

# The effects of global English on culture and identity in the UAE: a double-edged sword

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## Abstract

The United Arab Emirates' complex history, its current demographics, its youthfulness as a country, and the fact that it is a region undergoing fast-paced change make the issue of cultural identity particularly relevant and urgent in this part of the world. This is especially true given the rapid spread of English in the sphere of education and everyday life in recent years. This paper discusses the above issues before analyzing the attitudes and perceptions of female Emirati undergraduate students and female Emirati primary school teachers with regard to global English and its effects on local culture and identity. After analysis of the findings from a qualitative study using open-response questionnaires with 35 undergraduates and twelve teachers, a discussion follows with recommendations on how to overcome issues raised in the study.

## Introduction: the power of English as a global language

English has been given, at various points in time, the labels *world English* (since the 1920s), *international English* (since the 1930s), and most recently *global English* (since the mid-1900s). These labels have subtle differences in meaning with “the third being linked (often negatively) to socio-economic globalization” (McArthur, 2004, p. 3). The terms are used somewhat interchangeably in public discourse though, and all relate to the fact that English, as a language, stands in a category of its own with regard to its far-reaching and immense influence. It is true to say that its power in the world cannot be disputed. It is estimated that a staggering “one in three of the world’s population are now capable of communicating to a useful level in English” (Crystal, 2012, p. 155), and this is a number which is on the rise. As a result, as Al-Dabbagh (2005) states, “English has become the Latin of the contemporary world” (p. 3). It is the only language spoken on all five continents and is the official language of 52 countries, meaning that as Mohd-Asraf (2005) points out

Its influence spans the entire globe, and there is hardly any country today that does not use English in one way or another or that is not affected by its spread. (p. 103)

As English now occupies an important position in many education systems around the world, which is certainly the case in the Gulf,

It has become one of the most powerful means of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions. (Pennycook, 2001, 81)

This globalization of English appears to be increasing due to English’s leading role in world communication, social and cultural relations and international business.

Although the global power of English brings with it great opportunities, progress, increased knowledge and a sense of excitement, there are also notable concerns about the negative effects such a powerful language has on local languages and cultures. As Modiano (2001) warns, it is a challenge all around the world to both

embrace the beast and at the same time to tame it [...]. In the rush to participate in the global movement, the spread of English can potentially wreak havoc on any number of languages and

cultures. While it is capable of ushering in the 'beneficial' fruits of technology and of so-called 'Western advances', the English language is a dangerous bedfellow. (p. 345)

This "dangerous bedfellow" analogy often known as the "English threat discussion" (Pan & Seargeant, p. 2012) or the "homogeneity-heterogeneity debate" (Badry, 2011, p. 85) has provoked discussions worldwide in countries such as China (Pan and Seargeant, 2012), Japan (Lehner, 2011), Turkey (Atay and Ece, 2009), Malaysia (Mohd-Asraf, 2004), Saudi Arabia (Alabbad and Gitsaki, 2011), India (Hudawi, 2013) and United Arab Emirates (Findlow, 2006; O'Neill, 2014; Randall & Samimi, 2010) to name just a few.

Although important throughout the world, it could be argued that the 'homogeneity-heterogeneity debate' is particularly relevant to the Arabian Gulf. This paper will explore the unique set of circumstances in the UAE which, added to global English, exacerbate cultural fragility in the region. The concepts of culture and identity in the age of globalization will then be explored leading to a discussion of how English is often perceived as a 'double-edged sword' or 'سيف ذو حدين' (sayf tho hadayn) in Arabic, which, interestingly, is where the term originates. In this sense there are both clear advantages and troubling disadvantages to global English. This study, which forms part of a more extensive research project, was undertaken at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi. Zayed University is a large government-sponsored university in the UAE which also has a Dubai campus. The study took place in February and March 2014 and involved thirty-five female Emirati undergraduate students and twelve female Emirati primary school teachers sharing their perspectives and beliefs through open-response questionnaires. Due to the researcher being based on the female side of the campus, access to female students was easily achieved. The study aims to explore attitudes towards global English and their relation to culture and identity in the UAE. After the methodology has been presented, the findings will be analysed before turning to look at how these findings affect teaching and learning in the region.

## Background

### ***Factors contributing to cultural fragility in the UAE***

After over 150 years of British rule of what was a mainly poor population of Bedouin tribes, traders and pearl divers thinly spread across vast and desolate desert lands, the British announced their planned departure in 1968 and three years later the United Arab Emirates as a country was formed (Martin, 2003, p. 50). The British presence in the region, then known as the Trucial Coast, was regarded as in some ways beneficial but also exploitative, especially once oil was discovered in the late 1950s (Al-Fahim, 1995, p.42). After the discovery of oil, economic and social conditions changed dramatically due to the newly acquired petrodollars being pumped into the economy, infrastructure and society at large. These changes happened at a dizzyingly fast pace leading to the development of a very different world. As Al-Majaida (2002) states, until the mid-1960s,

the UAE was merely an inhospitable arid desert. A few years later it became one of the most attractive areas worldwide. (p. 18)

To make such a transformation possible, workers from Western English-speaking countries, Asia and other Arab nations were imported for construction and retail work and in the fields of medicine, teaching and business. Using mostly English as a lingua franca, these expatriates now outnumber the native population to the point where Emiratis make up less than 20% of the population (Findlow, 2006). Due to short contracts, there is a constant coming and going of this population resulting in Emiratis living amongst on-going dynamic demographic change.

