"Just a natural move towards English": Gulf youth attitudes towards Arabic and English literacy

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Abstract

This paper reports a sub-set of results from a mixed-method ethnographic study of literacy among female graduates and undergraduates of a United Arab Emirates public university. With reference to survey data and two in-depth interviews, the paper focuses in particular on the predispositions and preferences of these women with regard to reading and writing in English and Modern Standard Arabic. Employing a New Literacy Studies theoretical framework along with a number of concepts developed by Bourdieu, the paper finds that literacy practices in this context are developing rapidly, influenced by the diverse transnational linguistic marketplaces in which these women grow up. Suggestions are made with regard to possible directions for curricular development in higher education in this region based on the opinions expressed by these young women.

Introduction

In three generations, the geographical area known since 1971 as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has undergone dramatic changes. Three generations ago, the main occupations of people in this region revolved around the sea (fishing, pearl diving), nomadic pastoralism and work in emerging oil industries in other Gulf countries (Al Fahim, 1995). Since significant oil exports began in the UAE in the 1960's, there has been an increasing inflow of migrant labour to help build and maintain the infrastructure of a developing and globalizing country. This expatriate labour force, which represents 90% of the population of the country (Findlow, 2006) has expanded rapidly and now includes an extremely diverse range of nationalities from across the world. Given the short-term basis on which they tend to be employed, there is a constant outflow and inflow of these workers, and, in some cases, their families. Thus, the remaining 10% of the population, Emirati citizens, live amidst constant change, both in terms of the demographics of the country and in terms of the socio-economic changes that their country is experiencing.

A key component of this change is education. Three generations ago, literacy was the exception rather than the norm. Although some formal schooling was evident from the early 19th Century (Davidson, 2008), prior to 1971 education in the UAE still largely consisted of the *al-katateeb* system – rudimentary literacy instruction involving rote memorization of the Qur'an and other religious texts, which was sometimes, though not always, extended to both male and females[1]. Indeed, in 1971, literacy rates for those over 16 years of age are reported to have been less than 50% for males, and less than 30% for females (Davidson, 2008). By contrast, today the UAE has a comprehensive education system, for both males and females, including internationally-accredited private and public universities (Ministry of Higher Education & Scientific Research, 2013).

The UAE is a linguistic marketplace in which a large number of languages and dialects are available as potential resources for citizens and residents. Naturally, certain resources are valued differently from others. Emirati Arabic (EA) represents the spoken language of the most

powerful group in the country (albeit a demographic minority); Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the official language of the country and of the public sector; English is the language of much of the private sector. In the field of education, several languages are used in schools across the country (e.g. Urdu, Farsi etc.), but for Emirati citizens, MSA and English are the languages of greatest educational importance. For many Emirati parents, English is seen as a vital resource for educational and career success - so much so, that some of those who have the means send their children to private schools where there is the option of largely English-medium education. Others send their children to public sector schools, where the education is largely in Arabic until tertiary level when the main language of instruction is English.

The public university which was the site for the present research was established in the 1990's, and conducts the vast majority of its classes in English, with a few in Arabic. Nevertheless, key outcomes established by the University require students to be bilingual in Arabic and English upon graduation: it is thus important for students to develop literacy in both languages. Since the majority of the University's academic faculty is non-Emirati, and largely non-Arab, an understanding of the socio-cultural context in which students live is imperative. In addition to understanding Emirati society and the immense changes it is undergoing, it is important to understand how these changes impact students' lives, and to be aware of their attitudes and predispositions with regard to language and literacy. Understanding these attitudes is important for university educators, not only because of general institutional outcomes but also because language and literacy are key to successful learning in all subject areas. Differences in ability in a subject area may be due to differences in language and literacy practices. In a multilingual context, this is particularly important since students may have different literacy practices in their native language and the language(s) of instruction. Attitudes and predispositions to language and literacy are a key component of these practices and may have their roots in learners' experiences of language and literacy in the home, at school, in their social networks and in their free time interests. An understanding of these attitudinal factors can help educators to understand differences in language and literacy practices among students and in turn to understand differences in ability in a particular subject area. This knowledge can then be used for a number of pedagogic purposes, such as tailoring classroom methods and materials to the needs of learners and providing additional support beyond the classroom.

This paper aims to answer the following questions:

a) What are the predispositions of young, educated Emirati women with regard to reading and writing in English and Modern Standard Arabic, and to what extent have these predispositions changed throughout these women's lives?

b) What are some of the factors that appear to affect these predispositions?

Following outlines of the theoretical framework and research methods used in the study, the results section focuses on enjoyment of free time reading and writing in Arabic and English and on study language preferences, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data. This section is followed by two short case studies, and then by a discussion of the findings.

New Literacy Studies

Research in the framework of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) has highlighted the importance of viewing reading and writing in their social contexts of use, rather than as sets of autonomous skills having predictable cognitive and social consequences regardless of sociocultural context. Street (1984) contrasted the (sociologically) 'autonomous' or 'great divide' views of literacy, which he associated with the work of literacy researchers such as Goody (e.g. 1975), with what he termed an 'ideological' perspective on literacy, which describes literacy with regard to issues

of power in society. In this framework, the ways in which societies take up and utilize various 'literacies' are researched ethnographically by focusing on *literacy events*, a term defined by Heath (1982, p.50) as "occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies", and on *literacy practices*. For Street (1984), literacy practices are "general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 6). These practices may not be directly observable, but may be gleaned from the observation of literacy events and involvement with participants in the field. Hence, ethnographic approaches have come to dominate research in the field.

An example of a literacy event is the use of Powerpoint slides by a university teacher to get across key course concepts. For the professor, the slides might be seen as the starting point for student learning and he/she might provide additional readings for students to extend and reinforce the concepts, which students are advised to read in their own time. A typical scenario, however, is that a handful of students actually completes the additional reading while others rely on different strategies (which may involve minimal reading), such as seeking oral explanations from peers, who may or may not have done the assigned reading, approaching the teacher in office hours for additional explanations, relying solely on the Powerpoint slides, or a combination of these. An 'autonomous' view of literacy would tend to focus on the skills and knowledge that a learner demonstrates, and point to the 'skills gap' if the learner's skills were insufficient for a particular academic task. An NLS perspective acknowledges the importance of skills but tends to take a broader view of literacy, focusing on socio-cultural context and literacy practices. In other words, how do these undergraduates' experiences of literacy in the home, at school, and in their social lives, in both Arabic and English, affect the way that they engage in academic literacy tasks in English in the higher education context? Why do some students willingly engage with academic texts while others do anything to avoid such engagement? Are there differences in the way that students from different backgrounds engage with literacy – for example, those from English-medium private as compared with those from Arabic-medium public schools?

The NLS approach has yielded a large number of interesting and insightful local ethnographic studies – 'first generation' studies (Prinsloo & Baynham, 2008), such as Heath's seminal (1983) study of literacy in the Carolina Piedmonts, Street's (1984) work in Iran, and 'second generation' studies such as Barton & Hamilton's (1998) study of literacy practices in Lancaster, England, and Besnier's (1995) work on a Polynesian atoll, among many others (Baynham, 1995; Kral, 2007 etc).

Although the central principles of NLS have been widely taken up, critics have pointed out a need for more development of its theory. Brandt & Clinton (2002), for example, argue that the NLS approach pays insufficient attention to the interplay between global and local contexts. Luke (2004), extends this criticism by arguing that although NLS claims to focus on issues of power and ideology, these tend not to be sufficiently developed in most ethnographic accounts of local literacies. He argues that

> ethnographies of literacy must bridge not just home and school, but the local and global, and the micro and macro political-economic domains. (p.334)

To better understand the links between literacy practices and social contexts at micro and macro levels, the work of Bourdieu has been employed by some scholars working in the NLS framework (e.g. Grenfell, 2011), particularly the concepts of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital. Habitus* refers to the embodied predispositions of individuals, groups and institutions to act in specific ways, which are structured by experience and circumstances, but which are also structuring with regard to current and future practices (Maton, 2008). Habitus operates within structured social

spaces, or *fields*, such as education, culture or television, utilizing various forms of *capital* (cultural, linguistic, scientific, etc.). Bourdieu's (1984, p.101) equation shows how these three concepts work together:

[(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice

Or in other words:

> practice results from relations between one's dispositions (habitus) and one's position in a field (capital), within the current state of play of that social arena (field) (Maton, 2008, p.51).

