2005) that Muslims were the second most represented group in the UK, behind Christians. More recently, according to the Office of National Statistics (internet: 2010), the number of Muslims residing in the UK has risen to approximately 1.8 million. However, in the period since the terrorist attacks and their aftermath, Muslims, largely through their portrayal in the media, have become a focus of national concern and debate (Saaed, 2007) in the UK and worldwide. Representations of Muslims in linguistic literature has been addressed very recently in work by McEnery (2008), Al-Hejij (2009) and Baker (2010) who have been exploring British and American press. In particular, women have become the focus of Western fascination and are often represented as victims in both British and American press (Al-Hejij, 2009). The media are interested in how Muslim women dress and the reasons behind their decisions to wear the hijab or the burqa. Al-Hejij (2009) lists the forms ‘hijab’, ‘veil’, ‘wearing’, ‘wear’, ‘cover’, and ‘worn’ as common collocates of the cluster ‘Muslim women’ in BBC news reports. In addition, he states that the cluster is also associated with the forms ‘violence’, ‘rape’, ‘killed’ and ‘victims’. He also highlights that common modal verbs that occur to the right of the cluster ‘Muslim women’ are modals of obligation such as ‘must’, ‘should’, and permission such as ‘allowed to’, among others which all serve to provide a negative picture of the Muslim woman.

In February 2010, for example, the BBC (among others) covered stories about the banning of the burqa in France and it became a topic of debate at both national and international level. Politicians, journals and lay people across the world voiced their opinions for and against, while in the furore, very little – if anything – was heard from the women concerned. Recent media fascination also continues to depict Muslim women, for the most part, as being controlled by their Muslim husbands and male relatives. In March 2011, for instance, the British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* ran a story highlighting how Muslim women have been banned from travelling more than 48 miles from their homes without being chaperoned by a male relative. In general, the mediatisation of Muslim women, which is influential in swaying public opinion about who Muslim women are, has been negative and as Merali (2006) argues, as a result the portrayal of the Muslim woman has been problematised and comes to attention, largely, because of this perceived negativity presented in the press.

In a recent poll I conducted and which was sent to a group of 20 males and females in the 20 to 35 age bracket in Scotland and Ireland, over 50 per cent of those who replied highlighted that they did not have very much contact with Muslim women while 42.9 per cent stated that although they did not know very much about Muslim women, they were interested in finding out more. While this is just a very small sample, it is nonetheless enlightening as it provides a snapshot into what people in the host society think. In response to the question in the poll 'Do you understand why women wear the burqa or the hijab?', 50 per cent of the participants showed uncertainty in relation to this question. One respondent stated, 'It is for religious reasons but not sure what the basis is in their religious belief'. Another said, 'I don't understand why they wear the hijab/burqa. My opinion is it is again linked to religious and cultural beliefs and norms'. Other respondents claimed that wearing the veil was linked to cultural or religious beliefs but did not provide any more specific details. In general, the replies suggested uncertainty and a lack of information with regard to the women's reasons for their choice of dress. In response to the question 'Are you interested in why the women wear the burqa/hijab?', 53 per cent said they were not very interested while 47 per cent claimed to be interested. One respondent highlighted, 'Yes. It would be interesting to hear their opinions about wearing it, if they feel this influences how others view them and if it restricts them in any way'. Another woman said that she would be interested in understanding more about the burqa because 'it is so different to what Western women wear and I feel that it is misunderstood'. In another question which asked 'Do you ever find yourself judging Muslim women that you meet?', 57 per cent of the women replied positively to this question. One respondent stated that she was 'guilty of judging all Muslim women with regards to arranged marriages' but claimed that it is because she does not know enough about Muslim cultural differences. This respondent's choice of the word 'guilty' suggested that this was not good practice on her behalf and implied that she felt bad at having behaved in such a way. However, she also acknowledged that her limited knowledge about Muslim women played a role in her thinking in this way. Another highlighted that she felt 'sorry for the women because they do not have equal rights to men' while another said that wearing the burqa, for instance, 'should be the women's individual choice and not enforced by their culture'. It is interesting that although only 50 per cent of the respondents have no contact with Muslim women, they still have views which mirror those that are traditionally associated with stereotypical portrayals of Muslim women in the media, such as arranged marriages, and enforcing the wearing of the burqa/hijab.

In this article, I look beyond the media portrayal of Muslim women and society's perceptions and look directly to a group of young Muslim women, who have arrived in the UK in the past five years. In this preliminary small-scale study¹, I will focus in particular on three semi-structured hour-long interviews with eight women from three Muslim countries: Iran, Libya and Algeria. The women, who range in age from 22 to 28, are all married, except for one, and are living in the UK with their husbands, and studying at third level institutions. The main aim of the interviews was to hear the voice of the young Muslim woman living in the UK in order to gain insights into how the women see themselves as Muslims living in a non-Muslim host country, in light of the recent events and their portrayal in the media as well as reactions from people in

the host society. The interviews were transcribed and the transcripts were analysed using specialised linguistic software to investigate frequently occurring linguistic trends and patterns in the discourse²; the data were also explored from a discourse analysis perspective. From an initial exploration of the interview transcripts, three main themes emerged from the women's use of language, which revealed insights into their identity: a) the importance of the women's Muslim beliefs in defining who they are, b) the role of perceptions in relation to how they are seen by non-Muslims, which plays a part in how, in fact, they view themselves, c) the role of the English language in terms of how they are perceived by their host society.

¹ The small-scale study presented here is part of a larger project on exploring identity and Muslim women (20–60 years old) discourse. It is funded by the British Academy (2010–2012).

² The linguistic software used in this study is Wordsmith Tools (Scott, 2008) which facilitates the creation of frequency lists which show how frequent single words/word clusters are in the data. It also allows us to explore the words in context by running concordance lines (see Figure 1 for an example of concordance lines). Concordance lines present the node word in the centre and provides context on either side.

2

Identity and Muslim faith

The first theme emerging from the data, which seems to be central to the women's identity as Muslims living in the UK, is the importance of maintaining their own identity while living outside their own cultural and religious setting. In an exploration of the most common three word combinations in the data, using Wordsmith Tools (Scott, 2008), it was found that the women frequently make reference to the importance of being what they refer to as 'a good Muslim' or 'a real Muslim' (see Figure 1). The concordance lines highlight, for example, the women's personal desire ('I want') to be 'a good Muslim' (lines 1 and 3), the importance of the hijab in being 'a good Muslim' woman (line 2), the role of having knowledge of Islam and solid beliefs in god (lines 4, 5 and 6). The co-text that interplays with the clusters is important in illustrating insights into what the women have to say about being 'a good Muslim' and 'a real Muslim' and, therefore, words and phrases to the left and to the right of the cluster have been bolded. For instance, modals such as 'have to' and 'should' occur to the left of the clusters in lines 4, 5, 6 and 7 highlighting obligation in relation to the importance of good practice in Islam. The lines reflect the women's preoccupation with maintaining high standards in their religious practices. The seven occurrences of the forms in context can be grouped into three sub-themes: a) personal desire (lines 1, 3), b) wearing the hijab (line 2), c) religious beliefs (lines 4, 5, 6, 7).

Figure 1: Concordance lines for a good Muslim/a real Muslim

| | | | |
|---|--|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | Mmh mmh I want to be | a good Muslim | and do you sometimes |
| 2 | Muslim to be real Muslim | a good Muslim | so you have to wear hijab |
| 3 | be as much as I can I want to be | a good Muslim | not just a Muslim because |
| 4 | about Islam you have to go to | a real Muslim | who believes in god and |
| 5 | Like this they should come to | a real Muslim | and ask him about Islam |
| 6 | about Islam you have to go to | a real Muslim | a real Muslim who believes |
| 7 | wearing or not but you have to be | a real Muslim | from inside |

Personal desire

Concordance line 1 above reflects the women's personal desire to be a good Muslim. The women show their wish to follow the laws of Islam by saying 'I want to be a good Muslim'. Unlike popular public opinion and portrayals in the media, there is no indication that the women are being forced to practise their religion. Their use of language seems to indicate that their decision is personal. Concordance line 3 reflects this further when the women highlight that they want to be more than just a Muslim; they want to be 'a good Muslim'. It seems to be implied that there is an ideal state of 'Muslim-ness' which the women wish to meet. Although they do not mention explicitly what it is, they seem to be aware of the criteria and make reference to a number of issues (hijaab, solid understanding of their faith and good practice, etc). The use of 'as much as I can' in line 3 seems also to suggest that there are varying levels of 'Muslim-ness' and that the Muslim woman must strive in order to meet the highest level.

Wearing the hijaab

One of the criteria, it seems, that the women have to meet in order to be 'a good/real Muslim' is to wear the hijaab (see concordance line 2). The women's own background knowledge, beliefs and attitudes (Huckin, 1997) are revealed here as it is implied that not to wear the hijaab would mark a woman as not being 'a real/good Muslim'. This insight is interesting in light of the media portrayals which indicate that women only wear the hijaab because they are forced to and because they do not have freedom of choice. Here, the women are saying that it is an important part of their religion and it is embedded in their religious and cultural beliefs which make them who they are.

Religious beliefs

Concordance lines 4, 5, 6 and 7 reveal the importance the women assign to being a good Muslim which again seems to relate to their own subjective state of ideal 'Muslim-ness'. The women highlight that not all Muslims are what they consider to be 'real'. In lines 4 and 5, it is highlighted that a real Muslim believes in God and the prophet and knows their faith. As highlighted in line 7, a real Muslim is one who internalises Islamic practices and acts on them. In Extract 1, Nuha (26, Libya) states:

Extract 1

Sometimes they do not follow all the way sometimes they drink that is not good Muslim but still Muslim ... I am sending out my message [laughing] don't look to Islam in this way if you want to know about Islam you have to go to a real Muslim a real Muslim who believes in God and believes in the prophet and what he says and prophet and God never ask us to kill the others ...

This particular extract is insightful in that at the beginning of Nuha's utterance above, she says, 'I am sending out my message'. Backgrounded here is perhaps the assumption that this is her opportunity to put right the misconceptions that have

been communicated about Muslims in terms of Muslim identity. She states that ‘God never asks us to kill the others’. This, I suggest, is a direct reference to the terrorist activity in the past decade and the fact that Muslims, as a result of media portrayal, have largely appeared in a negative light. Nuha is, in her own way, taking this opportunity to put forward her version of the truth in order to make clear that her religion is not to blame. Attempting to clear the negativity surrounding the identity of Muslims seems to be what is being communicated here as an undercurrent to putting forward what is important for them as Muslims which is a belief in God and the prophets. It seems that Nuha sees the discussion group as a public forum for doing good and putting across her message regarding the portrayals of Muslims.

The women’s discussion of what it means to be ‘a good/real Muslim’ reveals insights into their religious identity, which is framed by cultural attitudes and beliefs. Their religion and adherence to its practices emerges from the data as being a very important part of who they are. They use the modal ‘have to’ when discussing wearing the hijab and how it is one of the ways Muslim women can show that they are not only real Muslims but good Muslims. Their outerwear is integral to their identity and how they are seen and how they want to be seen. It is this outerwear that contributes, in part, to them feeling and being seen as good Muslims. The use of ‘I want’ in relation to being ‘a good Muslim’ shows their willingness to do what they need to do to fulfil the criteria which they feel show that one is ‘a good Muslim’. It also suggests a freedom behind the women’s decision to choose and follow the Muslim way of life. Knowledge of Islam and a belief in God and the prophet also seem to be criteria for feeling or being regarded as ‘a good or real Muslim’. This exploration of the data here highlights the importance of Muslim beliefs in the construction of identity.

Returning to the original set of concordance lines for the clusters, discussed above in Figure 1, and adding in the last two concordance lines for ‘a real Muslim’, we find that the cluster is also used in a very different way to the context in which it occurs in lines 1 to 7 presented above. The two lines, lines 8 and 9, illustrated below, show that the women use the cluster with the form ‘very very extremist’ which implies that there is a negative association with being ‘a real Muslim’. Also, if we look to the left of the cluster ‘a real Muslim’, we find that it occurs with ‘they think’ and ‘they say’ which reflects that the women appear to construct their own identity in relation to how they think they are perceived by others.

The next section will focus in more detail on the role perceptions play in the construction of the women’s identity.

Figure 2: Concordance lines for a real Muslim

| | | | |
|---|--|---------------|-------------------------------|
| 8 | because it depends they think that’s | a real Muslim | is very very extremist that’s |
| 9 | the long ah coat they say she’s very | a real Muslim | she’s very very extremist |

3

Identity and perceptions

Despite the overwhelming desire to maintain their Muslim identity when in their host surroundings, the women's portrayal of who they are seems also to be very much influenced by their perceptions of what they feel non-Muslims think of them. This facet of their identity and the second theme to emerge from the interview data seems to ring loudly through the interviews carried out with the young women. Their view of themselves is shaped by how they think others (non-Muslims) perceive them. In one interview, Nuha (26, Libya) states:

Extract 2

You see when they look at me I feel that, in my point of view, I feel that when they look at me wearing the long ah coat, they say she's very real Muslim, she's very very extremist because ... they think a that real Muslim is a very very extremist that's why I'm trying to be more ah more you know more fashion to be [laughing] show them I'm not extremist like a baby trying to fit in.

This quote from Nuha illustrates her perceptions of what she feels non-Muslims in the UK think about her. Her statement shows how she thinks members of society ('they') see her or Muslim women, in general. She perceives that society sees her as being 'very very extremist' because she wears a long coat. This statement is likely to come from Nuha's awareness perhaps about how her outerwear might be perceived. She tends to think that the fact that she wears a long coat will be regarded in a negative way by non-Muslims. It could be suggested that her views and perceptions may have been influenced by external events such as, for example, her experiences of how Muslims tend to be viewed by society, as a result of the media since the terrorist attacks and other global events, as mentioned earlier. This would seem to suggest, simply from this extract alone, that such events and the backlash from them have impacted on how and why the women see themselves through others' eyes.

Nuha continues to show increased awareness of the situation she is experiencing and states that she has adapted her outerwear in a bid to fit in and stand out less. She is conscious of her identity as a Muslim woman and that her dress marks her as being 'different'. She states that she is trying to be more fashionable. This suggests that she feels that at present, she is not fashionable which perhaps, for her, indicates an imbalance of power with regards to how she sees herself and how she views herself as an individual living in the UK. Nuha provides indications that she is, perhaps, inferior. For instance, she likens herself to 'a baby who is trying to fit in'. This is interesting as a baby is helpless and dependent on others. It is possible that Nuha, for example, sees the non-Muslims in the host country as being more powerful as they belong to the host society and country. She sees herself in the minority and, therefore, in a less powerful position.

Another example which supports the view that the new Muslim women's identity is tied up with how they think others perceive them can be seen in the following extract from Nahid (26, Libya).

Extract 3

If we are real Muslim [they think] we are following something not real it's just we are stupid because we are following this guy [Allah]... we are not enjoying the life like the others we are stupid.

Nahid reveals here that she thinks if she behaves like what she perceives to be the behaviour of 'a real Muslim', UK society regards her and other women as 'stupid'. Nahid says that because they follow God and the prophets and Muslim beliefs, they are seen as 'stupid' and not open to enjoying life as possibly non-Muslims are. This insight shows how the women see themselves through non-Muslim eyes. It is again backgrounded, to some extent, in perhaps their own direct experiences of living in the UK and media portrayal of Muslim women or indeed encounters with non-Muslims in the host country. Another example shows further insights into the women's perceptions of what the host society thinks of them. Nahid says:

Extract 4

They feel that we are very very very tough tough people.

Interestingly, she is not sure if this is true as she does not have any concrete evidence that this is so and later reveals that her views are very much influenced by media coverage of Muslim women which she does recognise and acknowledge. The view Nahid seems to be communicating is that her identity as a Muslim woman in the UK is shaped by her surroundings, the media, others' perceptions of them, although she is not entirely certain that these are indeed others' perceptions. While the earlier poll indicated a lack of information generally in relation to Muslim women, none of the respondents criticised the women as harshly as Nahid puts forward above, or referred to them as stupid for believing in their religion. So while the women may be correctly noticing some behaviour, there is also a risk that they are overinterpreting actions or behaviour because they have also, in their own way, been swayed by media portrayal. It may also be the fact that they feel different because they are visitors to the host country and are not yet at ease with how they are accepted or if they have been accepted in light of the negativity with which they are portrayed. This theme of perceptions and identity is given strength by the fact that one of the women in the interviews mentions that she is very 'conscious of what others' think about her as a Muslim'. She credits this to being dressed differently from the majority and feeling part of a religious and cultural minority.

In another insight from the interview data, the women put forward a view of themselves as normal women which again reflects the gap they feel exists between them as Muslims and UK citizens. They align themselves to the women in the host country by saying 'we are tested, we have problems like the others'. They seem to want to portray themselves as being like other women and not being defined by their religion or sensationalist portrayals of cultural or religious difference. They add, 'we make mistakes as well' which again reinforces their desire to be seen on a level playing field. Finally they explicitly state, 'We are human'. The women seem to feel that they are not entirely viewed like other women because of their religion or their culture which impacts on how well they integrate into the host society. They want to be accepted, like other women, and not judged or associated with negative press. However, initial insights from the poll carried out earlier suggests that unless more information is made available which accurately reflects and portrays Muslim women in a positive light as well as more attempts at integration, it is more difficult for the women not to be perceived, on the whole, by the problematic media portrayal which is at least contributing, or so it seems, to public opinion.

4

Identity, English and culture

The final theme emerging from the linguistic analysis brings up the discussion of the women's use of the English language in relation to how they are perceived by the host society. One young qualified Iranian medical doctor (Ruia, 25) said that she was treated as an uneducated lowly citizen when she went to offer her services at the volunteer office and accredited this to the fact that she spoke with a marked accent. Although she owns a career which is highly regarded by society in her home country, in the UK, because of her language skills and the fact that, she states, she comes from a less developed country, she is perceived as being uneducated and of a lower standing and only fit for a certain kind of job. Ruia highlights that despite wanting to find a volunteer position which would involve working with the elderly in a medical setting, she was offered only a limited number of positions as a waitress in the service industry. Ruia highlights how her language use is very much an indicator of how she is perceived or misperceived by the host country. She says, 'It shows that we are different.' She highlights that this frustrates her and has an impact on how she sees herself. However, she is also aware of the cultural issues surrounding the use of English, others' perceptions and questions of identity. She highlights how some Muslim women, for instance, from other nationalities and backgrounds have lived for over twenty years in Edinburgh and still do not speak English. She highlights how these examples taint how the host society sees all Muslim women who are living in the UK.

This insight reflects an incident one of the older women who took part in the larger project mentioned in relation to the use of English and how she was perceived. Kal (52, Pakistani, grew up in the UK) recalls looking at perfumes in a pharmacy when the shop assistant came along and told her that the perfumes were very expensive, speaking to her very slowly in a way that suggested that Kal did not understand English. Kal responded:

Extract 5

I can read and I do know about perfumes I says well I got this this this this but this is what I'm looking for

Kal added that the shop assistant was very surprised by her reaction and she realised that she had misjudged the situation. Kal makes the point that, very often, Muslim women are pre-judged and, as a result, misjudged based on the host society's assumptions which are ill-informed. This also seems to be the case in Ruia's situation.

In addition to English language skills, the young women seem to also question the cultural impact of wearing the hijab when attending interviews in the UK. The general consensus from the women's discussions is that it is not a good idea

to wear the hijab. Beha (28, Iran) recalls an example provided by her Muslim friend who grew up in the UK and who speaks good English:

Extract 6

She was born here, yeah and she has a job and she went to interview and her English was very good but because she had hijab and she said you know, they didn't accept her... Why should they accept me then?

Beha questions her status in comparison to someone who already spoke very good English and who was, she claims, turned down because she wore the hijab. Beha places herself in a lowly position and is speaking about herself already in terms of being disadvantaged. Beha's comments are perceptions but she does not know for sure that their rejection was because of wearing the hijab.

In Extract 7, Nasim (27, Iran) again reflects a common view of herself as inferior or as less advantaged than members of the host society. She states that when going for interviews, she will need to prove herself. Interestingly, she uses the term 'normal people' which implies that she does not fit that category. Again, it provides insight into the gap she sees existing between her as a Muslim woman, and the host society.

Extract 7

I know that I should have em something more than normal people, that shows that I am good enough for this job.

5

Summary

This paper illustrates that a linguistic analysis of the discourse of young Muslim women reveals insights into their identity as visitors to a non-Muslim host country. First, the women's talk highlights the importance of their religious beliefs in defining who they are. Second, the women seem also to define themselves in relation to how they feel they are perceived by the host society. This is, no doubt, partly due to the fact that they are in a new country and experiencing a new way of life. However, it is also due to the fact that they are experiencing encounters with non-Muslims who are providing insights into how they may see them which, in turn, influences how they see themselves. Third, this paper highlights the role of the English language in terms of identity construction and portrayal.