Partly due to this extremely large expatriate population, the prevalence of English in the UAE is overwhelming. It has now become the norm in formal domains of education and non-formal domains of

leisure, tourism and daily life in the Gulf, leading to serious concerns about the future of Arabic and local culture. As Badry (2011) explains,

one cannot get by without English in urban centres, whether at the supermarket, the movie theatre, or in shopping malls. At home, parents import nannies who communicate with children in English, nurseries are immersing children in English to give them a head start and middle and upper class Arab parents are proud to showcase their offsprings' communication skills in English. (p. 91)

This demonstrates the overruling influence of English on multiple spheres of Emirati life.

The unique combination of factors: demographics, complex history and fast-paced change, when added to the strong presence of global English, lead to an exacerbated feeling of cultural fragility in this context (Figure 1).

### Global English +



**Figure 1: Factors contributing to cultural fragility in the UAE.**

These issues have been raised extensively in the local media. For example, as Al-Shehhi (2011) states in a *Gulf News* article:

There are socio-cultural and geopolitical dimensions to the presence of people from more than 200 different nationalities in the UAE. This poses a great risk to the identity of the country and its citizens. (p. 3)

Scholars have also warned of the dangers of the dominance of English in the region especially in terms of the Arabic language being affected. As Al-Issa & Dahan (2011) state, 'The nefarious role that English seems to play appears designed to eventually remove Arabic from a place of prestige and power on the local scene, both educationally and socially' (p. 3). Suleiman (2004, p. 35, cited in Abdel-Jawad & Radwan, 2011, p.125) adds to this sentiment by powerfully describing Arabic as "a small island that is in danger of being submerged by the foreign linguistic flood". By far the biggest part of this "linguistic flood" is global English being used as a lingua franca due to the numerous nationalities needing to communicate with each other on a daily basis.

In recent years, notable resistance to the effects of global English has been evident across the Gulf. One of the most obvious examples involves the UAE government's Emiratization initiative, which encourages Emiratis to enter the workforce, with the aim of reducing the need for so many foreign workers. Naming

Arabic the official language of all federal authorities and establishments in 2008, coupled with the fact that the same year was declared 'the year of national identity' in the UAE (Al Baik, 2008, cited in Badry, 2011, p. 91), highlights a need for bolstering cultural and linguistic security. Furthermore, multiple conferences have recently been organized to discuss ways to reaffirm cultural security such as the 2012 Qatar University conference on Arabic and identity, the Sharjah 2013 conference on 'The Role of Museums and Cultural Institutions in Strengthening Identity', and the 2014 Gulf Comparative Education Society (GCES) symposium 'Locating the National in the International'.

### ***Cultural identity in today's highly mobile and cosmopolitan world***

When looking at culture and identity in the UAE in relation to global English, it is necessary to define the terms involved. Whereas once the term 'culture' was relatively easy to define, this is not the case in today's globalized and mobile world. Culture, in its anthropological sense, was traditionally seen as "the whole way of life of a people" (Young, 1996, p. 37) or "the ways of people" (Lado, 1986, p. 52). However, much controversy now surrounds such a definition, because as the world becomes more and more globalized and cosmopolitan in nature, it is becoming increasingly rare to find groups of people sharing an identical way of life. Instead, as Spencer-Oatey (2000) points out,

members of cultural groups tend to show 'family resemblances', meaning that it is impossible to distinguish definitively one cultural group from another. (p. 4)

Moving away from an essentialist view of culture, Holliday (2005) states that

[a] culture is not a geographical place which can be visited and to which someone can belong, but a social force which is evident wherever it emerges as being significant. (p. 23)

Roberts (2010) emphasizes this point when stating, "Culture can only be understood as part of action and interaction rather than standing outside it" (p. 215). In this sense, cultural identity is constantly changing and leaking at the boundaries: it is not static or neatly packaged, and it is connected to several smaller overlapping groups rather than one large 'catch all' group such as nationality. As Ingold (1994, cited in Atkinson, 1999, p. 632) sums up well, nowadays "people live culturally" rather than living *in* cultures. Therefore, when we talk of 'Western culture' or 'Emirati culture', for example, we must do so with the understanding that there is fluidity, change and variety within and between these categories.

Just as culture has become somewhat of a "fuzzy concept" (Strauss and Quinn, 1997, p. 7) due to its complexity, the same can be said for the concept of identity. Identity can be defined as:

how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future. (Norton, 2000, p. 5)

There are many elements to a person's identity, which change due to personal, social and linguistic factors, making identity also dynamic, ever-changing and fluid over time and space. Indeed, identity seems to have been catapulted into a new realm of complexity in recent times. Block (2007) makes the valid point that "life in the late modern/postmodern age of globalization is different from life in previous ages", since there has been

a shift from fixed, essentialized versions of demographic categories such as race, ethnicity, gender and age to a generally constructivist perspective which sees these categories as more fluid and unstable. (p. 3)

Many scholars have recognized the strong connections between language, culture and identity (Kramsch, 1998; Jenkins, 2007; Al-Dabbagh, 2005; Suleiman, 2003; Karmani, 2005). As Nadkarni (1984) states,

Language is a critical component of culture. It is for this reason that anthropologists use language more than any other element of culture to define culture areas. (p. 151)

