

Problematizing English Medium Instruction in Oman

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Abstract

Oman has chosen to switch to English medium instruction (EMI) in higher educational institutions. The purpose of this study is to explore Omani college students' views on EMI and the effects it can have on their learning experiences. An exploratory research methodology with an element of critical ethnography was employed. Qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations revealed that students' attitudes towards English were shaped by educational and sociocultural factors. The study also revealed the challenges which students have to face and the coping strategies they have to employ. Considering realistic and pragmatic reasons, the students expressed a clear preference for studying in English rather than Arabic. The importance of Arabic was associated with local needs whereas English is seen to fulfill global needs. This study challenges established assumptions that education is most efficient if it is conducted in English. It was suggested that Arabic should be implemented as medium of instruction in tertiary education and English should be taught as a foreign language with an emphasis on appropriate curriculum, pedagogy and material. High quality education in L1 where students can gain profound knowledge in their subjects and profound knowledge in English as an international language would allow countries such as Oman to achieve the modernity they seek.

Keywords: Language instruction policy, English medium instruction, critical applied linguistics, students' views.

Introduction

English is used as a lingua franca in many international settings. It is seen as the language of science and academia and more than 90% of all information in the world's electronic revival system is stored in English (Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 1997). It is therefore widely assumed that English is the "key to economic success of nations and economic well-being of individuals" (Tollefson, 2000: 8). The view that the spread of English is natural, beneficial and neutral (Kachru, 1986, Crystal, 1997), has been challenged by Phillipson (1992) who relates the spread of English to linguistic imperialism that perpetuates the hegemony of English. Pennycook (1994, 2003) also rejects the neutral view of English and argues that it can lead to marginalization of indigenous cultures and languages. A less radical view is proposed by Canagarajah (1999) who adopts a functional perspective of appropriating English to one's needs rather than rejecting it.

In response to the global spread of English, Oman followed Gulf countries such as Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and switched from Arabic medium instruction to EMI at all colleges and universities in the private and public sector. The belief that education is best provided in English seems to be an unchallenged discourse. Nevertheless, some educators have questioned the effect of this policy on identity and personal status (Bryam, 2004), on threatening native languages such as Arabic (Troudi, 2009; Ahmed, 2011) and on students and teachers (Troudi&Jendli, 2011; Ismail, 2011). However, studies related in this field in the Arab world are rather scarce (Ismail, 2011). This study which is conducted in a college in Oman is an attempt to fill this gap. It is based on critical applied linguistics which aims at problematizing the belief that education can only be efficient if it is conducted in English.

Contextual background and current practice

English in Oman is considered to be an important foreign language. The promotion of English was affected by historical factors and official policies (Abdel-Jawad & Abu Radwan, 2011). Historically, Oman had never been a British colony but Britain had been involved in Omani affairs such as trading and commerce since the 1800s as Al-Busaidi (1995) explains. Oman like other Gulf countries depends mainly on expatriate labour force from countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Philippines, Egypt, Jordan and Sudan. English is used as a lingua franca for business and communication in public and private organizations. The competence of English is therefore a prerequisite for getting a job especially in the private sector.

From 1970 English was embraced as an officially taught foreign language in its institutions. From 1970-1998 English was taught at school from grade four onward. Starting 1998 English has been taught from grade one. In average students have 3-4 hours of English per week (Al-Jardani, 2012). English is also the language of instruction in all colleges and universities. Admission to these colleges and universities demands high proficiency in English. Students who do not meet the necessary language requirements have to take an English placement test and according to the results are placed in different levels in the English foundation program.

In addition, English receives political, economic, social and legislative support from the government because it is seen by the government as a “resource for national development and as a means for wider communication within the international community” (Ministry of Education, 1987: 2). Policy makers also perceive English to be the key that facilitates the national policy of Omanization, i.e. the process of replacing expatriate workforce with Omani nationals. Moreover, Omanis see that English is “the key to success in their professional lives” and is therefore perceived as “a symbol of prestige and an assertion of a superior social status” (Abdel-Jawad & Abu Radwan, 2011: 130).

The college under investigation offers three academic programs: Business, Information Technology and Engineering. It follows a credit hour system which allows for three levels of graduates: certificate, diploma and higher diploma. The medium of instruction is English. The students are taught by mainly non-native Arabic and by some native Arabic speakers. Before enrolling in the academic programs, students have to take an in-house prepared English placement test and are placed in four different levels accordingly (Pre-Elementary, Elementary, Intermediate, Advanced). For each level, students have 20 contact hours English per week for a period of 14 weeks average. All course books are in English and all exams are conducted in English.