This paper acknowledges that the findings presented here provide some insights into the multifaceted nature of the issue of identity in young Muslim women living in the UK. There is no one identity; there are layers which all seem to reveal insights into questions of identity. Such insights show that it is indeed a complex issue and one that is need of much further study. A larger study, for instance, may look at other cultures and nationalities of young Muslim women and explore further representations of identities. Others may compare Muslim women who have been living in the UK with the newly arrived to gain insights into the differing issues which surround them. Others may look at different age groups of women which would add to this project and further illuminate the insights into identity that this study has brought to the surface. It is clear that much more research is necessary both in terms of investigating the layers of identity which surround Muslim women in order to understand them further. Efforts are also needed to facilitate the integration of Muslim women and re-educate UK citizens in relation to issues such as wearing the hijab and religious practices, for instance, in a bid to avoid over assumptions.

References

Abbas, T (2005) *Muslim Britain: communities under pressure*. Zed Books.

Al-Hejjin, B (2009) *What matters about Muslim women? A comparison of BBC news and Arab news 1997–2008*. Conference paper. ICAME 30, Lancaster, May 2009.

BBC news (2010) French MPs vote to ban Islamic full veil in public available online at www.bbc.co.uk/news/10611398

Huckin, T (1997). 'Critical discourse analysis', in Miller, T (ed) *Functional approaches to written text: Classroom applications*. Washington, DC: United States Information Agency.

Merali, A (2006) Mad Woman in the Burqa: Muslim Women as Exemplar Feminists. *Hecate* 32/1: 173–198.

Nelson, D (2011) Muslim women 'should not travel more than 48 miles from home without male chaperone'. Available online at www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/8371221/Muslim-women-should-not-travel-more-than-48-miles-from-home-without-male-chaperone.html

Office for National Statistics, (2001) available online at www.ons.gov.uk/ons/taxonomy/index.html?nscl=International+Migration

Saaed, A (2007) Media, Racism and Islamophobia: The representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media. *Sociology Compass* 1/2: 443–462.

English in our lives – a Lebanon perspective

Haissam Minkara

1

Introduction

Language is central to the lives of individuals in communicating and in accessing information. However, language is not simply a communication tool. It is also a tool that people use to elevate themselves to a higher social and economic status. The mastery of a certain language can be a way into certain jobs and markets. In this sense, language can grant access to economic capital such as financial income, cash or assets. In addition, language is a medium to earn skills and knowledge that consequently becomes cultural capital that raises the social status of individuals. Additionally, language can be a medium of contact for social groups and networks which consequently provide support to the individuals. Language is a valuable resource. It is the linguistic capital that can convert into other forms of capital, i.e. economic, social or cultural¹.

In this text, I am going to analyse the value of English, as a foreign language, from the perspective of successful individuals from Lebanon and the role that English played throughout their lives. I put forward the argument that these individuals, across generations, came to regard English as a means of empowerment; each of these English-educated individuals serve as unconscious influencers who have encouraged potential learners to decide to start studying English.

I asked a number of prominent users of English to share their experiences about the role English has played in shaping or influencing their lives. There were two reasons for focusing on Lebanon. First, Lebanon's history and cultural complexity mixed with its bilingual tradition is loaded with religious and political rivalries². Second, Lebanon had the earliest institutionalised contact with the English in the Arabic-speaking world.

Assaad Khayat, Anissa Najjar, May Saade, Nawaf Kabbara and Maha Khochen are successful English-educated individuals from Lebanon who were able to achieve using their linguistic capital: English. The five success stories are meant to show how English was an empowering factor in their lives on both personal and professional levels. Their stories are also a vehicle to understand the development of English in the Lebanon's education system and market. Through interviews and content analysis of relevant texts, I tackle the relationship between English and a number of cultural issues, i.e. identity, social networking, social inclusion, cultural exchange, global mobility and globalisation. Their experiences reveal the importance of English in elevating the social status of these individuals and how English was behind their acquisition of various skills.

In order to help the reader to understand better the context of these stories, I offer a brief history of foreign language education in Lebanon. This brief background concentrates on the phases of Lebanon's English language teaching. Then I look at current trends of English in the Lebanese job market and in academic institutions.

¹ Bourdieu, P (1991) *Language & Symbolic Power*, Thompson, J (ed) (trans. Raymond, G & Adamson, M). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press

² Joseph, J E (2004) *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. p.194–223

2

Education in Lebanon

The Arabic speaking Levant was ruled by the Ottomans over four centuries. The multicultural population in the region attracted religious missionaries. These missionaries – mainly Christians – established schools and taught their own languages as a main component of the academic curriculum (i.e. the French Jesuits and the Italian Carmelite schools). Language mix was common in the early 19th century. In addition to Arabic and Turkish (the main spoken and written languages) French, Italian, Greek, Russian and English were also used. (Only a few of these survive to any significant degree in Lebanon today.) Now, English is widely used alongside Arabic – the official language of Lebanon – and French, which was bolstered by a strong language policy exercised through the French mandate in the early 20th century.

In 1919, the Lebanese territories were assigned to French control after the defeat of the Ottomans in the Levant. The French authorities established the state of Lebanon in 1926 and controlled the country until 1943 – the year Lebanon became independent. The French reinforced the French language as an official language while important public service positions were allocated to the local French speakers³.

Formal non-religious schooling was not common in Lebanon until the 19th century. The first conventional school in Lebanon was a clerical school established by the Maronite church in 1789 in Ain Waraka in Keserwein⁴. The school's syllabus was a mix of religious studies and general sciences; students were a mix of priests and lay people. Up until the early 19th century education was provided to the average Lebanese citizen through two traditional models⁵:

1. The 'solo teacher' schools of individual teachers who gathered students together to teach basic literacy skills and the holy books.
2. The 'shop-schools' of skilled workers or merchants where young boys would assist the shop owner in daily work, and in return the boss is expected to teach the young assistants basic literacy and accounting skills.

Languages were not given significant attention by teachers in these traditional schools.

The spread of conventional public schools started with the rise of missionaries⁶, and was followed by the local initiative of the Al Mutasarifia⁷ government to establish public schools.

The rich political history of Lebanon had a positive influence toward a flourishing educational environment. The Millet⁸ regulations adopted by the Ottoman Empire gave a certain level of autonomy for the religious communities to establish their educational and social welfare institutions. In addition, the emerging Egyptian rule of Lebanon and its policy of 'equal citizenship for all' gave more independence

to the various religious groups⁹. This was behind the launch and the renewal of different missionaries; Catholic, Russian Orthodox, British and American Protestant missionaries started coming to the region: 'This phase was characterised by an intense rivalry between Catholic and other Christian missionaries resulting in the establishment of important educational, spiritual and religious institutions that were to play a significant role in the Middle East¹⁰'.

The establishment of universities and higher education institutions by missionaries in Lebanon shaped the cultural and the linguistic context not only in the country but also across the entire region. Significant numbers of the intellectual and political elites in the region were educated in the country's first English-speaking higher education institution, the Syrian Protestant College – later known as the American University of Beirut.

³ Annous, S A (2008) 'The Phoenician Myth: The Language-in-Education Policy in Lebanon'. *L'Enseignement des Langues et en Langues*. Lebanon: Universite Saint-Esprit de Kaslik. p.240

⁴ Jeha, S (2009) *The History of Education and Schools in Beshmezin: 1850–1951*. Beirut: Beirut Book International Capital. p.13

⁵ *Ibid.* p.24–32

⁶ Badr, H, Slim, A R S, and Abou Nohra, J (eds) (2005). *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*. Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches

⁷ Al Mutasarifia (1861–1918) is the quasi-autonomous political entity of Mount Lebanon governed by a Christian ruler under the Ottoman authority

⁸ The Millet refers to the Ottoman regulations adopted to allow religious minorities to establish independent legal courts for personal status and to manage to their social associations

⁹ Daccache, S (2005) 'Catholic Missionaries in the Middle East' Badr, H Slim, A R S and Abou Nohra, J (eds) 2005. *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*. Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches. p.696

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

3

History of English education

The American missionaries arrived in Beirut in 1823¹¹. However, formal schooling did not start officially until 1835 with the formation of two schools in Beirut, one for boys¹² and one for girls¹³. By the mid 19th century, American Missionary Schools were common across most of the Levant¹⁴.

From the mid-19th century, a bilingual system of schooling was widely used. This was based on the use of Arabic and one foreign language as a medium of instruction. However, during the French mandate (1919–1943) direct pressure was placed on public and private academic institutions to adopt French as the first foreign language. In addition, Lebanese were indirectly required to learn French to be able to seek the inclusion in the administrative, political and academic structures of the new state¹⁵. English was exclusive to the private American and British schools and their local associates.

‘In 1946, the state made English an official alternative to French in the bilingual system of schooling¹⁶.’ Although English became recognised officially by the state schools as a medium of teaching, the position of French in Lebanon was stronger until the start of the civil war in the mid-1970s. The position of French began to decline sharply while English was rising¹⁷.

¹¹ Bond, A (1828) *Memoir of the Rev. Pliny Fisk, A M: Late Missionary to Palestine*. New York: Crocker and Brewster. p.314

¹² Jaha, S (2004) *Darwin and the Crisis of 1882 in the Medical Department*. Beirut: American University of Beirut Press. p.107

¹³ Dodge, B (1958) *The American University of Beirut*. Beirut: Khayat. p.59

¹⁴ Jaha, S (2009) *The History of Education and Schools in Beshmezin: 1850–1951*. Beirut: Beirut Book International Capital. p.65

¹⁵ Annous, S A (2008) ‘The Phoenician Myth: The Language-in-Education Policy in Lebanon’. *L’Enseignement des Langues et en Langues*. Lebanon: Universite Saint-Esprit de Kaslik. p.240

¹⁶ Zakharia, Z (2009) Positioning Arabic in Schools: Language Policy, National Identity and Development of Contemporary Lebanon Vavrus, F and Bartlett, L (eds) 2009 *Critical Approaches to Comparative Education: Vertical Case Studies from Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas*. New York: Macmillan Palgrave. p.218

¹⁷ Joseph, J E (2004) *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. p.203

4

The British role in English

The Reverend Pliny Fisk was one of the early American missionaries who arrived to the Middle East and established the Syrian Mission in Beirut¹⁸. Fisk met the 'English Missionary to the Jews' in Beirut during his first visit in 1823. However, there is no information on whether they had formed any schools at that stage¹⁹. In 1860, Mrs J. Bowen Thompson formed the British Syrian Mission that was behind the foundation of 23 schools around the Levant²⁰. A few years later, in 1869, the English Society of Friends, the Quakers, established a school in Brummana near Beirut²¹. British missionaries collaborated closely with the other active Protestant missions in Lebanon. American documentation of missionary work shows that British diplomats in Istanbul and the Levant provided substantial support to both American and European missionaries to help them expand their schools in the region²².

The British Council established an office in Beirut in the late 1940s. H. W. F. R. Ricketts was working for the British Council in Beirut. In 1949, he wrote an article for the students' magazine at the American University of Beirut to present the British Council's work to a wider Lebanese audience. The article described its activities in Lebanon and throughout the world: 'In many places, the Council has established British Institutes which provide classes of English, refreshers courses for teachers, libraries and reading rooms, shows of British films, concerts, lectures and exhibitions. In Beirut, there is a British Council Centre which is combined with a Hostel for the A. U. B. students²³.'

¹⁸ Jeha, S (2009) *The History of Education and Schools in Beshmezin: 1850–1951*. Beirut: Beirut Book International Capital, p.65

¹⁹ Bond, A (1828) *Memoir of the Rev. Pliny Fisk, A.M: Late Missionary to Palestine*. New York: Crocker and Brewster. p.316

²⁰ Dodge, B (1958) *The American University of Beirut*. Beirut: Khayat. p.59

²¹ Brummana High School website. 2009. School Profile – History (www.bhs.edu.lb/), accessed 12 February 2011

²² Jessup, H (1910) *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*. New York: Fleming H Revell Company

²³ Ricketts, H (1949) *Al Kulliyah Magazine Vol. 24*. Beirut: American University of Beirut. p.14

5

Women in higher education

The Syrian Protestant College (SPC) was the first English medium higher education institute in the region. SPC, the only English medium university in Lebanon until 1950, did not allow the admission of women until the early 20th century. In compliance with the conservative social norms in the region, the university leadership did not allow women to be enrolled in higher education beside men until 1924 when co-education officially started: 'A woman student received the diploma of the School of Pharmacy in 1925. It was the first time that a woman had been granted a degree, other than the certificate of the School of Nursing²⁴.' Although co-education became official, the number of female students in the university was low until the middle of the 20th century. In this environment, the women who earned their professional degrees over the first few years of co-education were privileged as pioneers in the entire region.

²⁴ Dodge, B (1958) *The American University of Beirut*. Beirut: Khayat. p.60

6

English in higher education

Until 1950, the American University of Beirut was the only English medium higher education institute providing professional degrees. In 1950, the Beirut College for Women (formerly known as the American Junior College for Women, and later known as the Lebanese American University) was authorised to bestow the Bachelor of Arts²⁵. The Lebanese National University was established in 1951; however, Arabic and French were the main languages of instruction. In 1955, the Armenian Evangelical community established Haigazian University that used English as the language of instruction²⁶. The Beirut Arab University, associated with Alexandria University in Egypt, was established in 1960 using English as one of the languages of instruction²⁷. The Beirut Arab University was the first English medium university that was not affiliated with missionaries. There is a simple explanation for the adoption of English in Haigazian University and the Beirut Arab University.

The Evangelical connection of Haigazian and the support from the Armenian Missionary Association of America²⁸ partly explains why English was adopted as the main language of instruction. The link between Beirut Arab University and Alexandria University in Egypt also explains this choice. The Egyptian supervision and administration of the Beirut branch partly explains the use of English as the main medium at Alexandria University²⁹. The Egyptian professors were mostly English educated.

The second wave of universities started in the late 1980s. Three new universities were established. All of them adopted English as a language of instruction, in addition to Arabic, or Arabic and French. The three universities were affiliated with local religious communities: the Makassed University, affiliated with the Sunni community, established in 1986³⁰; the Notre Dame University, affiliated with the Maronite Church, established in 1987³¹; and The University of Balamand, affiliated with the Greek Orthodox Church, established in 1988³².

In the late 1990s, many higher education institutions were formed and most of them adopted English as the main language of teaching, or at least as one of the languages of teaching. Thirty out of 39 licensed higher education institutions use English as a medium of teaching.

-
- ²⁵ Official Lebanese American University website (2011). History (www.lau.edu.lb/about/history/), accessed 12 February 2011
- ²⁶ Haigazian University Website (2009). History (www.haigazian.edu.lb/About%20HU/Pages/History.aspx), accessed 12 February 2011
- ²⁷ Beirut Arab University Website (2009). Historical Background (www.bau.edu.lb/history.php), accessed 12 February 2011
- ²⁸ Haigazian University Website (2009). History (www.haigazian.edu.lb/About%20HU/Pages/History.aspx), accessed 12 February 2011
- ²⁹ Alexandria University Website (2010). Historical Background (www.alexu.edu.eg/?q=HistoricalBackground), accessed 12 February 2011
- ³⁰ Directorate General for Higher Education in Lebanon. Private Universities (www.higher-edu.gov.lb/demo/university/index.asp), accessed 22 March 2010
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² *Ibid.*

7

English in academic institutions

It is remarkable that it was only in the 1980s that English was adopted by local or national institutions that did not have direct foreign affiliations with Anglophone bodies. At this stage, instruction in English was not a cultural choice; it was more of a reflection of the market requirements. In order to understand a perspective of the reasoning behind this choice, I met with the Vice president for Academic Affairs at the University of Balamand, Dr George Nahas. He explained that the official language at the University of Balamand is Arabic. However, according to the Ministry of Higher Education statistics for the academic year 2010–11, 70 per cent of students in Balamand use English as their main medium of education³³. He explained that the main language of instruction in the university depends on the discipline: 'The adoption of foreign languages is not based on ideological policies. Instead, it is based on the requirements of the job market. We believe that the main job market for the Lebanese graduates is the Arab world, mainly the Gulf. So, we are keen to equip them with the language that facilitates the easy access to this job market. For this reason, all of our scientific and technical courses are offered in English.'

The most interesting change toward English in higher education was the new language policies adopted by the universities that are classically French medium like the Lebanese University and Université Saint Joseph. Many departments at the Lebanese University are creating alternative English medium branches or introducing English language courses in the curriculum.

To understand the context of the use of English in higher education, it is important to know about the introduction of English at the French Jesuit University Saint Joseph (USJ – est. 1875). In 1999, Father Selim Abou, the President of the University and a prominent Francophone theorist, proposed the instruction of English as core courses in every department.

Thus English, alongside French, became obligatory for every USJ student. In his letter addressed to the deans and the directors of the university departments, Abou introduced the 'Sufficient and Necessary English Programme', for all students starting their studies from the academic year 1999–2000. They can only receive their university diplomas after having passed the Georgetown University English Proficiency Test³⁴. He was determined that by the end of their academic programmes, students should be able to prove that they had sufficient command of English in their field of specialty³⁵.

According to Dr Henri Awit – the Vice President for Academic Affairs at University Saint Joseph – the introduction of English is strategic on both academic and cultural levels. On the academic level, English is an added value to the university curriculum and reputation. With English, the USJ students were more competitive in the job

market after graduation. 'In addition to English, which is required by the local and the regional markets, our students master French and Arabic. They are trilingual³⁶,' he explained. He believes that students find the combination of French and English useful and advantageous. On a cultural level, Awit is convinced that the adoption of English was realistic in order to preserve the French language. He thinks that a trilingual policy of using French, English and Arabic has enabled the university to meet the market demands and to maintain the historical association that the university has with the culture of the Arabic and French languages³⁷.

Dr Awit told me, 'There is no way to confront English. It is not a choice.' He recalled his last experience at a UNESCO conference in Paris where only a few presentations out of 50 were delivered in French while the rest were delivered in English.

³³ Centre for Educational Research and Development (2011). Higher Education's Students Distribution by Main Language of Instruction

³⁴ Abou, S USJ President Official Letter. (99/USJ/3697) Awit, H. *La Question des Langues à l'Université Saint-Joseph*. p.8

³⁵ Awit, H *La Question des Langues à l'Université Saint-Joseph*. p.7

³⁶ Interview with Dr. Henri Awit, Vice-president at Saint Joseph University in Lebanon. Personal communication. Beirut: 27 May 2011

³⁷ Awit, H *La Question des Langues à l'Université Saint-Joseph*. p.1

8

The rise of English in Lebanon

The historical developments of English since the arrival of the American missionaries to Lebanon show that English was able to survive throughout the years. Despite the numerous languages that were taught in the country, English not only survived as a key language that played an important role in Lebanon, but also attracted greater numbers of learners. Increasing numbers of Lebanese believe that English is useful beside Arabic for the future of their country³⁸.

Interestingly, despite the strong historic tie between the Protestant missionaries and English in Lebanon, more Lebanese tend to consider that English is not associated with any sect in Lebanon. However, French is perceived as being associated with Christians³⁹. English seems to be more accepted by various Lebanese groups as not clashing with their identity.

Today, primary and secondary schools in Lebanon are either French or English medium and the language of instruction of maths and sciences⁴⁰. During the academic year 2009–10 the total number of students enrolled in primary and secondary schools was 942,391 students. Only 41 per cent of this number use English as their first foreign language⁴¹.

However, it is important to highlight that the national academic programme adopted in 1997 introduced a trilingual curriculum, in which students are obliged to learn a third foreign language (French or English) starting grade 7⁴². In other words, 100 per cent of Lebanese schools' students are expected to learn English for at least six academic years.

At tertiary level, 49.88 per cent of the total number of university students in Lebanon use English as the main language of instruction and 66.85 per cent use English as one of the teaching mediums.

A careful reading of the latest statistics of primary and secondary schools students seems to suggest a significant shift of choice at the higher education level in regards to the language of instruction. I examined the numbers of students choosing English as their first foreign language at school. There is a lack of comprehensive data about the number of students and their languages of instruction. The figures from 2001 and 2010 show that although the total number of French-educated students is still higher than English-educated ones, there has been a significant development in the number of students learning in English at primary and secondary level.

Thus English has been developing and proving itself as highly 'exchangeable' capital in the Lebanese and regional 'markets'. These developments explain the growth in the number of English medium institutions and students. But figures and trends only offer a superficial picture. In the following section, I show how English has shaped individual real lives.

³⁸ Joseph, J E (2004) *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. p.203

³⁹ Ghaleb, M L and Joseph, J E (2000) 'Factors Affecting Students' Perceptions of the Status and Use of Languages in Lebanon'. Joseph, J E (2004). *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. p.206

⁴⁰ British Council, 2011 'English Language Profile: Lebanon'. p.9

⁴¹ Centre for Educational Research and Development (2010) Statistical Bulletin for 2009–2010 Academic Year. p.18

⁴² The National Academic Curriculum for Schools (1997) Lebanon: Ministry of Education. p.51

9

English in their lives

Assaad Y Khayat

Until the middle of the 19th century, public schools, and more specifically English speaking schools, did not exist in Lebanon. So, the number of English speakers was very low. However, Assaad Khayat stands out as being amongst the earliest recognised English speakers in Lebanon. His experience is an example of the way English and other foreign languages were acquired before the existence of conventional schools. In 1847, Assaad published his autobiography *A Voice from Lebanon* in London. The hefty tome is a unique narration of personal, sociological and political history in the Levant. Moreover, it shows the extents to which English was an empowering factor for Khayat who built a career being the interpreter for the British Consul.