Al-Dabbagh (2005) adds, “Language is the major vehicle of culture and human communication”, going on to say that seeing English as a “neutral force in the cultural battle is a fatal supposition” (p. 5). It is true to say that language, culture and identity are seen as intrinsically intertwined, making them prone to the ‘domino effect’, in that if one of them is threatened, the others are not far behind. As Said (2011) powerfully states, “losing a language is losing a culture and losing culture is losing one’s identity” (p. 191). This strong statement, which focuses on ‘losing’ rather than ‘gaining’ does, however, imply that without one’s own language one is left with nothing, which is certainly not the case. While language is an important part of identity, it should be recognized that it is one of many aspects contributing to identity construction. These multifaceted aspects of a persons’ identity are fluid, changeable and constantly evolving. It is therefore not possible or desirable to remain in a state in which one’s culture, language and identity remain unchanged. Indeed, changes to identity through the use of English may be welcomed changes, which add to rather than subtract from a person’s sense of identity.

## The study

### ***Research questions***

This study, which looks at the effects of global English on culture and identity in the UAE from the perspective of female undergraduate students and female primary school teachers, seeks to answer three main research questions:

- What attitudes towards English as a global language are expressed by two groups: female Emirati undergraduate students and female Emirati primary school teachers?
- How does English affect Emirati culture?
- How does English affect female undergraduates’ and female primary school teachers’ identities in the UAE?

### ***Participants: the undergraduates and teachers***

Two groups of participants were included in the study, which have both similarities and differences. All the participants were female, Emirati and currently studying at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi. However, their positions (undergraduate students/ primary teachers), ages and lifestyles (living with parents/ wife and mother) were different, adding a wider perspective. The nature of the two groups is as follows:

**Group 1** included 35 female undergraduates aged 18 to 24 studying English in the highest level (Level 8, IELTS band 5-6) of the university’s intensive English program. The undergraduates stay in the twenty-hour-a-week program for a minimum of one term (three months) and a maximum of two years depending on their level of English upon entering. Level 8 students were chosen due to their more advanced language proficiency meaning they could competently express their opinions in English.

**Group 2** included twelve female Emirati primary school teachers working for the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) who had been given a two-year sabbatical, from September 2012 to June 2014, in order to improve language proficiency so they could reach the required IELTS 6.5 and return to the classroom. This language proficiency requirement was introduced in 2012 due to the government’s decision that all key subjects, including Mathematics and Science, should be taught in the medium of English in primary and secondary schools. They were in their second year studying English at the university when the study took place. Their course has a strong focus on skills needed for the IELTS exam, which they will be taking at the end of their sabbatical. The teachers’ ages range from mid-twenties to late-forties and many of

them are mothers. In conversation with the researcher, some said they were pleased to be studying at the university whilst others wished the English requirement were not in place.

### ***Data collection, sampling and data analysis***

The research project involved the collection of qualitative data, seeking to explore in-depth opinions and experiences through open-response questionnaires. The paper-based questionnaires, which took approximately twenty minutes to complete, were given to the undergraduates and teachers on a voluntary basis in their classrooms with the permission of their English teachers. The data from the questionnaires that are analysed in this article include biographical information as well as responses to four open-ended questions focused on the research questions. The undergraduates and teachers were given the same questionnaire, as can be seen in the appendix.

The undergraduate sample for the questionnaires included three classes with around twelve participants in each, making it a 'cluster sampling' as the groups were already in existence and contained a cross-section of the university's Academic Bridge Program (ABP) students who plan to study a wide range of majors. The teachers were all from the same class and participated voluntarily. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities and the abbreviation 'T' or 'U' after these names indicates whether the participants were teachers or undergraduates. The data were analyzed qualitatively using content and thematic analysis, which involved examining the data for recurrent themes and noting patterns within the data.

## **Findings**

### ***The importance of English***

The questionnaire started by investigating the prevalence and importance of English in the participants' lives. All the participants, both teachers and undergraduates, named Arabic as their first language and English as their second. The undergraduates had been learning English for an average of 13 years starting in KG1 for most, and the teachers had been learning English for an average of 20 years. All the participants use English on a daily basis in one or more areas of their lives.

When asked if English was important to them (Part 2, Question 1 of the questionnaire), all the teachers said 'yes' (100%) and all but one undergraduate said 'yes' (97%). The most common reasons, as can be seen in Figure 2, were to communicate with others, the fact that English is a global language, and that it was necessary to get a job for the undergraduates, and necessary to keep their jobs in the case of the teachers, as well as for travelling. Wanting to help their children with English was another reason for its importance among the teachers, and wanting to enjoy English TV and music was an additional reason given by the undergraduates. Shaikha's, Fatima's and Iptisam's comments express the importance of English:

- |                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| <b>Shaikha<br/>(T)</b> | It's very important for me as a teacher and as a mother. Everywhere you can see English signs and when you travel, you also need a language to contact people.'  |
| <b>Fatima<br/>(U)</b>  | Yes, because there are so many workers now in the UAE, they speak English so how do I communicate with them if I don't know English? Also, for survival reasons.   |
| <b>Iptisam<br/>(T)</b> | Yes, English is a crucial language because I need it for my work and communicating with others. Without English you may feel useless because almost everywhere you need to talk English. For example, in hospitals or in shopping malls, you need to know the language to communicate. |

