



Why are Kuwaiti Students Weak in the English Language?

A Study by:

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Abstract

This research will examine the perspective of both PAAET teachers and students on what they think the reasons are for the high failure rate. a questioner will be distributed to both, teachers and students, hoping to reach a solution to this problem that is facing the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training.



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Introduction:

Kuwait is a mono-cultural country and the majority of its population shares the same traditions, background, language and culture. Arabic is the country's formal linguistic and 70% of students are taught using it at different levels. English is mainly taught as a foreign language and lessons take 50 minutes a day. Students are only taught Basic English involving exercises that promote the core language skills that include writing, reading, speaking and listening (Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2012). The study will focus on teachers and students because they are highly affected by Kuwait's MOE policy and their voices are often left out during policymaking. The students are left out in most of the literature written to be used in English learning and teaching in Kuwait. Teachers and students are also the main stakeholders affected by MOE's policy. Exploring their views will be instrumental in getting detailed perceptions of the situation at hand.



English Language Level:

Low literacy levels of English language in Kuwait are attributed to attitudes and preferences amongst students toward learning. Most students do not understand the importance of learning English despite having difficulties in four core skills that include writing, reading, listening and speaking (Erguvan, 2014). The continued changes of the English curriculum indicate the country's progression towards a developed curriculum.

This study aims at exploring the views of students and teachers concerning learning and teaching using English. It also seeks to provide basis for further studies regarding language policy in Kuwait. The study will be used to tackle issues in the Kuwait education system before they become severe. In addition, it intends to identify, assess and examine alternative futures to language policies. The study further explores the current language policy in Kuwait and the critical areas that require implementing EMI. This will help locate positive and negative issues that impact the general learning process. The study will review the current status of English as a teaching tool in Kuwait's education system and will present strong and weak arguments for the country's educational policy.

History about the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training:

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to learners at Kuwaiti secondary and intermediate schools was announced by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Education (MOE) in 1993. Initially, the MOE



introduced EFL to students in elementary learning centres. However, in 2005 to 2006, the first group of students who had at least 12 years' experience in English was admitted by the Public Authority of Applied Education and Training (PAAET) colleges (Tollefson, 2013). Majority of students admitted to PAAET colleges had limited opportunities of advancing their studies in English language and as there were only a few students who had majored in English. Students admitted were limited from fully comprehending the English course because it was only assigned to them as English for Special Purposes (ESP). At the time, only high school students took pre-requisite courses in English. The expectations at PAAET were high at the beginning but these expectations began to diminish because the students recorded poor placement test results. In the years that followed, PAAET colleges continued to record low English proficiency (Habbash & Troudi, 2015). Since the 1990s, English curricula for Kuwait's intermediate, secondary and elementary learning centers have undergone numerous changes. Since 1993, English was taught in Kuwait public schools using UAE English books for a decade and then Kuwait's Ministry of Education designed the country's curriculum. Unfortunately, the design of the curriculum did not achieve any continuity to the country's teaching of English language but the curriculum was subject to change annually. The changes meant that both students and teachers experienced stress of coping with changes in aims, goals and preparation (Alnefaie, 2016). In addition, it was apparent that Kuwait's MOE had not put into consideration the challenges students faced in learning EFL.



The History of Learning English in Kuwait:

The popularity of English in Kuwaiti educational system was a past phenomenon. According to Alnefaie (2016), the importance of English in Kuwait is attributed to congregation of socio-economic, political, historical and geographical factors. Kuwait is position centrally and is the main connecting route between India, the Middle East and Europe (Alnefaie, 2016). This in turn makes it an important commercial trade center.

Historical and political factors came into play in the late 18th century. During that period, British East India Company that had its center of operations in Kuwait's northern region. During that period, Kuwait was compelled to use English to facilitate merchant operations. Furthermore, during the British protectorate that lasted from 1899 and ended in 1961, English played a central role in international administration and affairs. Kuwait joined the United Nations in 1963 after a protection treaty was discontinued (Tsui & Tollefson, 2017). Consequently, English became more reinforced as instrumental towards in international and political communication.