Born in 1811, Assad was raised in an average Christian Greek Orthodox family in Beirut. Conventional schools were not available at that time. Educational centres were only available for religious studies or for princes' sons⁴³. The most common way of learning for the average citizen was the shop-school. At the age of six, Assaad's father sent him to learn how to read and write under the supervision of a family friend, the owner of a tobacco shop in Beirut.

Assaad was exceptional. He was ambitious and showed interest in learning foreign languages. He developed a career path built around the various languages he mastered: Arabic, Greek, Italian, Turkish, Armenian, Farsi, English and French. His choices were pragmatic. He knew the harbour in Beirut, so this was the reason behind his choosing Greek and Italian; they were the main languages of overseas trade in Lebanon⁴⁴. Significant numbers of Italian and Greek ships used the port during the golden age of the Princedom of Mount Lebanon under the rule of Prince Bashir II (1788–1840).

However, the way Assaad was exposed to English is unique and different. Work was not a motive for his decision because trade with the Anglophone world was minimal. His decision to study English was provoked by his curiosity nature: 'Walking one day, I saw two strangers, whom I followed till I reached their house at a short distance from the town. I entered in after them⁴⁵.' The two strangers, Reverends Isaac Bird and William Goodell from the American Board of Mission in Beirut, shocked no doubt, asked Assaad what he wanted. He said: 'I wish to learn your language⁴⁶.' The Rev. Fisk started to teach him English. After Fisk died the boy continued learning and practising English at Goodell's house. He accompanied the Goodells on a day-to-day basis providing them with basic security.

With only the few informal lessons of English with the American missionaries, Assaad started using self-learning techniques to develop his linguistic skills. He describes English as the most important foreign language in his life: 'Who could have supposed that the few months' instruction in English which I had received from the good American Missionaries, Goodell and Bird, was to regulate the course of my life! But such is the goodness of providence⁴⁷.'

Assaad was proud to be a role model for the young boys who knew him: 'When other Syrian boys were attracted to there – meaning the informal language classes – by seeing how great a man-boy I was become [sic.] from knowing these languages⁴⁸.' Throughout the book, he stresses the value of foreign languages and encouraging young people to learn as many as they could.

Some years later, Assaad was appointed an interpreter for the 'first Consul-General that ever came to Syria from Europe⁴⁹': the British Consul John W. Farren. According to Assaad, this appointment changed his life. It exposed him to a life of privilege, luxury and travel, meeting the world's decision makers. Assaad accompanied the Consul on his travels across the Levant. He was also chosen to accompany the Persian princes on their trip to England where he got the chance to meet Her Royal Highness Princess Alexandrina Victoria of Kent who later became Queen.

Inspired by the various societies he was exposed to during his travels, Assaad came back to Lebanon and started his movement to promote education for women. Later, he returned to England where he gave a number of lectures at prestigious universities about Christianity in the Near East.

Assaad Khayat's autobiography is important on various levels. It covers the early stage of the emergence of English in the region through the Protestant Missionaries. It also shows the primitive learning/teaching techniques that were used in the 19th century. In the absence of any dictionary⁵⁰ or modern English language teaching techniques, Assaad developed his own ways to learn. He compared Arabic and English Bibles in order to learn synonyms of words. He described the method his languages teachers used the most to teach him new words: 'He brought a loaf of bread and, holding it in his hand, said, "Assaad, behold bread" ... and so on with the other substantives in the room⁵¹.'

Most importantly, the story of Assaad shows the extents to which languages were playing an important role in cultural exchange. On one hand, Assaad was an example through whom British society was exposed to the Orthodox Christianity and other cultural references in the Arabic-speaking world. In addition, he is an example of how language can be used as a neutral tool of communication without affecting the user's cultural identity; although Assaad was taught English by Protestant missionaries, he remained a strong believer in Orthodox Christianity.

Anissa Rawda Al Najjar

Anissa Rawda Al Najjar is another English-educated pioneer who, through English and education, broke barriers in Lebanese and the Arab society. Strongly opinionated, she

was among the earliest educated women in Lebanon. From the start of her career in 1936 until now, Anissa has founded numerous organisations at local and regional levels.

She was born in 1913 to a Druze family from Beirut. The environment at home was conducive to learning English. Her mother talked English fluently as she had graduated from Brumana High School that was founded and backed by the Society of Friends in England, the Quakers in 1869⁵². Her father took British nationality having lived in Australia for many years. When she was four years old, Anissa enjoyed learning a few English words from her mother in order to talk to her father's friends, the Australian soldiers who came to Lebanon during the First World War.

Anissa received her elementary and secondary school education at the Ahlia College where most of the teaching materials were in Arabic and English. However, with the emergence of the French mandate in Lebanon, English was imposed as the medium of teaching in her school. She had to spend the last two years studying almost everything in French. Later on, she moved to the American Junior College for Women for her second year of study at high school. In 1936, she graduated from the American University of Beirut with a Bachelor of Arts in Education and Sociology. Anissa describes her postgraduate experience saying, 'Then, I had a very long story of life in teaching, being a principal of schools and leading three societies: one for the service of rural women, one for children and one for the international contact of Lebanese women with others.'

After graduating, Anissa found a job in Iraq. She explains: 'There was a move towards Iraq by Lebanese, because the government of Iraq had asked for many Lebanese teachers. I was enthusiastic for going, especially after school, you need freedom. After being under the pressure of studies, I thought that if I go to Iraq, I will feel free and independent. This is how I went there.' In Iraq, she started teaching in Baghdad before being transferred to Mosul where she was appointed principal of the secondary school there. Anissa asserts that English empowered her. 'When I went to Iraq, it was English that gave me the chance,' she says.

I asked Anissa whether the French mandate in Lebanon was behind her move to Iraq. I wanted to understand if the job market discriminated against English educated individuals, but her answer brought a different perspective to my question: 'Since my childhood, I was seeking for independence all the time. When I was at the Ahlia College, the French came over and closed our school. They asked Mrs Kassab, the owner of the school, to dismiss our English teacher who was also teaching the Girl Guides. And she did dismiss her. Why? Because her mother was English.' The French authorities were also trying to move the students to another school. However, the owner of the Ahlia School sent a bouquet of flowers with two young students to the newly appointed High Commissioner. The commissioner responded positively, and in return he replaced teaching through English by French. The commissioner provided the school with two teachers who taught almost everything in French. 'But fortunately he did not stop the English language teaching ... though the share of English was reduced,' Anissa said.

This environment was difficult for the young Anissa: 'The French mandate left in us a king [sic] of pain.' She added, 'Even civics was taught in French; you would be saying 'my country' and meaning France!' She still remembers how furious she was when her French teacher belittled her country saying that Lebanon is 'a top of a pin on the map'. She left the class and went to cry. When her teacher asked her about what was on her mind, Anissa said, 'I am thinking of a way to enlarge this top of a pin.'

At the American University of Beirut, Anissa was among the few women from Lebanon and surrounding countries in the region. According to her, the whole university had around 23 girls. Fifteen were Jewish girls who came from Tel Aviv and eight were from Lebanon and the region. 'The number of female students was increasing year after another,' she said. Her contemporaries at university later became powerful and significant individuals in the region, including Abdul Mounim Rifai who became the Prime Minister of Jordan in 1969.

The first English book she bought was about a policeman in adventurous pursuit of thieves and outlaws. She strongly believes that reading and communicating in foreign languages encourages tolerance and exposes individuals to diversity. She comments: 'When you learn a language you do not learn only how to speak, you learn also how to behave and you study the rules of the society of the people you talk to.' Language for her is the channel of acculturation: 'From reading you understand and copy behaviours. As you read, there are things you like to imitate. It affects your personality and you do it.' She remembers an example of how her early views toward women's issues were formed through reading John Ruskin's speech on women: 'I read it when I was very young and it has affected me.'

English played an essential role in social networking on an international level. On numerous occasions, she was able to meet highly influential people from around the world. She remembers meeting the UK representative to the United Nations, Baron Caradon, and the American President Richard Nixon. When her husband Fouad Najjar was Minister of Agriculture, she was always privileged to sit on the left of the late Prime Minister of Lebanon Hussein Al Oweini who asked her to interpret what foreign guests said because he did not know English. In addition, her experience with the Children International Summer Village demonstrates how English presented opportunities to young Lebanese in being able to communicate and establish friendships with children from different nations.

According to Anissa, English played a crucial role in her professional life, most importantly when she entered the international arena by leading the Middle-Eastern associate organisation of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in 1963: 'This international connection was very important, because I made my colleagues step out of the stagnancy and go the international level. Here, they enjoyed themselves speaking Arabic, but there [meaning on an international stage] they had to know English and fortify themselves in English.' The leaders of Lebanese organisations she is affiliated to are convinced that English is an important skill for their members and workers: 'Now, the first question we ask to someone who would like to join us is: "How is your English?"' Under her leadership, it was a policy to recruit English-educated individuals, she explained. 'I said once, "No one of you can

become a member if you don't know English." Because you need English to be able to understand what is coming out from the United Nations and our league. There are heaps of papers that come in English.'

Anissa is convinced that the idea of English as a 'global' language, which has been discussed over the past 20 years, was already a reality. She points to the push to promote Esperanto as a language that united everybody. She comments: 'But English has superseded it. English became more prevalent.' She claims that English became more studied because it is easier to learn. 'With a few words,' she said, 'and very little grammar you are talking.'

I asked her if she could visualise her life differently without English. She said, 'Yes, but the important role that English played in my life would have been played by any other language. So with another language I would have been meeting different people. However, I succeeded in knowing English, I succeeded in my work where English was a help.'

Today, the 97 year-old woman dedicates most of her time to planning a project to establish a model school for girls in rural areas. She is very enthusiastic to fundraise for the building phase after successfully bidding for a plot in one of the Lebanese villages in Mount Lebanon.

Dr May Saade

May Saade was born in 1916 to a middle class family from the village of Amyoun, northern Lebanon. Her father, Hanna Saade, was an Arabic teacher and her mother, Malakeh Mubarak, was the director of the Russian School in Amyoun. The young countryside girl was captivated by poetry and the arts, but chose a different path. In 1942, she became the first Lebanese female gynaecological surgeon to graduate in Lebanon. She practiced medicine until 2001. Dr Saade, the busy doctor, has three poetry books and recently published her autobiography *The Life Path between Medicine, Politics and Poetry*.

Dr Saade was hugely influenced by her parents and her village: 'I am the daughter of Ma'arri Amyoun⁵³. My father was a blind man, but a big poet. He taught in schools and led people. He was very important. And he thought that his daughter should study medicine when everybody in Amyoun and Koura thought that something is wrong with his mind.'

May, born and raised in Amyoun, was keen to realise her father's dream to see his daughter become a doctor. Although her personal interests were poetry and the arts, her father's wish was the main motive behind her decision to study medicine. She says: 'He spoiled me very much, so that I wanted to please him. Maybe I was a poet since I was a little girl; I was very interested in Arabic and poetry. But my father had a great hope of seeing his daughter a doctor. He was very proud of me. He loved me very much and there were no female doctors and he wanted his daughter to be a doctor. I wanted to please him otherwise I would have done poetry and finished with poetry or maybe studied law or something like this.'

In her autobiography, she says that she never regretted her decision to study medicine. She adds, 'I chose medicine to please my father, but medicine coupled with me and became my best friend⁵⁴.'

In 1924, May's family had to leave the village and moved to Tripoli where she joined the Azaria Catholic Nuns' School. Two years later she moved to the Greek Orthodox School where her father started to teach. Her studies until this stage were all in French. She did not know even a word of English.

In 1930, May had already made her decision to study medicine. She had to study English to gain a place at the School of Medicine at the American University of Beirut, so she moved to the American Evangelical School in Tripoli and finished her secondary studies in 1932. At this time village gossip started spreading in Koura about her desire to study medicine. People started accusing her father of losing his mind: "Does he want to teach his daughter? What for?" At that time, people thought that a girl works in the garden and sews dresses, but girls do not go to schools!' Dr Saade said.

Since she decided to study medicine, the only way for her to pursue higher education was to move to Beirut. So, she joined the American Junior College for Women in Beirut where she completed her freshman and sophomore years with distinction. In 1935 she started her medical studies at the American University of Beirut.

Being a female in the conservative society of the early 20th century presented many challenges for the young May. The logistics of moving to Beirut and the criticism her father got were not the only barriers the young female doctor had to face. On campus, some of her male colleagues challenged her ability and competence. For many of these young men, her liking of poetry, her elegance and looks were evidence of her being doomed to failure as a trainee doctor. She recalls sniping comments: 'Who she thinks she is? Who would believe that this girl who comes to the university with a new elegant dress every day is able to be a doctor?'

The biggest challenge was when she finished her studies in the school of medicine in 1940. May had to choose a speciality. She told me, 'I wanted to be a real doctor, who helps people and do operations. So I chose to specialise in obstetrics and gynaecology.' In that year, only one post was vacant for a new resident doctor to specialise in these fields. Two graduates were shortlisted for the position: May Saade and her male classmate. At the selection meeting, the head of the department nominated May, but the Dean, while conceding that her academic record was the better of the two candidates, opposed her nomination. He reasoned that her gender would prevent her offering an appropriate standard of service, so he supported her male colleague, 'who will be able to endure such continuous hard work.' The dispute was only settled when the department head said that he would take up May's work if she failed.

She started her residency with great success. 'The rule was to give the first caesarean operation after one year of training,' she said. However, she proved herself so able that her supervisor gave her permission to conduct her first caesarean within six months of the residency. With a large smile on her face she told me, 'I became famous because of this.'

English was the medium that allowed Dr Saade to study medicine. She said, 'If I had not studied English, I would not have been accepted in the school of medicine.' She points out, however, that her success owed more to her intelligence and talent because, after all, 'Stupid people could not succeed even if they did know English.'

After finishing her speciality in 1942, Dr Saade returned to the north of Lebanon and continued to practise medicine until 2001. In addition to the role it played in shaping her professional path, the English language was also a tool that enabled her to participate in international conferences and to communicate with foreigners. It seems that it was common among the students of the American University of Beirut to communicate in English. She told me, 'I wrote most of my letters in English. As students, we use to talk in English all the time.'

She explained that she was meeting more people who talked French before, but today most people talk in English. She even believes that English is a global language: 'English is everywhere. No matter where you go, if you speak English you are all right. Everybody speaks English ... There is no place in the world where you don't find English.'

Thinking about the reasons why English has become global, she said, 'English is a very good language. It is also connected with America and London. First, it is the connection with important countries. Then, English is very simple; it is much easier to study English than to study French, it does not have the complications of French. They study English. They succeed quicker. So people study English. I encourage young generations to study English.'

The issues of language and identity are not a conflict in her mind. Although she is a nationalist, she does not feel that English threatened her identity. She said, 'Knowing English does not change me; it is a good language that we like and appreciate. But Arabic comes first.'

In the last few years, Dr Saade has worked on translating the poems of her son who lives in the United States. 'I translated the poems of my son, Hanna. He wrote poems in English, and I translated them to Arabic poetry and published them,' she says.

English played a pivotal role in Dr Saade's life, she told me: 'My life would have been different if I did not study English, I would not be a doctor, and without the English I would not have become that good doctor, because the other universities that do not learn English are not to be compared with the American University of Beirut.'

Today, at 95 years old, Dr Saade starts the day reading in her medical practice. Her schedule is always full; her social commitments and political activities do not stop.

Dr Nawaf Kabbara

Dr Nawaf Kabbara was born in 1953 to a Muslim family from Tripoli in North Lebanon. After graduating from the School of Business Administration at the American University of Beirut, a car accident changed his life. He was left physically disabled. However, this did not hinder his ambition. He later studied Political Sciences and became one of most prominent political figures in Lebanon and the Middle East.

He received his early education in the school of the Carmelite Catholic mission in Tripoli. Later, he moved to the Mi'atein Public High School where he finished his secondary school studies. Despite his poor English and the fact that he got all of his previous education in French, Nawaf chose the difficult path and decided to join the prominent American University of Beirut. He said, 'I barely knew any English but I did not want to study in the French Saint Joseph University that symbolised the right wing hegemony over Lebanon during that time. In addition, the American University of Beirut was a radical environment and pool of activism.' As a result, he had to take preparatory English courses in order to be admitted in the American University of Beirut in 1972.

He was awarded a Bachelor in Business Administration followed by a Masters in Business Administration. The university campus was a new field for the young man who came from the North of Lebanon – mainly French educated. Exposure to English opened new horizons to Nawaf. He told me, 'English was not simply a language; it was a certain philosophy, a paradigm in itself. With English I was exposed to the concept of liberalism as a way a life.'

The first Arabic book Nawaf bought was by Gergie Zaydan, another English-educated individual from Lebanon who worked in translation in Egypt and Sudan during the late 19th century. However, the first English book he bought was not of less importance in his life; it was *Animal Farm* by George Orwell.

After graduation, he worked as researcher and did various feasibility studies with the famous economist Marwan Iskandar. Later on, he was approached by Lebanese National Television to take part in the preparation for a socio-political talk show *The File*.

In 1980, Nawaf moved to Saudi Arabia to work with Indevco as a Marketing Research Supervisor. He worked in English; without English he would not have been offered the job. Ten months after his arrival, he had a terrible car accident causing a severe spinal cord injury. 'I became paralysed,' he said.

After the accident, He went to Princes Risborough in the United Kingdom for medical rehabilitation. 'It was there where I started to learn speaking "real" English. The four months I spent in the UK did not change my English only; it has exposed me to the active civil society that was flourishing there', he said. This short period caused a shift in his life. He decided to do his PhD in Political Science and joined the University of Southern California in the United States of America in 1981.

In the US, Nawaf completed the academic modules and had to start writing his PhD thesis when he saw a poster advertising a one-year course in Discourse Analysis at the University of Essex. 'I decided to go, and instead of one year, I stayed five years

in the United Kingdom,' he said. 'The intellectual realm in Essex was more competitive and interesting for me. I did not go back to the US. I preferred to pursue my PhD in Essex and I graduated in 1988.'

'In the UK, I discovered that disability is not a problem and that my wheelchair is not a handicap,' he commented. Accessibility was out of the question in Lebanon during the 1980s. The difficulties he was facing during his visits to Lebanon, while being settled in the US and the UK, highlighted many problems. Based on the experience he got in the UK and the USA, he identified problems and acted for change. He explained, 'It was 1984 when I started acting for the rights of people with disabilities in Lebanon. I wrote letter to Khaled Salam, the CEO of Middle East Airlines – the national Lebanese airline – addressing a number of issues of accessibility on flights and in the airport. The response was positive and change was tangible.' Ever since, Dr Kabbara has led national and regional movements defending the rights of disabled people and promoting accessibility.

In 1989, Dr Nawaf left the UK and decided to go back to Lebanon. 'Coming back home was not easy,' he told me. 'When you live in the West, you don't belong there, but you also do not belong to your home the way you used to! It is a dilemma. However, it is a fact that one carries a lot of notions, values and even a lifestyle. And that reflects on your actions and visions.'

Dr Kabbara led one of the most famous actions against the Civil War in Lebanon (1975–89). He organised the biggest and the most symbolic demonstrations gathering thousands of disabled people, mainly victims of the war, in a march across Lebanon that took four days. He said, 'I must say that the experience and the amount of reading that I was exposed to through English were behind my inspiration with the non-violent methods of resistance. Reading about Mahatma Ghandi and the speeches of Martin Luther King had a lot of influence on my political activism.'

His academic career started in the Political Sciences department at the American University in Beirut. He moved to the University of Balamand where the campus is accessible. 'The campus in Beirut was not,' he commented. 'My students had to carry me to the class, which was not nice for me. I could not attend staff meetings because the buildings were not prepared. At Balamand, I communicated with the university administration for an accessible campus. Now, my movement is fully independent there.'

He founded and is one of the leading organisers for the Arab Organization of Disabled People. He was President from 1998 until 2008. He is very active in the international arena, writing articles and participating in conferences. He thinks English played an important role in his life. 'English was passport for jobs,' he told me. 'It was a passport to travel throughout the world; for my articles and presentations to be accessed by the wider international audiences.'

He firmly believes that English is a global language. 'English is the global language until further notice,' he claimed. 'No language can survive without power. So, as long as the United States and the United Kingdom are the leading powers of the world,

English will remain in this position,' he explained. Interestingly, Dr Nawaf names a number of languages that could replace English in its global position: 'Spanish could be the new global language. Chinese also could take that place if the Chinese language is simplified. It is difficult to learn Chinese. The Chinese have to simplify their language if they want it to be global.'

Maha Khochen

Maha Khochen was born in 1970 to a Muslim family from Tyre in the southern part of Lebanon. She became visually impaired when she was a teenager. Her sight started to deteriorate gradually causing a serious visual impairment. After several operations in her eyes trying to protect the remaining sight she had, a severe case of glaucoma⁵⁵ left Maha with four per cent of sight in one eye and another eye with complete blindness. Yet the visual disability did not obstruct her desire to pursue advanced education and produce high quality work. Today Maha trains, researches and advises on inclusion and disabilities with various national and international organisations.

