Language, Identity and Transformation: The Case of Arabic in Qatari Higher Education

Emna Belkhiria, Mazhar Al-Zo'by and Arslan Ayari

Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the practical as well as the symbolic features of language selection-based vision in Qatari higher education. The politics of language indigenisation as well as the promotion of native curriculum designs in Qatari higher education are examined in the context of post-colonial nationalisation and identity formation in the age of market-globalisation.

Keywords

Qatar – politics of language – Indigenisation – nationalisation

1 Introduction

The divergence between education as a tool for socioeconomic transformation and education for wider social responsibility ideals has engendered critical debates primarily focussed on change in Higher Education (HE) (Thomas & Irwin, 2017). Recently, universities have aspired to transform themselves into economic agents driven by education while simultaneously generating social benefits and social equity. In this regard, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries represent a unique context to explore how HE policies are currently undergoing profound structural as well as intellectual transformations which embody and express this vision. A set of complex and interrelated socio-political challenges of nation building, change and continuity, oil and post-oil shifting economic strategies, and adjustment to the powerful forces unleashed by the process of globalisation have generated an array of reforms to contemporary HE systems in the region. Moreover, some of these countries and their societies are enduring the social repercussions of their rapid economic growth and demographic imbalance, whereby their citizens are becoming a minority

in their own countries, compounding the real and imagined threats that may affect their national identity and Arabic language (Abdulla, 2010; Belhiah & Elhami, 2015). Qatar, like many other GCC states, has undergone considerable transformation in its education system during the last few years (Murshed & Nakibullah, 2015). Its 2030 National Vision identifies major objectives and challenges including modernisation, preservation of traditions and sustaining the Qatari identity, culture, and the Arab and Islamic values both at the level of the family and the broader social contexts. Accordingly, language and education policies in HE have assumed central status in national development strategies as well its cultural politics. In 2012, the Supreme Education Council (SEC) of the State of Qatar decreed a change in the language of instruction from English to Arabic in its largest HE institution, Qatar University (QU). The changes affected mainly programmes offered by the colleges of Arts and Sciences, Business and Economics, and Law. However, English remained the language of instruction for all science and engineering majors, resulting in two separate and distinct pedagogical spheres of knowledge and cultural modes of production.

Because QU represents a major source of national human and knowledge development in the state of Qatar, this chapter analyses the practical aspects and features of language selection-based visions in the country as well as their symbolic dimensions on individual, social, and cultural identities. Furthermore, the implications for the choice of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in HE is examined within the context of post-colonial nationalisation projects as well as identity revitalisation movements in the age of globalisation. In this context, the chapter argues that although the English language dominated previous initiatives as a central feature of globalisation on language education policies adopted in Qatar, the current language strategies are guided by local intellectual and cultural strategies and exigencies that seek to promote the Arabic language and preserve traditions, national cultural identity and heritage.

2 Language, Language Policy and Identity Formation

The symbolic and functional utility of language in the socio-political formation of national consciousness has become a cornerstone in the current debate over postcolonial identities, national development, cultural policy, and social justice. A persistent feature within this debate has manifested in the discussion about the role of language planning in public life, educational policy, the revitalisation of linguistic communities against the intrusion, and the imposition

of global cultural orders in the age of cultural imperialism. Conceived in this manner, language policy has become a vital constituent of national cultures and educational systems in many societies around the world. It is often utilised to cultivate, safeguarded, and strengthen collective national identities as well as speech communities in every-day practices in the age of supranational structures. Such emphasis demonstrates, as Ricento (2006) argues:

the ways in which language (and language policy) is imbricated in all aspects of social identity and social change. Language is the medium by and through which individuals define and inhabit their own identities and, in the process, assess and ascribe the identities of others. (p. 231)

These linguistically expressed social and imagined identities have generated a wealth of studies on nation-building and identity construction (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1992). However, nowhere is this process articulated more crucially than in national educational policy and planning.