The prominence of English was also ascribed to socio-economic elements like the expansion of oil production industry which picked in 1930s. The discovery of oil in Kuwait led to the emergence of a booming industry that attracted many Anglophone companies that wanted to function and operate in the country. Majority of the workers were Westerners, Asians and mixture of foreigners but Kuwaitis also played a role in oil exploration because it provided excellent commodities and salaries (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2011). As a result, most Kuwaitis study



English up to a certain level to provide a basis for communication with foreigners from several nationalities. This is instrumental towards ensuring that they share expertise and they boost their development process.

Brief History of Teaching English in the Education System in Kuwait:

Teaching and learning EFL continues to face numerous challenges. Most of the challenges are associated with lack of student motivation, reliance on memorization and rote learning, underachievement, dependence on high stakes testing and low literacy levels. These issues are further coupled with outdated teaching methodologies and curricula, lack of enough qualified teachers, insufficient support systems and unflattering picture of the country's education system (Al Darwish & Sadeqi, 2016). In addition, Kuwaiti faces huge gaps in cultural and linguistic distance between teachers and learners.

Most colleges in Kuwait particularly PAAET colleges are constantly incompetent and run unsuccessfully. Considerations have not been factored to develop pedagogy and appropriate sociocultural materials that can address the specific needs of learners in the country. It is no surprise that most graduates from Kuwait are unqualified to manage their studies given in EFL in reading, writing and understanding texts. As such, Kuwait has a shortage of qualified EFL teachers while EFL Kuwait students have low linguistic levels. This means that most students cannot communicate in written English despite having learnt it throughout their higher



education. In future, the role of EFL teachers in learning and teaching English will be critical in Kuwait (Erguvan, 2014). Exploring the perceptions of student teachers at the higher educational level will be an influential factor that will affect students' abilities to be fluency in the English language.

The Ministry of Education in Kuwait:

Kuwait's MOE put in place specified measures and goals for teaching English in both secondary and elementary public schools. The ministry specified goals included students being able to write using the correct punctuation and grammar. The students were also required to communicate using various notions and linguistic functions in daily situations per MOE guidelines (Erguvan, 2014). However, Kuwaiti students often encounter problems learning English as their second or as a foreign language.

The Levels of Education in Kuwait:

The learning process that existed in Kuwait in the 19th century was elementary since it was based on traditional norms. The primary source of literacy at the time was Quranic schools and they were administered by religious preachers. During that period, the country's education system was more focused on promoting the mastery of the Arabic language, observing prayers as stipulated



in the Quran and principles of Islam. The only medium of instruction was classical Arabic where students were taught to do simple calculations and comprehend elementary reading and writing skills (Hasanen, Al-Kandari & Al-Sharoufi, 2014).

However, the expansion of the country's economic status at the beginning of the 20th century through trade and commerce boosted the levels of education in Kuwait. Merchants who travelled for business in other countries saw the need for formal education because informal education had failed to deliver sufficient reading, writing and calculation skills. As a result, the Mubarakiya School was established in 1912 to mark the first phase of formal teaching. The school was donated by wealthy merchants. In 1920, the second formal school was established to provide more structured and modern curricula (Javid, Farooq & Gulzar, 2012). This led to introduction of English language as the main subject for the first time.

The success of the two formal schools inspired the Kuwaiti government to take full responsibility for the education sector in 1936. The main reasons behind the takeover were that local entrepreneurs had failed to offer full sponsorship to the educational establishments because of the 1929-1936 economic crises that had adversely affected their businesses. Secondly, the development of oil deposits meant that the government had adequate resources to finance the education sector. In the years that followed, the government made huge transitions to the education system (Erguvan, 2014). For instance, it invited teachers from Palestine in 1937 to assist with the structuring of the country's education system. In addition, the first Council of Education was established which later oversaw the invitation of teachers and inspectors from



Syria, Egypt and other Arab countries to aid in the development of the country's education system (Tollefson, 2013).