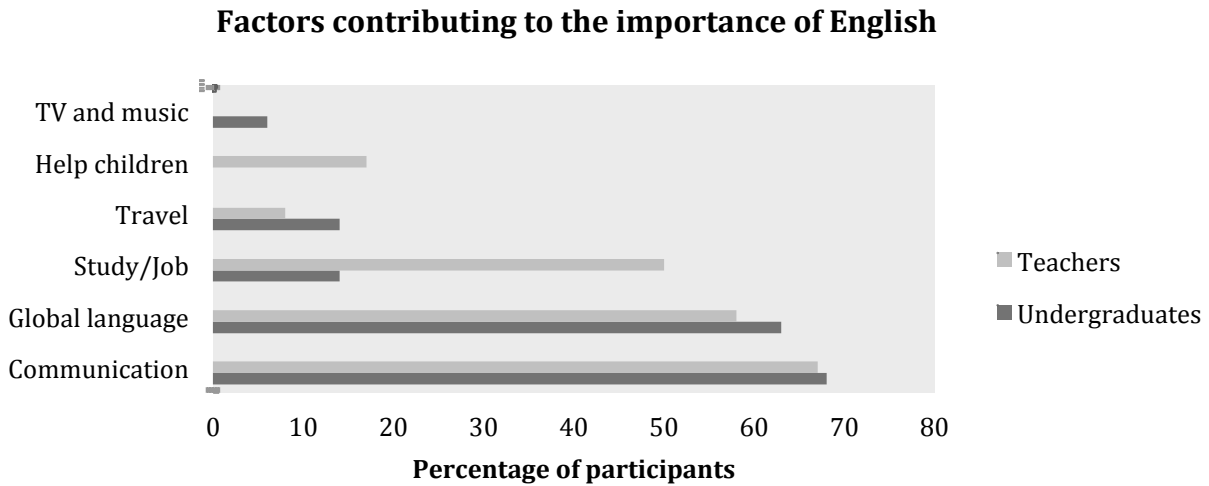


Figure 2: Perceived reasons for the importance of English.

After reflecting on the importance of English in their lives, the undergraduates and teachers were asked to comment on their attitudes towards English as a global language in Part 2, Question 2 of the questionnaire. As can be seen from Figure 3, the majority of participants expressed positive feelings towards English (75% of teachers and 54% of undergraduates). Positive responses were indicated by words such as “good”, “great”, “It helps me”, “I like it”, “it’s beneficial”, etc. Negative responses corresponded with the use of words such as “bad”, “I don’t like”, “It damages”, “It’s a problem”, etc. Mixed responses included expressions such as “partly”, “In some ways”, “It is good and bad”, etc.

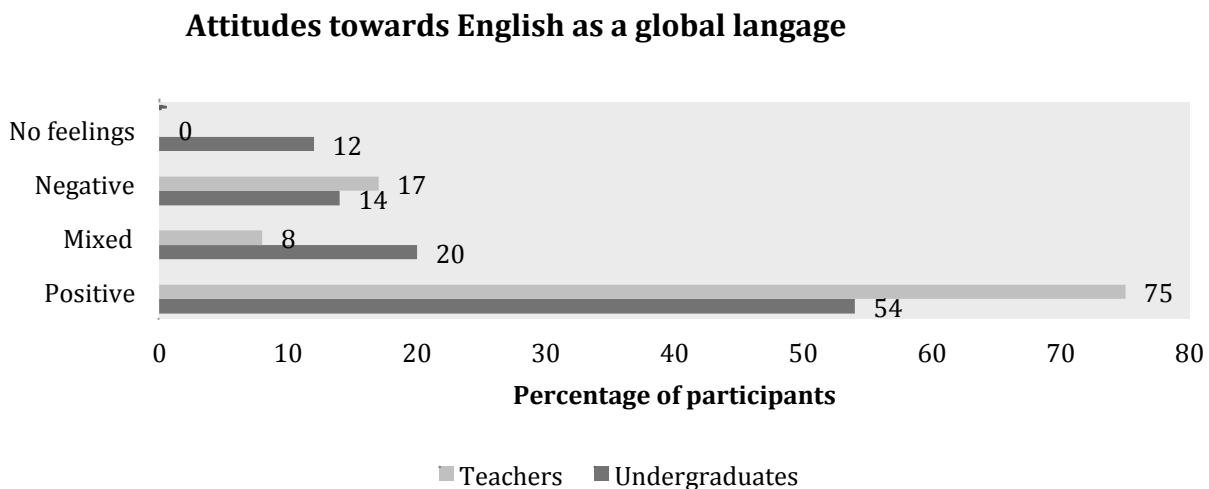


Figure 3: Teachers' and undergraduates' attitudes towards global English.

The most common reasons for desiring English as a global language for both teachers and undergraduates were that it helped them to communicate with people in other countries and share views, and that most people speak it. Shaikha and Iptisam voice these views well:

**Shaikha (T)** It is really nice to be part of conversation everywhere, especially on the internet and media and sometimes when you have to say something for studying or teaching.

**Iptisam (T)** Nowadays English being a global language forces us to learn it very well. As well as this, it's the only way to communicate while traveling abroad, I think it's a very vital language that all of us need to learn and use.

For the undergraduates, 20% commented on both positive and negative effects, as did 8% of the teachers. For example, Maryam pointed out the benefits of being able to communicate well when travelling but voiced concerns about the decreased level of interest and proficiency in Arabic Emirati children have these days. This point was raised again and again in various parts of the study, underlining its importance.