The resurgent and rising emphasis on the use of “national language” and educational policies in many countries as well as among ethnic communities around the world is based on the perception (and perhaps realisation) that globalisation, as a monocentric ideological system, has ushered in a new era of cultural and linguistic imperialism. At the core of this process is the reemergence of languages of the Euro-American powers (current and former) as the medium of global political, economic and cultural hegemony. Phillipson (2001) confirms linguisticism as:

the ideologies and structures which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and non-material) between groups which are defined on the basis of their language (i.e. of their mother tongue). [This] is best seen within the broader context of linguistic imperialism. (quoted in Reagan & Schreffler, 2005, p. 118)

It is in this broad context that most of the Arab world in general, and the Arab Gulf region in particular, began to construct educational language policies designed to reduce national linguistic subordination. The Arab world, like many other post-colonial regions in the world, was enveloped in dual dynamical modes of linguistic operations – one from below, manifested in the persistent usage of local non-standard accents/dialects in everyday social practices, and one from above, expressed in the “historical and world-wide dominance of monoglot ideologies [...] of linguistic purification [standardisation], the

market pressures for English, and so on” (Phillipson, 2001, quoted in Reagan & Schreffler, 2005, p. 249). In both cases, the primary objective was to bridge the divide between the “ascriptive identities” and “inhabited identities” in the wider societies in the region in the case of the former, and to reduce the gap between the “local” and “global” in the case of the latter.

It would be both misleading and false, however, to imply here that the challenge for the Arabic language is one of survival – it is certainly not the case, nor will it ever be. Arabic has revered religious and cultural status among its native speakers, has become the code of official and public life throughout the Arab world and is one of the main official languages of the United Nations. The threat to Arabic, therefore, is not its endurance and resilience in everyday life, but is rather to its employment in the academic spheres of knowledge production and knowledge transfer. Therefore, we believe the guiding strategy in these language policies and planning endeavors pursued by many Arab countries has been to ensure that students have a functional knowledge and basic competency in transnational global languages, mainly English, in order to function professionally in an increasingly globalised world, while working to advance a mode of academic and professional language practice in Arabic itself. But beyond the logic of language instrumentalisation in practical needs and given its role as a mediation for identity construction, assertion, and contestation, Arabic has also been used predominantly as a cultural and social asset.

To address the implications of such language policy implementation, we focus particularly on the State of Qatar, as it is one of the few countries that embarked on a remarkably multifaceted instructional language model to meet the new societal and national challenges. The country has implemented two pivotal changes in language policy – an Emiree decree in 2012 to change the medium of instruction in QU, followed in 2019 by a law to protect the Arabic language. In this regard, the country has made tremendous efforts to deploy Arabic as the main language of instruction and of communication in its school system. More particularly, however, we focus on how QU, as the first national university of the country, has given priority to the concept of social responsibility in their agenda to respond to these new requirements and changes.

3 Impact of New Decree and the Revert to Arabic as a Medium of Instruction

Since the mid 1990s, Qatar has launched economic and social reforms in order to modernise and diversify the country’s economy. Qatar’s strategic vision to

accomplish a full and sustainable socio-economic transformation has placed education as one of the key priorities of the country. As its sole national institution of higher education, Qatar University (QU) would become a cornerstone in these policy reforms. Established over four decades ago as a college of education, with a first cohort of 57 male and 93 female students (Qatar University, 2013), QU has expanded over time to currently encompass ten colleges with disciplines ranging from Sciences to Engineering and Islamic Studies, and the new college of Dental Medicine.

The SEC established in 2002, as the highest authority in Qatar's education sector, decreed a change in the language of instruction in QU in 2012 from English to Arabic for all Arts programmes offered at the College of Arts and Sciences, all programmes at the College of Business and Economics, and the bachelor of Law at the College of Law. In addition to changing the language of instruction for the programmes, QU introduced English courses in the general education curriculum and modified the admission requirements to meet the new changes. Thus, students were no longer required to complete all requirements of the Foundation Program¹ nor to satisfy a minimum score in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), a requirement for all students prior to the policy change decree.