Literature Review

Structure of Kuwait's Education System:

The education ladder in Kuwait changed in 1956-1957. Previously, it consisted of eleven years of teaching with students having to spend seven years at the primary school level and another four at the secondary school level. The structure was changed and was divided into four primary level, four intermediate and four secondary school years (Javid, Farooq & Gulzar, 2012). This structure was applicable until 2004-2005 when the duration of the several stages was changed. The new structure included two years in Kindergarten, five at primary, four at intermediate and three at the secondary school level. The changes to existing school structure meant that compulsory schooling was increased to nine years from the initial eight. The Ministry of Education argued that the new structure would address the psychological and behavioral needs of students particularly in the era of technology (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2011). Furthermore, it could unify the formal educational stages with other countries in the Arab world.

The Problem with Kuwaiti's Education System :

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is only implemented at the college of Business Administration at Kuwait University and in other scientific colleges. The education system in



Kuwait requires adoption of new textbooks written in English that are used to teach and conduct examination. As such, students are compelled to attain high competency in English to get admission to those institutes. Interestingly, the textbooks adopted for English learning are specifically written for native English speaking students meaning that Kuwaiti students need to double their effort to understand the context of the module, lexical and language terms used in the textbooks (Tsui & Tollefson, 2017).

Passing English language tests is set as the benchmark for which students can be admitted to business administration and science colleges. The Kuwaiti education disregards high scores students attain at the elementary and secondary school level. Instead, its academic eligibility is primarily based on the performance of a student in English language tests. Consequently, bright students could be denied an opportunity to study science courses merely because they lack an English foundation course or they fail to pass an English test. This policy by Kuwait's MOE frustrates many students because they are taught all subjects using Arabic (Habbash & Troudi, 2015). It is only after progressing to tertiary level that they are expected to improve their English proficiency.

The Kuwaiti context has high regard for English and learning the language is regarded as critical. Intensive research has been previously carried out in Kuwait on the benefits of English and how it can be taught better. Available literature presents English learning as a necessity instead of a luxury. The notion that English learning is critical in Kuwait is also adopted by policymakers. As such, the implementation of EMI is seen as the gateway to the new world and a sign of



modernity (Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2012). Despite these notions, a more critical approach needs to be established to ensure that the current language policy is implemented comprehensively.

The main problem with Kuwait's education system is that there exists a huge gap between the level of English taught in learning centers and the expected level of competency at the tertiary level. Students are expected to reach a high competency in English despite being taught in Arabic in all subjects and English is only taught as a foreign language for a limited time. In 2013, Kuwait's MOE announced that there were plans to have mathematics taught in English but these plans were quickly shelved due to protests by parents and students (Doiz et al., 2012).

Methodology:

The study was conducted on both teachers and students. The participants included five teachers and they were given a questionnaire containing nine questions. The students who participated in the study were sixty and they were required to answer twelve questions. The teachers consisted of those in the English Language Unit and English Department. The questionnaire given to teachers and students was to be answered on a four point Lickert Scale from "strongly agree" to 'strongly disagree'. The questions were open ended and the responses were directly recorded without teachers having to make any comment.



Questionnaire Analysis

Teacher Feedback:

It is noticeable from responses in the questionnaire that teachers had not motivated to teach English as a subject in Kuwait's education system. Over 50% of the teachers thought that students were not motivated to learn English and this could have been attributed to the use of teaching methods that were quite boring. However, 60% responded positively when modern teaching methods were introduced such as language games. In addition, attitudes and preferences



amongst student heavily influenced their desire to participate in English classes with 80% of them feeling embarrassed to participate in classes and believing it was a waste of time.

Interestingly, teachers felt that all students had a weak foundation in English. The teaching background and expertise was also questioned with 60% of the teaching fraternity expressing that 60% of teachers who taught student studying English lacked a proper teaching background.

As such, teachers strongly felt that it was important that tutors enrolled in PAAET to receive additional teaching courses.