**Maryam (U)** I think it's good because if you travel, you will be communicating with people using the English language. Also, it's bad because children are starting to lose interest in the Arabic language and most of them can't talk in Arabic.

The remaining undergraduates and teachers had either no feelings or negative feelings about English, with the most common feelings being those of resentment, which Marwa and Shaima articulated well. For example:

**Marwa (U)** Sometimes, I feel sorry for my language, which is Arabic. I feel it deserves to be the global language but Arabs let it down. Unfortunately, I hate the fact that English is the global language.

**Shaima (U)** To be honest with you, I feel like it's not a great thing. I don't know, but sometimes I think why are we learning English and no people learn our language.

Concerns about the dominance of English and its effect on Arabic were also voiced, as can be seen by Salwa and Khadija's comments:

**Salwa (T)** Recently, I started to feel we should minimize using English because it affects our language and it may weaken our language.

**Khadija (T)** From my point of view, once any nation becomes weak, no one will consider its culture or language. Thus, Arabic language becomes less important within Arabic countries and that refers to the superiority of the Western world over the Arab world.

### ***The impact of English on culture and identity***

Moving deeper into the study, the undergraduates and teachers were asked to comment on whether English had changed any aspects of Emirati culture (defined in the questionnaire as 'the way you live') or their own identity (defined as 'the way you think / who you are'). The definitions given were based on the terms defined earlier in this paper. As can be seen from Figure 4, similar patterns can be observed between the groups with regard to changes to culture. However, for identity, there are striking differences between the groups.



## Has global English affected Emirati culture and identity?

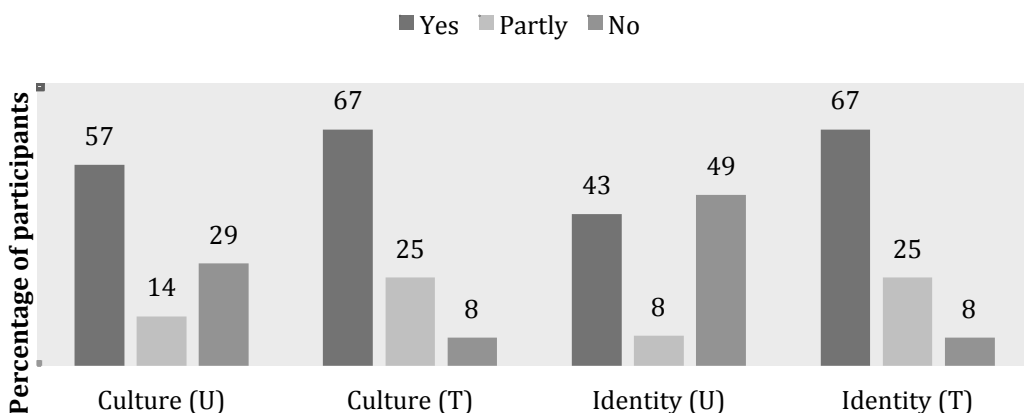


Figure 4: Perceived effects of English on culture and identity in the UAE.

### Effects on Emirati culture

When asked about whether English had caused changes to Emirati culture in Part 3, Question 1 of the questionnaire, 57% of undergraduates answered with a strong 'yes' and 14% stated they could see partial changes, whereas for the teachers 67% responded with a strong 'yes' with 25% commenting on partial changes. For both groups, the most common examples of how culture had changed included a change in attitude towards being more open-minded and accepting of other cultures, changes in clothing and lifestyle, an increased use of English and decreased use of Arabic, a desire to be like English native-speakers and increased development in the country. Some of these changes were seen as positive and others were seen as negative. Regarding Arabic loss, which was the most commented-on change amongst both groups, Reema and Naeema's comments highlight the issues faced:

**Reema (U)** Yes, English has a huge impact on our culture, both positive and negative impacts. Positive because it kind of developed our country and improved it, and negative because nowadays almost all of children's first language is English, which makes it hard for them to learn Arabic or even speak it. And, I'm afraid that our first language may disappear with time.

**Naeema (T)** Yes. The local language reduced and lots of words transform or are replaced with new ones. The people have a stereotype that knowing English makes you English so they start to act, wear, live, and talk like English people (who are in the movies) no matter who they are.

The influence of Western culture on national dress and life style, as mentioned by Naeema above, was the next most common example of cultural changes given. Lubna and Oshba also refer to these changes:

**Lubna (T)** Yes, I believe so. You can see it in our home, our style of living changed a lot. People are more open about things. For example, the way they dress, live, even our houses.

**Oshba (T)** Yes, to some extent, especially between teenagers or the locals who graduated from private schools. They chat or deal with their friend in English and they like to listen to English music instead of Arabic.

It could be argued that the cultural changes commented on by Naeema, Lubna and Oshba may not be a direct cause of English, but rather of globalization in general. One could also question whether indeed English causes cultural changes or, in fact, whether cultural desires lead to an increased use of English. The two may also happen simultaneously, or the order may vary according to the person. It is, however,

clear that cultural changes were perceived to have happened and that English was said to be connected to these changes.

### Effects on identity

When asked about the impact of English on their identities, the undergraduates' answers were divided. Around half of the undergraduates (51%) felt their identities had changed to some degree and around half (49%) felt they had not. For the teachers, on the other hand, 92% felt their identities had been affected or partly affected by English. Nada, Sara and Lubna commented on using English to express feelings and the effects it has on ways of thinking.