A particular focus of this paper is the linguistic habitus of these Arab women in the context of a linguistic market, or field that is diverse and multilingual. I follow a use-based (rather than a competence-based) definition of what constitutes a bilingual or multilingual speaker – that is, any speaker who uses "two or more languages or dialects in their everyday lives" (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 6). Because the focus here is predominantly on literacy, I will also use the terms 'biliterate' and 'multiliterate', in a similar way, but with reference to readers and writers. Most of the women in this study are indeed bilingual and biliterate since they use both Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and English, to varying degrees, in their everyday lives, in spoken and written contexts. In fact, given the diglossic situation among Emiratis in the UAE (Al Wer, 2006), whereby the local dialect (Emirati Arabic or Gulf Arabic (Holes, 2011)) is used in quite different domains to MSA (not to mention other Arabic dialects such as Palestinian and Egyptian), they could be regarded as multilingual and possibly also multiliterate.

The NLS emphasis on literacy events and practices as socially-constructed, locally-specific phenomena is employed in this study to gain an understanding of the multilingual literacy practices of young women in this context. In order to analyze these local literacy practices with reference to national and global contexts, the study also employs Bourdieu's view of the ways in which habitus, field and capital interact to create practices. The notion of habitus is particularly germane to this study, as the focus is on language attitudes in literacy. These women's linguistic predispositions as manifested in their language choices, their language and literacy skills (capital) and the social spaces (fields) in which they operate, interact to form specific literacy practices. Understanding local literacy practices is of value both to educators and academic advisors working outside their home countries, in new or changing sociocultural contexts (as in my case), and to those working in their countries of origin with students from diverse backgrounds.

Method

This study, which is part of a larger research project investigating first and second language literacy among female undergraduates and alumnae of a public university in the UAE, focuses on attitudes to literacy in both Arabic and English. In particular it focuses on attitudes to free time enjoyment of reading and writing in the two languages at three stages of the students' lives, and on their attitudes with regard to studying in Arabic and English. To develop an understanding of these aspects of the respondents' literacy practices, an ethnographic approach was used, which enables the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of a particular socio-cultural situation through active involvement in the field, interviews with participants, participant observation and so on (Baynham, 2004). It enables the literacy researcher to observe literacy events and to gather data on less directly observable literacy practices. However, within this overall methodology, both qualitative and quantitative mixed methods were used: in addition to interviews with participants and the writing of field notes based on my observations, a literacy questionnaire was used in order to develop a broader understanding of literacy practices across the University.

The data on which this article is based was taken mostly from the second stage of the larger research project. The first stage had involved gathering data and writing field notes based on classroom observation of literacy events, discussion board postings and social network postings on literacy-related themes. The second stage involved a two-phased design (Dörnyei, 2007, p.167): quantitative research in the form of the questionnaire, followed up with qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews with students and alumnae. The questionnaire was based on the themes that had begun to emerge in the first part of the project, and on my understanding of literacy in this context after ten years teaching Foundation-level and undergraduate English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at this university. This stage of the project involved enquiry into both English and Arabic literacy.

The questionnaire incorporated both closed and open-ended questions focusing on several areas of literacy as a socially situated phenomenon. As this particular paper focuses on literacy predispositions in English and Arabic, data from two of the survey questions is presented here: (1) a question related to free time enjoyment of reading and writing in English and Arabic across three time periods of the participants' lives, and (2) a question asking participants' opinions as to what they feel should be the main language(s) of instruction in the University.

The language used in the questionnaires was English, but an attempt was made to create questions that would be comprehensible to students with an IELTS score of 5.0 or higher. The questions were piloted and subsequently edited for greater clarity. It might be argued that the use of English rather than Arabic, and the fact that the questionnaire was sent out by a non-Arab faculty member, might encourage a certain amount of bias with regard to English in the responses. However, because the respondents were given the option of anonymity, they were free to express their thoughts without being identified. In fact, the results reveal a wide range of opinions with regard to English and Arabic literacy, from those with a very pro-English stance, to those who are concerned for the future of Arabic as a language.

A sampling procedure was selected which would enable me to capture data from a reasonably representative sample of participants while at the same time minimizing any impact on teaching and learning. An email was sent out to all female students on the University's Dubai and Abu Dhabi campuses, and also to former students via the University's Alumni Office. Over 1,000 students attempted the questionnaire; however, as some responses were incomplete, I decided to exclude respondents who had completed fewer than half of the questions. The remaining 712 respondents represented approximately 10% of the University population in the 2011-12 academic year. Around 500 students completed 95-100% of the questions and a further 212 completed at least half of the questions.

The final sample was representative of the University's population of female students and alumnae, with approximately 20% of respondents from each of the four years of study and 20% graduated students. 269 (38%) of the respondents were Abu Dhabi campus students or graduates while the remaining 443 (62%) were studying on or had graduated from the Dubai campus. Reported Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) scores ranged from 1.7 to 4.0, which is reflective of the typical range.

The data was filtered in order to obtain descriptive statistics on various sub-groupings – for example by respondents' school background and school medium of instruction. The mean response on each question was then analyzed. Based on prior findings (in stage one of the project) and indications based on my knowledge of the context, it was predicted that there would be significantly different responses between respondents (e.g. with regard to study language preferences), depending on school background (public or private) and school medium of instruction (English or Arabic). Inferential statistical analysis was carried out on the filtered

data using a two-tailed, two-proportion Z test. In order to reject the null hypothesis (i.e. that there would be no difference in the responses), results at $p < 0.05$ were considered to be statistically significant. Statistics were calculated using an online two-proportion Z test tool (Stangroom, 2013).

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured (Dörnyei, 2007), in that the questionnaires and the interviewees' online responses were used as the basis for the questioning, but space was given to the participants to expand on their answers and mention anything that they considered to be relevant, in order to develop an 'emic' or 'thick' description (Geertz, 2007) of literacy practices in this context. They were also retrospective in that participants were asked to look back over their lives and, for example, describe how their attitudes to literacy in Arabic and English had changed (or otherwise) during their lives.

In order to select a group of participants for in-depth interviews, purposive sampling was used. From the pool of 318 questionnaire respondents who were happy for me to contact them to ask for further information, 84 were already known to me. A sub-grouping of 30 of these known participants was identified for the in-depth interviews. I selected known participants for a number of reasons. Having already developed a good working relationship with these young people while I was teaching them, I knew that they would feel comfortable talking with me, which increased the likelihood of their being willing to take part and meant that they were more likely to open up and give in-depth answers to my questions. Secondly, as I have some biographical knowledge about each of my students, I was able to predict, and not dwell on, questions that might be sensitive for individual participants.

All of the in-depth Interviews were conducted in English. As with the surveys, it could be argued that conducting interviews in English, rather than the respondents' first language, could lead to some bias in favor of English, especially as the participants were already known to me, and might wish to 'tell me what I want to hear'. This is of course a possibility. However, to minimize the impact of these factors on the data, I purposively sampled respondents to reflect a range of 'typical' backgrounds – for example respondents with pre-university backgrounds in Arabic-medium public schools and those from English-medium private schools, or respondents with a particularly high or low CGPA/ IELTS score. I also ensured that they were drawn from across the University – from the General Education program (i.e. first and second year of undergraduate studies), and from Majors (third and fourth years), and included a number of working graduates. As an additional step, I ensured that all key interviewees were given the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview and a draft of any report that included their survey/interview data (e.g. drafts of this article) in order for them to reflect in their own time on the content and clarify anything that they felt might be inaccurate, overstated or misunderstood. In general, as with the questionnaire data, the data that I gathered from the interviews reflects a wide range of views and attitudes, suggesting that respondents were able to express their views and attitudes regardless of the language in which the interviews were conducted.

