

“Make them take an ‘IELTS test’ in Arabic”! Resentment of and resistance towards English and English-medium instruction in the UAE

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Abstract

English in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has grown to become the primary language of trade and retail, the mass media and advertising, and the de facto medium of instruction in federally-sponsored institutions of higher education (HE). In recent years, however, the widespread proliferation of the English language in this otherwise conservative Arabic-speaking country has become increasingly controversial. Indeed, resentment of and resistance towards English on the part of Emiratis has been found to exist in relation to English-language mass advertising (Nickerson & Crawford Camiciottoli, 2013) and English-medium instruction (EMI) within HE (Issa, 2013, March 6). In addition, there is growing concern that ‘native’-English-speaking teachers from largely secular, ‘inner circle’ countries will inadvertently transmit values, ontologies, and epistemologies contrary to those of their Muslim students (Ibrahim, 2013) and their traditional, tribal-based, gender-segregated society. In order to determine whether there existed any evidence of resistance towards the place of English in the present-day UAE on the part of Emirati HE students, a bilingual (Arabic/English) survey was conducted with a group of students completing a foundation programme at a major federal HE institution. The findings reveal some not inconsiderable ambivalence towards English and EMI, especially in the realms of cultural integrity and language policy.

Key words: Arabian Gulf, English, Islam, social distance, social psychology

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