**Nada (U)** Yes, when I want to express my feelings, I express them by talking English, it is more confident when talk more than Arabic.

**Sara (U)** Yes it does. It affects on the way we think and talk. It affects on us as students and all that we think is how to write it and say in English. I think now Emirati people think like foreign people.

**Lubna (T)** Yes, it affects my way of thinking. I am more open-minded and outgoing. It changed my views of thinking about others who live in this world.

For those who felt English had not affected their identity, reasons were that English was only a language and a tool for communication, as can be seen by Maitha's comment:

**Maitha (U)** No, I don't think so. I still think in the same way even if I use other languages. I just translate my Arabic words.'

When discussing deeper concepts such as identity, one should always be aware that a self-preservation instinct may influence responses. For example, it may have been difficult for participants to make comments on certain changes which might be viewed as disloyal to their Emirati identities.

Despite the complexities involved, looking at the findings from the study, we can see that clear patterns emerge. The following section will provide a summary of the key patterns and a discussion of their significance, before looking at the implications of the findings for teaching and learning in the Gulf and recommendations for the future, in the concluding section.

## Discussion

It is clear from the study that English is incredibly important in the undergraduates' and teachers' lives, with all but one participant stating this to be the fact. The main reason in both groups was that English is used throughout Emirati society and the world and is needed for communication inside and outside the UAE, which testifies to the power of English's global nature. Answers such as needing English to progress in studies and careers, helping their children in the case of the teachers, and enjoying English entertainment in the case of the undergraduates, also point to the all-encompassing nature of English in the region. For the teachers, especially, the very fact that keeping their jobs and future teaching careers rests on their ability to score Band 6.5 in the IELTS test further exemplifies the extreme power of English in the UAE.

Looking at the attitudes towards English as a global language, 75% of the teachers had positive attitudes as they focused on the opportunities English brought, such as greater self-confidence and being able to communicate with a range of nationalities. This supports the results from numerous previous studies conducted in the Gulf, which found a majority of positive attitudes. For example, findings from Findlow's study from 1997 to 2000, which examined linguistic-cultural dualism in three Emirati higher education

institutes, revealed that although there may have been underlying ideological conflict between wanting to maintain heritage versus opportunity associated with English, the climate (modernist, global, a strong economy, no evident material need for resistance) meant English was above all “enabling” for the students (Findlow, 2006, p. 33). In addition, Morrow & Castleton’s study (2011) investigated a range of issues including attitudes towards the English language with 40 informants from 14 Arab world countries, and found responses to be overwhelmingly positive. In Saudi Arabia, Hagler’s study in 2012 at King Saud University assessed students’ attitudes to the West and found most (62% of males and 70% of females) held positive outlooks to Western culture and were curious and eager to learn more about it (Hagler, 2014). Similarly, Alkaff’s (2013) study with 47 foundation year students at the English Language Institute of King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah found that students generally had positive attitudes towards English (p.119).

Perhaps surprisingly, and in contrast with the teacher participants, just over half the undergraduates had positive attitudes towards English, which is a considerably lower percentage than results from other studies done in the region. This could indicate that, with the younger generation in particular, attitudes may be starting to turn. For the remaining participants, who had negative feelings towards English, comments indicated concerns that Arabic was being pushed aside or weakened, and questions were raised as to why expatriates were not expected to learn the official language of the country they chose to inhabit if Arabs were expected to learn English.

When looking at the perceived effects English has on Emirati culture and identity, interesting patterns can be seen. For effects on culture, the undergraduates and teachers had similar perspectives, with the majority in each group (57% of undergraduates and 67% of teachers) feeling changes had indeed taken place. These changes were both positive and negative with the latter category including ‘Arabic loss’, ‘clothing and lifestyle changes’ and ‘desires to be like English native-speakers’ being described in the greatest detail. It is clear that, whereas the participants value the importance of English, concerns about its effects on their society were numerous, indicating the ‘double-edged sword’ nature of English as very much present.

Regarding changes to identity, the teachers’ answers replicated their answers for perceived changes to culture, despite a clear distinction between the two concepts being made in the questionnaire. This perhaps indicates that Emirati culture is very much part of the teachers’ identity to the point where they are inseparable. The interrelated nature of language, culture and identity is highlighted here. As Dahan (2013) states, in the Arab world

the connection between language and identity has evolved into an indivisible partnership, which some are unwilling to let go of. (p. 48)

In this sense, such a mindset can be difficult to change. For the undergraduate group, however, responses were very different. The undergraduate group was divided when it came to whether English had affected their identities; some felt their identities had changed as a result of learning English and others felt they had not. This may indicate that in the case of the undergraduates, identity is harder to influence due to its depth and its stronger connection to personal choice. In Norton’s (2000) view,

investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner’s own identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space. (p. 11)

The notion of learners ‘investing’ in the language emphasizes active decisions being made rather than English being a force influencing identities of passive subjects standing in its way. According to Joseph (2004), identities “are not natural facts about us, but are things we construct” (p. 6), also stressing the element of agency involved in identity construction.