For the purposes of this paper, data from two of the interviews was selected, based on the closeness of fit between respondents' attitudes as measured by the two survey/interview questions, and the overall tendencies in the survey data. However, the results section also includes data from other interviews. In addition to asking key participants to review this paper, I also asked a recent Emirati International Affairs graduate, AlShaima, to read a draft of this paper for an additional Emirati perspective on my findings.

Results

Attitudes to free time literacy

Respondents were asked in the survey to express their attitudes towards free time reading and writing in English and Arabic at three stages of their lives – childhood, teenage years and currently (young adulthood) - by selecting one of six statements about the extent to which they enjoyed reading and writing in their free time (*Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Neutral*, *Disagree*, *Strongly Disagree* or *I don't/didn't read/write in my free time*). This section reports the percentages of the total respondents who chose *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* for each item.

Although the trends for English and MSA were dissimilar (see Figure 1 below), for each language those for reading and writing were similar, suggesting fairly parallel trends from 'childhood' to 'now' for the two skills; and for both, reading was more frequently rated as enjoyable than writing. For MSA, a fairly high proportion of respondents reported enjoyment of free time reading in childhood (67.9% 'strongly agree' or 'agree') and a lower number reported enjoyment of writing (55.8%) (z-score = 4.628; p = 0). This pattern continues over the three time periods, with no significant rise or fall. Similarly, English reading was more frequently rated as enjoyable than writing for the 'childhood' period (46.26% vs. 36.87%) (z-score = 3.5564; p = 0.00038), and the pattern continues across the three time periods. The overall trends for Arabic and for English are quite dissimilar, however. The figure for MSA start relatively high, and there is little change across the three time periods. The data for English, however, shows a marked change over the three time periods. From a starting point of 46.3% for English reading, which is significantly lower than the figure for reading in MSA (67.87%), it rises sharply to 64% for the teenage years, which remains lower, though less so, than the figure for MSA (70.7%) (z-score = -2.819; p = 0.0048), and rises again to 76.5% for the current period, which is higher than the corresponding figure for MSA (71%) (z-score = 2.3158; p = 0.02034).
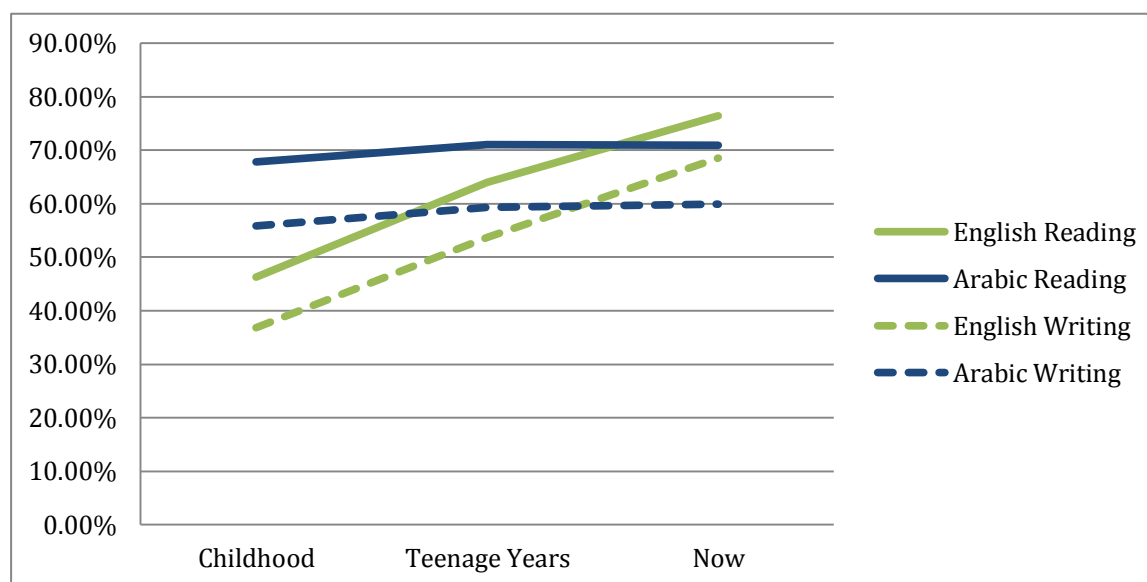

Figure 1 Percentage of respondents reporting enjoyment of free time reading and writing in English and Arabic at each stage of their lives

In other words, enjoyment of MSA reading was reportedly more widespread than enjoyment of reading in English for the childhood period. However, by the teenage years, although the Arabic reading enjoyment figure is at a similar level, enjoyment of English reading has become more widespread. Enjoyment of reading in English is reported by the majority of respondents, but is

still less widespread than Arabic. By the current period, young adulthood, enjoyment of English reading has become even more widespread than enjoyment of Arabic reading, to a statistically significant extent.

The data for writing shows a very similar trend, with the figure for English writing rising sharply from 36.9% to 53.8% and 68.5% across the three periods, and a relatively high yet stable trend for MSA. Enjoyment of writing in English is less widespread than enjoyment of writing in MSA until the current time period when greater numbers of respondents report enjoyment of English writing than for Arabic (z-score = 3.3082; p = 0.000094).

With regard to how sub-groups of students viewed MSA and English reading and writing in their lives so far, there were significant differences in the data[2]. The data from Arabic Medium Public School (AMPuS) background respondents shows substantially different trends from that of the English Medium Private School (EMPrS) background respondents. With regard to English, 34.6% of AMPuS respondents report childhood enjoyment of English reading, compared with 62% of EMPrS respondents - a statistically significant difference (z-score = -5.8121; p = 0) (Figure 2). From childhood to the teenage years, reported enjoyment of reading in English rises among both groups (54.8% vs. 80.7%), but a statistically significant difference remains (z-score = -5.6587; p = 0). However, from the teenage years to the current period, reported enjoyment of reading in English continues to rise among the AMPuS respondents, but levels out among the EMPrS group, and the difference is no longer statistically significant in the third stage (74.4% vs. 80.7%) (z-score = -1.5695; p = 0.05821).
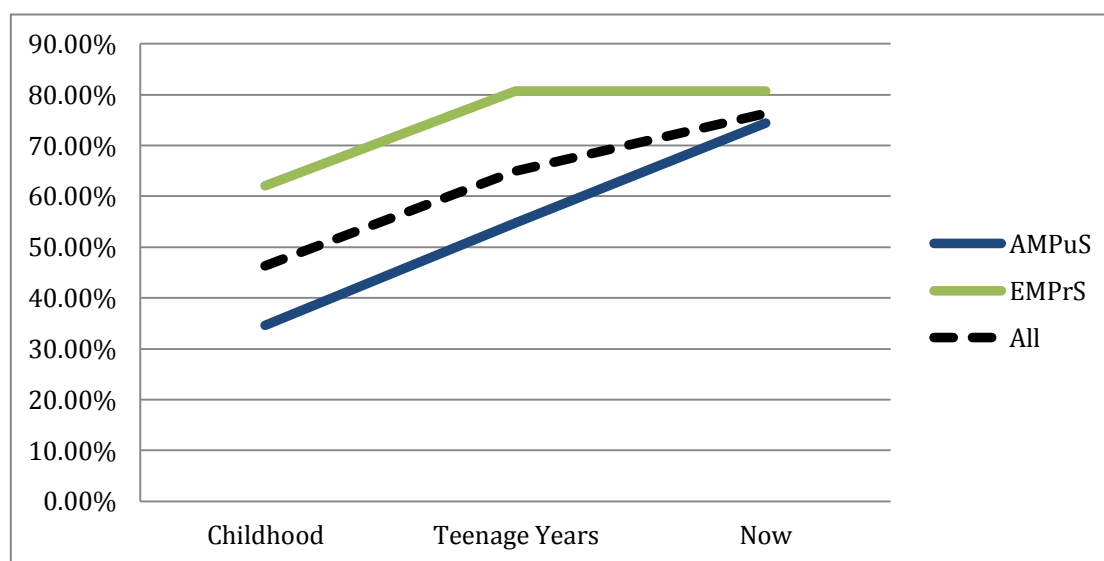

Figure 2 Percentage of respondents reporting enjoyment of free time reading in English at each stage of their lives (by school background).