Student Feedback :

The responses from students demonstrate that they deemed learning English as not important. At least 90% of the student did not regard English as their favorite subject and rarely spoke it outside the classroom. However, there was an increase in morale by students to learn English with about 30% enjoying English classes and regarded it as important to their future careers. Despite a seemingly positive response, over 90% had difficulties comprehending elementary writing and reading skills. At least 80% enjoyed learning English if modern teaching methods were adopted.

Results



The findings from the questionnaire will be divided into four sections. The first section will discuss the positive and negative views of EMI and the second section will present views of teaching and learning experiences particularly challenge teachers face in delivering EMI. The third section will explore the effects of EMI on linguistic rights and identity of Kuwaitis and the final section will address students' opinions on EMI.

Theme 1: Views on EMI:

This section offers insights to the student responses on English as a medium of instruction. Examining Kuwaiti student perspectives on EMI is critical towards achieving a better understanding of its benefits and drawbacks. The positive views by students on EMI are centered on English being the language of the world, employment prospects, the preponderance of English in research and their ability to continue their post graduate studies. The students perceive the English to be critical towards their future prosperity and as important to achieving their goals. Only 30% of the student agreed that proficiency in English would be beneficial to their future careers. This shows that English is still considered important amongst Kuwaiti students comparing to responses in other questions which had many negative reviews.

The negative views are attributed to the notion that EMI is a waste of time and English does not have any effect on future employment. In addition, the students complained that they lack a proper background in English because previous education did not adequately prepare them EMI.



Adverse reviews on the importance of learning EMI could be attributed to the notion amongst students that English is not useful for subjects such as physics and mathematics. In addition, failure to prepare students at the secondary school level means that they lacked a strong foundation at the tertiary level (Al Darwish & Sadeqi, 2016). Consequently, the students had a negative perception about English particularly when compelled to speak it. Majority of the students (90%) were nervous to speak English inside and outside the classroom because of lack of a good foundation at the secondary school level. Although the tertiary level is supposed to be a continuation of secondary school level, majority of the students still felt there were gaps in how the subject was taught.

Theme 2: Learning and Teaching Experiences:

Student learning and teaching are centered mostly on incomprehensibility of lectures. Kuwaiti students face struggles and challenges in their quest to get competency in English and learning through EMI. Most students struggle at the tertiary level where they are required to be more complacent in English language. Some struggle with terminologies, subjects and others the entire language. According to Alnefaie (2016), most students struggle at first because they are required to know terminologies but it becomes overwhelming for them to acquire sheer knowledge of another language. These learning and experiences could be the reason why teachers noted that



most students do not enjoy learning English, are not motivated and are embarrassed to participate in class.

The Kuwait education system exposes students suddenly to learning large amount of English despite the majority of students lacking a proper background of the language. The sudden transition to EMI means that students do not have a smooth university life. Instead, they are compelled to work hard to at least overcome linguistic hurdles (Erguvan, 2014). The sudden transition could be the reason why most students believe studying English to be a waste of time since they already lack a proper background in English.

The shift from learning EFL at school to using EMI often confuses many students and they end up requesting remedial courses to enable them to focus on their major. In addition, students lack adequate English proficiency to enable them understands textbooks and lectures used. Despite these challenges, they are expected to pass English modules to ensure they are allowed to major in their scientific field. Most students end up feeling under pressure to overcome these obstacles. They have to ensure that the language barrier does not slow down their progress. Only students with a lot of drive likely take extra time to learn the language meaning that most students will fail to study the major they prefer (Javid et al., 2012). The obstacles highlighted are attributed to failure by PAAET to enroll their teachings in training courses. This could be reason many teachers lack proper teaching background to enable them adequately address the student needs and employ the right teaching methods that could see students comprehend English much faster.



Improving competence of teachers is critical towards boosting grades of students in the study EFL.