When the decree was announced in January 2012, QU had only a few months to prepare for the reforms in order to start full implementation by the fall semester of 2012. The shift represented a dramatic and drastic shift in policy, as for about a decade, the SEC of Qatar appeared to favor increasing the use of English at the university level (Lindsey, 2012; Zellman, 2009) and the adoption of English as the medium of instruction in mathematics and science classes, following the reform of the K-12 system in the country (Ellili-Cherif & Alkhatteeb, 2015; Zellman, 2009). In addition, in a country developing as rapidly as Qatar, and to cope with the sweeping forces of globalisation, Qatar had made significant progress in education. It had invested heavily in educational initiatives and projects, such as the world-renowned Education City which hosts a number of foreign, mostly American-style, universities on its campus. Furthermore, there were a number of initiatives embraced by the state that sought a Western-style modernisation of the educational system, including seeking Western accreditation certification.

However, the SEC decree implied a critical concern about, and profound attention to the preservation of the Qatari culture and the Arabic language during this process. One may argue that the SEC decree was aimed at preserving the cultural identity of the country, where the national university should offer an environment that combines and balances the modernisation process

while at the same time preserving the Arab and Islamic character in the educational system.

4 Language Change: Assessment and Outcomes

In order to assess and evaluate the impact of the decree on the student body and the community at large, different data related to student academic performance, attitudes and achievements were analysed. Keeping in mind that the date of implementation was 2012, data was retrieved from the university's annual fact-books as well as findings from surveys conducted by the university thereafter. Only findings pertaining to the topics addressed and analysed by the present work were taken into consideration. To this end, three categories of respondents were identified and used, which included: employers, undergraduate (UG)-level alumni and students in their senior year.

5 Access to Education: Registration and Graduation

The language change outcomes have been evaluated in terms of offered opportunity for more Qatari students. Indeed, according to Krishnaswamy et al. (2019), for the university to remain socially responsible, it should make HE accessible to all students, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, the number of registered and graduated students' trends were observed since the implementation of the decree. During the period of the study, the total number of Qatari registered students dramatically increased, at least in the three successive years post decree implementation, as shown in Figure 10.1. The increase is also visible in both categories (i.e. Qataris and non-Qataris). Figure 10.2 illustrates similar patterns, where the number of graduates has also considerably increased, with an observed peak three years from the decree implementation, while a plateau is maintained towards the last academic year, in contrast to numbers seen before the decree.

As these figures demonstrate, access to higher education is influenced by the medium of instruction, and the policies addressing these issues should take into consideration their broader context. As established by these findings, the language change policy decree has accomplished, at least to a certain extent, one of its major aims, that is, using the native language (Arabic) as a medium of instruction to attract more Qatari students. This has clearly resulted in a greater number of Qatari students graduating into the workplace.

FIGURE 10.1 Total number of students registered in concerned programmes: total number of students vs. Qatari students from AY 2010–11 to 2018–19

FIGURE 10.2 Total number of graduates and Qatari graduates in concerned programmes: from AY 2010–11 to 2018–19

6 Communication Skills

Mother tongue-based teaching refers to imparting formal education in students' first and native language. Mother tongue in Qatar is seen as a source of great pride, and the community resists any perceived threat to Arabic,

FIGURE 10.3 Trends of perceived communication skills among UG students from spring 2009 to 2018-19

FIGURE 10.4 Trends of perceived communication skills among alumni from 2012-13 to 2018-19

especially by a foreign colonial language (Mustafawi & Shaaban, 2019). Thus, changing the language of instruction has certainly improved communication skills in the native language; however, and more interestingly, it has also enhanced communication skills in English, as illustrated by the data studies here. The competency and fluency of QU on students' communication skills has been analysed using data collected by the university among UG students, alumni and employers, before and after the decree. Data in Figures 10.3 and 10.4 show that just after the decree, there is a sudden drop in the students' reading and writing fluency in English among UG students and alumni in 2013-2014.

The drop continued for three consecutive academic years from 90% to 75%. However, after 2016, the perception of fluency performance for UG students in English speaking and writing improved once again and stayed at a constant level, ranging between 80% and 85%.

General fluency perception in Arabic reading and writing, by contrast, has been increasing overall before and after the decree to reach a plateau of 85%. Alumni performance, however, tells a different story. The fluency performance in English reading and writing dropped from 85% to 75%, while the Arabic fluency, in spite of fluctuation, did not surpass the 75% limit. This can be explained by the fact that the language change policy decree is “raising the bar” when it comes to expectations of the level of reading and writing in Arabic and English.

When it comes to market needs and expectations, employers’ perception seems to be the most realistic, as they consistently have seen an improvement of the Arabic reading and writing skills even though the English skills have slightly improved (Figure 10.5). These findings are difficult to interpret beyond the survey indicators, since we have no access to raw data; however, they confirmed that graduates joining the workplace have professional English working proficiency. Although having the advantage of improving communication skills for employment needs, it is worth investigating the employers’ needs in terms of communication and language proficiency. Do employers require monolingual, bilingual and/or multilingual graduates? Perhaps the exclusive use of mother tongue instruction can be counterproductive when the country is operationally multilingual, as the case in Qatar, and is seeking a knowledge-based economy in the age of fierce global competition.

FIGURE 10.5 Trends of perceived communication skills among employers from 2011–12 to 2016–17

7 Scholarship

Looking at the total number of Qatari students receiving scholarships to study abroad (mainly in Western universities), in Figure 10.6 we can see that the numbers have increased, following the same patterns observed with the number of registered and graduated students. Likewise, after a steady increase for four years, the number of students awarded a scholarship reached a plateau. Qatari scholarship students are committed contractually to come back and join the university as full-time faculty members. This can be considered as a long-term pledge by the university to build the local-based capacity of faculty and to ensure that, in the future, there are enough Qatari faculty members to teach in Arabic after completing their studies. The vital investment and increasing numbers of scholarships awarded after the Arabisation policy illustrates how the language change policy engenders a commitment to knowledge hybridisation, albeit to be delivered and integrated within the Arabic mode of knowledge production.

FIGURE 10.6 Number of scholarships awarded to study overseas: from AY 2011–12 to 2018–19

8 Perception of National Identity

Finally, we explored indirect figures related to the impact of change in the medium of instruction on national identity. We linked the results of alumni surveys conducted by QU to their perception in seeing or identifying QU as “reflecting Qatari national identity”. This question was inserted by QU in the

survey after the approval rating of the implementation of the decree increased by 11% since 2015. The 2018–2022 national strategy has raised the presence of challenges related to national identity, heritage, culture and community values and considers the adoption of the Arabic language as a step towards adherence to national values (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 2018, p. 187). It is manifest that the results support the national strategy in promoting the symbolic and functional utility of language in the socio-political formation of national consciousness.

9 Conclusion

It is amply clear that the pedagogical, social and political dilemmas and realities of language policies present unique challenges and promises for language policy-making and implementation. Recognising those challenges enabled both students and educators in Qatar to acknowledge the critical role of national universities in their formation of and contribution to the social and cultural welfare in their organic communities. For instance, when reflecting on the language policy change, some students in QU emphasised that:

English as a second language can always be acquired, however, what is more essential is to study and anchor the foundations of knowledge that can be the cornerstone of the future, and Arabic [as a native language] is more desirable for this. (AlFakki, 2015)

Similarly, and linking knowledge acquisition to identity formation, the renowned Qatari educator, Ali Al-Kubaisi, observed that promoting Arabic as the language of learning throughout all educational stages will allow students to “build a linguistic reservoir” that is essential to knowledge production, internalisation of social and cultural values, and the preservation of identity (Al-Kheder, 2012). Within this framework, education should not be confined to teaching and learning performance, but more profoundly to its social responsibility and social contract with the community of learners in the broader context of society. In this regard, one of the most crucial aspects about language planning and policy strategies is the reorientation of traditional educational ideas with a new mission of social community building and cultural resilience.

