

The Role of the School in Supporting the Minority Language Used in the Arabic Community Living in London

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Abstract

This paper studies the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Arabic language community in a private international school by looking closely at how the community is using its linguistic and cultural resources for the welfare and educational advancement of its students. The study concentrates on the languages used in certain places and with certain people from the perception of the students themselves. A five-part questionnaire was used to collect the data. The first two parts collected logistical information, while the last three parts asked the students to provide reasons for using a particular language in various situations. It is evident from the data that the school is a real bilingual school. When students were asked about the language they use in a variety of places and with different people, many respondents indicated that they use both languages. The study revealed that bilingual education enhances balanced bilingual development.

Keywords: linguistic interdependence; bilingual education; language maintenance; multilingualism and Arabic EFL learners.

INTRODUCTION:

Bilingualism is already a reality today, but its importance will continue to develop as the world becomes increasingly globalized. The extent to which it is prevalent is evidenced by the presence of bilinguals in every country today, as well as in every social class and every age group (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008). International travel, communication and the mass media, emigration, and planetary economics have created a so-called global village whereby inhabitants speak more than their own native language.

This pattern of globalization has also resulted in the resurrection of languages that had previously been on the brink of “language death,” when a language ceases to be used by those who formerly spoke it (Matras, & Bakker, 2003). Many known languages have already become extinct around the world, while other endangered languages have only a few speakers (Katzner, & Miller, 2002). The United Nations estimates that more than half of the languages spoken today have fewer than 10,000 speakers and a quarter have fewer than 1,000 speakers; unless efforts to maintain them succeed, over the next 100 years, most of these will become extinct (Crystal, 2000).

Meanwhile, governments, political authorities, and enthusiasts work to bring back languages that are dead or endangered; they often choose a particular dialect or even standardize one from several variants, adding new forms—mainly modern vocabulary—through neologisms, extensions of meanings for old words, calques from sibling languages (Arabic for Modern Hebrew, Welsh for Manx), or simple borrowings from modern international languages (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). The resulting languages are an amalgam of linguistic structures and meanings, resulting in a “new” dead language.

A similar process can be seen when immigrant and host communities interact, mixing languages and structures to create a new strategy for communication. A well-known example is Spanglish, the mixing of Spanish and English—a common occurrence in communities along the United States-Mexico border (Suh, 2016). Without a doubt, the United Kingdom is a country where large numbers of immigrants come to pursue their goals, freedom, and a better life. Based on that fact, it is inevitable that immigrants and their children will face language barriers that—due to not being able to speak English—may prevent them from succeeding in the all-English environment of a typical British classroom.

It is important at this point to define *bilingual education* in order to prevent any kind of misunderstanding or confusion. The phrase *bilingual education* has multiple definitions (Skutnabb-Kangas, & McCarty, 2008):

- education where two distinct languages are used for general teaching;
- education designed to help children become bilingual (sometimes called “two-way bilingual education”); e.g., Spanish speakers and English speakers in a classroom are all taught to speak both languages;
- education in a child’s native language for (a) the first year or (b) however long it takes, followed by mainstreaming in English-only classes (in the United States); and/or
- education in a child’s native language for as long as his or her parents wish (with minimal instruction in another language).

This paper studies the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Arabic language community in a private international school by looking closely at how the community is using its linguistic and cultural resources for the welfare and educational

advancement of its students. The study concentrates on the languages used in certain places and with certain people from the perception of the students themselves.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Shohamy, & Ghazaleh-Mahajneh, (2012) proposed that three factors combine to give, more or less, vitality to a minority language. These factors are status factors, demographic factors, and institutional support factors. Status factors indicate whether the language minority is the ascendancy (superordinate) or subordinate by looking at the economic, social, and symbolic statuses of the communities. When a minority language community experiences considerable unemployment or widespread low income, the pressure may be to shift towards the majority language. Similarly, when a majority language is seen as giving higher social status and more political power, a shift towards the majority language may occur. On the other hand, a heritage language may be an important symbol of ethnic identity—of roots in the “glorious past”—that represents a symbolic status and participation in the survival of the minority language.