Students have to contend with missing information during lectures and this leads to incomplete comprehension. The missing information is apparent while listening to the lectures and during the reading of textbooks. The pieces of missed information tend to prevent students from understanding their EFL. As such, PAAET enrolls teachings in training courses. Furthermore, teachers need to take additional classes in English because most of them are natives and English is their second language.

Theme 3: The Effect of EMI:

Students often feel that EMI is a variable that affects their identity. English directly affects the cultural, social, physical and intellectual perspectives of the Kuwaiti students. In addition, EMI contributes to the spread of Western traditions and thoughts because the students have to read English books, watch English programs and learn English courses (Habbash & Troudi, 2015). This ends up absorbing their thoughts. This could be the main reason why students fail to speak English outside the classroom despite being exposed to it in their studies. The students feel that by speaking English they are absorbing their traditions. Others feel that speaking English places more importance to it compared to Arabic. This is despite the fact that competency in English is critical in their studies.



The perception amongst students is that English has taken over Arabic in most areas of Kuwait's education system. For instance, most foreign teachers in Kuwait publish their work in English and do not denote anywhere the Arabic language. In addition, foreign teachers are not compelled by the Ministry of Education to learn Arabic because they can easily teach curricula in English (Habbash & Troudi, 2015). As such, students perceive teachers to lack pride in the country's language. It is important that teachers take pride in the country's mother tongue to encourage students and other stakeholders of the academic community also to embrace English.

Theme 4: Arabic as the Medium of Instruction (AMI):

The negative attitudes and preferences of students towards EFL and EMI could also be attributed to the fact that most consider it easier to learn using their language. Majority of students and academic fraternity are in support of AMI. As such, this could be the reason why there are few students who consider English to be their favorite subject, enjoy learning it or speak it outside the classroom. They often regard Arabic as adequate to facilitate their academic achievements. The easiness of Arabic for native speakers makes it easier for them to read books and comprehend academic content. The majority consider the adoption of EMI as challenging because majority does not understand important aspects of its curriculum especially when it is incorporated during lectures. Students continuously express views how learning through AMI would help during learning, revision and acquiring majors in scientific fields.



Conclusion:

Most students in Kuwait do not consider English as the gateway to academic prosperity, personal gains and future careers. However, some believe learning English would help them maximize their chances of achieving personal goals and securing better jobs. Kuwaiti learners are supposed to view competency in English as a valuable asset and should therefore focus on mastering the English language. Despite Kuwaitis having their language, it does not provide them with the same advantages and opportunities as English would do. Many students believe that despite the importance of English in future, their competence in Arabic is sufficient for them to achieve their academic goals and get good employment. This could be one many reason why most Kuwaiti students are still weak in English language.

The high failure rates are also attributed to the notion that learning English is exaggerated and a waste of time. Students perceive the idea that EMI is useful to Kuwait's education system as not substantial. The students' reasoning is that English will not benefit them in their future careers particularly those studying science subjects. Almost all graduates studying majors such as medicine and engineering are all absorbed to the public sector which does not competency in the English language. Consequently, it leads to abandonment of EFL even in scientific fields hence leading to high failure rates amongst students. The implementation of EMI is too costly for Kuwait. As such, students do not get ample training and competency in English because teachers



are also not trained properly. Consequently, most students struggle to comprehend terminologies and different elementary skills in English. This often results in high failure rates for students.

Recommendations:

The study concludes by recommending that Kuwaiti's Ministry of Education modifies the medium of instruction policy so that it can incorporate both Arabic and English. Implementation of the instruction could have implications for teachers, policymakers and students. The current EMI policy should also be modified so that students have a proper foundation of the English language before they are enrolled in the tertiary education level. The current policy is characterized by many challenges because students are compelled to endure additional effort and extra effort when they are studying. Teachers have to get proper training to ensure they can adequately handle the different literacy levels of learners. Modern teaching methods should also be introduced to ensure that students get encouraged to comprehend English. In addition, Kuwaiti students should be made to understand the importance of learning ESL. There are many benefits attributed to being competent in English and they should be made to understand.



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