



Name of researcher: Taghreed Ibrahim Masri

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Abstract

Recently, a new dimension of learning a second language has gained interest in the literature. The identity of learners has made its way as a concept that has become central in second language acquisition (SLA) and bilingual education research. More and more the notion that learners' identity is constructed and negotiated through language learning has become widely recognized. However, so far, few studies have focused on how learning a second language, particularly English impacts Arab learners' identity. Given the 'magic,' power and status associated with English as the global language, its impact may be deeper than that usually associated with foreign language learning. The purpose of this study is to explore how the level of proficiency in both Arabic and English shapes Emirati students' perception of their identity in the United Arab Emirates public schools. The study explores high school students' linguistic preferences and language practices to assess their impact on identity construction. Data collection methods include a students' survey, interviews with students, teachers and an administrator, and ethnographic observation. Results show that students' preferences are driven by their perceived proficiency in both languages. While students are aware of their poor proficiency in English, their relative fluency in Spoken Arabic leads them to believe that they are proficient in it. In fact, results indicate that students have poor proficiency in both Arabic and English which has created an identity dilemma as they are unable to identify completely with either of the two languages. However, data analysis reveals that English has to a certain extent impacted students' identity because they associate it with modernity and a brighter future, which they want for themselves, while Arabic is associated with respected traditions and values. Findings also show that although students are aware that English is flourishing at the expense of their mother tongue, they still want to learn it and appreciate its culture. Finally, results indicate that the educational policy towards both languages falls short of providing these students an effective bilingual program.

Keywords: language proficiency, identity, Arabic language, English language, United Arab Emirates