Theoretical framework

This study is informed by a critical approach based on critical applied linguistics. Its aim is not merely to describe the status quo, but to problematize the “taken for granted” belief that education can only be efficient if it is conducted in English. This critical practice has been suggested by Dean (1994: 4, in Pennycook, 2001: 8) and is called “the restive problematization of the given”. Pennycook (2001) states that the main concern of critical applied linguistics is to relate aspects of applied linguistics to social, cultural and political domains from a viewpoint that social relations are problematic. Critical language policy research is part of the field of critical applied linguistics and is aimed at social change (Tollefson, 2006). A critical view of language policy stems from the premise that language policy is not ideologically free and is affected by social and political forces (Ricento, 2006). The main tenets of critical language policy research are power, struggle, hegemony, ideology, and resistance. Tollefson (2006: 42) asserts that “a critical approach acknowledges that policies often create and sustain various forms of social inequality and that policy-makers usually promote the interests of dominant social groups.” Language of instruction policies such as EMI which are implemented in an unquestioned manner in higher education should therefore be viewed from a critical perspective as this might be useful for some groups of students but detrimental for others. I support the view that it is essential to raise awareness to the detrimental effects EMI policy can have on the lives of students in order to be able to hopefully change the situation.

Language policy

Language policy can be defined in many ways as Skutnabb-Kangas (2006) notes. One of the broadest definitions is provided by Shohamy (2006: 45) where she states that “language policy (LP) is the primary mechanism for organizing, managing and manipulating language behaviors as it consists of decisions made about languages and their uses in society.” She further explains that through language policy decisions are made about which languages should gain status in society and which languages will be considered as official, standard, correct and national and which languages will be considered as important for economic and social reasons such as English.

Examples of language policy can be seen in India, Philippine and Singapore where the official language is English, in the European Union which acknowledges twenty-five languages as official languages and in the United Nation, which as a result of a complaint made by eighteen states against the monolingual United Nation, acknowledges six official languages to be used (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish) thereby leaving delegates from other nationalities no other choice than to use English (Piron, 1994 in Phillipson&Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996). The last example makes it clear that although language policies attempt to solve problems of communication in multilingual settings, it can also lead to inequalities as they violate democratic rights.

These policies can be stated explicitly through official documents or they can be derived implicitly through the examination of a variety of practices (Shohamy, 2006). Schiffman (1996) differentiates between overt (explicit) and covert (implicit) policy. He argues that it is not sufficient to study the overt and declared policies but it is necessary to study the covert and de facto policies. Spolsky (2004) proposed a model for language policy that identifies three components of language policy: belief, practice and management. He argues that “real language policy is more likely to be found in its practices than in management” (ibid: 222). This explains the mismatch that might occur between language policy and practice. An example of a policy (overt) that differs from the “real” or covert policy is related to Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) - the only public university in Oman. Arabic is considered to be the official language of the university. Accordingly, all official documents must be in Arabic. However, most official documents are written in English and then translated to Arabic as the majority of the staff is made up of non-native speaking expatriates. Therefore, “it is evident that English is competing with Arabic as an official language in terms of all official documents” (Abdel-Jawad& Abu Radwan, 2011: 133).

Tsuda (1994) states that there are two language policy paradigms: diffusion-of-English paradigm and ecology-of-language paradigm. They should be regarded as two opposing paradigms. The diffusion-of-English paradigm is mainly characterized by monolingualism, whereas the ecology-of-language paradigm promotes multilingualism and protection of human rights. Language policies such as the implementation of EMI in higher education in the Gulf belong to the diffusion-of-English paradigm. Policies that promote multilingualism and minority language rights belong to the ecology-of-language paradigm. So far, the diffusion-of-English policy paradigm has been the dominant paradigm all over the world (Phillipson&Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000a). However, the ecology-of-language policy paradigm should be promoted to encourage linguistic diversity (Phillipson&Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996).

Research approaches on language policy

There are mainly two approaches to research on language policy. The traditional approach, or neo-classical approach as termed by Tollefson (1991), stems from the assumption that language policies are adopted to solve language conflicts in multilingual settings, and to provide social and economic opportunities for linguistic minorities, for modernization and development (e.g. Eastman, 1983). For example, the rational model, which adopts a positivist approach, assumes that “multilingualism is often a problem that states have to solve” (Ricento&Hornberger, 1996: 405). The critical approach rejects this apolitical, positivist approach. Critical language policy research has been affected by critical theory, which includes work that examines “the processes by which systems of inequality are created and sustained” (Tollefson, 2006: 43). The critical approach stresses that language policies are ideological although it might not be apparent (Tollefson, 1991).

Language policy research has also been affected by Phillipson's model of linguistic imperialism (1992) and research on linguistic human rights (Phillipson&Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000a, 2006).