She received her elementary education in the Evangelical School in Tyre. Later, she moved to Al Jaafaria School in Tyre where she finished her secondary studies. Maha was treated like any other student although she was visually impaired. 'Schools lacked knowledge about special education and inclusion of people with disabilities. I had to develop my own strategies and methods to be able to study,' she said.

Using her limited sight, she was able to read and write until 2003. However, accessibility was a serious concern that reflected on her decisions. She wanted to study English literature. Unfortunately, she could not pursue her preference because there were no universities offering this course near her city. In 1992, she went to the Lebanese University in Saida where she received a Bachelor of Arts in History, followed by a Teaching Diploma in 1998.

After graduation, Maha started working in Lebanon. She taught in the leading Al Hadi Institute for Deaf and Blind People. Her mastery of English allowed her to advance her position. She was involved in writing proposals to donors and liaising with international organisations. She said, 'I was promoted because the boss noticed my ability to work and communicate in English.' Later, she worked as a consultant with the United Nations' Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, where she developed the Net Forum for the Blind – a website accessible for blind users.

It was important for Maha to advance her education. She aimed to study abroad since it was a big challenge for her to achieve this goal in Lebanon. At this stage, she thought that English would be the tool for her to achieve. She attended some English courses in the British Council in order to put herself in the strongest possible position to apply for scholarships. She applied for – and was awarded – a prestigious Chevening Scholarship in 2006, which is a programme funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. She was awarded the scholarship to pursue a Postgraduate Diploma in Special and Inclusive Education with focus on the disabilities of sight at the Institute of Education in the University of London. After finishing her advanced diploma in 2007, she applied to do a Masters degree at the Institute of Education specialising in Special Education, Inclusion and Disability Studies. This course was

sponsored by the Karim Rida Said Foundation, whose mission is to bring positive and lasting change to the lives of children and young people in the Middle East.

Having finished her MA in January 2009, Maha spent around three years in the UK, working with organisations like the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), Action for Blind People and the British Council. She also has done some voluntary work for Enabling Education Network, an information sharing project ran at the University of Manchester.

English played an essential role in Maha's education and career. 'English has shaped my life,' she said. 'Through English I was able to further my education and to work with recognised organisations. It was the tool that I have used to achieve what I wanted to achieve.' She also believes that English exposed her to greater opportunities: 'Through English I was able to learn about the scholarships and to fill the job application forms.'

Through her professional experiences, English stood as the key to accessibility; the majority of resources in special education and inclusion are in English. 'Without English I would not have accessed references to enrich my knowledge and to be up to date,' she said. In 2000, English enabled her to introduce the computer to her life. She never imagined using a computer. 'My family had a computer at home, but it was out of the question. I never thought that a computer was something I could ever use,' she explained. However, a gift from London changed Maha's assumption. The computer became accessible through the screen reader software that her sister brought from RNIB during her stay in London. 'With English I was able to use the computer and to be up to date since English softwares are more advanced and less expensive than the ones in my first language,' she commented.

In addition to the important role that English played on a professional level, English was enabling for Maha on various scales in her personal life. In the previous interviews with Anissa Najjar, May Saade and Nawaf Kabbara, I asked a question about personal libraries in an effort to try and understand the extent to which English served as a means to knowing a different culture. Maha's visual impairment gave her a different perspective to the other interviewees particularly in terms of issues related to accessing resources in English. When she was a teenager, she was not able to enjoy reading for leisure. 'My readings were limited to the school curriculum where almost nothing was available in enlarged print or other accessible formats. My academic tasks were a time-consuming burden,' she told me. Yet, when she moved to the UK, a wide range of audio books was available in ordinary bookshops and libraries. 'I started to enjoy reading books including those of Jane Austen, the books that I didn't have a chance to access when I was at school,' she said. Accessibility and the use of assistive tools made her education smoother. She started studying using different technical aids such as computers, recorders and Braille note takers. 'It was completely different way of how I studied before,' she said.

English helped Maha to get her overseas experience, mainly through her visits to the USA and the UK. This was very important for her. 'Living, studying and working in the UK inspired me on different levels. I experienced a different way of life. I learned my independence skills and got my education on an equal level as others.'

Without English I would not be able to get what I have got,' she said. During her stay in the UK, she visited specialised places to learn the way they cater for the visually impaired people. It was inspiring to her to meet other visually impaired people. 'From the perspective of a visually impaired person it is important to learn about others' achievements. It was a big issue to see some visually impaired individuals leading organisations and getting their higher education,' she explained.

She thinks that her experience in the UK and the multicultural aspect of British society made her more tolerant toward differences. 'I appreciate the way I learned to value the differences. It is fascinating how everybody had something to bring and enrich the cultural experience,' she told me.

Maha was not only a receiver in this English speaking realm. Using the skills she learned and the experiences she developed, she contributed through publications aimed at English speaking and Arabic audiences. She published an article in the Journal of Inclusive Education that looked at the attitudes of teachers and headteachers towards the inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools across Lebanon. She has published two guidebooks; the first is about the best practices to be a sighted guide, and the second is about the ways to deliver accessible presentations in terms of meeting the needs of different audiences. She has also written some articles in the field of inclusive education which are available and accessible in Arabic.

Thinking about whether English is a global language or not, she said that today English is the lingua franca. She believes that people are learning English because it is helpful for them. 'Without English you cannot be as advanced as you would be using English,' she explained.

Assessing the empowering aspects of English in her life, Maha is firmly convinced that 'without English I would not achieve my goals. I would not say that I would be doing nothing,' she said. 'I would have found my ways to achieve and contribute, but I am not sure if it could be from the same calibre of what I have achieved using English. It is the willingness that leads to achievements, but English was the tool I used.'

After acquiring an excellent education as well as good work experience throughout five years of living in the UK, Maha wants to return to Lebanon. She is planning to resettle and work in her home country. 'I got a nice experience about inclusion and disability,' she said, 'and I am very keen to transfer what could be of benefit to the people in my country.'

-
- ⁴³ Jeha, S (2009) *The History of Education and Schools in Beshmezin: 1850–1951*. Beirut: Beirut Book International Capital. p.32
- ⁴⁴ Jeha, S (2004) *Darwin and the Crisis of 1882 in the Medical Department*. Beirut: American University of Beirut Press. p.107
- ⁴⁵ Khayat, A Y (1847) *A Voice from Lebanon*. London: Madden & Co. p.34
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p.72
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p.35
- ⁴⁹ Khayat, A Y (1847) *A Voice from Lebanon*. London: Madden & Co. p.73
- ⁵⁰ Jessup, H H (1910) *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company. p.35
- ⁵¹ Khayat, A Y (1847) *A Voice from Lebanon*. London: Madden & Co. p.21
- ⁵² Brummana High School website. 2009. School Profile – History (www.bhs.edu.lb/), accessed 12 February 2011
- ⁵³ Ma'arri is an additional name given to the poet Hanna Saade associating him with the late famous Arab blind poet Abul Ala Al-Ma'arri (973–1057)
- ⁵⁴ Saade, M (2010) *The Life Path between Medicine, Politics and Poetry*. Beirut: Arab Encyclopaedia Publisher. p.24 OR Saade, M. (2010) *Meshwar Al Omor Bayna Al Teb, Al Syassa w Al She'er*. Beirut: Al Dar Al Arabia Lil Mawsouat. p.24. [translated from the Arabic]
- ⁵⁵ Glaucoma is an eye medical case where the optic nerves are partially or completely damaged.

10

Conclusion

Although success and prosperity are determined by various conditions, English was a important criterion of empowerment in the lives of my interviewees and for thousands of English learners around the Middle East and North Africa. Millions of people in the Arab-speaking world would regard these stories of successful English-educated individuals as inspiring. Today, many young individuals regard English as a source of prosperity and professional development. Imad Abou Amcheh, a young aviation technician and English learner, told me, 'English is an investment. There are careers that people cannot access without English. I am seeking to promote and enhance my economic status.' Imad believes he had no chances to access the career he loved (aviation technology) without English.

The historical development of English in the region and the shift English has made in Lebanon are significant. English, a language that started in the region being the language of missionaries has become the global language of communication and international business⁵⁶. People regard English as a key skill. The number of learners in Lebanon is increasing because of the direct benefits that English brings to their lives. Today English is everywhere. There is a massive amount of exposure to English in the international media, internet and computer technologies and the public space (billboards, advertisements, restaurants menus, etc.)

It is a fact that many people get access to various careers using English. Undoubtedly, the wide range of media available in English is increasing the opportunities for young learners to develop their language skills. It is important not to forget, however, that while English can be a tool to help people become included, it should not become the preserve of those who can access a certain level of education around the MENA region.

⁵⁶ Graddol, D (2006) English Next. British Council. p.62

References

- Annous, S (2008) 'The Phoenician Myth: The Language-in-Education Policy in Lebanon'. *L'Enseignement des Langues et en Langues*. Lebanon: Universite Saint-Esprit de Kaslik.
- Badr, H, Slim, A and Abou Nohra, J (eds) (2005) *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*. Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches.
- Bond, A (1828) *Memoir of the Rev. Pliny Fisk, A.M: Late Missionary to Palestine*. New York: Crocker and Brewster.
- Daccache, S (2005) 'Catholic Missionaries in the Middle East' in Badr, H, Slim, A and Abou Nohra, J (eds) (2005) *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*. Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches.
- Dodge, B (1958) *The American University of Beirut*. Beirut: Khayat.
- Graddol, D (2006) *English Next*. London: British Council.
- Jeha, S (2004) *Darwin and the Crisis of 1882 in the Medical Department*. Beirut: American University of Beirut Press.
- Jeha, S (2009) *The History of Education and Schools in Beshmezin: 1850–1951*. Beirut: Beirut Book International Capital.
- Jessup, H (1910) *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company.
- Joseph, J (2004) *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Khayat, A (1847) *A Voice from Lebanon*. London: Madden & Co.
- Saade, M (2010) *The Life Path between Medicine, Politics and Poetry*. Beirut: Arab Encyclopaedia Publisher. 24 OR Saade, M (2010) *Meshwar Al Omor Bayna Al Teb, Al Syassa w Al She'er*. Beirut: Al Dar Al Arabia Lil Mawsouat.
- The National Academic Curriculum for Schools. 1997 Lebanon: Ministry of Education.
- Zakharia, Z (2009) 'Positioning Arabic in Schools: Language Policy, National Identity and Development of Contemporary Lebanon', in Vavrus, F and Bartlett, L (eds), (2009) *Critical Approaches to Comparative Education: Vertical Case Studies from Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas*. New York: Macmillan Palgrave.

The influence of English language skills on the lives of people with disabilities across the MENA region

Maha Kochen

1

Introduction

In this paper I examine the growing importance of the English language in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the role it plays in enhancing the access of disabled people to education, information and employment opportunities. I also look at the difficulties that working age disabled people, particularly those with vision impairment, face while learning English as a second language. The study has been informed by some important arguments of social inclusion theory, particularly those that see disability as being caused by the society in which a disabled person lives, not the impairment of that person. It is also informed by views that favour the inclusion of disabled people in their societies as equals.

There are four parts to the study. The first is a general introduction that provides an overview on the topic and outlines the rationale and main questions. The second is a description of data collection methods including how participants were selected and approached, and the questions I asked them. The third is a presentation of the most significant research findings. In the final section, I make recommendations for action.

1.1 English as a universal language

According to Mayor and de Swann, out of the approximately 6,000 languages spoken today, some 100 occupy a central global position as world languages¹. Of these, English occupies the innermost position across most regions of the world. For example, the United Nations (UN) has adopted six official languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. These languages are used in intergovernmental meetings and documents, but English and French are the two working languages across the organisation.

It is, however, English, rather than French, that is seen as a means for attaining professional growth. 'By general consensus English has become, if not a global language, then at the very least a lingua franca².' Indeed, English is increasingly becoming the language of general communication; a language used by persons not sharing a mother tongue. In addition, English is also becoming essential for building crosscultural relations and for accessing the global job market³.

According to the British Council:

English is critical for countries' successful participation in the global economy, in that it provide individuals with access to crucial knowledge, skills and employment opportunities and enables organisations to create and sustain international links.⁴

1.2 The importance of the English language in the Arab region

The majority of Middle Eastern and North African countries view English as a vital foreign language⁵ and many Middle Eastern people appreciate the worldwide application of English in business, education and communication⁶.

For example, the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States carried out a study that looked at the importance of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Oman. The study found that Omani graduates consider English as essential to enter the business sector and work in both public and private sectors⁷. Another study conducted by Alam et al examined the attitudes of students, teachers and parents towards EFL in public schools in Saudi Arabia. The study found positive attitudes towards learning English among students, teachers and parents. It did not find evidence to suggest that English was a threat to Arabic or Islamic cultural values. The majority of the participants recognised the global growth of English in business, education and communication⁸.

Jordanians are similarly motivated to learn English, believing that it helps them to study and/or work abroad, or, alternatively, to secure a well-paid job in Jordan. For example, Hamdan and Abu Hatab conducted a longitudinal study into the status of English in Jordan. They examined newspaper job advertisements at 10-yearly intervals: 1985, 1995 and 2005. They then made judgements as to the increasing 'status' of English through changed attitudes towards the language in these texts. In addition, the researchers reported a significant increase in the percentage of advertisements that make English proficiency a necessary requirement for employment. They found that in 2005 English was seen as a means of attaining professional growth by all workers in Jordan⁹. Furthermore, the attention that many Jordanians pay to learning English stems from an interest in being better informed about international events and 'the values and traditions of people from various parts of the world'¹⁰.

Researchers in a further study of English in Jordanian primary schools concluded that English language proficiency should be an essential requirement for professional development¹¹. The recommendations were based on a targeted sample from five public suburban and urban schools for boys and girls in greater Amman.

The English language is often seen as being important in enabling people from diverse backgrounds to communicate internationally and to further their education. Evidence for this was suggested in a study carried out by Musa in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) who investigated the attitudes of 357 Emirati secondary students towards learning English. The study revealed that 75 per cent of surveyed students reported liking English because they felt it was 'important' as an international means of communication and as a tool that enabled them to 'keep in touch' with foreign cultures and to pursue postgraduate studies¹².

Furthermore, in some Arab countries where French has historically prevailed, such as in Tunisia, English has begun to assume greater dominance. Al-Khatib attributes

the growing status of English to the desire to access scientific and technical knowledge from the 'original source' rather than through the French translations of English language texts¹³. Indeed, not only are many of the academic studies in general subjects written and published in English, but, in addition, many international conferences, reports and events have adopted English as the working language¹⁴.

Nevertheless, there are some groups across the region that show less positive interest in learning English, especially those who do not need English for their future career and those who intend to take postgraduate studies in an Arab university or have a job that does not require knowledge of English. For example, Al Malallah explored the importance of learning English among Kuwaiti students. A questionnaire was given to 1,030 students that represented 11 per cent of the secondary school student population. The results reflected an unfavourable attitude of the majority of students towards English language learning; more than three quarters of the participants disagreed that English is necessary for a better 'job and future business'¹⁵.

1.3 English and inclusion

In 'English Next India', Graddol argues that we are fast moving into a world in which not to have English is to be marginalised and excluded. Graddol also believes that 'when English becomes universal, no one gains advantage by having it. Rather, anyone without it suffers'¹⁶. However, Graddol is talking about being marginalised in its broadest sense. In this text, I look at the marginalisation of less included groups, i.e. those with disabilities or impairment, whether mental, physical or sensory, that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out day-to-day activities. I focus on English language from the perspective of those with vision impairment.

The fewest number of English speakers across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is among non-educated and vulnerable groups and particularly those of low socio-economic status. Of these, the most exposed to marginalisation are those with disabilities and their families. One major reason for this is the high cost of bringing up a child with a disability. For example, a UK study that looked at the cost for parents of children with disabilities researchers concluded that it costs three times as much to raise a disabled child compared to one without a disability. They reported that some 85 per cent of the surveyed families with disabled children were in debt and that over than half of them lived on the margin of poverty¹⁷.

As English becomes more widely used, the group most at risk of missing opportunities would appear to be disabled people. How then can we ensure that global communication (which is increasingly through English) be inclusive regardless of differing needs and abilities? Does English support the participation and inclusion of people with disabilities?

1.4 Research rationale, scope and questions

Little research has been done to assess the influence of English on the lives of people with disabilities. In this study, I investigate the difference that English language brings to the lives of people with disabilities across the MENA region. I wanted to know:

1. Whether English language skills give disabled people increased access to information, employment and education.
2. If all disabled people in the MENA region are able to learn English if and when they want to.
3. What are the barriers that limit the participations of people with a disability in mainstream English teaching classes, and for blind and partially sighted people in particular?

However, before I was able to answer these questions, I needed a regional view. I needed to know:

- Who are the disabled people across MENA?
- What education and employment opportunities are available to them?
- How their rights are protected in their respective countries.
- How they can be included in society.

1.5 Who are the disabled people? What are their entitlements?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006 and signed by 147 countries including Jordan, Oman, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Palestine, Libya, Qatar and Morocco. It states that people with disabilities are:

Persons [...] who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others¹⁸.

According to UNCRPD, disabled people are entitled to education, employment and health services to the same level as anyone else without discrimination. However, the concept of discrimination is unclear in much disability rights legislation of the region. For example, some countries do not make reference to discrimination in law and do not include the denial of reasonable accommodation as a form of discrimination. As a result, law may not protect the rights of people with disabilities or may hinder their inclusion in mainstream settings and fail to acknowledge their right to be treated as equal to their peers without disabilities¹⁹.

As the UNCRPD definition notes, there are different types of disabilities, some of which are sensory in nature, others mental, intellectual or physical. Within each type of disability there are further variations in severity, effects and causes²⁰. Disability can be partial or total, severe or mild, temporary or permanent, stable or deteriorating, congenital or acquired during a certain period. Some types of disabilities are visible, others invisible.

Visible disabilities range from sensory impairments to physical and motor impairments. Sensory impairments include hearing or sight or a combination of both, e.g. blind–deaf. Invisible or hidden disabilities are those disabilities that significantly affect the performance of someone’s daily activities. They represent, by far, the

largest group of people with disabilities. Some hidden or almost hidden disabilities include attention deficit disorders, dyslexia, dyspraxia, mental health issues and HIV. There are also disabilities that may not have developed and reached the stage that make them visible, such as mild hearing or vision impairment²¹.

1.6 How can disabled people be included in society?

Inclusion is a broad term that refers to the process of involving and encouraging the meaningful and active participation of all people – regardless of their ability or disability, socio economic background or gender – in all aspects of life²².

According to the social model of inclusion, disability is something created by external societal factors, and that impairment is an individual property. Thus the social perspective of disability distinguishes between the individual property of impairment and the social property of disability. This differs from the medical model of disability which focuses on a variation from the norm inherent to the disability; a view which makes disability a problem attached to the individual.

However, the human rights perspective of disability calls for equal rights for all irrespective of the differences. It focuses on the similarities, rather than the differences, that exist between people. Hence, the human rights perspective places the responsibility for solving social problems on society²³ and stresses the need for social inclusion, particularly the need to give all society members the opportunity and necessary resources that allows them to participate fully in all aspects of social life²⁴.

1.7 Access to information and employment opportunities

There are no precise statistics on the number or percentage of people with disabilities in the world. However, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO) some 10 per cent of the world's population have some type of disability, the majority of who (around 80 per cent) live in developing countries. It is also estimated that around 65 per cent of disabled people are of working age, but unemployed. This rate varies from country to country depending on the facilities available for disabled people in terms of access to education, employment, available legislation and implemented inclusive practices. Unemployment rates also vary considerably on the basis of factors such as gender, age, level of education, geographical location in the country, and type and severity of disability. The prevailing dismissive attitude towards disabled people in several countries is also one of the most significant factors that can lead to their exclusion not only from the educational sector and the job market, but from all aspects of society²⁵.

In addition, the level of unemployment among disabled people is significantly higher in developing countries, reaching 80 per cent in some²⁶. In the MENA region, the employment situation of disabled people varies from one country to another, but is, generally speaking, high in most. For example, Wehbi and El-Lahib interviewed 200 people with disabilities in Lebanon in order to explore their employment situation. Their study indicated that the majority of interviewees were unemployed at the time of the study, with many never having been employed. They found that few employed respondents were mostly self-employed and home based workers²⁷. The employment

situation for disabled people is equally poor in some other Middle Eastern countries. For example, in Abu Dhabi only twenty people with disabilities are employed out of the 1,422 disabled people²⁸.

High unemployment rates among disabled people across the region may largely be owing to the negative attitudes of employers, the lack of disabled rights legislation and the inaccessibility of many job locations. It seems likely that it is also due to a lack of employment skills among disabled people including, among other things, English language skills.