A similar pattern is evident for English writing (Figure 3), with an overall rise among both groups over the three time periods, and with significant differences in the data for the two groups for both childhood (27.2% vs. 50.3%) (z-score = -5.1023; p = 0) and the teenage period (48.2% vs. 66%) (z-score = -3.7914; p = 0.00016), but (unlike the data for English reading) there is also a significant difference, though to a lesser extent, in the current period (65.7% vs. 75%) (z-score = -2.0487; p = 0.04036).

The trends for MSA reading and writing are very different from those for English reading and writing. With regard to MSA reading enjoyment (Figure 4), there is a sizeable difference between the two sub-groups for the childhood period (78.2% vs. 50.6%) (z-score = 6.2005; p =

0); then for the teenage period there is a rise in reported enjoyment of reading among the AMPuS respondents, and a fall among the EMPrS respondents (84.2% vs. 44.5%) (z-score = 9.2587; p = 0). For the current period, reported enjoyment of reading then falls slightly among the AMPuS participants, and rises slightly in the EMPrS group (81.8% vs. 51.8%) (z-score = 7.1883; p = 0).
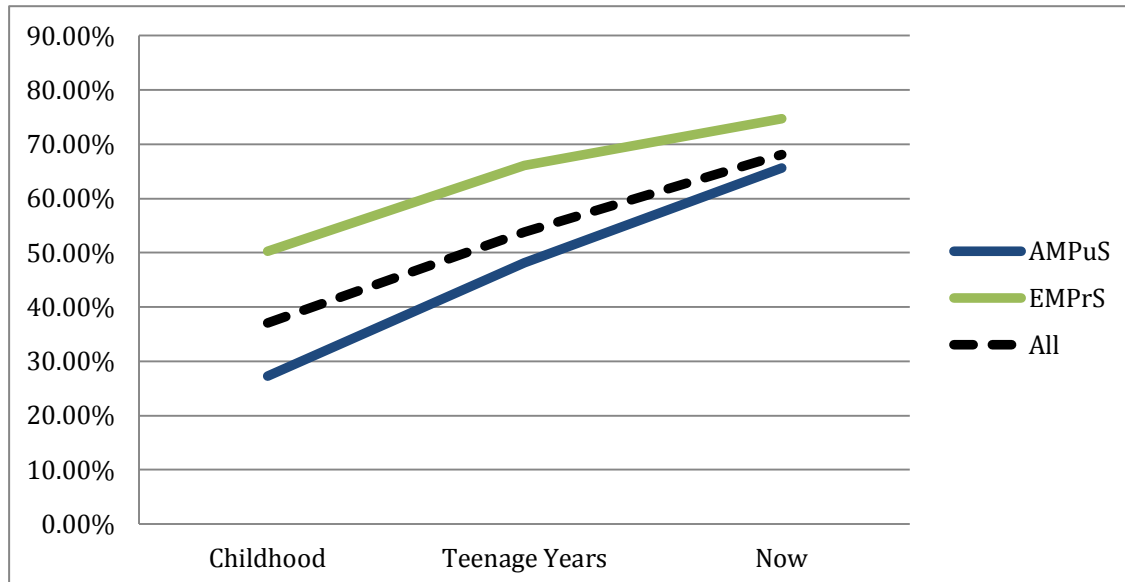

Figure 3 Percentage of respondents reporting enjoyment of free time writing in English at each stage of their lives (by school background).
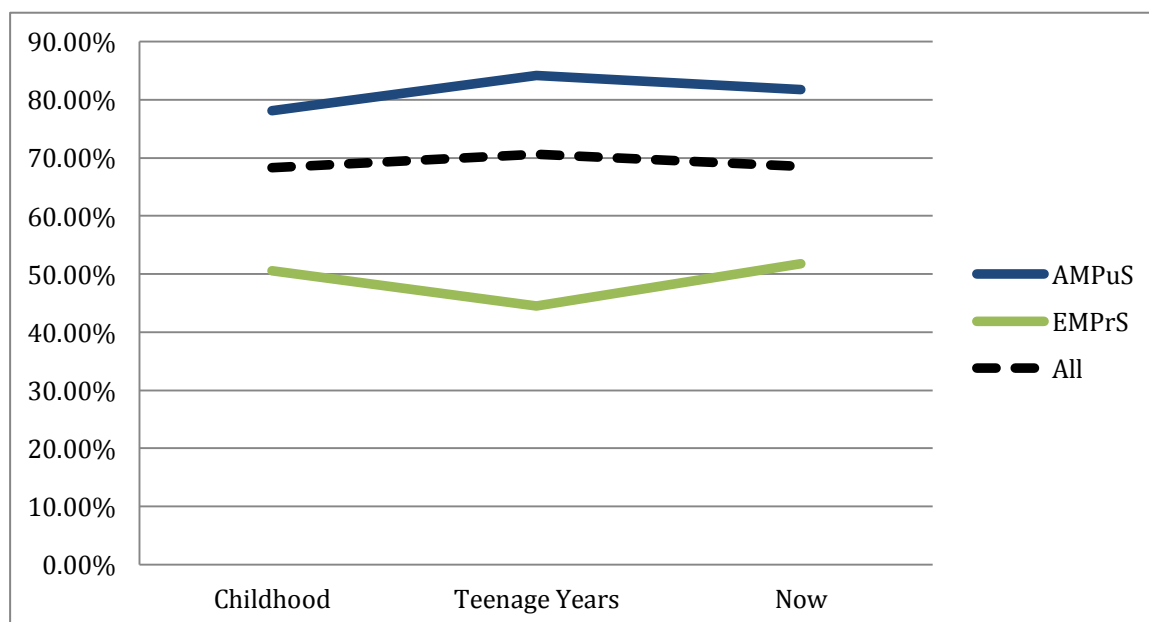

Figure 4 Percentage of respondents reporting enjoyment of free time reading in Arabic at each stage of their lives (by school background)

Overall, there is no significant change for the two groups in reported enjoyment of MSA across the three time periods, and the differences between the groups remain statistically significant. For most respondents with Arabic-medium school backgrounds, there is a high level of reported enjoyment of free time MSA reading, but this is much less the case for those with backgrounds

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in English-medium private schools. The trends for MSA writing are somewhat similar to those for reading (Figure 5). However, there is generally a lower level of reported enjoyment of writing than reading. Among the AMPuS group, there is nevertheless a fairly widespread enjoyment of MSA writing for the childhood period – almost double that of the EMPrS figure (66.07% vs. 33.33%) (z-score = 6.8354; p = 0). There is a very slight rise in the data for both groups for the teenage years (69.1% vs. 36.3%) (z-score = 7.0595; p = 0), then no further overall rise in the AMPuS figure to the current period, but a slight rise in the EMPrS figure. However, the difference between the two groups remains statistically significant (69.1% vs. 41.1%) (z-score = 6.014; p = 0).
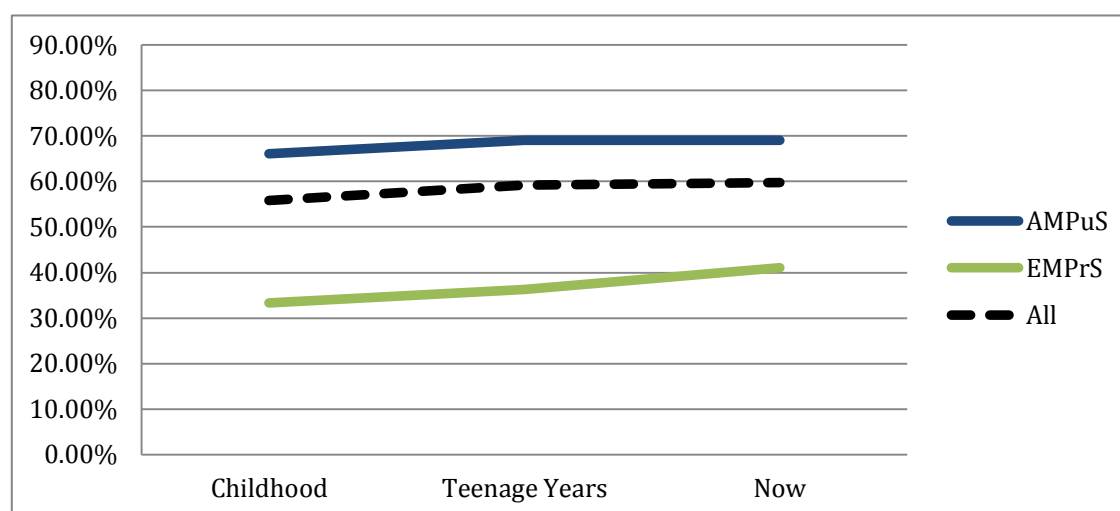