Language education policy – EMI

The impact of the global spread of English has affected language policy and language education policy in many countries all over the world such as Europe (Coleman, 2006), East Asia (Nunan, 2003; Draper, 2012), and the Gulf (Al-Issa&Dahan, 2011). Shohamy (2006: 76) states that language education policy "is considered a form of imposition and manipulation of language policy as it is used by those in authority to turn ideology into practice through formal education." An example of language education policy is the adoption of EMI in higher education. Tsui and Tollefson (2004: 2) note that "Medium of instruction is the most powerful means of maintaining and revitalizing a language and culture." Skutnabb-Kangas(2000b) even argues that EMI is the most direct agent of linguistic genocide.

In the Gulf in general and in Oman in particular, it seems to be common sense that higher education is best provided in English for individual and national development. This assumption has rarely been challenged with the exception of some researchers such as Findlow, (2006); Troudi, (2009); Troudi and Jendli, (2011); McLaren, (2011). If the national language such as Arabic is not seen as adequate for higher education, then, inevitably this renders Arabic to a lower status than English. Although it has been recognized that the implementation of EMI in the Gulf is problematic, it is assumed that the implementation has not been carried out efficiently. This can be noticed from the review of literature on EMI in the Gulf where studies are mostly related to classroom procedures and pedagogies such as Al-Issa (2002) and Al-Jadidi (2009).

Studies on EMI

A lot of research has been conducted on EMI at tertiary level. However, most of these studies have adopted the traditional, apolitical approach that focuses mainly on the effects of medium of instruction at the micro level, including the classroom and individual (Tollefson&Tsui, 2004). Such an apolitical approach serves to maintain the social and linguistic status quo (Pennycook, 2001).

Researchers such as Al-Issa (2002), Coleman (2006), and Collins (2010) have explored the rationale for using EMI. Other studies have investigated issues of implementation of EMI such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), an approach in which a second/foreign language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language (March, 2006; Ruiz de Zarobe& Jiménez Catalan, 2009). In addition, Ibrahim (2001) argues that EMI is most effective if it is preceded by a bridging EMI program and if it is implemented in an English zone. This reflects the belief in what Phillipson (1992) has called the monolingual fallacy. The effect of EMI on language proficiency has been explored by Rogier (2012) in the UAE. After four years of EMI, students' language proficiency has been increased in speaking, reading, writing and listening. Teaching style has also been investigated (Bielenberg, 2004; Suvinity, 2010; Björkman, 2011). In Oman, Al-Jadidi (2009) argues that teaching pedagogies of native and non-native teachers in at tertiary level have to be developed for EMI to be effective.

Some studies have investigated teachers' and students' perceptions on EMI. In Taiwan, Chang (2010) reports that students did not show any negative attitudes towards EMI because they believed that EMI helped them improve their English listening skill. Kim (2011) reports that the majority of students and teachers preferred to have some portion of L1 to help students understand complicated content. Research conducted by Zare-é and Gholami (2013) shows that Iranian university teachers support EMI and provide academic justifications. In contrast, teachers in Turkey prefer Turkish medium instruction due to the problems EMI poses on learning of the subject matter (Tahran, 2003; Kiliçhaya, 2006). Charise (2007) reports on research done in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. She states that students developed a positive attitude towards EMI for pragmatic reasons and did not relate the use of English to linguistic imperialism.

Some research has investigated EMI from a critical stance (Coleman, 2006; Findlow, 2006; Brock-Utne, 2007; Troudi, 2009; Ismail, 2011; McLaren, 2011; Troudi&Jendli, 2011). Brock-Utne (2007) shows that EMI has detrimental effects on test performances of students in Tanzania and South Africa. She therefore argues that students should have the right to study in their own language. Troudi (2009: 211) warns that "the burden of having to study content subjects in an alien language can be detrimental" which has been supported by McLaren (2011). Moreover, Troudi and Jendli (2011) investigated the effect of EMI on the

quality of the educational experience on students in the UAE, whereas Qorro (2006) argues that language of instruction affects the quality of education.

The concern that English poses a threat to Arabic has been expressed by intellectuals such as (Al-Askari, 2002; Suleiman, 2004; Al-Dhubaib, 2006; Al-Jarf, 2008; Troudi, 2009; Ahmed, 2011; Hunt, 2012). Several studies reported that Arabic is depicted as a symbol of local Arab and Muslim culture whereas English is linked to modernization and internationalization (Findlow, 2006; Pessoa & Rajakumar, 2011; Troudi & Jendli, 2011). Hunt (2012: 309) warns that “depriving Arabic students of using their first language not just within the English lesson but within the institution as a whole ... is likely to have disastrous effects upon Arabic use.” Two studies revealed that students are concerned about their inability to use Arabic for academic purposes (Pessoa & Rajakumar, 2011; Troudi & Jendli, 2011). This concern has been raised by universities in Qatar and they started considering how to improve students’ Arabic (Guttenplan, 2011). Ismail’s (2011) study in Oman shows that students in general have an antipathy towards studying in their L1 despite the fact that they have great difficulties understanding the textbooks. He argues that the reason lies behind “the quintessential colonized consciousness that breeds an inferiority complex” (ibid: 244). In addition, the study shows that non-native Arabic speakers rather than native-speakers are responsible for the promotion of EMI. This is in line with the findings of McLaren’s (2011) study.