Disabled people in the Arab region believe that English language can help them, just like everybody else, to gain better access to information and job opportunities, and ultimately opportunities to participate widely in all aspects of society. For example, in a qualitative study that looked at care giving family responses to social inclusion of children with atypical development in the UAE, Crabtree interviewed 15 mothers from diverse ethnic Arabic origins that had a child attending a care giving centre in Sharjah. Her study revealed that lack of English language knowledge was a major problem with the result that some families were unable to access information about the disability of their child. This is because the majority of internet and printed resources advising on the disability of children were written in English²⁹. Indeed, much of the internet-based information and specialised study in the field of disability and its related issues is available in English. In fact, much of the material that is available in Arabic has been translated from the original English text.

1.8 Does English help people to be equal members of society?

In spite of recent initiatives towards creating a more inclusive society across MENA, inclusion is still far from being implemented. It is not only that people with disabilities are excluded from job opportunities, but also from mainstream education. Indeed, the majority of disabled learners across the region are still educated in special, separate institutions mostly supported by the local governments or political groups (as in the case of Lebanon). By and large, the level of education in these special institutes is relatively low³⁰.

Having worked in the field of disability in Lebanon and observed the limited level of the acquired knowledge of English which was taught as a second language among many of the graduates, I wondered how disabled people in the region could improve their English. Do they believe that English helps them to have better opportunities to access education, employment and information? Do all English teaching centres welcome everyone irrespective of their different needs and abilities?

If so, how could people with disabilities, particularly visually impaired people, participate actively in English language classrooms? Are English teachers well prepared to have learners with diverse needs? How can the value of learning English (as well as the opportunities of learning English) be better promoted to the visually impaired?

- ¹ Mayor, B and Swann, J (2001) 'English language and global teaching'. Lea, Mary R and Nicoll, Kathy (eds) *Distributed learning: social and cultural approaches to practice*, UK: Routledge
- ² Asker, B (2006) 'Some Reflections on English as a 'semi-sacred' language', *Cambridge Journal*, Vol. 22:1
- ³ Borg, S (2011) Impact Study of British Council Teaching Centre EFL Classes, A Report, commissioned by British Council. 22:1(www.teachingenglish.org.uk/transform/books/impact-study-british-council-teaching-centre-efl-classes), accessed 28 February 2011
- ⁴ Coleman, H (2010) The English language in Development, a research paper commissioned by the British Council, (www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/UK011-English-Language-Development.pdf), accessed 16 November 2010
- ⁵ Malallah, S (2000) 'English in an Arabic Environment: Current Attitudes to English among Kuwait University Students', *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, Vol. 3:1, p.20
- ⁶ Hamdan, J M and Hatab, W A (2009) 'English in the Jordanian Context', *World Englishes*, Vol. 28:3, p.402–404
- ⁷ Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (1990) The Status of TEFL in General Education of the Arab Gulf States: A Study Presented by Hammash, K, Albazzaz, H and Altamimi, A (in Arabic). Documents of the Executive Council, Gulf Arab Bureau of Education, Session 27, Riyadh, 15–17 January
- ⁸ Alam, M A, et al. (1988) A Study of the Attitudes of Students, Teachers and Parents Towards English as a Foreign Language in Saudi Arabian Public Schools. Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Education, Educational Development, The General Directorate of Research & Evaluation
- ⁹ Hamdan, J M and Hatab, W A (2009) 'English in the Jordanian Context'. *World Englishes*, Vol. 28:3, p.394
- ¹⁰ World Bank (2007) MENA Development Report: The Road Not Traveled in the Middle East and North Africa, Washington DC: The World Bank, p.104
- ¹¹ Hashisho, N H (2009) An Investigation of the Status of English Language Instruction in the Lower Basic Stage in Jordanian Public Schools, Dirasat, Educational Sciences, Volume 36, No.1
- ¹² Musa, M A (1985) 'Why Don't Our Students Speak English Fluently after Eight Years of Study?', *Journal of Education (JAE)* Vol. 38, p.67–72 (in Arabic)
- ¹³ Al-Khatib, Mahmoud A (2008) 'Innovative second and foreign language education in the Middle East and North Africa'. Nelleke Van Deusen-Scholl and Nancy H Hornberger (eds) *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, Vol. 4:14
- ¹⁴ Eriksen, T H (2005) 'McDonaldisation or diversity? Notes on the use of English as a foreign language: A keynote speech to a conference at the University of Helsinki (folk.uio.no/geirthe/EFL.html)
- ¹⁵ Malallah, S (2000) 'English in an Arabic Environment: Current Attitudes to English among Kuwait University Students'. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 3: 1, p.19–43
- ¹⁶ Graddol, D (2009) 'English Next India; The future of English in India: when English becomes universal, no one gains advantage by having it. Rather, anyone without it suffers,' a paper commissioned by British Council, p.10
- ¹⁷ Disabled Peoples' International (DPI) 2010 (www.dpi.org/lang-en/resources/topics_detail?page=273), accessed on 20 December 2010
- ¹⁸ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2010 (www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf), accessed on 14 November 2010
- ¹⁹ National implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. 2010. Response by the National Centre for Human Rights of Jordan (www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/disability/docs/study/NCHRJordan.pdf), accessed on 15 December 2010
- ²⁰ Mont, D (2004) 'Disability Employment Policy', Social Protection Discussion Paper Series. Washington DC: World Bank (info.worldbank.org/etools/docs/library/135862/Disability%20Employment%20Policy%20-%20Mont.pdf), accessed 10 December 2010
- ²¹ Wolf, L E (1999) 'College Students with ADHD and Other Hidden Disabilities Outcomes and Interventions'. Boston: University of Boston, Office of Disability Services and Department of Psychiatry, School of Medicine
- ²² Hwang, Yoon-Suk (2011) 'Attitudes towards inclusion:gaps between belief and practice', *International Journal of Special Education*, Vol. 26:1, p.136–146
- ²³ Von Krogh, T (2010) 'A Case Study of Efforts to Change the Portrayal of Persons with Disabilities on Swedish Television', *International Communication Gazette*, May 18, Vol. 72 no. 4-5, p.379–394
- ²⁴ Boushey, H, Branosky, N, Fremstad, S, Gragg, R, and Waller, M (2007) Social Inclusion in the United States. Center for Social Inclusion (www.inclusionist.org/files/socialinclusionusa.pdf)
- ²⁵ Disability monitor initiative Middle East. 2009. 'DMI Report 2009', *Journal 2 Issue 2* (www.cbm.org/Disability-Monitor-Initiative-Middle-East-252828.php), accessed 13 November 2010
- ²⁶ Lakkis, S (2003) 'Disability and Employment'. Working Paper. Lebanese Physical Handicapped Union (www.lphu.com/AN/doc/employment/disability_and_employment_IL0.doc), accessed 28 February 2011
- ²⁷ Wehbi, S and El-Lahbi, Y (2007) 'The Employment Situation of People with Disabilities in Lebanon: Challenges and Opportunities', *Disability and Society*, Vol. 22:4, p.371–382
- ²⁸ Bradshaw, K, Tennant L, and Lydiatt S (2004) 'Special Education in the United Arab Emirates: Anxieties, Attitudes and Aspirations'. *International Journal of Special Education*, Vol. 19, No.1
- ²⁹ Crabtree, S A (2007) Family Responses to the Social Inclusion of Children with Developmental Disabilities in the United Arab Emirates, *Disability and Society*, Vol. 22:1, p.49–62
- ³⁰ In a study carried out by the Lebanese Physical Handicapped Union (LPHU) in 2003, 200 residential institutions' graduates with disabilities aged 14–38 were asked to answer questionnaires about their educational and vocational achievements. The study revealed that 40 of the 200 graduates could not read or write. Thomas, E. & Lakkis, S. 2003. 'Disability and Livelihoods in Lebanon', unpublished paper presented at the conference 'Staying Poor: Chronic Poverty and Development Policy', University of Manchester (www.dfid.gov.uk/R4D/PDF/Outputs/ChronicPoverty_RC/ThomasLakkis.pdf), accessed 11 December 2010

2

Research methods

I used two qualitative research methods: 1) focus group discussions and 2) telephone interviews. Two focus group discussions were carried out in Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt; there was a total of 29 participants in these six groups. In each of the countries, one of these group discussions included visually impaired people (VIP) who speak English (see Appendix 1) and the other group discussion included VIP who do not speak English and/or are learning English (see Appendix 2)³¹.

There were a total of 12 English-speaking participants; nine men and three women. Ten of them were blind and two were partially sighted. Their ages ranged from 20 to 65 and they had qualifications ranging from diploma to doctorate. The personal data revealed that ten of the participants of the English speakers' focus groups were employed, one was self-employed and another one has retired. Their occupations varied between head of an organisation for the disabled, manager, co-ordinator, officer, assistant professor, teacher for the visually impaired, researcher and translator.

There were seventeen participants in focus groups with VIP who would like to learn English or are in the process of learning it. (The gender ratio was 10:7 female: male.) Twelve were blind and five were partially sighted. Their ages ranged from 20 to 45. They had either BAs, diplomas, or were undergraduates. Some were reading for their MAs or their PhDs. All of the participants in the Jordan focus groups were employed. However, only two of the six participants in Lebanon were employed. In Egypt one of the three participants was employed, another was not employed and a third was self-employed.

I conducted telephone interviews with 18 VIP from Syria, Kuwait, Palestine, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Morocco, Tunisia, and Bahrain (see Appendix 3). Interviewees included individuals who know English and those who are learning or are interested in learning English. Eleven of the participants were male and seven were female. Their ages ranged from 20 to 65. Fourteen were blind and four were partially sighted. Their level of education varied between high school, BA, diploma, MA and PhD. Thirteen of them were employed, two were unemployed, two were self-employed and one was retired. Their occupations varied between head of an organisation, director for a programme, manager, telephonist, teacher, assistant professor and parliamentarian.

2.1 Participant selection

I looked for working age visually impaired (VI) individuals who think that English has helped them in one way or another throughout their lives, as well as for VI who are interested in learning English or are in the process of learning it.

I applied the ‘snowballing’ technique, a useful sampling tool for increasing the number of participants, to reach the target group, i.e. participants were identified through asking for suggestions for other relevant potential interviewees. In order to identify the prospective participants, and to look for a sample of diverse background and views, I contacted active people in the field of VI. I asked them to nominate other VIPs who they thought may meet the criteria of the participants. I approached British Council offices, disability organisations of each country to ask them to nominate suitable participants as well. This is ‘essentially strategic’³² as it aims to match exactly the interviewees with the research questions.

To avoid the risk of concentrating the sample in a particular discipline – or rather to a group known to each other which may restrict the sample to those of similar views – participants were drawn from different countries across the MENA region, from different age ranges, gender, and geographical locations within the country and they had different experiences, level and type of education, job occupations, and level of sight loss.

2.2 Research set up and arrangements

Prior to conducting the interviews, I ran a pilot interview. Two people with similar specifications to those who took part in the study volunteered to pilot the study questions. One of them spoke English. He said that English has helped him to further his education in the United States and to hold several positions in well-respected organisations in the States. The other was interested in learning English and believes that English would help him to find a suitable job position.

I led group discussions from British Council offices in Lebanon and Jordan. I conducted telephone focus groups to Egypt together with the telephone interviews from British Council London with VIPs across the region. I made arrangements for all interviews and focus groups by email, where applicable, or by telephone with the help of the British Council Diversity Unit and some other staff members when needed. All data were collected between the end of January and the beginning of May 2011.

At the start of all interviews and focus groups, the participants were given background information about the MENA Perspectives Project, the purpose of the study that they were taking part in and my particular interest in the study. I established the tone of the discussion at the beginning of each session always taking account of the level of vision impairment that the participants and I have in order for the discussion to be as effective and participatory as possible.

I collected personal information from all participants such as the age range, level of education, whether the participants were employed, not employed or self-employed. I also asked about the participants’ level of vision impairment; whether it was partial or total. I noted job occupations and the level of English that they thought they had reached. I first asked all questions in English; these were then translated into Arabic. I followed the same procedure in all interviews and focus groups. The reason for this was because participants were of different levels of English and they all spoke Arabic as their first language. They were given the opportunity to speak the language that they felt more comfortable with.

All participants gave their consent for the interviews/ focus groups to be recorded digitally. These were later translated and transcribed into English. At all times, I endeavoured to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the collected information. The interviews lasted for an average of 30 minutes each. Each focus group took a maximum of two hours.

2.3 Research findings analysis

I extracted and developed themes across the collected data. I paraphrased common ideas and direct quotes from the transcribed materials, which I later supported with arguments from the literature. The transcriptions covered the main ideas, so I revisited the recorded materials on several occasions in order to identify recurrent themes, to accurately quote someone or to rephrase his or her ideas.

³¹ The recent political events in Egypt meant that it would have been difficult for the researcher to travel there. These two focus groups were therefore held by telephone.

³² Bryman, A (2008) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Third Edition. p.458

3

Main findings

The main findings that emerged from the face-to-face and telephone focus group discussions together with the one-to-one telephone interviews that I carried out are detailed below:

- Participants' experiences in learning English.
- Challenges they have faced as visually impaired people in learning English.
- What they expect to achieve/have achieved through English language (and that they can't achieve without it).
- How English language shaped their lives.
- The challenges they and other VI face in their respective countries to learn English.

Across much of the Arabic-speaking world, good quality of education is associated with proficiency in foreign languages³³. Three main languages – Arabic, English and French – are used and taught in many schools. This is reflected in the participants' learning experiences. These, of course, differ from one participant to another depending on:

- country
- age
- age at which s/he started to learn English
- the approach to curriculum in each country
- the type of the school s/he attended (e.g. private, public or special school for the visually impaired).

Below I set out explanations on some of the participants' different experiences of learning English as well as the thoughts of the participants about some of the challenges they faced while learning a different language. I use this to discuss issues related to the accessibility of the English teaching environment. I highlight the main issues that face VI (from their perspective) while seeking the opportunity or while learning English.

3.1 Participants' English-learning experiences

Many of the participants started to learn English as a second language at an early age. These were mostly those who went to private schools. Those who learned it later did so at state schools. One reason for this variation is that, in the past, public schools in Jordan, Kuwait, Syria, Yemen, Egypt and some other countries used to teach a second language from late primary schooling years onwards. Nowadays, second language teaching starts at early primary school level. In some countries, schools

teach English as a third language at a later stage, e.g. Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco where English is introduced after French which is taught as the second language.

A number of participants started their educational schooling in French then switched to English, or sought opportunities to learn English, later on in their life. One of the participants had to learn English after starting his education in French in a public school in his home city. Later, when he had to join a special school for the VI, he learned English as a second language (P6)³⁴. Some others had to learn English to be able to navigate the internet and access the many English materials posted there or to be able to use the assistive softwares that help VIP use the computer and mobile phones independently, in addition to simply communicating and interacting with people from different countries.

There were variations in the methods that participants followed to learn English. In some cases this is associated with their specific visual impairment. In others (or in addition to their impairment), variations in teaching method were simply owing to it being the one chosen by a state to educate learners with vision impairment. For example, some of the participants relied on Braille from an early age, some on auditory methods of learning, while others used printed materials and struggled to use their remaining sight (sometimes with the help of low vision aids). Some had to switch from visual learning, i.e. print material, to auditory or Braille later on in life. This created many challenges in the process of learning English, as I will explain more fully below.

To a great extent, it was due to personal effort that those VIP who consider their English to be 'good', 'very good' or 'excellent' were able to improve their language skills. This included listening to radio English teaching programmes, such as those on the BBC or Voice of America, surfing the internet, watching television and listening to audio CDs.

According to some participants, English speaking volunteers played a significant role in enhancing their English skills. One of the participants said:

The British Council used to send us overseas volunteers. One would be sent to the Evangelical School to stay with us the whole year. This was of great benefit to me in conversations and discussions, inside and outside the English sessions (P2).

Some interviewees thought having the opportunity to travel and study abroad had a major role in their English language learning. For example, one participant said, 'I went to the United States to do my Masters. That was a big break in my English language ...' (P30). Others believed that their proficiency in English not only gave them opportunities to study abroad, but also helped them learn about different funding resources (P11).

3.2 English and its influence on the employability of VIP

Almost all participants believed English was an essential skill in order to get worthwhile employment, retain it and to be valued by bosses. Some noted that while everyone needs to compete to get a job, VI also have to stand out in order to get a

job. English language skills are an asset and help VI compete on an equal level with sighted persons. Indeed, one participant said:

English has given me greater opportunities in my work. Had my language been weaker than this I would have been at a lower post. Now I am more a part of the management of the institution. My English attracted the attention of my boss and got me more involved in writing of proposals and reports that correspond to the institution as a whole and beyond my job description issues (P39).

Another commented that when it comes to promotion in an organisation, knowledge of English language skills is essential (P1). Participants with good command of English argued that their language skills helped them to be recognised in their organisations and to occupy senior positions in them. They argued that had they not learnt English, they would most probably have more limited job choices. Some participants noted that, habitually, VI people living in MENA only find jobs as receptionists. Alternatively, some get jobs in education or in the Islamic sector. Indeed, many VIP across the region, in particular those who do not speak English, still have these kinds of jobs. But with English language skills, the participants argued, VIP would be able to get more diverse jobs and work in different places such as in national and international NGOs, embassies, councils and other places that often require English as an essential element of the job. However, while it was clear from my sample that many VIP who speak English are able to occupy senior positions, it is difficult to make generalisations as there are few comprehensive studies that look at the situation of VI in the job market across the region.

Although knowing English might support the employability of VIP, the attitudes of employers, the lack of legislation to protect the rights of disabled people, and the inaccessibility of many jobs in terms of their locations as well as the required duties negatively influence their chances of being employed. One participant said:

Any disabled person who says that English is not beneficial for him or her is not telling the truth (P2).

In the job market, it is English and good ICT skills that are always essential and without either of them, VIP will continue to be offered undemanding jobs as described above – if employed at all (P44). This is because English is the language of the assistive tools that VI need to access information, regardless of whether the job itself requires English.

3.3 English and specialised assistive tools used by VIP in MENA

Many of the assistive tools for the blind use English as the main language. In addition, many talking and magnifying software for computers, Braille devices and programmes for mobile phones support English. Manuals and guidebooks are also mainly in English. Thus once VI have access to the assistive tools that meet their needs, they will only be able to access the internet and the wide range of information posted there in English (provided, of course, that this information is accessible with assistive tools that the VI utilises). Indeed, the availability of websites that can be accessed by all users (regardless of the tools that everyone uses to access

information) is an issue that extends beyond MENA. This is due to a serious lack of understanding in adopting and implementing the web accessibility guidelines that are designed to help web developers provide content that is universally accessible³⁵.

For many participants, the internet is not only a tool for communicating on an international level, but also an information device that they use to learn about disability related issues and the rights of people with disabilities. However, despite global advancement in assistive technology, relatively few VIP across MENA possess assistive tools and are connected to the internet. This is mostly owing to the high cost and a lack of external resources to support VIP families in attending to the needs of their child. This is a real problem for many VI and their families in MENA and especially those who live in villages or rural areas in Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. However, in the more wealthy countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE, the possession of assistive tools and internet connection is not a problem. Despite this, while the VIP in the countries that can afford to connect to the internet have their assistive tools, they have a problem in understanding the material posted there, since it is mostly written in English (P37, P34, P46).

3.4 Challenges that face VIP while learning a different language

VIP face many challenges in learning a different language. These challenges are influenced by the adopted methods of learning, the accessibility of the teaching environment and the available facilities that support the inclusion of VIP in English classrooms. Below are a number of issues that were raised by the VIP participants:

- Accessing English courses.
- Teachers are not prepared (either through experience or inclination) to teach inclusively.
- The limited accessible material available for the visually impaired.
- The nature of the Braille system itself and the accompanying difficulties in reading Braille after being able to access printed format.
- The challenges of relying on auditory methods of learning.
- Practising English speaking.

3.4.1 Accessing English courses

In terms of accessing English courses, the challenges varied between:

1. having a place on a course
2. being able to participate effectively
3. achieving and maintaining levels of English similar to other course participants.

The participants highlighted the need to motivate VI to learn English. This could be achieved in several ways including listening to the radio, CDs books, etc. While some participants believe that English centres do not discriminate against VI on the grounds of their disabilities, others argued that they had personal experiences of

being discriminated against. Some told of how they were not accepted on an English learning course on the pretext that the lessons are visual so they 'would not be able to follow them'. Others said that they were rejected because the English centre they applied to was not well prepared to cater for people with disabilities. Yet it became clear through the discussions that it is more difficult for a VIP to get a place on an English course in some countries than in others and in some centres than in others. The accessibility of the English centre and its location together with the facilities that are available for the VI to reach English centres may have an influence on this as well.

In some countries, such as Yemen and Saudi Arabia, VI were advised to join specialised English classes for the visually impaired to prepare them for English examinations including TOEFL. This is largely because English teaching centres in the countries of the region are still unprepared to accommodate the needs of different ability groups. Also, the dominant norm across the region is for VI to be taught in special settings and so it is the responsibility of special schools to teach VIP. This presents a major obstacle to VI not being able to join English teaching centres – and ultimately not to be able to learn English. One participant said:

Blind people in Yemen struggle to be accepted on a TOEFL course and ... up until eight years ago they were even not allowed to enter the school of English literature on the grounds of their vision impairment (P42).