The mixed nature of responses with regard to changes in culture and identity, both within and between the groups, clearly supports the concept of “small culture” formation (Holliday, 2013) in that rather than a whole nation sharing one culture and members of that nationality thinking in the same way, smaller social groupings such as contemporaries, families or work/study groups often form cultures of their own. As Holliday (2013) states, small culture formations happen all the time and are the “basic essence of being human” (p. 3). We can see this, perhaps most clearly, in the two groups’ responses to how their identities are affected by English. The undergraduates, who were divided on the influence of English on their identities, chose to see language as either a major part of who they were or a minor part. This highlights that there are undoubtedly multiple factors which contribute to a person’s notion of culture and identity. Almost all of the teachers, on the other hand, indicated that English had a major influence on identity. Being older, working in the field of education, being mothers and playing a more prominent role in society are examples of small cultures to which the teacher may belong. The existence of these small cultures could very well play a role in how the teachers feel their identities have been shaped with regard to the English language. Indeed, the fact that they are required to teach in English in order to keep their jobs, added to the possibility that they may feel a great responsibility for encouraging their children to use English, could explain the greater impact English has on their identities. It is certainly clear that ways of viewing global English and its effects on cultural identity in the UAE are far from homogeneous.

It should be noted that although clear patterns emerged from the data, as the study is relatively small in scale due to being part of a larger study, one should be wary of making widespread conclusions regarding the attitudes and beliefs of Emirati undergraduate students and Emirati public school teachers in general. In addition, as culture and identity are dynamic, fluid and highly changeable in nature, what may be true for participants at the time and location of the study, may alter with time and experience.

## Conclusion

The study showed that although attitudes towards English are relatively positive among Emirati undergraduates, and especially teachers, connections between the power of English and cultural fragility in the UAE were voiced throughout the questionnaire responses in both groups. This needs to be taken into consideration with regard to teaching and learning in Gulf universities at present, and with a view to making longer-term changes.

Looking firstly at implications for teaching and learning in Gulf universities at present, the study highlights the complexity of the position of English in the Gulf and the importance of hearing learners’ perspectives. Being aware of how learners view the language helps teachers to be more sensitive to their needs. It is clear that the ‘double-edged sword’ nature of English in the Gulf needs to be taken into consideration in university classrooms, and teachers should be wary of presenting English in ways that exacerbate feelings of resentment or alienation. Rather than using excessive censorship to remove Western cultural content – which Hudson (2012) warns can result in “dull, anodyne lessons that are demotivating for both teachers and students” (p. 16) – adding local cultural content would be preferable. This could be achieved through the use of regionally themed textbooks, which are becoming increasingly popular, or by using local newspapers in lessons and centering projects around relevant and culturally accessible topics (McBride, 2004). With English surrounding the students in everyday life and in higher education, they may benefit from greater inclusion of local culture, in its many forms. Ahmed (2011) suggests that

When all that is around one is seemingly foreign, as is increasingly the case in the UAE and many of the Gulf countries, any mention of one's own culture, no matter how simple, may help to maintain it. Issues such as student vulnerability, personal worth, and alienation need to be examined. (p. 131).

In addition to this, Gulf university students should be encouraged to take ownership of the language in order to diminish the subtractive effects learning English as a global language can have on local cultures and languages. Holliday (2014) recommends learners should move away from anxieties that English represents a culture which is incompatible with their own; rather "they should carry their own cultural experience into English and stamp it with their own identities" (p.1). In this sense, as McKay (2004), suggests, rather than seeing English as intrinsically linked to learning about Western culture, one could take the view that "the purpose of an international language is to describe one's own culture and concerns to others" (p. 14). Due to the intertwined nature of language, culture and identity, however, this can be challenging; as Hudawi (2013) observes, "emptying English of its ideological and cultural kernel is easier said than done" (p. 17). Morrow & Castleton (2011) also emphasize this point:

even those who are briefly in an Arabic speaking country will find themselves, without conscious thought, utilizing the more common Allah phrases. Who, then, can learn English without learning all that comes along with it? (p. 329).

It is true to say that one cannot escape the issue of pragmatics in language, which is rooted in the culture in which the language originated.

Finally, it should also be recognized by teachers that learners' identities often have a direct effect on second language (L2) learning. As Giroir (2014) states,

Learners' multiple identifications can impact their L2 learning processes as well as their access to L2 community resources. (p. 34)

If learners feel a degree of ownership towards the target language, attitudes tend to improve and an increased eagerness to commit to language learning can be seen. If, on the other hand, a sense of resentment or guilt is attached to using the target language, less effort may be given to the learning of the target language. It is therefore important to be aware of how English affects identity, both positively, in terms of greater self-confidence and opportunities, and negatively in the sense that English is often viewed as a subtractive force.

Turning now to look at the bigger picture, two main long-term recommendations would help to address the issues raised by the study. Firstly, slowing down the pace at which English is introduced in schools could help to alleviate feelings of being swamped by English, or as undergraduate participants voiced, "needing English for survival reasons" or feeling "useless without it". Whereas English was traditionally only taught as a subject in Abu Dhabi public schools, since the introduction of the 'New School Model' (NSM) the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) has made language acquisition in both Arabic and English one of its key learning outcomes. This dramatic change, with the inclusion of English medium education starting in all KG and Grade 1-3 classes in government schools in 2010, all Grade 4 classes in 2011 and all Grade 5 classes in 2012, was introduced with the aim of students becoming biliterate in Arabic and English by the time they reach university (ADEC, 2014). This monumental change was perhaps too sudden. As Gallagher (2013) points out, the UAE education system has veered from one extreme to the other by

shifting paradigm from 'late-late' immersion all the way down to 'early-early' immersion starting from Kindergarten. (p. 6)