Meanwhile, demographic factors concern the geographical distribution of the language minority group. One aspect of this factor is the territorial principle in which one country creates territorial divisions; each division has its own official language, which creates new linguistic minorities. The second aspect of this factor is the number of speakers of a certain language and their saturation within a particular area. Also important in the language maintenance equation is the demographics of bi-literacy. When someone can speak a minority language; but not write in that language, the number of functions and uses of that language is diminished (Giles 1977). Bilingualism without bi-literacy also means a decrease in the status of that language and less chance of a linguistically stable language.

According to Shohamy, & Ghazaleh-Mahajneh, (2012), the third factor—institutional support—can also affect the vitality of a minority language. The extent and nature of a minority language’s use in a variety of institutions—including national, regional, and local government; religious and church organizations; mass media; commerce and industry; and education—play an important role in determining this vitality. Nancy Hornberger’s anthropological study of language planning, language shift, and bilingual education in the Quechua-speaking highlands of southern Peru suggested that “schools cannot be agents for language maintenance if their communities, for whatever reason, do not want them to be” (cited in Baker, 2003).

This study concentrates on the role of the school as an example in supporting the minority language used in the Arabic community living in London. The students in the focus school belong to various types of families. Some have lived in England for a long time; their children are fluent in English but weak in Arabic. Other students are newcomers to England; most of them cannot even speak or understand Basic English. By mixing these two groups students in one school, the school—which provides instruction in both languages—

hopes to enable both groups to learn the language needed from each other (Baker, 2003).

Joshua Fishman (1991) introduced another theory regarding the attempt to reverse the language shift; he provides a list of priorities to halt language decline and attempt to reverse language shift. Fishman has researched several minority languages throughout the world, including a study of initiatives to revive these languages and of language development policies. His philosophy in his research focuses on intergenerational family transmission. Fishman claims that this intergenerational family transmission is an important aspect of keeping a language alive and well. Based on this idea, he created a chart for measuring—from level one to eight—how healthy a language is. In addition to measuring the state of a language, it also recommends the kind of action required—at each particular stage—to develop the language. Level 8 indicates a language in its weakest state, while level 1 indicates one that is relatively strong. The following is a summary of the eight levels, from weakest to strongest.

Stage 8

This stage relates to a need for regenerating the language, which is especially true for any language in a very weak state and of which little prior knowledge exists. Activities at this stage include: gathering information about the language and recording the language, such as vocabulary, idioms, storytelling, history, and both written and sung songs. Information is also required about the phonetics and the grammar/structure of the language.

Stage 7

This stage focuses on getting speakers of the language (usually older people) to talk to young people; this is much easier in theory than in practice. It also focuses on using older speakers as teachers in informal settings; learners must be taught numerous skills, as many of the people concerned may not have writing or reading skills.

Stage 6

This stage centers around encouraging the usage of the language within families, with neighbors, and in the community. Success at this stage results in increased language usage between children and parents, families, and the community, thereby creating intergenerational transmission.

Stage 5

This stage relates to increasing competence in language literacy, as little importance may have been placed on literacy in many minority language settings. In addition to improving people’s skills, an increase in literacy improves links between speakers who may be scattered throughout a region or country.

Stage 4

Stage four relates to education and using the minority language rather than the main language in formal education. This could manifest in numerous ways, including immersion programs—at least in the early years in school—followed by bilingual education or partial immersion at later stages. When

this happens, the result will be more work associated with the minority language.

Stage 3

In this stage, the focus is on using the language in the workplace. Fishman says that this will result in a significant amount of work in regard to primary planning/corpus planning, reading and writing skills, translation, staff motivation, and the creation of opportunities for people to use the language in the workplace.

Stage 2

In this stage, the language use focuses on public services. This occurs at levels where community members have opportunities to talk to officials.

Stage 1

In this stage, the language is used at the highest levels of education, the media, and the government.

Fishman's chart is used extensively by language academics and language activists to measure how healthy a minority language is. Fishman does not state that these steps must be taken in sequence in order to reverse language shift, but he emphasizes the importance of intergenerational transmission in Stage 6 (MacLeod, 2004).

The current study faces a diversity in the chosen sample; students fall into groups at different stages according to language one and language two because of the differences among students in their families' backgrounds and status from linguistic and social points of view. As will be explained shortly, the main purpose of this school is to provide a good and suitable environment (culturally and educationally) for the Arab and Muslim students living in London.

CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOL

The school in which the research was carried out provides a high standard of education equally acceptable to both Arabic and British educational authorities, for the children of diplomats and students as well as the children of Arabs and Muslims in London (Staff Handbook, 2016). According to the school, every pupil is entitled to a curriculum that is broad, balanced, and relevant and that seeks to promote moral, spiritual, physical, and intellectual development. From the time of its establishment, the school has offered a complete education, from kindergarten through university entrance, continued to emphasize languages, especially Arabic as well as English and French.

Among the students, the Arabic language is one of the most important components of their education. It is part of their cultural (for Arab students) and/or religious background (for non-Arab students). English was the language of learning under the National curriculum. French was a third language taught to enable students to communicate in an additional modern foreign language as well as provide a means for opening up students to other cultures (French/francophone).

The school's students are from various countries as well as cultural and linguistic backgrounds. From the first day of its foundation in 1985, the school opened its doors to students from the Arab and Muslim communities in London. More than 20 nationalities from Europe, Africa, North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia came to study in an inclusive environment that provided equal opportunities, forming an integral part of the learning process in order to meet the requirements of the curriculum. The students chose to study in this school to preserve their Arab and Muslim identity through the study of the Arabic language and Islam.

Arabic language classes have great potential to teach about culture and identity. Issues such as Arab/Muslim identity, human rights, racism, and discrimination as well as those related to the global dimension—such as poverty, environment, and conflict—can be taught using the syllabus. Despite an overcrowded program, teachers use the different topics of the program to raise certain issues related to students' backgrounds. They can implicitly introduce the cultural dimension, which is an essential part of the language, when teaching their lessons. They can host Arabic clubs during lunch breaks or after school to address issues of citizenship that interact with the Arabic language, Arabic culture, and real-life between Arabs and their countries. They can develop coursework for their pupils in which they cover the curriculum while studying historical and cultural issues. The four skills can be used to tackle topics related to citizenship education. In addition, literature taught in years 12 and 13 is a rich source for teaching topics such as racism, discrimination, abuse of human rights, and other related issues.

The issue of language and social background requires particular care. Linguistic development is an important feature of educational development (Staff Handbook, 2016), and the school must work to enable pupils from all backgrounds to learn the formal application of language. In the school, everyone takes the necessary steps to maintain the self-esteem of pupils who do not, as a matter of course, use Standard English (Staff Handbook, 2016). Bilingual pupils have developed transferable linguistic skills worthy of recognition in several areas of the curriculum.

The school enjoys teaching staff from different backgrounds, including various Arabic countries, South Africa, Britain, Asia, and Africa. Not only does the school benefit from the diversity of their cultural backgrounds and professional expertise, but it has also helped students to identify themselves with their tutors and enhanced their knowledge and academic achievement. Teachers have found in the school a unique opportunity to discover other cultures and appreciate their differences. This atmosphere of mutual understanding and acceptance of each other that exists between the teaching staff has enriched the students' experiences and increased their awareness of the global nature of the human culture. This multilingual environment has encouraged many teachers to learn Arabic to be closer to their Arabic colleagues and achieve better interactions with their students (Staff Handbook, 2016).

METHOD

In order to analyze the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Arabic language community in a private international school, the researcher collected data about the personal details of the students, including how long they have been in the United Kingdom, how many languages they speak, and which language they use in certain places and with certain people. In addition, the researcher sought to collect data about what perspectives the students have towards the reasons for using a specific language.

To gather these data, a five-part questionnaire was used. The first two parts collected logistical information, while the last three parts asked the students to provide reasons for using a particular language in various situations. This method was used because it gives the researcher the capability to analyze the results statistically. In addition, the students' answers can be compared objectively because they are fixed and consistent in a standard form. A questionnaire used to manipulate its design to gather either qualitative or quantitative data. In addition, questionnaires are easy to administer confidentially, which is often necessary to ensure that participants will respond honestly, if at all.