In Saudi Arabia, the situation is not any better. In one case, a VI female told me how she was asked to get another nine VIP who wanted to learn English and who were to have the same English level, be the same gender and be able to afford the course fees, before the English teaching centre was prepared to teach them (P43).

Some VI were able to join classes, but found that they were not adapted to their needs. The result was that they could not follow the lessons effectively. Furthermore, some participants had problems in converting the course material into an accessible format of their preference. They also suffered delays in receiving the course materials. Others have not been able to follow the lessons because of the extra time that they needed whilst using Braille. Additional challenges were that course materials were often not available in advance, the insufficient time during the English sessions, and the additional challenges VI face while studying a different language constituted major problems for many VI, particularly those who majored in English at university level as well as employed VI who are keen to prepare before and after the lessons.

Some other VIP received somewhat unwarranted sympathy, which was not helpful for visually impaired learners to acquire the knowledge of English on the same level as their peers; for example, some English teachers omitted lessons for their VI learners with an aim to make learning easier for them. But in fact, this has negatively affected the level of the acquired English among VI in comparison with their peers (P37).

3.4.2 Teachers inadequately prepared to teach inclusively

Another problem is related to the fact that some teachers in English centres were not prepared to adjust their teaching methods to meet the wide range of their students'

needs. Some respondents who followed English learning courses had difficulties with visual English material that had not been adapted to meet VIP needs. Others noted that teaching strategies were ‘far from being inclusive’.

3.4.3 Accessible material available for the visually impaired

By and large, accessible English material for VIP in MENA region is limited to school and university textbooks. This presents an obstacle to many VIP in improving their English skills. Fundamental to this is a lack of knowledge among educators as to the availability of reading material for VIP and the inaccessibility of some of the available material to VI even when accessed through assistive tools.

Some respondents suggested that it is now more difficult to access English language learning materials than it had been in the past. One remarked that in the 1960s and 1970s, VIP in MENA had been able to borrow books from the UK through the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and the National Braille Library:

Many persons used to borrow from there. They had everything and they had no problems because, you know, they extensively print in Braille compared to us. Additionally they have big libraries (P7).

Another noted, however, the limited range of formats for material and the software available at that time (P30).

3.4.4 The Braille system accessing printed formats

Braille is written in tactile cells of six raised dots arranged in two columns and three rows, forming 36 letters and symbols. Braille reading involves fingers, hands, and arms, a combination of body postures with spatial and tactile tasks. Moreover, whereas ocular movements allow sighted persons to skip some of the words of the text (although there is some fixation on most of them), Braille readers cannot do the same, since their fingers must necessarily pass over all the characters on a line³⁶. Therefore, speed of reading among Braille readers is often considerably slower than those of their print reading peers. Braille users read at approximately half the speed of print readers. Whilst sighted readers can take in whole words at a time, Braille readers comprehend words sequentially by moving the finger across the words³⁷.

Blind readers have greater sensorial restrictions; the field of information, single Braille cells, must be processed individually by the fingertips. This can create difficulties reading Braille especially for those who have additional vision impairment. This is also problematic for VIP who lost their vision after having being sighted. As one such participant said:

Up 'till now I can't read Braille as fast as those who learned it in childhood. I was not habituated to it and learned it for convenience and you could say for leisure as well. It helped me read things I liked to read. However, I depended fully on listening for studying (P39).

Another stated:

The challenge was in the materials. Actually I didn't learn the Braille system very well and I can't use it to read and write ... So I had to rely always on listening and hearing the vocabulary, the grammar, and all the things via listening to others and depending on the spoken language and skills, the speaking and the hearing skills (P30).

3.4.5 The challenges of relying on auditory methods of learning

For VI English language learners who have adopted the auditory method of learning, one of the most common challenges for many is spelling English words correctly. Some participants commented that it is difficult for them to store and retrieve correctly spelled English words, mainly words with silent letters, words that are not pronounced the way they are spelled (e.g. enough, debt, laugh, etc.), and homonyms (e.g. there and their, here and hear). One participant said:

I certainly can't take spelling for granted. At some stage I had a problem with, let me say, storage of vocabulary. But now because I use the computer a lot and listen to the radio a lot I have developed a very good kind of, let me say, a storage of vocabulary ... but spelling is still a problem (P30).

Another focus group member has similar problems: 'I am not sure if I can say that my English is excellent, I am truly very bad in spelling' (P45). About her spelling problem, another added: 'Depending on listening means one does not know any spelling. I still live this problem' (P13).

A common challenge for VI is finding an English reader with a good command of English and clear diction who can read an English text to VIPs. Some commented on the fact that those who studied through Braille have reached a better level of English than those who relied on hearing. One said:

The students of Baabda in the period before the Lebanese war and late 80s ... were good in spelling, even better than students of the Evangelical school. That's what professors at the American University of Beirut also confirmed when they asked "Why do you spell better?" The answer is because we concentrated more on Braille (P2).

According to a number of the respondents, another issue that helped some VI to improve their spelling skills has been use of a typewriter or keyboard while taking part in exams or submitting their written work. This has the added benefit in that sighted teachers who do not know Braille can read and assess their work (P12, P2).

Less than five per cent of the visually impaired are totally blind and the rest have some residual vision³⁸. So many VI would be able to use their sight if they are encouraged and enabled to do so. Despite this, in many special schools across the region, VIP are taught Braille regardless of whether they still have useful vision that can help them to

access print or not. Effectively, some special schools across the region treat all VIP as if they had no remaining vision; the schools were for the totally blind where they were taught only Braille. The result, as one of the participants noted, is the lack of services for the partially sighted with, for example, material in large print (P39).

3.4.6 Practising English speaking

The limited opportunity to practise talking in English is another major issue facing VIP. For example, an English teacher in a school for the visually impaired said that his teaching textbook is inadequate and the Braille books available to him are mostly very old (P36). Another participant said that studying English in a special school for the visually impaired:

...depended merely on the book and the teachers who did not get many tapes for us to hear and catch the talk, nor did they give us expressions of everyday life. They just followed the curriculum (P17).

For undergraduate English literature majors in the Cairo area national universities, there is not much English use on a day-to-day basis. Their use of English is almost entirely restricted to the classroom. They are unlikely to have had any personal contact with native speakers of English. In addition, they are unlikely to require English for anything other than their literature studies³⁹.

While fluency in English did not seem to be a problem for those who were taught in private schools or universities where the level of foreign language proficiency is high, it seems to be more of an issue for those who were taught in special schools for the visually impaired, in state schools and universities. This may be because private schools have higher expectations and better preparation in at least one foreign language than public schools. In addition to this, the quality of teachers varies between some urban schools that recruit graduates of private universities in which the standards of teacher preparation programmes are more rigorous than less well-funded rural schools. Better educated teachers in wealthier schools are more fluent in foreign languages. It is no surprise, therefore, that fluency among English-speaking VIP is greater in the teaching environment mainly available in private settings.

3.5 English as a support for social and professional participation

Watching television is another problem for VIP who have not developed good English language skills. It can result in their exclusion from family gatherings and from social events in which English dominates. Not being able to read the transcriptions nor understand the language would certainly put VI at a disadvantage. However, knowing English helped those who spoke it in Egypt to read and access international media that reports events from a different perspective to local media outlets. (The participants noted how important this was, particularly in terms of recent events in Egypt (P27).)

Many VIP with good command of English have been able to participate effectively in international conferences and workshops in their field of interest. In contrast, those with no English skills had fewer opportunities or had to contribute through a

translator which limits their participation (P35). One participant who spoke English commented on this issue, saying that her knowledge of English gave her the opportunity to pass on political messages during an international celebration at the House of Lords in London; she mentioned that if she had to speak through a translator then the messages might have not been the ones she wanted to convey (P38).

According to some interviewees, English helps VI, as it helps everybody else, to be independent when travelling. Added to this, English, as a universal language, may enable them to communicate with people from diverse nationalities, build friendships and maintain relationships. Furthermore, English supports VI to be independent in their lives; some of the participants had experienced living and studying in one of the English speaking countries where they have acquired good independent living skills that they have brought with them to their respective countries. One participant mentioned that in the United States she learnt how to independently look after her child, as well as getting some ideas of different exercises that she has implemented later on in her job (P12).

It had become clear throughout the discussions that there is a serious need across the region for some mentor and emotional support for VIP. This is because many participants – especially those who would like to learn English or those who teach VIP – stressed the need to have an adviser to guide them or their learners through the possible choices they can undertake in their lives and careers (P18, P3). In fact, many VIP need continuous emotional support, the support that sometimes is not provided through their families who, in turn, need guidance on issues related to the impairment of their child and how best to motivate and support them.

3.6 The mediator role of English

Some VIP have used English as a medium to learn a third language; it was easier for them to learn the third language through English rather than through Arabic. This is mainly because of the unavailability of accessible learning resources for the visually impaired in Arabic. In terms of education, knowing English opened the opportunity for many VIP to enrich their academic lives and widen their horizons. They are able to access the many English language resources on the internet and reach some Braille as well as audio books.

English language skills allowed some VIP to apply for scholarships to further their education abroad. This was of great support as it offered them a solution to the financial burden endured by many VIP in MENA. It is also a solution to the problem in that many of the universities across MENA are not prepared or willing (whether through a lack of knowledge or material resources) to meet the individual needs of learners with disabilities.

3.7 Financial constraints

While being able to afford English courses was not a problem for some VIP across the region, many others were prevented from attending English classes due to a financial constraints. This is owing to many factors including underemployment, needing to

pay the course fees, needing to cover their transportation expenses and the high cost of the assistive tools, which all prevents many of them from enrolling in English courses.

Very few English teaching centres offered the visually impaired some discount as a contribution towards the extra expenses that converting the course material into Braille. However, as one participant noted, 'My sister, who is employed, has benefited of a 25 per cent discount offered to the youth organisation' (P13). Participants stressed the need to support VIP in learning English regardless of whether they belong to organisations or not.

In addition, English teaching programmes are not only mostly private, but also mainly exist in capitals or major cities. This puts VIP living in villages and rural places at a disadvantage in terms of affording the course fees and a daily commute that may involve an inaccessible physical environment. (These vary between one city and another as well as between one country and another throughout the MENA region.)

³³ Bahous, R and Nabhami, M (2008) 'Improving schools for social justice in Lebanon'. *Improving Schools* 11 (2), p.127-41

³⁴ P in this context refers to the participant number

³⁵ Doush, A I Mohammed, A.B. Ali, E. (in press) 'Towards a More Accessible E-government in Jordan: An evaluation Study of Blind Users and Web Developers'. Jordan university

³⁶ Rogers, S (2007) *Learning Braille and Print Together*. *BJVI* 25 (2), p.121-122

³⁷ Fellenius, K (2000) 'Computer-Based Instruction for Young Braille Readers in Mainstream Education: an Evaluation Study'. *Visual Impairment Research* 1 (3), p.148-164

³⁸ Miller, O and Ockelford, A (2005) *Visual Needs*. London: Continuum

³⁹ Zaher, Christine (1995) 'The development and implementation of a first-year undergraduate EFL writing programme for English departments of Egyptian Universities'. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Wales, Cardiff, UK. p.112

4

Recommendations

All societies need to be concerned about issues of inclusion, equality and diversity. The following recommendations are intended to be guidelines for institutions of teaching and learning in the region for the promotion of the training and employment of disabled people. They could form part of the process of creating a more inclusive society. These recommendations are based on discussions with VIP from across the MENA as well as my own experience in the field of disability and inclusion.

4.1 Programmes and projects to consider

1. Encourage disabled people to take part in exchange programmes in different domains, e.g. school, universities and work placements. Disabled people across the region could visit the UK and learn about different practices in the field of disability from the perspective of one of the developed countries in the field of inclusion. At the same time, encourage disabled people from the UK to take part in exchange programmes in the MENA region to interact with disabled people of the region and to learn about issues that disabled people face. These all contribute to building relationships and improving the knowledge of different cultures as well as different practices and approaches through the use of English.
2. Produce written as well as documented profiles of role models across the MENA from a range of ages, economic and social backgrounds, different types and severity of disabilities, etc., on how English improved their lives and helped them to achieve more. These role models could also share their personal narratives at national disabled conferences or events.
3. Encourage scholars with disabilities to act as mentors for other VIP through organising regular regional/national clubs across the region (possibly supported by NGOs or accredited arms of government). These clubs could organise events to raise awareness on disability issues as well as to give guidance and support for other disabled people, their families, and those who work with them and support them across the region.
4. Organise mobile English speaking activities, in hard-to-reach areas, in different venues across the countries of the region to encourage people including VI to practise speaking with no intensive qualification – just to practise.
5. Build activities that support one-to-one as well as group communication with fluent English speakers that is affordable. For example, organising telephone group conversations or VIP conversations (e.g. using Skype) with native English speakers.

6. Organise events in MENA (inclusive of local grassroots activities to national and international events) to encourage and motivate VIP to participate. These events could include English theatre for the blind as well as English story writing competitions.
7. Support projects of regional and national libraries for the blind that aim at increasing the range of the available English books in different accessible formats, perhaps by encouraging the production of accessible material nationally as well as acting as a mediator to get accessible books from the UK and other places, e.g. digital, audio and Braille books.
8. Promote and encourage the active participation of disabled people and their families in civic activities implemented or supported by NGOs or other accredited government agencies.

4.2 Suggested training needs

1. Training trainers in the different ways of adapting English examinations to meet the needs of people with vision impairment and how teaching strategies could be adapted to meet the needs of all learners.
2. Providing training on how to deal with and interact with visually impaired people as well as on how to enhance social inclusion inside and outside the classroom settings. The training would be of benefit to teachers and service providers as well as interested members of the public.
3. Provide guidebooks for teachers as well as teacher training on how to make the visual activities of their lessons accessible for those who are blind or partially sighted.
4. Run workshops for 'disabilities-of-sight' advisors and teachers in order for them to understand better the challenges faced by visually impaired students in classrooms.
5. Encourage agencies to facilitate the running of workshops across the region that aim to creating awareness of the importance of the accessible physical environment as well as the soft environment, e.g. in the design of the accessible websites and its materials on enhancing the inclusion of disabled people.

4.3 Assistive technologies and tools

- Provide each centre of teaching and learning with reasonable assistive tools, i.e. some tools that helps in transferring the images into a tactile format, others to give audio descriptions, and others to convert the text into Braille so that teachers can use them to create accessible materials for the VIP when needs be.
- Provide accessible electronic materials for teachers to download, enlarge (if applicable), and convert into Braille, or deliver them electronically for VI learners each, depending on her/his preference.
- Make audio descriptions of the used videos in advance for the VI learners to have access to them.

- Ensure that audio CDs (such as IELTS examinations and for taking qualifications in English speakers of other languages) are also available in an accessible format and compatible with assistive tools that VIP use. This is particularly important, especially as the available teaching CDs are mostly inaccessible with the use of assistive tools that VIP use, plus they are always accompanied with a book which are very often only available in hard copies.
- Design and apply a process that enables local organisations to work with the schools and universities on teaching and learning of English. These local organisations could convert institutions' course materials into different accessible formats or make sure that they convert the required course material prior to the start of a course.
- Standardise procedures regarding VIP students for all centres of teaching and learning.
- Standardise the messages regarding accepting a disabled student on an English course across institutions by making a check list with information about what the organisation could offer to disabled people. Make this list available with the customer services desk of English language teaching centres across the regions.
- Create a short, concise set of guidelines on the reasonable adjustments that need to be in place to accommodate the needs of learners with vision impairment in and outside the classroom settings.
- Establishing links with disabilities sight advisors to carry out a study needs assessment for VIP learners and to give guidance on how to meet the needs of these learners in the educational environment.
- Share good practice across organisations in terms of supporting disabled learners to participate on an equal level as others, e.g. giving discounts for VIP learners in recognition of the extra cost the disability may cause. (This is already benefiting some learners in Lebanon.)
- Create VIP trainer trainers who can help train others – who have experienced teaching inclusively – to teach VIP individuals and classes.
- Provide trained support workers for VI learners in and outside the teaching classroom in tasks that requires the help of a sighted person.

5

Limitations and conclusion

Very few studies have looked at the inclusion of people with disabilities in employment, education and in social activities in and across the MENA region. I wanted to fill in a gap in the literature. I examined the importance of English language skills in enhancing the opportunities available for people with disabilities generally, blind and partially sighted people in particular. More specifically, I looked at the success that some VIP have achieved through English and the way English supported their access to education, information and employment. In addition, I highlighted the difficulties that many visually impaired face in learning a foreign language vis-à-vis: 1) unavailability or shortage of accessible reading materials for the visually impaired, 2) the lack of an accessible English teaching environment that support the inclusion of learners with disabilities, and 3) the lack of mentor and emotional support for VI and their parents.

This study was limited by three factors. First, owing to the recent political events in Egypt, the focus group discussions that were scheduled to take place in Cairo/Alexandria were cancelled. Instead, telephone focus group discussions were held. However, the number of those who participated in these discussions had to be limited to make it easier to lead the discussion groups from a distance. Unfortunately, the group lacked the necessary diversity. Second, the study on the whole has linguistic shortcomings given that some of the focus groups and telephone interviews were conducted in Arabic then translated into English. Third, the specialised studies that looked at disabilities in the MENA from different angles, i.e. achievements, education, employment, etc. were limited.

Despite these limitations, I believe the study can contribute to improving teaching and learning of English across MENA by making them more inclusive. The issues I raise are also aimed at encouraging further research on the topic of English, disability and inclusion as well as at raising the awareness of policy makers and professionals on issues of disability and the inclusion of disabled people so that they will prioritise them in their agendas.

Acknowledgement

This study has been carried out as part of the English Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Perspective Project, a large scale project funded by the British Council that aims at exploring the socio-economic value of English across the MENA region.

My study explored the influence of English on the lives of disabled people across the MENA. In addition to researching the existing literature, the data was collected through conducting focus groups together with telephone interviews with 47 working age, visually impaired people from thirteen different countries across the region.

Being the researcher in charge of conducting this study, I would like to give my sincere appreciation to everyone who has participated in this study for their very useful input (see appendixes for the list of participants). I would like also to extend my genuine thanks to Hamish McIlwraith, June Jackson and Dr Mona Khechen for the invaluable feedback throughout the progress of the study. I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of all of those who helped, guided or facilitated the research activities: British Council staff members, various organisations working for the disabled and the many active persons involved in the field of vision impairment across the region.

References

- Al-Khatib, (2008) 'Innovative second and foreign language education in the Middle East and North Africa', in Van Deusen-Scholl, N and Hornberger, N (eds) *Encyclopedia of Language and Education* 4:14.
- Alam, M et al. (1988) *A Study of the Attitudes of Students, Teachers and Parents Towards English as a Foreign Language in Saudi Arabian Public Schools*. Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Education, Educational Development, The General Directorate of Research and Evaluation.
- Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (1990). *The Status of TEFL in General Education of the Arab Gulf States* a study presented by Hammash, K Albazzaz, H and Altamimi, A (in Arabic). Documents of the Executive Council, Gulf Arab Bureau of Education, Session 27, Riayadh, 15–17 January.
- Asker, B (2006) Some Reflections on English as a semi-sacred language. *Cambridge Journal*, 22/1.
- Bahous, R and Nabhami, M (2008) Improving schools for social justice in Lebanon. *Improving Schools* 11/2: 127–41.
- Borg, S (2011) 'Impact Study of British Council Teaching Centre EFL Classes' a report, commissioned by British Council. 22:1 available online at www.teachingenglish.org.uk/transform/books/impact-study-british-council-teaching-centre-efl-classes
- Boushey, H, Branosky, N, Fremstad, S, Gragg, R and Waller, M (2007) Social inclusion in the United States. Center for Social Inclusion. Available online at www.inclusionist.org/files/socialinclusionusa.pdf
- Bradshaw, K, Tennant, L and Lydiatt, S (2004) Special Education in the United Arab Emirates: Anxieties, Attitudes and Aspirations. *International Journal of Special Education*, 19/1.
- Bryman, A (2008) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Third Edition.
- Coleman, H (2010) 'The English language in Development', a research paper commissioned by the British Council available online at www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/UK011-English-Language-Development.pdf
- Crabtree, SA (2007) Family Responses to the Social Inclusion of Children with Developmental Disabilities in the United Arab Emirates. *Disability and Society*, 22/1: 49–62.
- Disability monitor initiative Middle East (2009) 'DMI Report 2009', Journal 2 Issue 2 Nov (www.cbm.org/Disability-Monitor-Initiative-Middle-East-252828.php)
- Disabled Peoples' International (DPI) 2010 available online at www.dpi.org/lang-en/resources/topics_detail?page=273

Doush, A, Mohammed, A and Ali, E (in press) Towards a More Accessible E-government in Jordan: An evaluation Study of Blind Users and Web Developers. Jordan University.

Eriksen, T (2005) McDonaldisation or diversity? Notes on the use of English as a foreign language, a keynote speech to a conference at the University of Helsinki (folk.uio.no/geirthe/EFL.html).

Fellenius, K (2000) Computer-Based Instruction for Young Braille Readers in Mainstream Education: an Evaluation Study. *Visual Impairment Research* 1/3: 148–164.