Using the mother tongue in primary school and English immersion in secondary school, as is the case in Hong Kong (Gallagher, 2013, p. 5) may be a more gentle approach. As Al-Issa and Dahan (2011) state,

Today's world of global English and globalization allows everything new and foreign or culturally 'different' to be made available almost immediately in the UAE. It is the speed at which the continual input arrives that is making the difference today and is causing disquiet within the country. (p. 13)

As well as reassessing the fast-paced way in which English has come to dominate education in the UAE, the amount of English taught at every stage of the Emirati educational journey needs to be balanced with that of Arabic. As Badry (2011) states,

for Arabic to remain part of the identity of young and future generations in the UAE (and elsewhere in the Arab world), the same efforts exerted in teaching English must be brought to bear in improving the teaching of Arabic. (p. 112)

A move towards bilingualism in Emirati universities would address this concern. Troudi (2007) gives the example of Icelandic universities where academic subjects are taught in the native language as an model which the UAE could emulate, stating that

Using one's native language at tertiary level is also a symbol of cultural, national identity, and even self-respect and pride. (p. 7)

Certainly providing students with the option of studying in English or in Arabic for university courses, depending on the subject or purpose of the course, would address the current lack of balance between the two languages in tertiary education. This, of course, would only be achievable if English and Arabic degrees were equally valued.

Considering the issues discussed in this paper, it is clear that the presence of English in the UAE is indeed a double-edged sword in that it is necessary due to its global nature, but resented in some ways due to its growing dominance. To research this area further, it would be helpful to probe the participants' responses to the questionnaires in more detail by conducting in-depth focus groups or individual interviews. This would allow the researcher to explore the issues in more depth. It would also be fascinating to gain the perspectives of a wider range of the UAE population such as male Emirati students, older Emiratis and expatriate instructors teaching at the university in which the study was conducted. It is clear that the issues explored are complex and worthy of further investigation.

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**Appendix**  
**Questionnaire**

Note: This questionnaire was modified from a longer questionnaire used as part of a larger study.

**English as a Global Language and Cultural Identity**  
**Questionnaire**

**Part 1 – Biographic information**

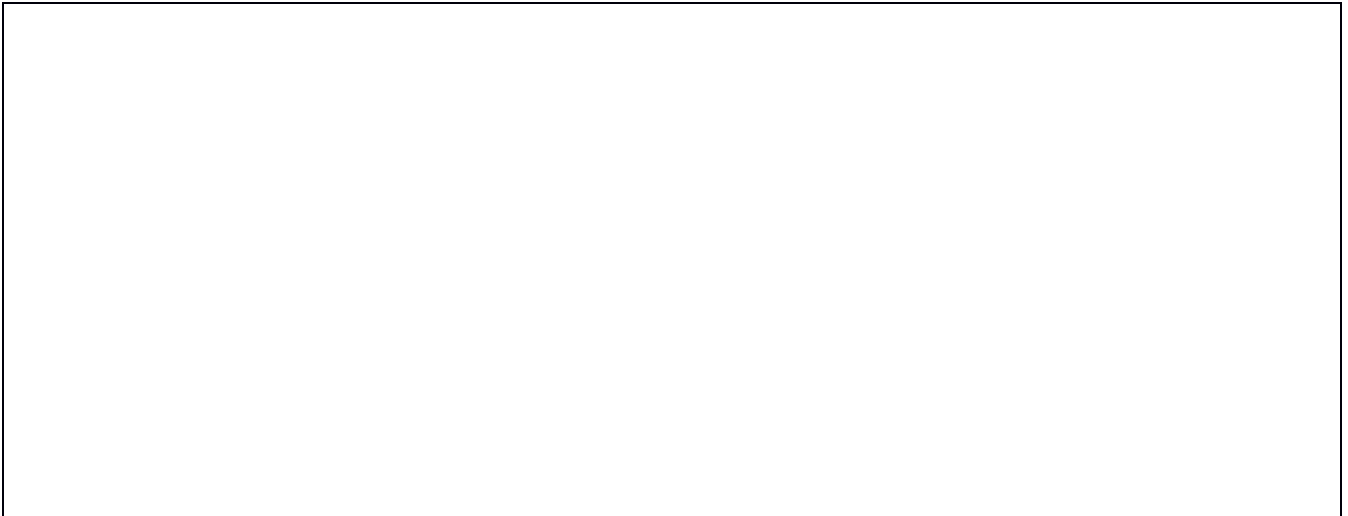
- 1) Age: 18-20 21-24 25-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 61+
- 2) Course level and section: \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) First language: \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) Do you speak any other languages? If so, what are they? \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) When did you start studying at Zayed University? \_\_\_\_\_
- 6) How many years have you been studying English? \_\_\_\_\_
- 7) When do you use English?

	✓/x		✓/x
Outside class time at university		Internet	
With friends		Music	
At home		Movies	
For travelling		e-mail / texting	


Other (please state) \_\_\_\_\_

## Part 2 – Feelings about English

1) Is English important to you? Why/Why not?



2) How do you feel about English being a **global language** (a language people speak all over the world)?



### **Part 3 - The effects of English**

1) Has English changed Emirati **culture** (way of living)? If so, how?

2) Does English affect your **identity** (the way you think / who you are)? Why / why not? Please give examples.

**Thank you for participating in this study.**