A total of 53 questionnaires were distributed in the boys' section to students in years 6, 7, 8, and 9. The number of respondents according to each year's group follows:

Table 1: Distribution of questionnaires

Year of group	6	7	8	9	Total
Number of respondents	17	16	16	4	53

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS:

Based on the data collected from the questionnaire, several significant points can be made. First of all, it is evident from the data—especially for students—that this school is a real bilingual school. In the sample, not one respondent indicated that he is monolingual. When students were asked about the language they use in a variety of places and with different people, many respondents indicated that they use both languages. Although not all responded that they use both languages, such responses do not mean that they do not know both languages. The answer to this question (knowledge of a particular language) is beyond the scope of this study.

The results first will be presented for each individual question alone, along with brief comments. Then more elaboration will be on the overall data in the conclusions.

In response to question 1 (length of time spent living in the United Kingdom), the data show the following results:

Table 2: Length of time in the United Kingdom

Number of years living in the United Kingdom	0-3 years	4-10 years	More than 10 years	No answer	Total
Number of respondents	14	10	21	8	53

As these results indicate, the length of time in the United Kingdom varies among the respondents. The majority (40 percent) have lived in the United Kingdom for more than 10 years, and another 20 percent have lived in the United Kingdom for 4 to 10 years. This indicates that more than 60 percent of the students have been exposed to authentic English language extensively. At the same time, only one-third of the students (27 percent) have lived in the United Kingdom for less than four years.

Yet the data show that almost all of the respondents are bilingual; some are even trilingual. Not one respondent indicated that he was monolingual, although 15 percent of the respondents did not answer the question.

Table 3: Languages spoken

Number of languages spoken	1	2	3	No answer	Total
Number of respondents	0	29	16	8	53

Students indicated that they spoke Arabic, English, Spanish, French, and Italian.

The second part of the questionnaire focused on the languages used in different places and with different people. In this section, the choices were limited to only two languages: Arabic and English. The responses to questions 3 and 4 from the second part of the questionnaire have been summarized in the following tables.

Table 4: Use of language in certain locations

Place where the language used	Arabic	English	Both languages	Total
Home	36	2	15	53
School	6	17	30	53
Media	10	23	20	53
Travel/Holidays	15	17	21	53
Reading/Writing	14	9	30	53

Table 5: Use of language with certain people

People with whom language used	Arabic	English	Both languages	Total
Parents and siblings	35	2	16	53
Other relatives	31	7	15	53
Teachers	3	17	33	53
Friends	13	8	32	53
Neighbours*	6	23	15	44

In the home, the majority of respondents (68 percent) use Arabic exclusively; respondents indicated that this was due to the fact that they are Arab and all of their family members speak Arabic. Another 28 percent indicated using both languages; the prevailing reason for this is that, when they talk to parents, they use Arabic, and when they talk to siblings, they use English or vice versa. Only 4 percent of the respondents use English exclusively. One interesting case indicated that the parents do not speak the same language; they communicate with each other using English, so the child uses English in his home. Another respondent indicated that his father forced him to speak English instead of Arabic to learn the language. This result concurred with Schwartz, & Shaul (2013) that bilingual education enhances balanced bilingual development.

Meanwhile, at school the majority of students (57%) indicated the use of both languages for the following reasons:

- it is a multicultural school with an international curriculum;
- students learn both languages;
- some teachers in the school speak Arabic and some English; and
- when students talk to each other, they use Arabic; when they talk to teachers, they use English.

The respondents who use Arabic more said that they are weaker in English and it is an Arabic school, so they felt Arabic to be more appropriate. On the other hand, respondents who use English said that they like speaking it and have become used to it because they have been in the United Kingdom since they were born. Some students indicated that they use English more because they need to learn the language better.

Of those who use English while watching TV—the majority at 43 percent—they said that they only understand English. They also indicated that they have English satellite television and they like English movies, whereas Arabic films are boring. Others indicated that they watch English programs to learn the language.

* Nine students did not respond to this prompt.

Interestingly, during travel, language use seems fairly evenly distributed between one or the other language or both. According to the respondents, when they travel on holiday, they often return to their countries. Since these are Arab countries, they use Arabic. However, they may still travel elsewhere—to non-Arabic countries—and in this situation, they use both languages depending on to whom they speak.