Graddol, D (2009) *English Next India: The future of English in India: when English becomes universal, no one gains advantage by having it. Rather, any one without it suffers*, a paper commissioned by British Council. 10.

Hamdan, J and Hatab, W (2009) English in the Jordanian Context. *World Englishes* 28/3: 402–404.

Malallah, S (2000) English in an Arabic Environment: Current Attitudes to English among Kuwait University Students *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 3/1: 20.

Hashisho, N (2009) An Investigation of the Status of English Language Instruction in the Lower Basic Stage in Jordanian Public Schools. *Dirasat. Educational Sciences* 36/1.

Hwang, Yoon-Suk (2011) Attitudes towards inclusion: gaps between belief and practice, *International Journal of Special Education*, 26/1: 136–146.

Lakkis, S (2003) 'Disability and Employment'. Working Paper. Lebanese Physical Handicapped Union available online at www.lphu.com/AN/doc/employment/disability_and_employment_ILO.doc

Malallah, S (2000) 'English in an Arabic Environment: Current Attitudes to English among Kuwait University Students'. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 3/1: 19–43.

Mayor, B and Swann, J (2001) English language and global teaching. Lea, Mary R. and Nicoll, Kathy (eds) *Distributed learning: social and cultural approaches to practice*, UK: Routledge.

Miller, O and Ockelford, A (2005) *Visual Needs*. London: Continuum.

Mont, D (2004) 'Disability Employment Policy', Social Protection Discussion Paper Series. Washington DC: World Bank available online at info.worldbank.org/etools/docs/library/135862/Disability%20Employment%20Policy%20-%20Mont.pdf

Musa, M (1985) Why Don't Our Students Speak English Fluently after Eight Years of Study? *Journal of Education (UAE)* 38: 67–72 (in Arabic).

National implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2010) Response by the National Centre for Human Rights of Jordan available online at www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/disability/docs/study/NCHRJordan.pdf

Rogers, S (2007) Learning Braille and Print Together. *BJVI* 25/2: 121–122.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2010) available online at www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf

Von Krogh, T (2010) A Case Study of Efforts to Change the Portrayal of Persons with Disabilities on Swedish Television, *International Communication Gazette*, May 18, 72/4–5: 379–394.

Wehbi, S and El-Lahbi, Y (2007) The Employment Situation of People with Disabilities in Lebanon: Challenges and Opportunities. *Disability and Society*, 22/4: 371–382.

Wolf, L (1999) *College Students with ADHD and Other Hidden Disabilities Outcomes and Interventions*. Boston: University of Boston, Office of Disability Services and Department of Psychiatry, School of Medicine.

World Bank (2007) 'MENA Development Report: The Road Not Travelled in the Middle East and North Africa'. Washington DC: The World Bank.

Zaher, C (1995) *The development and implementation of a first-year undergraduate EFL writing programme for English departments of Egyptian Universities*, unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Wales, Cardiff, UK. p.112.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Focus group participants whose English has helped them in one way or another throughout their lives

| Participant no. | Age | Gender | Nationality | Country and city | Level of education | Blind or partially sighted (PS) | Employment status | Occupation | Level of English (self assessed ¹) |
|-----------------|----------|--------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|--|--|
| P1 | 46 to 55 | male | Lebanese | Lebanon, Lehfed-Jbeil | MA | Blind | Self-employed | Freelance translator, interpreter, writer and researcher | Good to excellent |
| P2 | 56 to 65 | male | Lebanese | Lebanon, Tripoli-el-Mina | MA | Blind | Not employed | Retired – former Director of an organisation for the blind | Good |
| P3 | 26 to 35 | female | Lebanese | Lebanon, Beirut | BA | Blind | Employed | English teacher for the visually impaired | Excellent |
| P4 | 36 to 45 | male | Palestinian | Lebanon Tyre, Palestinian Camp | BA | Blind | Employed | Head of an organisation for disabled Palestinians | Good |
| P5 | 26 to 35 | female | Lebanese | Lebanon, South Lebanon | BA | Blind | Employed | Data entry – Communications Officer | Intermediate |
| P6 | 36 to 45 | male | Lebanese | Lebanon, Beirut | Phi | PS | Employed | Assistant Professor | Excellent |
| P7 | 36 to 45 | male | Jordanian–Palestinian | Jordan, Amman | Diploma | Blind | Employed | Chairman of the Friendship Association of the Blind | Excellent |

| Participant no. | Age | Gender | Nationality | Country and city | Level of education | Blind or partially sighted (PS) | Employment status | Occupation | Level of English (self assessed ¹) |
|-----------------|----------|--------|-------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|---|--|
| P8 | 26 to 35 | male | Jordanian | Jordan, Amman | BA | Blind | Employed | Teacher, MOE, Secondary School for the blind | Excellent |
| P9 | 26 to 35 | male | Jordanian | Jordan, Irbid | Diploma | Blind | Employed | Technical support manager | Excellent |
| P10 | 26 to 35 | male | Egyptian | Egypt, Cairo | MA | Blind | Employed | Disability Unit Co-ordinator, National Council for Childhood and Motherhood | Excellent |
| P11 | 20 to 26 | male | Egyptian | Egypt, Cairo | BA | PS | Employed | Brand Manager | Excellent |
| P12 | 26 to 35 | female | Egyptian | Egypt, Alexandria | BA | Blind | Employed | Principle Specialists Librarian | Excellent |

¹ The participants were asked to assess their level of English in the scale of 'basic, intermediate, good, excellent'

Appendix 2: Focus group participants who would like to learn English or are in the process of learning

| Participant No | Age | Gender | Nationality | Country and city | Level of education | Blind or partially sighted (PS) | Employment status | Occupation | Level of English (self assessed) |
|----------------|----------|--------|-------------------------|------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| P13 | 26 to 35 | female | Lebanese | Lebanon, Beirut | BA | Blind | Not employed | N/A | Basic |
| P14 | 26 to 35 | female | Lebanese | Lebanon, Beirut | BA | Blind | Employed | Receptionist | Basic |
| P15 | 36 to 45 | female | Lebanese | Lebanon, Allay | BA | Blind | Not employed | N/A /Arabic literature | Intermediate |
| P16 | 36 to 45 | male | Lebanese | Lebanon, Allay | Teaching Diploma | PS | Not employed | MA student – active in the field of vision impairment in Lebanon | Good |
| P17 | 20 to 25 | male | Palestinian | Lebanon, Beirut | Diploma | Blind | Not employed | MA student | Excellent |
| P18 | 20 to 25 | male | Lebanese | Lebanon, Beirut | Undergraduate | PS | Employed | Receptionist | Intermediate |
| P19 | 26 to 35 | female | Jordanian | Jordan, Amman | BA | Blind | Employed | Teacher | Intermediate |
| P20 | 26 to 35 | male | Jordanian – Palestinian | Jordan, Amman | MA | Blind | Employed | Teacher | Intermediate |
| P21 | 26 to 35 | female | Jordanian | Jordan, Kayak | MA | Blind | Employed | Teacher – Phi student | Intermediate |
| P22 | 36 to 45 | female | Jordanian | Jordan, Kayak | MA | PS | Employed | Teacher – Phi student | Intermediate |
| P23 | 20 to 25 | female | Jordanian | Jordan, Kayak | MA | Blind | Employed | Teacher – ICT trainer | Basic |
| P24 | 36 to 45 | male | Jordanian | Jordan, Amman | BA | PS | Employed | Teacher | Intermediate |
| P25 | 26 to 35 | female | Palestinian | Jordan, Ozarks | BA | Blind | Employed | Operator | Excellent |

| Participant No | Age | Gender | Nationality | Country and city | Level of education | Blind or partially sighted (PS) | Employment status | Occupation | Level of English (self assessed) |
|----------------|----------|--------|-------------|------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| P26 | 20 to 25 | female | Jordanian | Jordan, Amman | BA | PS | Employed | Officer at Jordan's Higher Council for the Affairs of People with Disabilities – member of a humanitarian organisation | Basic |
| P27 | 26 to 35 | female | Egyptian | Egypt, Cairo | Diploma | Blind | Not employed | Call centre supervisor | Intermediate |
| P28 | 20 to 25 | male | Egyptian | Egypt, Cairo | BA | Blind | Not employed | Receiving training at 'Ability' to be a call centre worker | Intermediate |
| P29 | 36 to 45 | male | Egyptian | Egypt, Cairo | MA | Blind | Self-employed | Lawyer | Good |

Appendix 3: Telephone interview participants

| Participant no. | Age | Gender | Nationality | Country and city | Level of education | Blind or partially sighted (PS) | Employment | Occupation | Level of English (self-assessed) |
|-----------------|----------|--------|--------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|--|----------------------------------|
| P30 | 36 to 45 | male | Palestinian | Palestine, Ramallah | MA | Blind | Employed | Director of an Advocacy Unit in a community development association | Excellent |
| P31 | 46 to 55 | male | Algeria | Algeria, Algiers | MA | Blind | Employed | Freelance translator | Good |
| P32 | 20 to 25 | male | Algeria | Algeria, Algiers | High school | Blind | Unemployed | Student | Basic |
| P33 | 46 to 55 | male | Saudi Arabia | Saudi Arabian | BS | Blind | Self-employed | Architect | Very Good |
| P34 | 26 to 35 | female | Saudi Arabia | Saudi Arabian | BA | PS | Employed | Assistant head of computer training for the visually impaired | Basic |
| P35 | 36 to 45 | female | Syrian | Syria, Damascus | BA | Blind | Employed | Head of an organisation of visually impaired women in Syria- Alweeam.org | Basic |
| P36 | 36 to 45 | male | Syrian | Syria, Damascus | BA teaching diploma | Blind | Employed | English teacher | Good |
| P37 | 36 to 45 | female | Kuwait | Kuwait, Kuwait City | BA | Blind | Employed | Head of the Alhoor Print for the blind | Intermediate |
| P38 | 36 to 45 | male | Kuwait | Kuwait City | BA | PS | Employed | English teacher at the Alhoor School for the Blind | Intermediate |

| Participant no. | Age | Gender | Nationality | Country and city | Level of education | Blind or partially sighted (PS) | Employment | Occupation | Level of English (self-assessed) |
|-----------------|----------|--------|-------------|-----------------------------|--|---------------------------------|---------------|--|----------------------------------|
| P39 | 46 to 55 | female | Palestine | Bayt Lahm | MA | Blind | Employed | Director of programme and project development | Excellent |
| P40 | 26 to 35 | female | Morocco | Morocco, Ribat | BA | PS | Employed | Communication officer | Basic |
| P41 | 55 to 65 | male | Morocco | Morocco, Temara | BA in English Language | Blind | Retired | A Former English teacher (for the blind), the President of the African Union of the AFUB Blind, an Executive member of the World Blind Union | Good |
| P42 | 45 to 55 | female | Yemen | Yemen, Sanaa | BA in Philosophy Diploma in special education | Blind | Employed | Special Education specialist at the ministry of social affairs – Head of the school of blind girls in Sanaa | Intermediate |
| P43 | 36 to 45 | male | Yemen | Yemen, Sanaa | BA Arts | Blind | Self-employed | Run his own business – Head of the Blind Association | Basic |
| P44 | 36 to 45 | female | Bahrain | Bahrain, Saar North Bahrain | Diploma ICT– Under graduate English language | PS | Employed | General Services at the Arabian Gulf University | Intermediate |

| Participant no. | Age | Gender | Nationality | Country and city | Level of education | Blind or partially sighted (PS) | Employment | Occupation | Level of English (self-assessed) |
|-----------------|----------|--------|---------------|------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|------------|--|----------------------------------|
| P45 | 20 to 25 | male | Iraqi-Swedish | UK, Bath | PhD | Blind | Unemployed | PhD student | Excellent |
| P46 | 10 to 25 | male | Oman | Oman, Maskat | High school | Blind | Employed | Switch Board | Basic to Intermediate |
| P47 | 56 to 65 | male | Tunisia | Tunisia, Tunis | Dr-third cycle | Blind | Employed | Director at the Ministry of Social Affairs, Assistant University Professor, member of the parliament, Director of the national union for the blind | Good |

English at work: perspectives from the MENA region

Nour Nasr

1

Introduction

The power of the English language as a world lingua franca is strongly felt in the process of globalisation¹. Globalisation is marked by a circulation of people, cultures, and economies around the world². This transnational exchange is facilitated by a common language, namely English.

In its economic sense, globalisation refers to the exchange of goods, services and labour³. In order for companies to expand to new markets across national and cultural borders, a common language is needed to standardise operations. At the same time, English has emerged as the primary language in communication technology and computer software⁴. English has thus become the preferred language for business operations and exchange around the world⁵. In response to the rising need of English in business settings, English language teaching (ELT) institutions now offer courses in 'Business English'. Learners in such courses aim to possess a command of English for a specific purpose: to understand and communicate in a globalised or English-medium workplace⁶. According to Tollefson⁷, 'English is widely seen as a key to the economic success of nations and the economic well-being of individuals.'

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the process of globalisation has been evident (if slow)⁸. The pace of economic growth in the region, however, is in favour of diversifying import–export exchanges, increasing the number of multinational firms in the MENA, and the rise of MENA-based companies operating overseas⁹. At the same time, English is present in the public sphere: an examination of product advertisements in the Middle East showed that a very low proportion exclusively used Arabic in their wording, and that 60 per cent of advertisements were from international companies¹⁰. In parallel, English language in the MENA has grown in popularity and demand, especially in the business domain, as the language of business in the MENA is known to be English¹¹. If corporations in the MENA are increasingly using English for business, proficiency in English should be a valued skill for employees.

The following text is the result of an investigation I undertook to explore the extent to which employee English proficiency is valued in MENA corporations. I looked at the demand of English as a requirement in local job advertisements. I surveyed and compared job advertisements requiring English and/or those written in English as compared to Arabic or French to get an idea of the relative importance of English as an essential qualification among job applicants.

-
- ¹ Jenkins, J (2007) *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University
- ² Lechner, F (2009) *Globalization: The Making of World Society*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell
- ³ Giddens, A (1990) *The consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity
- ⁴ Crystal, D (2001) *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- ⁵ Goodman, S and Graddol, D (1996) *Redesigning English: New Texts, New Identities*. London: Routledge
- ⁶ Ellis, M and Johnson, C (1994) *Teaching Business English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- ⁷ Tollefson, J W (2000) 'Policy and ideology in the spread of English' Hall, J K and Eggington, W G (eds), *The sociopolitics of English language teaching*. Tonawanda, NY: Multilingual Matters
- ⁸ Looney, R (2005) 'Why has the Middle East been so slow to globalize?' Review of Middle East Economics and Finance, 3 (3), p.173–202
- ⁹ Fawzy, S (2002) *Globalization and Firm Competitiveness in the Middle East and North Africa Region*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2002
- ¹⁰ Kavoossi, M (2001) *The Globalization of Business in the Middle East: Opportunities and Constraints*. Westport, CT: Quorum Press
- ¹¹ Kavoossi, M (2001) *The Globalization of Business in the Middle East: Opportunities and Constraints*. Westport, CT: Quorum Press

2

English language and work

Some academics put forward the view that non-English speakers seek to learn the language not only for its practicality, but for the culture and values that are perceived to be associated with it. In a recent analysis of ELT textbooks in the United Kingdom¹², when the world of work was represented, it was often associated with values such as hard work and success in large economies. To learners of English, such values become associated with the English language itself. Gray explains that ‘some languages are commodified in the globalised economy in the sense that they are marketed primarily in terms of their perceived economic usefulness.’ English thus acquires a perceived value because of its association with economic success. Put simply, individuals become encouraged to learn English because they believe that such a skill will yield economic rewards at work.

It seems that even reading texts in English activates perceived associations about the value of English. For instance, in a recent study¹³ that looked at Dutch speakers’ reactions to job advertisements in English versus those in Dutch, it was found that Dutch individuals initially had negative reactions to job titles in English; they felt more comfortable browsing jobs in their native language. Interestingly, however, when reactions to job advertisement content was gauged, respondents claimed the English version conveyed impressions of a higher salary with a greater international remit than the Dutch version. What is important to note, then, is that even if the English language is sometimes resisted, it seems to suggest to readers notions of ‘better’ opportunities and job prospects.

The increased presence of the English language in various public domains has, in fact, been investigated in many countries from South Korea¹⁴ to Rwanda¹⁵, to Pakistan¹⁶. Governments in these countries feel the need to respond to globalisation trends by increasing English use, education, and proficiency. By adopting the English language at work, corporations seem better enabled to compete and exchange on a global level, thus contributing to national economic development¹⁷. Yet the learning of English is not always met with enthusiasm. As Pennycook¹⁸ argues, every language carries with it its culture, and even its political ideologies. Rather than being an objective tool for communication, English has come to be seen as a vehicle of cultural transmission. Phillipson’s¹⁹ notion of ‘English linguistic imperialism’ illustrates that pervasive English media may be seen as a threat to cultural identity by nations on the receiving end. Critics fear that individual national languages might lose their cultural value as more emphasis is put on the practicality of English. According to Phillipson, the globalisation of a certain language will marginalise, and ultimately cause the loss of, indigenous, local languages²⁰. This is possibly because people start ‘believing that their language is not as useful or developed as the dominant language and that they help their future children best by speaking the dominant language to them²¹.’

However, the learning of a 'dominant' language does not necessarily result in the loss of a less dominant one, and the idea of rootedness in one's cultural folklore does not preclude openness to other linguistic influences²². Kumaravadivelu argues that teaching practice needs to cater to the learning community in a manner that is relevant to the local culture. Language teachers, he argues, need to take a teaching approach that encourages learners to 'construct their own cultural identity'. This phenomenon, termed 'glocalization', represents the existence of both local and global considerations when learning English. Kumaravadivelu asserts that this process is positive in that it promotes 'learning from other cultures that will lead to cultural liberty.'

¹² Gray, J (2010) 'The branding of English and the culture of the new capitalism: Representations of the world of work in English language textbooks.' *Applied Linguistics*, 31 (5), p.714–733

¹³ Van Meurs, F, Korzilius, H, Planken, B, and Fairley, S (2007) 'The effect of English job titles in job advertisements on Dutch respondents.' *World Englishes*, 26 (2), p.189–205

¹⁴ Lee, J, Han, M, and McKerrow, R E (2010) 'English or perish: How contemporary South Korea received, accommodated, and internalized English and American modernity.' *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 10 (4), p.337–357

¹⁵ Samuelson, B L, and Freedman, S W (2010) 'Language policy, multilingual education, and power in Rwanda.' *Language Policy*, 3, p.191–215

¹⁶ Rahman, T *Language Policy and Localization in Pakistan: Proposal for a Paradigmatic Shift*

¹⁷ Tollefson, J W (2000) 'Policy and ideology in the spread of English' J K Hall and W G Eggington (eds.), *The sociopolitics of English language teaching*. Tonawanda, NY: Multilingual Matters

¹⁸ Pennycook, A (1994) *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*. Harlow: Pearson education

¹⁹ Phillipson, R (1992) *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

²⁰ Phillipson, R (1992) *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

²¹ Skutnabb-Kangas, T (2000) 'Linguistic human rights and teachers of English' Hall, J K and Eggington, W G (eds), *The sociopolitics of English language teaching* p.22–44. Tonawanda, NY: Multilingual Matters

²² Kumaravadivelu, B (2008) *Cultural globalization and language education*. New York: Yale University Press

3

English in the MENA region

The MENA region has been described as a region with significant resistance to globalisation. Looney suggests that one internal barrier is that local leaders had defensive reactions to what they perceived were threats to the region's socio-cultural independence²³. Nevertheless, Looney does not fail to mention that globalisation has received support from several leaders, such as King Abdullah of Jordan. Still, the MENA's key to successfully competing in the global economy lies in its ability to maintain high uniformity in standards and practices as well as in retaining a qualified labour force, 'enabling individuals, and corporations, to reach around the world further, faster, deeper and more economically than ever before.'

In this sense, the value of English as a lingua franca in the global economy resonates in the MENA. Looking at the respective language policies in MENA countries, an increased awareness of the importance of English in today's global society is notable. For instance, the World Bank report²⁴ on educational reform in the MENA indicated that both Tunisia and Jordan introduced English as a compulsory foreign language in school curricula. Tunisia's Ministry of Education and Training report²⁵ on educational strategies affirmed that 'In addition to French, it is important to strengthen the teaching of English in light of its important place in the world today as a means of accessing and transferring knowledge.' Research in Tunisia has confirmed a rivalry between French and English; English is gaining more status and support on the part of policy-makers²⁶. English is introduced in Egyptian public and private schools early on in preparatory levels²⁷. In Lebanon, English is well-established as a foreign language²⁸, and has grown in status ever since missionaries founded prestigious schools before World War I. Today, English is thus seen by Lebanese university students as easier to learn than other foreign languages such as French²⁹. In Qatar, a nationwide school survey³⁰ indicated that 84 per cent of students perceived English learning as useful, while 81 per cent listed Arabic as useful.