Figure 5 Percentage of respondents reporting enjoyment of free time writing in Arabic at each stage of their lives (by school background)

Interview and other field data shows unique trajectories for all participants. There are EMPrS background women for whom reading and writing in English have never been enjoyable, and those for whom MSA is more enjoyable than English. There are AMPuS participants who have loved reading in English and MSA since childhood, and those who report having been neutral about MSA their whole lives. Nevertheless, much of the qualitative data mirrored the trajectories evident in the quantitative data.

EMPrS background women often reported enthusiasm for reading and writing in English from an early age and mentioned early encouragement by parents to read in English and Arabic. Indeed, they often report starting to learn to read and write in both languages even before kindergarten. In primary, middle and high school, there is a far greater emphasis on English, however. They are often encouraged by teachers to read in English (one interviewee mentioned being given summer holiday reading lists), but there is much less encouragement to read in Arabic, and several mentioned never having read an Arabic book in their free time (apart from the Qur'an). They often evaluate their English literacy skills as being above their Arabic skills, particularly with regard to writing. Although these students generally value EA very highly and view the Classical Arabic of the Qur'an as very precious indeed, their orientation generally appears to be strongly towards English, especially in terms of their own engagement in reading and writing. In terms of daily speech acts, they often report codeswitching in English and EA, or using English in daily conversations with friends of a similar background.

AMPuS background participants often reported a love of reading and writing in Arabic from an early age, encouraged by parents or other family members. Relatively few mentioned being encouraged to read in English. Very few reported being encouraged to read and write in free

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time by teachers at school (in either language). The majority of their school classes were in Arabic, with around one hour per day of English. However, many participants commented that the English classes were often conducted wholly in Arabic and that they were very grammar focused (rather than developing communicative or literacy skills). The view that these school English classes were very weak was often expressed by AMPuS respondents, and they frequently attributed their relative weakness in English to insufficient preparation at school. Those who regarded their English skills as being adequate often commented that they succeeded despite schooling, and frequently attributed their success to leisure time interests developed particularly from grades 5 and 6 and onwards into the teenage years. Interests in popular culture (e.g. English sub-titled Japanese anime and manga, Korean drama, Bollywood movies, and American music, TV and movies), along with online social networking and increased, though often still limited, use of English outside the home contributed to a rising enthusiasm for English, including reading and writing. As they enter young adulthood, encounters with English outside the home increase further, in social spaces such as shopping, eating out and travel, but particularly in the educational field, in the University, where AMPuS students have extended conversations with 'native-speaker' English teachers, often for the first time, and, crucially from a literacy point of view, begin to engage with academic content in English textbooks and to write assignments in English. Enthusiasm for free time English reading and writing are often reported as being very high at this stage[3]. In some cases this may be an intentional effort to improve their English to survive or do well at University, while others emphasize being motivated by the leisure time interests to which English gives access. At the same time, it is important to recall that these AMPuS background participants are often still oriented strongly towards Arabic and report that Arabic reading and writing were enjoyable free time activities from childhood onwards. Their leisure time interests might engender literacy practices in Arabic, such as reading newspaper articles on UAE football or reading and writing Arabic poetry, or listening to and reading Arabic song lyrics. Some may engage in free time reading and writing in Arabic in a conscious effort to maintain their Arabic as they progress through university, worried that English is "taking over" their Arabic.

Thus, the interviews and other field data tend to confirm that there are significant differences in the leisure time literacy trends for these two groups. However, it is also clear that each individual has her own story, as we shall see in the case studies below.

Preferred language of undergraduate study

Respondents were asked to state their study language preference by completing the sentence *In my opinion, we should study…*, selecting from the following options: *only in Arabic*, *mostly in Arabic*, *in English and Arabic equally*, *mostly in English* and *only in English*. The results (Figure 6) revealed that the majority of respondents would prefer a balance of study languages quite different from that which is currently in operation in the University. Of the 626 respondents to this question, only two (0.32%) were in favour of studying exclusively in Arabic, and a further 49 (7.83%) supported studying mostly in Arabic. In contrast, 42 respondents (6.71%) expressed a preference for studying in English only, while 156 (24.92%) favoured studying mostly in English. The majority of respondents, however, stated a preference for studying in English and Arabic equally (377 respondents, or 60.22%).

As above, there were significant differences between AMPuS and EMPrS sub-groupings (Figure 7). 68.65% of AMPuS respondents selected "English and Arabic equally", compared with 41.09% of EMPrS respondents (z-score = -5.361; p = 0). 19.47% of the AMPuS group selected "mostly" or "only" in English, as against 56.59% for the EMPrS group (z-score = -7.6645; p = 0). 11.55% of the AMPuS respondents selected "mostly" or "only" in Arabic, compared with only 2.33% of EMPrS respondents (none of whom selected "only in Arabic") (z-score = 3.1717; p = 0.00152). Thus,

there was a strong tendency for EMPrS background respondents to favor studying in English, while AMPuS background respondents strongly favored an equal balance of Arabic and English.
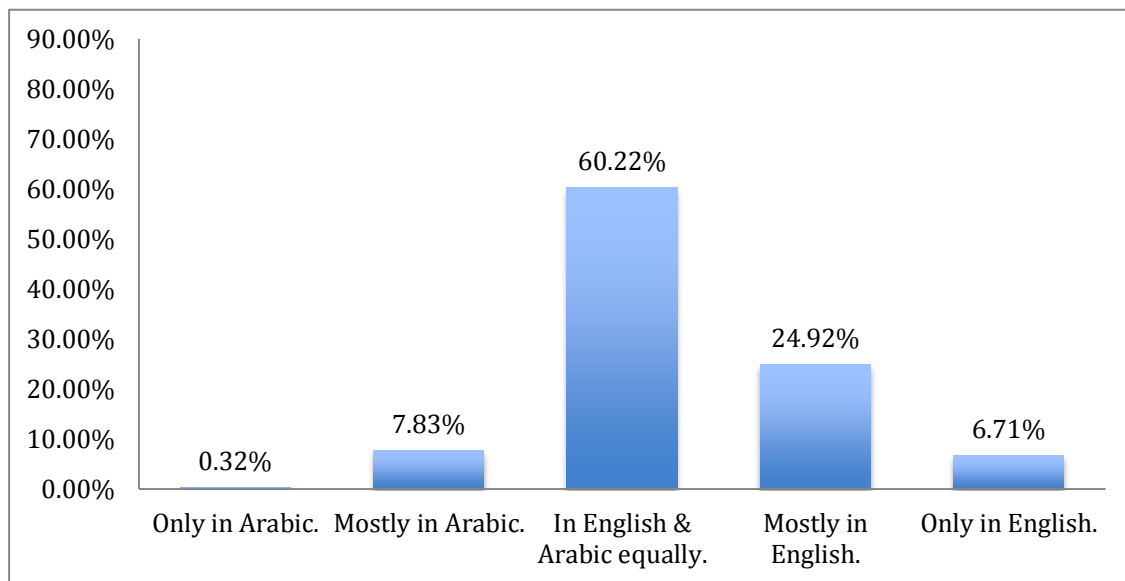