Hence, educational institutions have a vital role in sustaining such missions, especially in areas that cultivate social responsibility, identity formation and cultural development, in addition to academic success in the native languages. In the case of Qatar, and since the change of medium of instruction in

a number of programmes at the national university, it is clear that some objectives have been achieved that both reflect and advance the country's aspirations in its national vision of 2030.

However, at present, the change of language of instruction has affected only a few programmes. Efforts towards the improvement of social responsibility require a cross-sectoral and holistic approach (Turker et al., 2016). Therefore, transferring the experience from the social sciences to engineering and applied sciences, as well as other domains, is a future implication to be considered in the context of knowledge transfer and knowledge production.

Note

- 1 Pre-undergraduate remedial courses in English and Mathematics over one academic year that do not count in the credits earned toward a degree.

References

- Abdulla, A. (2010). *Contemporary socio-political issues of the Arab Gulf moment Emirates University*. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/55523/>
- AlFakki, M. (2015, April 23). Student euphoria for Qatar University's decision to teach law in Arabic. *Al Arab Al Qataria Newspaper*. <https://alarab.qa/article/23/04/2015/531417->
- Al-Kheder, S. (2012). *The Arabization of education comes to the forefront in Qatar*. <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2012/2/2/-تعريب-التعليم-يعود-للووجهة-بقطر>
- Anderson, B. R. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- Belhiah, H., & Elhami, M. (2015). English as a medium of instruction in the Gulf: When students and teachers speak. *Language Policy*, 14(1), 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-014-9336-9>
- Ellili-Cherif, M., & Alkhateeb, H. (2015). College students' attitude toward the medium of instruction: Arabic versus English dilemma. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 3(3), 207–213. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2015.030306>
- Gellner, E. (1983). *Nations and nationalism* (Vol. 12). Blackwell Publishing.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1992). *Nations and nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press; Cambridge Core. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521439612>

- Krishnaswamy, J., Hossain, Z., Kavightha, M. K., & Nagaletchimee, A. (2019). What matters for higher education success of private educational institutions? Senior students' perceptions in Malaysia. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 11(3), 616–635. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-07-2018-0142>
- Lindsey, U. (2012). Debate arises at Qatar University over decision to teach mainly in Arabic. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <http://chronicle.com/article/Debate-Arises-at-Qatar-U-Over/130695/>
- Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics. (2018). *Qatar second national development strategy 2018–2022*. <https://www.psa.gov.qa/en/knowledge/Documents/NDS2Final.pdf>
- Murshed, H., & Nakibullah, A. (2015). Price level and inflation in the GCC countries. *International Review of Economics & Finance*, 39, 239–252. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iref.2015.04.008>
- Mustafawi, E., & Shaaban, K. (2019). Language policies in education in Qatar between 2003 and 2012: From local to global then back to local. *Language Policy*, 18(2), 209–242. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-018-9483-5>
- Phillipson, R. (2001). English for globalisation or for the world's people? *International Review of Education*, 47(3–4), 185–200.
- Qatar University. (2013). *Fact_book_2012–13*. http://www.qu.edu.qa/offices/oipd/institutional_research/documents/Fact_book/fact_book_2012-13.pdf
- Reagan, T., & Schreffler, S. (2005). Higher education language policy and the challenge of linguistic imperialism: A Turkish case study. In A. M. Y. Lin & P. W. Martin (Eds.), *Decolonization, globalization: Language-in-education policy and practice* (pp. 115–130). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853598265-009>
- Ricento, T. (2006). *An introduction to language policy: Theory and method* (Vol. 91). http://doi.wiley.com/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2007.00639_20.x
- Thomas, E., & Irwin, W. (2017). Embrace, Embed and Enliven: Advancing Social Responsibilities at the University of Northampton, England. *Journal of International and Comparative Education*, 6(1), 49–62. <https://doi.org/10.14425/jice.2017.6.1.49>
- Turker, D., Altuntas, C., & Idowu, S. O. (Eds.). (2016). *Social responsibility education across Europe: A comparative approach*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-26716-6>
- Zellman, G. (2009). *Implementation of the K/12 education reform in Qatar's schools*. RAND.