The usefulness of English, it seems, lies in its economic rewards that allows its users to enter the global labour market and benefit from better job prospects. Other studies from the Middle East show that English is associated with developing a greater competitive edge in the labour market. A study³¹ dating back to as early as 1975 indicated that English was used at work by 63 per cent of a sample of Jordanian employees, and was also seen as important for success in one's job. It was mostly used in managerial, administrative, sales, and technical positions. Along the same lines, English was perceived in Lebanon as the language most suited for the business sphere³², and Lebanese students said they were motivated to learn English for both academic and professional needs. In Tunisia, science and technology students have reported a need for more English courses to help them in their discipline³³. Schaub found a similar drive to learn English in Egyptian college students who felt it is

associated with better job prospects and higher salaries. He further described how English has become the sole central competency required by firms recruiting in Egypt, terming it English ‘hysteria’.

-
- ²³ Looney, R (2005) ‘Why has the Middle East been so slow to globalize?’ *Review of Middle East Economics and Finance*, 3 (3), p.173–202
- ²⁴ The World Bank (2007) ‘The road not travelled: Education reform in the Middle East and North Africa’. MENA Development Report
- ²⁵ ‘The Republic of Tunisia Ministry of Education and Training’. *The New Education Reform in Tunisia: An Education Strategy for the Future 2002 – 2007*. Government strategy paper October 2002
- ²⁶ Battenburg, J (1997) ‘English versus French: Language Rivalry in Tunisia’. *World Englishes*, 16 (2), p.281–290
- ²⁷ Schaub, M (2000) ‘English in the Arab Republic of Egypt’. *World Englishes*, 19 (2), p.225–238
- ²⁸ Diab, R (2000) ‘Political and socio-cultural factors in foreign language education: the case of Lebanon’. *Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education* 5, p.177–187
- ²⁹ Diab, R L (2006) ‘University students’ beliefs about learning English and French in Lebanon’. *System*, 34(1), p.80–96
- ³⁰ Qatar Supreme Education Council. *Schools and Schooling in Qatar 2008–09 Report*. December 2009
- ³¹ Harrison, W, Prator, C, and Tucker, G R (1975) *English-language Policy Survey of Jordan: A Case Study in Language Planning*. Virginia, VA: Centre for Applied Linguistics
- ³² Shaaban, K and Ghaith, G (2002) ‘University students’ perceptions of the ethnolinguistic vitality of Arabic, French and English in Lebanon’. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 6 (4), p.557–574; Shaaban, K. & Ghaith, G. (2003). ‘Effect of religion, first foreign language, and gender on the perception of the utility of language’. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 2, p.53–77
- ³³ Harrabi, A (2010) ‘Tunisian science and technology students’ perceptions of ESP courses: A step towards a program design’. *English for Specific Purposes World*, 29 (9), p.1–20

4

The research project

My research is modelled after an important study by Hamdan and Abu Hatab³⁴, which analysed job advertisements from popular Jordanian newspapers over a 20-year period. Job clippings were classified according to the language they were written in, whether English proficiency was required, and the type of vacancies advertised. Findings showed that about 45 per cent of all advertisements either required English proficiency or were written in English. Moreover, both the rate of English advertisements and the requirement of English proficiency increased across the years.

The teaching of English is increasing in MENA. So, if MENA corporations are increasingly aware of the competitive advantage of an English-proficient workforce, English proficiency should figure markedly in job descriptions. My research sought to examine the extent to which knowledge of English is judged by corporations as an important job competency. I wanted to get an overall picture of the role of English language in the job market in the MENA region by attempting to answer a principal research question: to what extent does English proficiency increase access to job opportunities?

My specific research questions were:

- What are the languages in which job advertisements are written?
- Is English proficiency stated as a required competency in job advertisements?
- What types of jobs are stated as requiring English proficiency?
- What types of companies advertise jobs in English and/or require English proficiency in job positions?

Research method

My data source was job advertisements in popular newspaper classifieds pages in a number of countries in the MENA. I sampled newspaper clippings from Lebanon, Bahrain and Oman (see Appendix for examples). I collected one full page of advertisements once a week from a classifieds newspaper in each country, for a period of a month. The sole condition was to sample from newspapers that imposed no restrictions on language, as advertisers could freely use any language for postings. I used content analysis³⁵ to analyse the total compilation of advertisements. Following this method, I transformed each advertisement into numerical codes, one to represent each theme present in its wording. In doing so, I was able to enter the numerical data on statistical software (SPSS 17.0 in this case) to look for relationships between the different variables or categories. To illustrate, I coded the data sets at hand according to the following categories:

- Country (Lebanon, Bahrain or Oman)
- Language used (Arabic, English or French)
- English proficiency requirement (Yes, No)
- Position advertised (accounting, sales, IT, managerial, clerical, etc.)
- Company (local, regional or multinational).

In addition, after a thorough examination of the data, I added the categories below to the coding scheme. I explain the reasons for doing so below:

- Salary (in local currency)
- Whether computer skills are required (Yes, No)
- Place of work (if job position is abroad)
- Nationality requirement (if present).

The rationale behind the selection of the categories was to test the following hypotheses about the possible relationships between variables:

- Whether job advertisements written in English or requiring English proficiency were more likely to be for higher-level positions (managerial as opposed to non-managerial).
- Whether job advertisements written in English or requiring English proficiency were more likely to be linked to globalised workplaces (multinational as opposed to regional companies, and place of work being abroad).
- Whether job advertisements written in English or requiring English proficiency were more likely to have a higher salary.

I noted any requirement for computer skills since these can serve as a good indication of English proficiency, since most computer software and information technology is in English.

³⁴ Hamdan, J M, and Abu Hatab, W A (2009) 'English in the Jordanian context'. *World Englishes*, 28 (3), p.394–405

³⁵ Stemler, S (2001) 'An overview of content analysis'. *Practical assessment, research & evaluation*, 7(17)

5

Results

Lebanon

The Lebanese sample totalled 409 job advertisements. Frequency counts are listed in the tables below:

Table 1: Distribution of language of advertisements in Lebanon

| Language of ad | Number of advertisements | % |
|----------------|--------------------------|------------|
| Arabic | 323 | 79 |
| English | 73 | 18 |
| French | 13 | 3 |
| Total | 409 | 100 |

Table 2: Distribution of English proficiency requirement in Lebanon

| English proficiency | Number of advertisements | % |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|------------|
| Required | 34 | 9 |
| Not required/not mentioned | 372 | 91 |
| Total | 409 | 100 |

Frequency analysis revealed that about 18 per cent of advertisements were listed in English and about nine per cent stated that English proficiency was a requirement of the job. In addition, given that most computer software and ICTs are in English, computer proficiency must then include a certain level of English proficiency and ease of use. Eight per cent of advertisements stated that computer proficiency was required.

The most frequent job opening was in sales, with 55 advertisements out of 409, or a rate of about 13.5 per cent. As table 3 (below) shows, most companies advertising were local companies.

Table 3: Distribution of companies by type in Lebanon

| Type of company | Count | % |
|-----------------|------------|------------|
| Local | 212 | 51.8 |
| Regional | 23 | 5.6 |
| Multinational | 20 | 4.8 |
| Unknown | 154 | 37.8 |
| Total | 409 | 100 |

7.1 per cent of advertisements were for overseas positions, but they were mostly located in Gulf countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

When I examined the relationships between the different variables, the results indicated the following:

- English was mostly associated with jobs involving hospitality or people skills. To illustrate, it was found that postings for receptionist and sales jobs were more likely to be written in English, and that secretarial and sales jobs were more likely to require English proficiency. The same strength of relationships was, however, not found in managerial, executive, and IT jobs.
- Looking at the trends associated with the types of companies, local companies advertised in all languages while regional companies were more likely to advertise solely in English, and to require English proficiency. This seems to support the perceived importance of English when a job moves beyond national borders.
- The use of English in the job posting and the requirement of English proficiency seem to go hand-in-hand, as all companies that used English in the job advertisements also tended to require English proficiency. This means that when English proficiency is deemed important, advertisements tended to be written in English to target English proficient readers exclusively. This is important in determining one's access to job opportunities, as non-English speakers would miss such job postings altogether.

Finally, little data was available with regards to salary, so the evidence relating salary to advertisement language, proficiency requirement, or company type was inconclusive.

Bahrain

I collected 292 advertisements from Bahrain. The counts and percentages of job postings written in English and requiring English proficiency are in the summative table below. The table also contains the distribution according to computer skills requirements.

Table 4: Distribution of language of advertisements, English proficiency, and computer skills requirements in Bahrain

| | | Count | % |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|------|
| Language of advertisement | Arabic | 60 | 20.5 |
| | English | 232 | 79.5 |
| English proficiency | Required | 35 | 12 |
| | Not required/ not mentioned | 257 | 88 |
| Computer skills | Required | 33 | 11.3 |
| | Not required/ not mentioned | 259 | 88.7 |

Almost half of the companies advertising were local (47.9 per cent), 2.7 per cent were regional and 4.8 per cent were multinational, but 44.5 per cent were unknown. The most common positions advertised were in sales (14.4 per cent). Few postings were for positions abroad, including Qatar and the UAE, indicating that job mobility outside Bahrain does not seem to be common. Indeed, the trend is for expatriates to come to Bahrain for work. This is illustrated by the fact that job advertisements tended to prefer applicants of certain nationalities; for instance, nationality requirements in the sample included being Bahraini, Arab, Asian, Filipino, Thai, Indian and Nepali.

Similar to the Lebanese data, Bahraini companies that advertised in English were also more likely to require English proficiency. In addition, posting advertisements in Arabic was mostly restricted to local companies. This indicates that local companies may not need to target exclusively English proficient applicants because the business may operate entirely in Arabic within the same country.

Job positions in which English proficiency was mostly required included sales, secretarial, teaching, and managerial jobs. As was previously discussed, hospitality and people-oriented jobs necessitate a good command of English. In addition, teaching jobs were either to teach the English subject or within international institutions that operate primarily in English. Managerial jobs would also require English proficiency for a variety of reasons, including the ability to establish connections with a range of investors, partners and institutions and the need to manage and communicate with a multicultural workforce from various nationalities. Furthermore, computer skills were mostly needed for sales, secretarial, accounting, and designing jobs. Thus, apart from the need of English in front office positions, English proficiency is an assumption for positions with heavy dependence on information and data such as accounting and design.

With regards to salary, the little data available yielded some evidence that job advertisements written in English indicated a higher salary than job advertisements in Arabic. Although the data available is in no way definitive, the result comes as a confirmation of previous research showing that English job advertisements commanded a higher salary.

Oman

The Omani sample of job advertisements consisted of a total of 169. It was difficult to collect a large number of job advertisements as classifieds pages contained very few job postings. Nevertheless, the present sample is enough to draw a few interesting conclusions. Table 5 illustrates the distribution of English advertisements, English proficiency requirements and computer skills requirements.

Table 5: Distribution of language of advertisements, English proficiency and computer skills requirements in Oman

| | | Count | % |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|------|
| Language of advertisement | Arabic | 122 | 72.2 |
| | English | 47 | 27.8 |
| English proficiency | Required | 26 | 15.4 |
| | Not required/ not mentioned | 143 | 84.6 |
| Computer skills | Required | 17 | 10.1 |
| | Not required/ not mentioned | 152 | 89.9 |

The data shows that 39.1 per cent of companies advertising were local, while the majority (57.4 per cent) were unknown. Common positions to be listed were in sales (13.6 per cent), and as a beautician (8.9 per cent). Again, preference for certain nationalities included Arab, Indian, Indonesian, Lebanese, Moroccan, Sudanese, Filipino, Syrian and Turkish. About 13 per cent of advertisements preferred Omani applicants.

Omani companies advertising in English were more likely to require English proficiency as well. English proficiency was required mostly for sales, secretarial, technical and managerial jobs, while computer skills were necessary for sales and secretarial positions. The findings are quite similar to those in Lebanon and Bahrain, where English is needed for hospitality jobs, as well as jobs involving the use of technology.

6

General trends

The table below summarises the results obtained across countries. As can be seen, inter-country differences are minimal in terms of the rate of advertisements requiring English proficiency, computer skills and the company profiles and positions required. Nevertheless, one observation is that Bahrain has a significantly higher number of advertisements in English compared to Oman and Lebanon. This high frequency is probably due to the fact that by Bahraini policy, any work visa applicant is required to have a certain level of English proficiency in order to be considered; as such, English proficiency is an assumed skill. On the other hand, such differences might also be due to sampling biases whereby the newspaper in which most job advertisements were found was in an English language medium newspaper. In any case, the rate of advertisements requiring English proficiency in Bahrain does not seem to be outside the range in Lebanon and Oman.

In addition to frequency counts, I found a number of trends that were replicated across countries. For instance, English proficiency was primarily required for hospitality and people-oriented jobs in all three countries. This finding is in line with previous indications that tourism and hospitality jobs across several MENA corporations cited English proficiency as an essential skill for employees³⁶. Indeed, the mentioned research highlighted that 80 per cent of respondents in a MENA-wide survey about the tourism industry viewed English as a preferred skill for all job levels. A second trend is that the more globalised the company (i.e. when it was more multinational), the more likely it was to post job advertisements in English and require English proficiency in the job. Clearly, the process of globalisation is strongly seen in the fact that workplace boundaries have shifted beyond national borders. While 7.1 per cent of classifieds in Lebanon advertise for positions in other Arab countries, Bahrain and Oman receive significant numbers of expatriates from the MENA as well as Asian and African countries. Unsurprisingly, with more 'global' jobs, English takes a prominent position in the daily business operations and social communications throughout the MENA.

Table 6: Aggregated distributions across countries of study

| Country | Number of advertisements | % in English | % English proficiency | % computer skills | % local companies | Positions English required |
|---------|--------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---|
| Lebanon | 409 | 18 | 9 | 8 | 51.8 | Sales, secretarial |
| Bahrain | 292 | 79.5 | 12 | 11.3 | 47.9 | Sales, secretarial, teaching, managerial |
| Oman | 169 | 27.8 | 15.4 | 10.1 | 39.1 | Sales, secretarial, technical, managerial |

My research has some limitations with regard to method. First, it should be noted that most job advertisements in all three countries were for local companies looking to fill mainly sales positions. This represents a bias as rich information is not equally available for higher-level positions or for regional/multinational companies. Secondly, a true representation of the MENA region needs to rest on data collected from a large number of countries, including at least a few North African countries. However, my research was conducted at a time of political unrest that spread to the entire MENA region. This inevitably limited the possibility of data collection in a number of countries. Follow up research is thus needed to provide a richer image of the MENA with regards to English in the workplace. Finally, the data collection has taken place in a cross-sectional manner, at one point in time. Although it provides a snapshot of English in popular texts in a few MENA countries, an interesting approach would be to sample newspapers over an extended period to identify how the importance of English changes over time.

³⁶Tohamy, S 'The Competitive Position of the Tourism Industry in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region (2002)'. Fawzy, S . (ed), Globalization and Firm Competiveness in the MENA Region. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2002

7

Implications for language policy

In light of the present findings, I conclude this research piece with a brief reflection on the future of language policy in the MENA. In fact, I argue that the MENA represents a peculiar case when it comes to the issue of language policy. The region defines itself primarily in terms of its common native language, Arabic, which is also the language of the Quran, another salient determinant of the MENA socio-cultural and political identity³⁷. In this context, Kumarvadivelu's³⁸ recommendations become of paramount importance. The English language, if represented by MENA learners as a primarily 'Western' influence, runs the risk of being seen as a threat to cultural values and would be met with resistance. However, as Kumarvadivelu points out, in today's cultural globalisation, cultural identity is no longer an unchanging characteristic residing within strict national borders. Rather, it is 'a complex process of interrelationship between global, national, social, and individual realities', and in turn, it also influences other cultural identities.

Thus, in order to promote intercultural communication that values every cultural identity, Kumarvadivelu points to the need to change teaching and pedagogical practices. English teaching curricula need to incorporate indigenous elements from the host culture to allow the learner to appreciate different cultural nuances in an objective manner that does not place a value judgement on cultural values by locating them on opposite ends of a continuum. As such, cultural liberty is 'about expanding individual choices, not about preserving values and practices as an end in itself with blind allegiance to tradition', it is the willingness to learn from other cultures, not just about them. The implication for classroom learning is to represent English as a world phenomenon, used in business, technology and communication all around the world, by Western and non-Western groups alike. In addition, class material would need to provide cases, vignettes and texts in English that are relevant to the MENA socio-cultural context, evoking everyday practices, traditions and social communication patterns. With regards to English in business settings, business English courses similarly need to employ scenarios that apply to the MENA workplace, taking into consideration the cultural subtleties within work communication. Pennycook³⁹ terms this approach 'global critical pedagogy' where educators have the responsibility to get learners to discuss and celebrate the different linguistic varieties and cultural meanings outside the classroom.

In this sense, it appears that the MENA has started to recognise the importance of this pedagogical approach. Hamdan and Abu Hatab⁴⁰ report that in 2005, the Jordanian Ministry of Education has included the following among its objectives of English language teaching: 'Acquire a positive attitude towards English and realise

its importance as a world language and as a means for promoting mutual understanding among people and countries as well as a means for professional development of the individual.' There was also an indication that English language would be taught eclectically. Such developments point to an optimistic future for English in the region.

³⁷ Maamouri, M (1998) *Language education and human development: Arabic diglossia and its impact on the quality of education in the Arab region*. International Literacy Institute, Philadelphia, PA

³⁸ Kumaravadivelu, B (2008) *Cultural globalization and language education*. New York: Yale University Press

³⁹ Pennycook, A (1994) *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*. Harlow: Pearson education

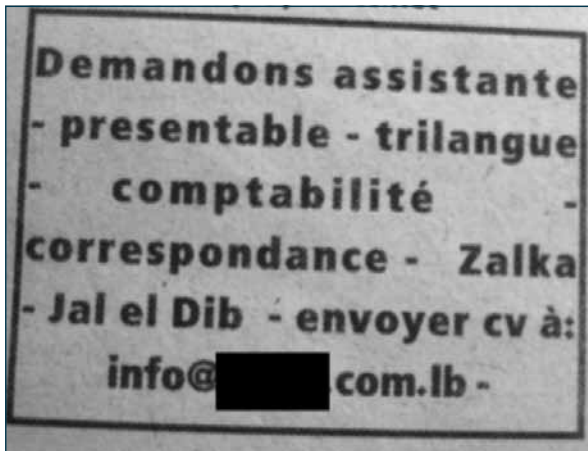
⁴⁰ Hamdan, J M, and Abu Hatab, W A (2009) 'English in the Jordanian context'. *World Englishes*, 28 (3), p.394–405

References

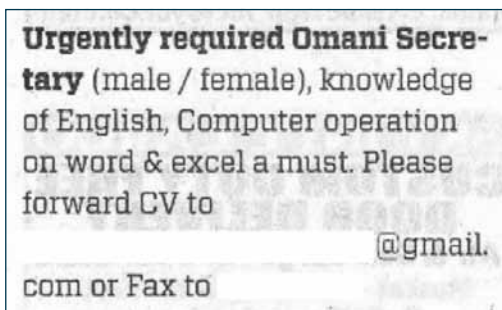
- Joseph, J (2004) *Language and Identity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Salameh, F (2010) *Language, Memory, and Identity in the Middle East: The Case for Lebanon*. Lanham, Md: Lexington Books.
- Suleiman, Y (1994) *Arabic Sociolinguistics: Issues and Perspectives*. Richmond: Curzon Press.
- Ricento, T (2006) *An Introduction to Language Policy; Theory and method*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Tollefson, J (2002) *Language Policies in Education; Critical issues*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Shohamy, E (2006) *Language Policy: Hidden agendas and new approaches*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Appendix

Advertisement types from MENA newspapers



This clipping from a Lebanese classifieds newspaper reads, in French: 'Seeking assistant – presentable – trilingual – accounting – correspondence – [location: Zalka, Jal el Dib] – send cv to ...' It is interesting to note the requirement is for a trilingual applicant (i.e. Arabic, French, and English), even though the advertisement is in French. Also, the only method of application is by email, so applicants need to be fairly IT literate.



Secretary - with experience
- spoken/written English
French - for a pharmaceutical
company in Hazmieh - send CV
on fax: [REDACTED] - and email:
info@[REDACTED].com

A similar clipping in English from a Lebanese newspaper, highlighting the need for both foreign languages.

A reputed trading company in Bahrain requires
EXECUTIVE SECRETARY
for immediate posting

Candidates must have:

- ◆ Minimum Degree in English Literature
- ◆ Over 5 years experience in the similar position
- ◆ Excellent communication skills both written and spoken
- ◆ Excellent computer skills in Windows (excel/ word/ powerpoint etc)

Please send your CV by email to:
[REDACTED]@gmail.com

This clipping is from a Bahraini newspaper. This secretarial job emphasises a very high level of English proficiency suggesting a large pool of potential English language speaking employees.

URGENTLY REQUIRED for
a leading Courier Company,
Operation Executives,
Office Coordinators, Courier
Boys. Computer literate, flu-
ent in English. Email to:
info@[REDACTED].com, Fax:
[REDACTED]

For this job vacancy clipping from a newspaper in Bahrain, English proficiency and computer skills are the only requirements.

AREA FOR BARCODE

ISBN 978-0-86355-696-8

© **British Council** 2013 / C563

The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities.