

A 'Gift' of Neoliberalism: English as the Language of Instruction in the GCC

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Abstract

Barnawi's *Neoliberalism and English Language Education Policies in the Arabian Gulf* (2018) addresses language of instruction policies in the six Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, U.A.E., Qatar, Bahrain and Oman. Barnawi takes the reader through a comparison of national language policies throughout the Gulf. He presents the neoliberal Western ideological roots of these policies and the resulting clash with traditional Islamic worldviews. Further pointing out that Gulf countries seek to transform their economies from oil-based to knowledge-based economies and in doing so, English language skills have become commodified and serve as a means to guaranteed economic prosperity. However, Barnawi does not offer an alternative vision to English medium instruction (EMI) for the reader to consider. Moreover, Barnawi has not successfully argued that the adoption of English language will by default lead to the adoption of Western cultural norms. Missing from the analysis is an alternative framework that advocates for a culturally relevant education policy which addresses the needs of a citizenry who must be both globally competent and culturally grounded.

Keywords: Language of instruction, English medium institutions, national language policy, neoliberalism, Gulf states.

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Introduction

As Milligan et al. (2020) acknowledge, “countries that do not provide access to L1 education experience the lowest levels of literacy and educational attainment worldwide” (p.118). ‘L1’ or native language instruction in schools continues to be at the forefront of educational policy debates within the developing world. National language policy that downplays the importance of indigenous language impacts not only literacy, but cultural identity, self-esteem among local populations, and further exacerbates socio-economic barriers to success.

It is within this context that Barnawi offers *Neoliberalism and English Language Education Policies in the Arabian Gulf*. Focusing on the language of instruction policies in the six Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, U.A.E., Qatar, Bahrain and Oman, Barnawi takes the reader through a comparison of national language policies throughout the Gulf. He presents the neoliberal Western ideological roots of these policies and the resulting clash with traditional Islamic worldviews.

Commodifying English

In his introduction, Barnawi provides an excellent overview of neoliberal education policies and their global and regional impacts. He draws from a variety of sources to expound his ideas. After defining and establishing the theoretical base of neoliberal thought, Barnawi argues that current English language instructional policies are the direct result of international pressures to revamp national curriculums following 9/11. Western perceptions that an Islamically based curriculum will inherently incite violence is buttressed by the fact that as Barnawi (2018) points out, “According to the ICEF – International Consultants for Education and Fairs – the UK market for English as a foreign language teaching was worth £1.2 billion (US\$1.74 billion) in 2014 alone” (p.13).

Barnawi rightly avers that Gulf countries seek to transform their economies from oil-based to knowledge-based economies and in doing so, English language skills have become commodified and serve as a means to guaranteed economic prosperity. However, according to Barnawi, Western hegemony over the language of instruction has led to a breakdown of Muslim values and Arab cultural identity as demonstrated by youth behavior in recent years. Moreover, strategic economic plans such as Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 further underscore the waning of Islamic moral principles as central to the region’s core values.

Missing Pieces

Scholarship focused on language policies in the Gulf region has been limited and the book provides a basis for enhanced academic discourse. However, Barnawi has not offered an alternative vision to English medium instruction (EMI) for the reader to

consider. For example, Barnawi presents a nostalgic picture of the Gulf's education systems of the 1980s (which had concerning elements) rather than offering an EMI policy alternative. Although Barnawi acknowledges that Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are transforming into knowledge-based societies, he fails to reconcile English language competencies as essential for those living within those societies. As Altbach and Knight (2007) attest in their discussion of internationalization of higher education, "The results of globalization include the integration of research, the use of English as the lingua franca for scientific communication, the growing international labor market for scholars and scientists..." (p. 291).

In this book, Barnawi conflates neoliberalism, EMI, and anti-Islamism. However, he does not answer the question, is learning English fluently somehow detrimental to Islamic values? How do English speaking Muslims in other parts of the globe reconcile their religious traditions and values with Western culture that comes along with English-speaking culture? Mohd-Asraf (2005) argues in a critical analysis of the intersection of Malay Muslim identity and English language learning, "If Islam acts as a socializing factor, if the learners are socialized into the Islamic worldview, ..., it is less likely that they will be easily influenced by ideas and values that are contrary to their own" (p. 116).

Perhaps more problematic, his evidence of Western hegemony remains anecdotal at best. It is difficult to give his conclusions credence without the presence of structured ethnographic qualitative research or data driven quantitative evidence. Barnawi has not successfully connected the adoption of English language and the adoption of Western cultural norms — his sample size is simply too small to draw meaningful conclusions. He seems to only have interviewed a handful of young Saudi male students, as he acknowledges, "the six young Saudis (all male), whom I interviewed" (Barnawi, 2018, p. 63) while ignoring female students and their perceptions of opportunity based on English language learning.

Further, he writes of each GCC nation as a 'lone wolf' offering no comparative statistics to gain perspectives on the data provided. For example, in his discussions about private tutoring in Abu Dhabi, he cites one study that found up to 47% of students have used private tutors (Barnawi, 2018, p.84). However, there is no comparative information - how does this number fair in comparison to the rest of Asia? He has also not addressed the imbalance of the population of Emirati to non-Emirati and its relationship to the school system's choice of language. He cites that there are over 500 English-medium institutions in the U.A.E. and acknowledges that "of the 9.2 million population only 1.4 are Emirati citizens - rest are foreign workers and their families" (Barnawi, 2018, p.74).

However, he does not address the notion that perhaps the high number of EMIs may be necessitated by the needs of a high expatriate population. It is not until he discusses the Qatari policies (Chapter 7) that the reader is exposed to the real crux of the issue, "How can the Americans know what is right for Qatari school children?" (Barnawi, 2018, p.92). In other words, a superimposed Western educational system simply does not fit into the GCC cultural landscape. (Abou-El-Kheir & MacLeod, 2019).

Conclusion

Perhaps what Barnawi is missing is an advocacy for a culturally relevant education

policy which addresses the needs of a citizenry who must be both globally competent and culturally grounded. This alternative framework may be best described by Hillman and Eibenschutz (2018) in their discussion of Qatari language policy, “more heteroglossic, ‘culturally responsive’ (Crabtree, 2010), and more ‘glocal’ approaches to education which include the ‘interpenetration of the global and the local’ (Selvi & Rudoph, 2018, p. 2).” (p. 241). Although falling short on several key elements, the book introduces the reader to the nuanced issues that emerge as English fluency becomes a marker of success in nonwestern cultural spaces. *Neoliberalism and English Language Education Policies in the Arabian Gulf* clearly demonstrates that those attempting to maintain cultural identity and cultural values must acknowledge the realities of modern economies and seek solutions that enable citizenry to globally engage.

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