This literature review shows that it is necessary to investigate EMI from a critical perspective to see how EMI affects the lives of individuals. Certain research areas still need further investigation such as the impact of EMI on identity, language proficiency gain and quality of educational experience.

Conceptual framework

I employed an exploratory methodology with an element of critical ethnography as this best serves to answer the research questions and matches my theoretical positions. Since this study does not try to support any prior hypothesis, an exploratory methodology is necessary, which seeks to understand how individuals in a certain social and educational context make meaning of their learning experience under the EMI policy (Richards, 2003). Ethnography is a methodology that allows the researcher to see things from the perspectives of members of the group and this requires extended exposure to the field. This helps the researcher to get direct information rather than to depend on reports. Critical ethnography is concerned with the exposure of inequality in society “with a view to emancipating individuals and groups towards collective empowerment” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007: 186). In critical ethnography, questions of legitimacy, power, values, dominance and oppression are foregrounded. Because the study does not seek to generalize the findings but aims to understand the views of the participants on their experience with EMI and the reasons they provide, the employment of qualitative data collection methods is justified. The collection of data from multiple resources (interviews, classroom observations) could help to develop a holistic picture of the issue under the study (Creswell, 2009).

The research questions

The purpose of this study is to report on students’ situation at a college in Oman due to the implementation of the EMI policy. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are students’ attitudes towards EMI at the college?
2. What effect does EMI have on their learning experiences?
3. What challenges do they face and how do they cope with these challenges?

The participants

The participants of the study can be divided into interview participants and classroom observation participants. For the semi-structured interviews, 10 students volunteered to participate in the study: two from the faculty of Business, four from Engineering and four from Information Technology. After I explained the aim of the study to the students and that they have the right to withdraw at any stage, I received written consent of all students to be interviewed. I also assured confidentiality and anonymity by assuring that any

information they provide will be used for research purposes only and that I will use pseudonyms to protect their identity. All students had studied in the faculty for minimum of two years (diploma, higher diploma) and are Omani nationals between 20-24 years old with the exception of one student who is 34 years old. All had studied in public schools.

The classroom observation participants consisted of five teachers (4 male, 1 female) and 85 students (35 male, 50 female) from the Business department. It was suggested by the Vice-Dean for academic affairs that I observe Business classes since they were expected to be more interactive than classes in the other two departments. I informed the teachers that the aim of the observation is to observe the students and that I have no intention to evaluate or judge their teaching.

Data collection methods

Interviews

In order to explore students' views on the implementation of EMI policy I decided to use semi-structured interviews which "combine a certain degree of control with a certain amount of freedom to develop the interview" (Wallace, 1998: 147). I developed the interview questions in relevance to the critical literature on EMI and students' experiences (see Appendix). Some items are similar to items used by Troudi and Jendli (2011) since they investigated the same topic but in a different context. I piloted the interview before its actual use to see if it works as planned. I designed the interview items in English, but since I share the L1 of the students I conducted the interviews in Arabic for the students to be able to express themselves clearly and to feel more comfortable. I used prompts to elicit more detailed responses from the students. The interviews took between 34 - 48 minutes each. Eight interviews were held in the teachers' resource room in the Self-Access Center in the English language department and two in the meeting room of the Engineering department. Both places were quiet and allowed for the interview to be conducted without any interruption. The atmosphere was rather informal and I made it clear that their opinion would be respected and not judged. All interviews were recorded which allows for transcription and analysis of the data. I shared the transcripts with the participants for respondent validation in order to present students' opinions as accurately as possible.

Classroom observation

Dörnyei (2007: 178) clarifies that the collected data from classroom observation can show "a more objective account of events and behaviours than second-hand self-report data." I conducted five classroom observations (90 minutes each) as a non-participant observer over a period of one week. I followed a semi-structured approach in my observation. My agenda consisted of issues related to the teacher, student behaviour and classroom atmosphere which I prepared with reference to the research questions. However, I observed what was actually taking place and decided later on its significance for the research. All teachers introduced me to the students who were informed that I am interested in seeing how they learn. I tried to minimize "obtrusive researcher effect" (Dörnyei, 2007: 190) by choosing a place in class that best allowed me to see the students but without being a distraction.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and then fully transcribed with some exceptions when students went off-topic in their responses. Since the interviews were conducted in Arabic, they were first transcribed in Arabic and then translated to English. I added punctuation for ease of comprehension. I analyzed the data inductively using a bottom-up approach (Richards, 2003). First, I coded the transcripts using highlighters to be able to classify the data into themes and sub-themes. The codes were not predetermined but emerged from the data. I organized the themes and sub-themes in relation to the research questions and the main aim of the study (Cohen et al, 2007). Then I coded and analyzed the observation data by developing themes in the same way as for the interviews. Then I worked through both sets of data to identify key themes and went back and forth between the data, coded themes and research questions. I conducted qualitative data analysis in stages of

description, analysis and interpretation as suggested by Wolcott (1994) which is essential for successful qualitative analysis (Richards, 2003). I also tried to be as sincere and faithful as possible in my interpretation of the data despite my own bias towards Arabic being a native speaker of Arabic (Holliday, 2007).

Limitations

This is a small-scale study and the number of participants is limited so findings can only be generalized to a context that is similar to the context of the study. In addition, my position as an English teacher at this college might have had an impact on students' responses in favour of learning English or EMI. However, since students provided different and sometimes contradictory responses, I believe that my position had a minimum effect on their responses. Finally, although my classroom observations were restricted to business classes, the interview data revealed that students in all three departments share similar experiences.

Findings and Analysis

Students' attitudes towards EMI

All students studied at public schools where content subjects are taught in Arabic and English is taught as a second language. Some students had a positive attitude towards studying English at school whereas the majority had a rather indifferent attitude. Samia explains: "I studied English but I felt I was forced to. It's a subject I had to study and pass." All participants were informed about the EMI policy by school advisors when they were in grade nine or ten. For some of them, this information had a positive effect as it encouraged them to work hard to improve their English skills. However, most students had great concerns about their ability to study in English. Samia draws attention to a negative effect such a policy can have on students:

I was extremely worried. Most students were worried. Even my sister, who is in grade 10 now, always says that she might not be able to join a place [college or university] because of English. She says "It's over, I can't join a place. Why study, why work hard and my English is like that?"

It might be that some students will be discouraged to continue their higher education due to EMI. Troudi (2009: 20) states that "effects of EMI policies on students' educational and career choices have largely been ignored."

Nevertheless, all interviewed participants acknowledged the international status of the English language and its important role in global communication, development and employment. Assad explains that "English is the language of money and business." The students also thought that EMI is necessary to help them improve their English language as Zahra states: "Honestly, I don't want to study in Arabic because I really want to learn English." This reflects the common belief in the Gulf that students can improve their English language skills while studying in their degree programs (Ismail, 2011). Some students related knowing English to being well educated. In addition, Zahra explains: "I am viewed differently in my society. At home I am respected. My brothers give me more respect" confirming that English is seen by many as a symbol of prestige and necessary for receiving a superior social status (Abdel-Jawad & Abu Radwan, 2011).

This shows that students view the position of English as a lingua franca or what Phillipson (2009) calls *lingua academia* (the international use of English in higher education) and therefore see English as neutral. Advocates of the neutral view of English assume that the international status of English is "unproblematic and detached from the agendas of the powerful" (ibid: 337). For realistic and pragmatic purposes the students do not challenge the efficiency of EMI. They see it as essential to gain social status and to be able to join the workforce after they graduate.

Arabic as a medium of instruction

Students' views on the possibility and necessity of Arabic as a medium of instruction were almost identical. Most students thought there is no scope for using Arabic to teach content classes. Information Technology

students in particular thought that Arabic cannot be used as a medium of instruction claiming that there are no equivalent Arabic terms for terms used in their specialization as Assad notes: "I believe it is not possible because most resources, especially in programming, are in English. Originally, this specialization is in English." However, Information Technology as a major is taught in Syrian, Jordanian and Egyptian public universities in Arabic. In addition, Troudi (2009: 204) mentions that "Scholars in Syria are making great efforts to translate new scientific terms and publications into Arabic."

Some students thought their specialization could be taught in Arabic. However, most students preferred to study in English as Siham's quote shows: "I do not need to understand the subject in Arabic because I need English. I need to improve my English." From the point of view of linguistic imperialism discussed by Phillipson (1992), it seems that most students support the monolingual fallacy (that English is best taught monolingually). Ismail's (2012) study in Oman reveals that the monolingual fallacy exists among students and teachers, although there are very few studies that support this fallacy. Only two Engineering students out of the ten interview participants expressed their wish to study in Arabic. Faysal explains: "Studying in Arabic is better. The person who understands the subject has a chance to understand more in depth. What is the point of reading a book and at the end I get only 20% of it?"

Most participants rated their ability to use Modern Standard Arabic for academic purposes to be 50-80%, but they did not express any concern about that unlike students in studies by Pessoa and Rajakumar (2011) and Troudi and Jendli (2011). If students continue to study in English, then they will not be able to develop their Arabic language academically. None of the participants considered Arabic to be less important than English. They rather believed that they serve different functions. Bilal explains: "Arabic is everything in my life. It is important to communicate with my family and people in my community. English is only important for work and studying."

The concern that EMI policy will eventually affect the status of the Arabic language is well grounded because the relationship between Arabic and English is not well balanced. Arabic is seen to serve local needs whereas English is seen to serve global needs which will eventually lead to marginalization of the Arabic language.