Since the respondents attend a bilingual school, it is not surprising that 57 percent indicated using both languages in reading and writing activities. However, when it comes to leisure reading, some respondents (27 percent), indicated that they use Arabic because it is easier for them and they like it. Still others (17 percent) indicated using English since the available resources in the United Kingdom are mainly in English; in addition, some are not strong Arabic readers. Generally speaking, Schwartz & Schwartz (2014) reported that children from the bilingual preschools displayed significant improvement in both languages and performed similarly to their peers from the monolingual preschools in vocabulary depth.

The final question asked respondents to reflect on which language they felt was their stronger language and which their weaker one. The results are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6: Aptitude in Arabic and English

Strong in Arabic alone	Strong in English alone	Strong in both languages	Total
23	8	22	53

According to the data, 43 percent of the respondents felt stronger in Arabic than English. The reasons provided for this feeling include the fact that Arabic is their first language, they use it frequently, and their study depends on Arabic. At the same time, they are weak in English because they have just started learning English recently. Meanwhile, 15 percent of the respondents felt stronger in English than in Arabic. The reasons provided included the fact that they have lived in the United Kingdom for a long time, they use English frequently, and the English teachers are good and helpful. At the same time, they have never lived in an Arab country and they have forgotten Arabic because they do not practice it.

CONCLUSIONS

The challenge of bilingual education, which can also be phrased as “the challenge of educating students with limited English or Arabic proficiency,” is a complex one, for it is not just a matter of teaching grammar and syntax or a question of instilling an appreciation for nuance and vocabulary choice. Most students involved in bilingual education come from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds. In the current study, those students who are not proficient in English are often newcomers to the United Kingdom and, therefore, in need of a variety of services, training, and education. They often have to learn about local culture and British legal and

governmental systems as well as learn the English language. Making the challenge of bilingual education even greater, those who have grown up in the United Kingdom are often poorly educated in Arabic. Some may not be literate in either Arabic or English.

In addition, despite the fact that this school has tried to maintain the Arabic language and culture for students, it is clear that English is the dominant language inside the school. This conclusion comes from several pieces of data. First, the language of instruction and the curriculum are in English for all courses except Islamic and Arabic studies. Second, when students talk with teachers, they prefer to use English, regardless of whether the teacher is an English or Arabic speaker; the reason behind this is students wish to practice their English, and English is required for the curriculum. In addition, parents want the school to prepare their children to continue into institutions of higher education in Britain, which requires strong English language skills.

Students clearly use more Arabic at home and with family members; however, they use more English outside the home. This situation is understandable. Although the students live in England, where they meet people from various nationalities and the common language is English, their families are tied to their cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Finally, it is apparent that two major consequences of first language loss are: strain to family relationships and the crises of self-image and cultural identity (Montrul, 2005; Kouritzin, 1999). These results are evident in this study. While many respondents indicated they spoke Arabic to their families, these same respondents indicated they chose to use English with their friends. Although seemingly a minor difference in language choice, such differences can exacerbate the dichotomy often found between generations. While the younger generation may see it as a choice to promote the common bonds shared with friends, older generations may see such divided language use as an affront to cultural and linguistic roots. In addition, this study found that the respondents—who are all of the Arabic origins—varied in their perceptions of how strong their Arabic language skills were. Fifteen percent of the respondents indicated that they felt weak in their Arabic skills. Coupled with the fact that 43 percent prefer to watch English television programs because they only understand English and Arabic films are boring, it is clear that the links to cultural identity are—at the least—being tested and—at the most—being broken.

When teaching a second language along with the first language, teachers should keep in mind that students may be facing a greater task than learning a language. Students are trying to maintain a sometimes precarious balance between home and school, native culture and new culture. Teachers should seek to carry out effective practices that enhance students' abilities to learn in *both* languages. Particularly in a situation where students are learning a second language, their native language may be deteriorating; as such, educators should be especially aware of the potential to frustrate learners through constant grammar corrections in the second language. Students who are struggling in both their native language and a second language are in a difficult position—one which could

easily lead to personal and permanent crises involving self-image. The diction creates a vivid image of insecurity and alienation. The separation of a child from the masses because of language differences will not produce an identity; rather one must feel accepted to receive an identity. Instead, educators and school leaders should model the correct English or Arabic structure to the student and complement the student on any skill learned, whether it is in Arabic or English.

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