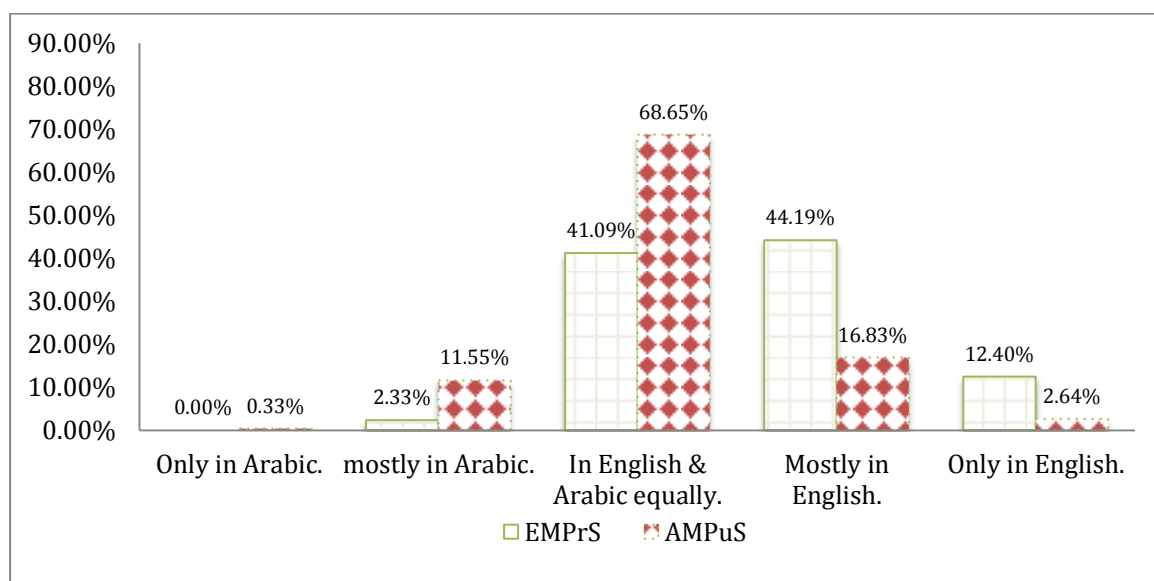**Figure 6 Study Language Preferences (All Respondents)**

Figure 7 Study Language Preferences (by School Background)

Interview and other field data revealed ambivalent feelings with regard to study language preferences among EMPrS individuals. Because these students tend to have higher levels of English proficiency on entering the University than their AMPuS peers, the majority enter directly, without going through the pre-sessional English program. Because they are familiar with studying in English, and may have taken international examinations such as General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and International Baccalaureate (IB), the transition into tertiary studies is relatively smooth. However, these women often comment on the challenges they face in the compulsory Arabic-medium courses in the first three semesters of University. Although Arabic-medium classes in Arabic and Islamic Studies are compulsory for Emirati citizens in primary, middle and high schools, many EMPrS respondents mentioned

O'Neill, G. T. (2014). "Just a natural move towards English": Gulf youth attitudes towards Arabic and English literacy. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, *11*(1). http://lthe.zu.ac.ae

feeling poorly prepared for their tertiary Arabic courses. As a result, they often stated a preference for studying only or mostly in English. However, the interviews revealed somewhat conflicted feelings in this area. They were often torn between their own strong preferences for English and their ability to perform better academically (and professionally) in English, on the one hand, and their loyalty towards Emirati Arabic and MSA as the languages associated with Emirati national identity and Islam on the other.

Though some AMPuS background individuals enter the bachelors program directly, the majority spend between 10 weeks and two years in foundational English. They may thus be a little older than their EMPrS peers on beginning their degrees. The transition from high school to tertiary studies can be challenging given the shift from Arabic to English, but many students comment on how valuable the foundation English program is in making this transition easier. Nevertheless, once they enter the General Education program, they see themselves as competing with younger students who "sound American" and "speak fluently in English" and this can be daunting at first. The higher-achieving AMPuS interviewees often talk of their struggles and strategies to bring their academic reading and writing in English up to an adequate level in the first year. In contrast, the Arabic-medium classes they take are often reported as being low-challenge in that they cover similar ground to what has been covered in high school. Lower achieving AMPuS background interviewees often mentioned the immense challenge of developing academic literacy skills in English and talked of coping strategies that they had developed in order to avoid extensive reading.

Several interviewees, particularly those in their third and fourth years, where almost all courses are taught in English, reported anxiety at "losing" their ability to read and write in Arabic. One AMPuS participant reported having to "think in English and translate" when doing (occasional) written assignments in MSA, which she clearly found disturbing. Another issue is that some of these women feel that they have never been able to excel academically in English. A fourth year commented in the interview that her CGPA of 2.6 would have been "much better" if she had been able to study more courses in Arabic. Whereas she generally achieved grades in the range 'C' to 'B-' in her English-medium Communications major courses, she received 'B' to 'A' grades in the few Arabic-medium courses she took. At the same time, it is interesting to note that students from Arabic-medium schools were very well represented among the highest CGPA's reported by survey respondents.

Most AMPuS background women clearly see the value of English for their studies, careers and future family lives, yet they also tend to be more strongly oriented to Arabic than their EMPrS peers. Thus, they were more likely to select 'English and Arabic equally' in terms of study language preference.

Two case studies

I report here the results of two interviews: one with a respondent I shall refer to as Afra (EMPrS), and the other whom I shall refer to as Amna (AMPuS).

Afra (EMPrS Background)

At the time of the interviews, Afra was a 19-year-old second year student who had recently declared her major, in Finance. Her parents are both university educated, and her father, now retired, held a managerial position in a government department. Unusually for the majority of survey respondents, Afra's mother had a lengthy career, working as a high school science teacher and later as a hospital X-ray technician. Although both parents are university educated, and are literate in Arabic, her father is not able to read or write in English, but "speaks a few words". Afra's mother is literate in both languages.

Afra's father enjoys reading in his free time, mostly newspapers and religious texts in Arabic, and her mother has similar reading tastes, but often reads in English also. They both read (and told) stories to their children as they were growing up, in Arabic and/or English, and taught Afra the basics of English and Arabic alphabets before kindergarten. Afra also points to the help that she received indirectly:

> It was mostly my mum would be sitting and she would be helping my older brother with his homework and I'd be sitting with them just doing the same things.

Afra attended a private primary school with an American curriculum that was largely English-medium, though she points out that the Arabic curriculum was relatively strong in that she studied not only Arabic and Islamic Studies in Arabic but also History from Grade 5. She later moved to an international high school, where all subjects except Arabic and Islamic Studies were in English.

Afra's trajectory in terms of Arabic and English literacy is fairly typical of the overall trajectory for EMPrS background respondents. Although she strongly agrees that Arabic reading was enjoyable in childhood, and she read newspapers and stories her parents bought for her, for the teenage years and 'now', she evaluates her enjoyment of Arabic as 'neutral'. As a child, she very much enjoyed reading in English and read "random stories" bought for her by her parents, along with those available from school, and English language newspapers. Unlike for Arabic, however, her enjoyment of reading in English did not decrease, but remained at a high level into the teen years. From fifth grade and into her teens, she began reading series such as 'Lizzy McGuire' (Bevan, 2005) and 'Mary Kate and Ashley' (Willard, 2002), along with English newspapers and 'Friday' magazine in the local Gulf News. Her strong enjoyment of English contrasted with her 'neutral' feelings for reading in Arabic, and this is something she is not entirely happy about:

> It's kind of really sad…it was just that phase where I started reading novels in English. They were just more enjoyable. There were more things I can relate with. I just remember going to [local bookstore] and getting stuff in English I don't even remember an Arabic section - it was probably somewhere at the back.

Aged 19, she still expresses strong agreement that free time reading in English is enjoyable, though she does not read as much as she did, due to the pressure of University work. She is still neutral about reading in Arabic, however. Although the Qur'an clearly has immense value to her, and she reads it, in Arabic, every Friday and in its entirety during Ramadan, Afra claims to have read only one other book in Arabic: a translation of 'The Secret' (Byrne, 2006), which she chose to read for an extensive reading assignment in a University Arabic course.

Afra's strong orientation towards English is very evident in both academic and non-academic contexts. With regard to her university studies, she feels that her English reading and writing are far stronger than her Arabic; in fact, she feels her Arabic is weak. When asked why she feels that, she says, "It's not a feeling… it's been confirmed by grades". Afra's overall CGPA is high, at 3.6 (approximately A-), but her grades in compulsory Arabic language classes are in the C range, which has an adverse effect on her CGPA. She attributes her self-professed weakness in Arabic to "my schooling background, lack of interest in Arabic". When asked why she thinks she is not interested in Arabic, she replies:

> I don't know… it wasn't planned… it was just a natural move towards English, when I started reading books in English…in fifth or sixth grade.

Despite her relatively weak Arabic, Afra wrote in the survey that she believes that the University should offer its curriculum in English and Arabic equally. However, in the interview she expresses surprise that she had written that. On reflection, she clarifies that from a personal point of view, she prefers an English-medium curriculum - otherwise her CGPA would be much

lower than it is - but she concedes that both languages are important for the development of the UAE and so a balance would be preferable.

It is important to point out that Afra's lack of enthusiasm for Arabic relates mostly to reading, and particularly writing, in MSA. The language of her home, and the language she frequently uses around campus, is EA; and she is entirely comfortable using it, unlike MSA. She did point out that with Emirati friends of a similar background to hers, she tends to speak English, or a mix of EA and English. At primary school, where her social network included Emiratis, she often spoke EA, but at the international high school, most of her social circle were non-Arabic-speaking expatriates, or expatriates from other parts of the Arab world. English became the preferred language of daily communication (in the case of the Arab students, to avoid issues with differing Arabic dialects). In contrast to her daily life outside the home, however, Afra reports that she very rarely speaks English at home. Although her parents were clearly predisposed to her acquiring cultural capital in the form of an English language education, Afra feels that it is not acceptable to speak English in the home. Indeed, she recalls being laughed at and gently taunted by her parents and brothers for speaking English. This may be partly due to the strong perceived role that Arabic has in the construction of Emirati and Arab identity; but in Afra's case it may also be because English is not a language shared by all members of the household. However, it is entirely acceptable for Afra to engage in literacy practices in English in the home. Indeed, it is positively encouraged. These literacy practices may include both EA and English in that she will often discuss with her parents, in EA, issues arising from her English reading and writing assignments.

In looking to the future, Afra envisages a career in which English is of prime importance. She hopes to find a job that enables her to travel around the world. She does not intend to use MSA to any great extent, and because of that, does not intend to pursue a career in the UAE public sector.

In August 2013, about to start her senior year, and having switched majors to Marketing, Afra commented as follows on my written account of the survey and interview:

> Everything represented was accurate to how I felt at the time of the interview. I did not think I would feel this different so soon, but almost starting my senior year with a concentration in marketing I am much more aware of the importance of Arabic communication skills.

Afra now sees the value of being multilingual and multiliterate for career purposes, particularly in the field of marketing (i.e. more so than for finance, her previous major), so she is more predisposed towards MSA than previously; yet she is still very clearly oriented to English in many aspects of her life, and continues to feel more comfortable reading and writing in English than she does using MSA.

Amna (AMPuS Background)

Amna is a 24-year-old graduate student currently working as a government auditor. She has been a very high-achieving student, graduating with a CGPA of 3.9. The youngest of nine children, Amna is the daughter of a university graduate father who works for a government department, and a mother who is a housewife and who, Amna informs me, is illiterate apart from being able to recite parts of the Qur'an from memory "for prayer purposes". Amna started her literacy journey in kindergarten and does not recall being read to at home prior to that, nor being helped to develop her literacy at home (however, she is careful to point out that her mother was generally very encouraging, despite her inability to read or write). Amna attended Arabic-medium public schools. Only one of her classes – English – included a language other than Arabic, yet most of that class was also conducted in Arabic. She attributes her success in

English mostly to the instruction and feedback she received during university foundation and general education English courses, and to the extensive reading she did in this period. In the interview she also mentioned that during the teenage years, her English improved greatly as a result of watching American TV and movies, which she watched with Arabic or English sub-titles until she reached a point at which they were no longer necessary.

In terms of free time reading in English (which she interpreted as "reading fiction"), Amna disagrees that it was enjoyable when she was a child and teenager, and she did not engage in it to any great extent. Now she is "neutral" about reading in her free time in English. A very different trajectory is reported for Arabic, however, with strong agreement that reading in Arabic has been enjoyable from childhood onwards. She says that she is more "at home" reading fiction in Arabic:

> I understand every single word, so I can really be involved with the characters and erm, when I have to do it in English I lose my focus very easily. It's true, I just lose my focus. It's not that they're not interesting, and there's really amazing pieces, but for me Arabic is more enjoyable.

The pattern for writing is similar. She is neutral about English, does not write English in her free time and agrees, though less enthusiastically than for reading, that writing in Arabic is enjoyable. However, she also says:

> I don't write, writing's not my thing, I prefer reading, but er, I think writing in Arabic is nice. However, the grammar of Arabic is a little bit complicated… I'm very good at the grammar in Arabic, but it's complicated to be honest.

The perceived difficulty of MSA compared to English (writing in particular) was expressed many times in both the survey and the interviews.

Amna clearly sees the instrumental value of English and is a very empowered reader. Though she claimed not to be a free time reader of English, she did point out that sometimes she is obliged to read English in order to achieve certain free time goals:

> Unless it is like because I like technology, so in order to keep up you have to read a lot of articles in English… When it comes to how to jailbreak the [brand of phone] for instance... So yes, I have to read in detail in English and I've been breaking a lot of [brand of phone], and [brand of tablet] (laughing).

Here she reports willingly engaging in free time English reading, not for the intrinsic enjoyment of reading (which she clearly experiences reading Arabic novels), but for its instrumental value. Amna's self-professed loss of focus while reading English fiction appears to be entirely absent from this kind of reading, and from her academic and professional reading, which she does almost entirely in English. She recalls that in order to catch up with students from private school backgrounds and then excel in her studies, she would read every single item that was given to her by her professors, and more. She believes that to "add value" in an assignment, she must read at least 30 pages for every page she is to write. For her, English is the language of academia and of the professional world.

> All the terms I know are in English. Even now, if I read something, the same major, in Arabic, I don't understand it because the terms varies a lot so I prefer… reading in English when it comes to my field because I understand.

Although it is true that working for a UAE government department requires the use of Modern Standard Arabic, as stipulated in Articles 2-4 of the Arabic Language Charter (UAE Government, 2012), because Amna is assigned for periods of several months at a time to private sector companies that conduct their business in English, most of her daily work is in English; on the

other hand, final reports are written in MSA. Unlike the majority of AMPuS respondents, she believes that the University should conduct its courses mostly in English.

> I'm not against Arabic but many thinkers and scholars and knowledge is made in other languages so we need to take the best of that and not just to be very erm, into Arabic without considering that there's even material. Like, I don't think that we can carry most of the courses in the University only in Arabic, I don't assume there's very advanced research and stuff like that in Arabic.

Amna's response to my written account of our interview was as follows:

> I believe you have presented my thoughts correctly, I just want to clarify one thing regarding the [above] quote… I meant that I personally could not find neither researches and academic journals written in Arabic nor translated into Arabic regarding my field (finance, accounting and banking) during my time at the university or currently as I am doing my MA.

Discussion

The results suggest that, in general, MSA and English are both highly valued languages of literacy among female Emirati graduates and undergraduates, although there are significant differences in the data with respect to the language involved, the skill (reading or writing), primary and secondary schooling background and medium of instruction during schooling.

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital are useful in explaining the differing predispositions of the respondents in the sample. AMPuS background students' reflections on their childhood suggest that they tend to operate in a relatively monoliterate (MSA) and diglossic (EA/MSA) social space of home and school. Although they have English classes from early in life, these may be conducted largely in Arabic, there may be little encouragement to read in English at home or school, and they may not be using English in their daily lives to any great extent. There may consequently be no particular linguistic habitus, and very little linguistic capital, in English, but a strong linguistic habitus and growing linguistic capital with regard to MSA. Thus, at this early stage in their lives, AMPuS background participants tend to engage in few literacy events and practices in English, but are engaging in a growing number of literacy practices in Arabic.

As they become teenagers, predispositions change for many. Although the level of English-medium instruction remains modest, a growing interest in other areas, or fields and more encounters outside home and school brings these young women into contact with a larger linguistic marketplace, in which English is predominant. They begin to develop predispositions and capital with regard to English, and gradually start to become biliterate (English and MSA) and multilingual (English, MSA, EA). As they transition into adulthood, switching from an Arabic-medium high school to a largely English-medium university, a number of English literacy practices have already begun to be established, but it is in early adulthood that English predispositions and capital develop most. Here the combined effects of studying in English, more English encounters outside the home, and more literacy events around leisure time interests lead to the establishment of English literacy and speech practices alongside those in Arabic. For some, the balance between the two can be challenging to negotiate. In some senses, there may be what Bourdieu (2007) referred to as a *cleft habitus*, in that the linguistic predispositions that these young women develop by young adulthood, as a result of their higher educational, social and leisure time experiences might contrast markedly with predispositions developed in the family home and through primary and secondary education. They may perceive their focus on, and progress in, English as being detrimental to their Arabic proficiency. They might also be concerned that their changing predispositions towards English conflict in

some ways with their established Arab and Emirati identities, or that their relative lack of capital in English conflicts with their view of their own academic abilities.

The predispositions of EMPrS women are greatly influenced by the predominantly English language educational 'field' in which they grow up. Although they may be encouraged at an early age, at home, to engage in MSA literacy practices, reports suggest that little encouragement is received during school years to pursue Arabic reading and writing as leisure time activities. In addition, MSA is generally not seen as an instrumental language for developing the kinds of interests that these women gravitate towards in teenage years and young adulthood (see also Kamhieh, 2011). As a result, the development of linguistic capital in MSA is limited and their repertoire of MSA literacy practices somewhat truncated (Blommaert, 2010). Almost all respondents emphasized the precious nature of the Qur'an and some underlined the sacred nature of Classical Arabic for Muslims ("the language to be spoken in Paradise"). EMPrS respondents were no less emphatic in this regard; nevertheless, in terms of most other forms of literacy, they tend to be more strongly oriented towards English. The concept of 'cleft habitus' might also be applicable to these individuals in that their strong orientation towards English may conflict with the predispositions developed in the home. Although these EMPrS participants are generally comfortable speaking EA in the home, the language used in the home may often be very different from the EA-English hybrid used in daily conversation with their EMPrS background peers (hence Afra's family's gentle taunting when she uses English at home), and apart from their Arabic literacy practices with regard to the Qur'an, their general literacy practices may be considerably different from those of their parents and grandparents. This difference in predispositions may be felt as an internal conflict (e.g. Afra's feeling of sadness at her relative weakness in Arabic).

With regard to study language preferences, AMPuS background women generally see the importance of studying in both languages, both from a career point of view and in terms of their identities as Emiratis, Arabs and Muslims. EMPrS background women are more ambivalent, but many see that an emphasis on both languages might be beneficial overall, even if it might not be in their best interests from a CGPA point of view. Findlow (2006) reported data on the same question (though not according to educational background), gathered in the late 1990's. Her data revealed that 50% of students favored studying in English, while 28% preferred MSA and 22% "both". This contrasts with the 32% of respondents in this sample who chose 'only or mostly in English', the 8% who chose "only or mostly in Arabic" and the 60% who chose "both." This suggests a growing awareness among Emirati youth that both English and MSA are important for their personal and national futures.[4]

What might be seen as a cleft linguistic habitus might also be described more constructively as a *dual habitus* in that these young women have linguistic predispositions in both English and Arabic that will be crucial in their future lives. They are products of an environment markedly different from the one in which their parents, and particularly their grandparents, grew up. The national and transnational, physical and virtual social spaces (fields) that they move through, which are in constant dynamic flow and flux, work to structure their predispositions, yet these women are also in themselves potential agents of change, creating social identities and 'culturing' through their daily discursive acts, events and practices (Heath & Street, 2008; Piller, 2011) to the extent that their sociolinguistic capital allows.

Conclusion

The NLS approach views literacy practices as the general cultural ways that individuals use written language in their lives. Local linguistic practices in the UAE are in a state of flux,

becoming increasingly diverse as the nation takes its place in the world economy and as it experiences, on a daily basis, constant transnational flows of people and languages. In former days, the inhabitants of this region would predominantly employ oral Emirati Arabic and written MSA to create and recreate social identities, and Arabic was seen as vital to these identities. Today, young people in this country are discursively constructing cultural identities in a number of languages, but principally in Emirati Arabic, MSA and English. As Canagarajah (2013, p. 199) points out,

> Languages don't determine or limit our identities, but provide creative resources to construct new and revised identities through reconstructed forms and meaning of new indexicalities.

Though Arabic has immense value to the majority of these women, English increasingly takes a significant role in their lives, and not just from a study or career point of view. Indeed, for some, English has a wider range of uses than Arabic. Yet there seems to be a growing awareness among Emiratis of the critical importance of safeguarding the Arabic language while still developing substantial capital in English. Many would thus welcome a higher education curriculum that gave equal prominence to English and Modern Standard Arabic.

For university educators in the Gulf teaching in English or Arabic, the development of literacy practices is a key to successful learning regardless of subject area. Many of our students may have had very limited exposure to English reading and writing prior to university study, either in their school work or in the home. Some may have had limited exposure to literacy in Arabic. It is thus important that we provide opportunities for students to read and write as part of our courses. For example, rather than simplifying course materials in order to 'get the point across' (e.g. in the form of Powerpoint slides) we can include required readings in our courses, ideally as a regular classroom activity, that present key course content. These readings should be carefully selected (possibly with the help of language teaching or learning specialists) so that they are sufficiently challenging but not overwhelming for our students. It is also essential that key vocabulary items be taught prior to reading. Through the use of such expository texts, vocabulary development, and other literacy building activities across the curriculum, we can play a role in developing our students' literacy practices, equipping them with the literacy skills they will need throughout their undergraduate years and beyond.

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[1] Interviews with undergraduate and graduate Emirati women reporting on their grandparents' educational experiences, February to June 2012.

[2] AMPuS and EMPrS background respondents represented the main sub-groupings but there were also other sub-groupings, such as those respondents who reported that they came from Arabic-medium private Schools, English-medium public Schools, or public and private schools in which there was an equal balance between English and Arabic. This study focuses predominantly on the AMPuS and EMPrS background respondents.

[3] It should be noted that the students who have passed through the foundation program, or who have entered directly into undergraduate programs, may be more pre-disposed to English than those who have failed out of the foundation program, or who have not proceeded to higher education institutions. Thus, the views expressed in this sample may not reflect the views of all young Emirati women.

[4] Findlow's data was gathered at a different university in the UAE, where there is a higher proportion of Arabic courses than there are at the institution in this study. Some of Findlow's informants might have selected that university because of the possibility of taking Arabic language courses – hence the higher percentage of students selecting "Arabic only". For similar reasons, however, one might expect respondents in the present study to have selected "English only" to a greater extent, whereas in fact the majority expressed a preference to study in both languages; this suggests a change in attitudes among young Emiratis since the late 1990's.