Effects of EMI on learning experiences

Psychological effects

The data analysis revealed that EMI had psychological effects on students, which in turn had an effect on their learning experience. Only two students reported to have gained confidence through studying in English. Most students stated that they do not feel comfortable speaking in English. This can explain why most students during my classroom observations were very quiet in class. In response to a question, students answered collectively rather than individually. Furthermore, some students suffered from low self-esteem (Bryam, 2004). Faysal expressed his feelings by stating "I'm afraid to make mistakes in front of my classmates" and Aysha explains that "Even if I am sure of my answer I do not participate." Moreover, most students felt burdened to ask questions in class (Kim, 2011) as Assad's quote shows: "During the whole lecture nobody says a word. Students do not understand but do not ask. He [the student] can't arrange a question to ask." From my own classroom observations, I noticed that students rarely ask a question. Only two students asked a simple confirmation question in class. Most students turned to their classmates sitting close to them and they discussed some points in Arabic.

Some students mentioned that they lack confidence speaking in English especially with Omanis or Arabs as Samia declares: "I can speak English, but with Omanis or people who speak my own language I have a problem. But with a foreigner - I might make mistakes in vocabulary or grammar - I feel more comfortable." Although this can be seen as a positive effect, it might have a negative effect on students' performance during job interviews if the interviewer is an Omani or an Arab. I can conclude from the discussion above that these students will not be able to discuss, debate, ask and answer questions and ask for clarification in order to generate knowledge. This shows that EMI can have a negative effect on the quality of education (Qorro, 2006).

English proficiency

The rationale behind using EMI in tertiary education seems to be that while learning the content in English, students will learn English (Qorro, 2006; Rogier, 2012). In this study, students acknowledged a slight gain in language proficiency in at least one of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Only two students reported that their listening skills have improved, unlike findings by Chung (2011) whereas Samia states: "My English has improved in my specialization, in communication, no." Furthermore, some students thought that their grammar (the ability to produce correct English) has not improved at all. Overall, students rated their English proficiency to be 40-70%. Some students expressed their intention to register in language courses after they graduate to further improve their English.

Some theorists believe that contexts which provide sufficient input and exposure in the target language are ideal for language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). On the other hand, Swain (1995) argues that comprehensible input is not sufficient for second language acquisition, but that it is important to engage in meaningful oral exchanges (output) to develop fluency and accuracy. However, during my classroom observation I noticed that students do not take an active part in learning. They simply sit and listen to the lecture. Occasionally they underline a word or sentence in their handout and write down meaning of words which the teacher explained. Moreover, the teachers did not provide the students who responded to a question with feedback about their language, since the aim of the lecture is to deliver the content and not language learning. Such a context does not provide the students with the necessary conditions to improve their English proficiency.

Challenges and coping strategies

The data showed that students encountered many challenges during their study in their specializations, thus confirming findings in the literature about the consequences of EMI policy on students' learning experience (Bielenberg, 2004; Troudi & Jendli, 2011).

English serving as a gatekeeper

Pennycook (1994: 13) states that English has become "the language of power and prestige in many countries, thus acting as a crucial gatekeeper to social and economic progress." The analysis revealed that English played a role as a gatekeeper which had an impact on students' academic lives and career choice. All students explained that studying in this college was not their first choice. Instead, they had the desire to study in SQU. They were not admitted because their final high school grades and/or their English grade did not meet the entry requirements. For four students, the English grade acted as a gatekeeper and prevented them from joining SQU. Samia expressed her disappointment by stating "I was one of the distinguished students at school. I achieved good grades - 94%. They [SQU] admitted students with 93% but with an A in English. I got a C. This is why they put me in college." Bilal, who wanted to become a pilot but is now an Engineering student expressed his frustration by stating that "I got 84% in my certificate and I had only one bad grade, in English, of course. This is why I had to go down to the level of a college instead of SQU."

English also acted as a gatekeeper when students first joined the college. Although all students had studied English for eight years at school, their English level upon entry to the college was rather low. Low English proficiency in Omani public schools has been discussed by Al-Mahrooqi (2012) and Babrakzai (2001). Therefore, they had to study three semesters in the English foundation program, with the exception of one student who had to study English for two semesters only, before they could join their specialization. In addition, Amer explains that so far he has not met the English level requirement to pursue his higher diploma degree. He states: "I did IELTS, here at college. I needed 4 but my result was low - 3.5." It is worth mentioning that he has studied at this college for 4 years. Furthermore, Mariam explains that "Even interviews are in English. The first thing they ask for is your English level. This is one of the requirements. Even in job advertisements, for example, they want the applicant to have an average of A or B in English." Therefore, English will also have an impact on their careers after they graduate.

This situation reflects the situation in Troudi and Jendli's (2011) study. English language proficiency requirements hinder students with low English language proficiency to choose the institution they wish to join and the field they wish to specialize in. It may also affect their future employment. Although English in Oman is seen as a key to economic success for the nation and individuals, and therefore as beneficial, it can be seen that the benefits of English are not distributed equally; for students with low English language

proficiency, English is an obstacle to education and employment (Tollefson, 2000). Moreover, the use of English tests and English language proficiency requirements for acceptance in certain institutions or employment further perpetuates the power of the English language and its speakers (Shohamy, 2006).

Comprehending lectures and material

Although the students reported that they benefitted a lot from the foundation program, especially in writing, they encountered great difficulties in comprehending their lectures due to the specialized language which was completely new to them thereby confirming findings of Kim's (2011) study where students related their lack of understanding in EMI classes to the capacity of their L2 skills. Amina explains: "We all had problems understanding the lecture. Teacher explains and asks 'Students, do you understand?' We tell him no teacher." In order to understand the content which is delivered in English students need to be equipped with the necessary language proficiency (Ismail, 2011).

Reading the course material was another challenge. All students, especially Engineering and Information Technology students, reported that the greatest challenge was reading the material. They had to translate the text first in order to understand the content which was time consuming (about two hours each lecture). Assad states that "Whenever I want to study, I have to translate, translate the words. This takes a lot of time." Hewson (1998: 318) argues that "Specialized terminology, which is not necessarily congruent between the two languages, poses considerable problems for the teacher and significant learning difficulties for students."

Exams

Preparing for the exam was a major challenge for students. First, students are used to memorization. However, the teachers explained that students should understand rather than memorize. This shift to a different approach to education was found by some students as challenging. Furthermore, almost all students reported that they encountered comprehension problems during exams. Faysal's quote illustrates this issue: "Reading the question can make you upset. What is this? What is this question about? Then you answer incorrectly." Most students also thought that studying in Arabic would allow them to achieve better grades. The effect of EMI on test performance has been discussed by Brock-Utne (2007) and Ismail (2011).

In order to cope with these challenges, students reported that they mainly depended on themselves, relying heavily on dictionaries because no one in their family is able to help, or on their classmates or friends, those who understand, so that they can explain in Arabic. Some students, mainly Business students mentioned to be able to find some support from teachers such as explaining a point or checking the language of a written assignment.

Discussion

Students who study through EMI are disadvantageded in comparison to students who study in their L1. First, Omani students have no other choice than to study in English. Those who are weak in English have to spend up to two years in foundation programs in order to upgrade their English proficiency before joining their specialization. The data also showed that low proficient students might suffer from low self-esteem which hinders them to participate in classroom discussion essential to enhance learning. In addition, the main factor for success is related to language ability rather than the ability to understand the content. In order to graduate with a higher diploma degree students spend about five to six years at college depending on the specialization. They have to study another year in order to receive a bachelor degree. This time would be sufficient for students who study in their L1 to receive an MA degree.

This policy has also affected the overall quality of education. Students who study through EMI have to deal with an additional cognitive burden. They need to make meaning of the content before they can actually comprehend it which is time and effort consuming. Students might graduate with less profound knowledge, skills and expertise in their subjects than if they had studied in their own language. Students who are not able to achieve a high level of language proficiency might find it difficult to find a job especially in private organizations where advanced proficiency is required. Even their Arabic linguistic ability will lag behind since they have not used it in any formal context for several years. This brings to mind Skutnabb-Kangas' (2000a) argument that students should have the right to study in their mother tongue.

The arguments put forward for the necessity of EMI are that it is needed to prepare students for the internationalized workplace and to help develop the country to bring it closer to modernity. It is clear that EMI can perpetuate social and economic inequalities because only students with high language proficiency can be successful in their jobs. In the current context it might also be difficult to achieve the national policy of Omanization. As already discussed, Omani graduates might be weaker than expatriates in their specialization and linguistic ability which might make it difficult for Omanis to replace them. As a result, countries such as Oman will lag behind because they cannot develop themselves and remain dependent on expatriate workforce. If EMI does not serve the students or the development of a country then the legitimacy of such a policy should be questioned. As Tollefson (2006) argues, language policy is not ideologically free and is affected by social and political forces. Those who promote EMI have to ask themselves who they are serving. It seems that EMI policy serves the interests of dominant groups rather than the own country. Furthermore, EMI supports maintaining and revitalizing the English language and its culture (Tsui&Tollefson, 2004; Shohami, 2006).

The data reveals that most students are in favour of EMI for pragmatic and realistic reasons. All participants believe that EMI is necessary in Oman for individual and national development and that Arabic is important for local use. It can be concluded that the students held a simplistic liberal complimentary view of English use (Pennycook, 2001). This naïve view that “English will be used for international and some intranational uses, while local languages will be used for local uses” is inadequate because it “does not take into account the far more complex social and political context of language use (ibid: 57).

In addition, English is presented by the participants as being non-ideological. However, the findings show that the EMI policy helped in turning the ideology that higher education is most efficient when conducted in English into practice through formal education, as Shohamy (2006) declares. This unquestioned belief has become naturalized and therefore contributes to the hegemony of English. Carlspecken (1996) asserts that ideological domination is strongest when oppressed groups see their situation as natural or inevitable. The assumption that language policy in general and EMI in particular are adopted to solve language conflicts in multilingual settings and to provide equal social and economic opportunities for everybody and to facilitate modernization and development is shortsighted. So far, the traditional approach to research on EMI policy has been dominant which serves the status quo. This study shows that a critical approach to EMI is necessary to relate the policy to the social, cultural and political context in which it has been implemented in order to investigate the detrimental effects such a policy poses on students and the society in large.

It is also worth mentioning that EMI has a negative effect on the status of the Arabic language. Although Arabic is the language of instruction at school and English is the language of instruction at tertiary education, this linguistic dualism is not equally balanced (Findlow, 2006). Since Arabic, the official language of Oman, is not used in tertiary education and is used in a restricted way in business and economic affairs, its role is being marginalized.

Conclusion

This study shows that Markee (1993, 2002) and Bruthiaux (2002) are right in their argument that adopting English for instruction at tertiary level does not necessarily lead to success. Shohami, (2006: 78/79) points out that “teachers, principals and inspectors are responsible for carrying out language education policies” and that “Teachers, therefore are viewed as bureaucrats that follow orders unquestioningly.” However, Troudi (2009: 212) asserts that “Our role as language educators and language teachers is not only to serve the curriculum but to evaluate it, challenge it, play an active role, and even redesign it.” I believe that the so far unchallenged practice of EMI, which is part of the diffusion-of-English paradigm, should be challenged for three main reasons: First, EMI disadvantages students with low English proficiency because it has negative effects on the their learning experience and on the quality of education. Second, EMI does not help Oman to head towards modernization and development because economic and human development depends on effective education (Williams & Cooke, 2002). Third, EMI has detrimental effects on the status of the Arabic language. Therefore, I would first suggest that it is necessary for policy makers to consider the idea of switching to Arabic medium instruction at tertiary level. This would allow students to graduate with more profound knowledge in their subjects. However, appropriate pedagogical implications should be adopted for

students to gain skills in questioning, investigating, critical thinking, problem solving and decision making. Second, English should be taught as a second language in school similarly to Nordic and Scandinavian countries where students develop profound English skills but pursue their higher education in their L1 (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000a; Troudi, 2009). This can be achieved if adjustments are made to the current curriculum, pedagogy and teaching material for students to gain an advanced English level. In addition, English for special purposes (ESP) should be taught at tertiary level, so that students can further develop their English language in relation to their specialization. Third, efforts should be made to upgrade the Arabic language in order to cover all scientific and technological terms that do not exist in the Arabic language.

Although this is a small-scale study I believe that it contributes to the critical language policy literature that examines the unquestioned practices of EMI and its effect on students, society and the Arabic language. However, further research studies are needed, preferable including teachers' view on EMI, since they are also affected by the EMI policy.

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Appendix

Semi-structured interview items:

1. General information of the students

- name, age, average in secondary certificate, year of study

2. Background information

- Did you study in a public or private school?
- How did you feel about learning English at school?
- When did you know that you are going to study your higher education in English? How did you feel about it?

3. Students' experiences with EMI at college

- Why did you choose to study in this college?
- Did you study in the English foundation program? If yes, for how long?
- How well prepared were you for your study in your major after you finished the

foundation program? Did you face any problem? Can you give examples?

Prompts: comprehending your lectures
 reading textbooks or material
 writing assignments
 oral activities such as participation or presentations
 preparing for the exams
 understanding questions in the exams

- If you have any difficulty, how do you face it/ how do you get help or help yourself?
- What do teachers do to help you overcome language difficulties?
- How much time do you spend improving/working on your English skills in order to understand courses or do your tasks?
- How confident do you feel about using English in class/ with your teacher?
- Do you think your English has improved because you are studying in English? If yes, in which area: speaking, listening, reading, writing?
- How would you rate your English level now (spoken and written)?

4. Arabic versus English

- Do you think your specialization can be taught in Arabic?
- Do you think that you would perform better if you could study your major in Arabic?
- If you had a choice, would you rather study your specialization in Arabic or English? Why?
- Do you think that studying in English has affected your Arabic language?
- How would you rate your Arabic language?
- What language do you use in your social life?
 Prompts: home, friends, internet ...
- Is Arabic important for you? Why?
- Is English important for you? Why?
- Has studying in English affected you in any way?
 Prompts: culture, identity, ...
- Overall, how would you rate your experience with English medium instruction?