

The role and status of the English language in Kuwait

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How is English used as an additional language in the Middle East?

Introduction

In the Arab world, English is having substantial effects on the region's educational systems, language policies and patterns of language use (Nunan, 2003; Bolton, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2008). Having realized the importance of English in all domains of life, Arab countries have encouraged the acquisition of English by their people. Most Arab countries have introduced English as a main subject in the school curriculum. In most government and private sectors, most business organizations ask for proof of English proficiency before hiring people for employment.

Although in Kuwait English is neither a national language nor an official language, it is definitely the most important language in the country. It is taught together with Arabic in Kuwaiti schools and is considered to have a prominent place in the educational curriculum of Kuwaitis. A high proficiency level in English is a central requirement to excel at the university level, where the most prestigious colleges teach through the medium of English. English proficiency is also required to gain the most high-status jobs in the country (Akbar, 2007). According to educationalists (see Akbar, 2007; Hamdan & Abu Hatab, 2009; Randal & Samimi, 2010; Taqi, 2010), demand for a Western education has increased among Kuwaitis for several reasons. The main causes for this demand are the perceived inadequacy of state education, the importance of an English language education as a preparation for further education overseas and life in general, and the advanced curricula of the non-Arabic foreign schools in Kuwait. Despite the comparatively high fees, schools that teach American and British curricula are booming in Kuwait. As a result, most people in Kuwait speak some English. There are a number of radio

and television broadcasts in English. Newspapers and magazines are also available in the language. Most road signs are in Arabic and English, as are most business and restaurant signs. In the current paper I present a summary of the role and status of English in the state of Kuwait.

The use and users of English in Kuwait

English has been used increasingly in Kuwait since the 1940s, which is when the British people came to pipe out the oil after its discovery. Many people from the 'old' Kuwaiti generation who worked in the fields side-by-side with English people found themselves obliged to learn some English, though they learnt it informally through communicating with them. Many of them are still able to



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communicate in English whenever the situation requires. Since that time, a number of words were borrowed from English, some of which were phonologically and morphologically inflected. To give a few examples, words such as *foreman*, *finger*, *puncture*, *tall*, *pencil* and many others are still used by Kuwaitis of the old generation as replacements of Kuwaiti equivalents.

When government schools were first launched, English was one of the core compulsory subjects required for all students. Now English is not only expanding to a number of domains beyond the school domain, such as social, government, and business, but it is also the most prestigious language, as I show in following sections. It is extensively used in restaurants, cafes, shops, at home, in business, science and technology, and in the media (Dashti, 1998). Both the government and private sectors prefer to employ those applicants who have a good command of English. Both sectors also provide their employees with periodic in-house training sessions in the English language. English in Kuwait is also seen as an international language, and is used as the first 'foreign' language (Al-Mutawa, 1986, 1990, 1994; Al-Shalabi, 1988; Erguvan, 2014).

Methodology

In order to outline the role of English in Kuwait, I analysed a range of data using Kachru's (1983) models of non-native Englishes. Kachru's framework highlights four salient categories of language use, namely, the instrumental function, the interpersonal function, the regulative function, and the imaginative/innovative function (Kachru, 1983: 42). The regulative function does not apply to the situation in Kuwait. The regulative function entails the 'use of English in those contexts in which language is used to regulate conduct; for example, the legal system of administration' (Kachru, 1983: 58). English in Kuwait is not used in the legal system of administration. Standard Arabic is the only variety used in legal contexts.

Data collection

In order to assess the status of English among Kuwaiti speakers, I examined a variety of data collected from social media (Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram), the internet, TV shows, newspaper articles, and participant-observation. 50 tweets, together with 50 WhatsApp texts, 50 comments on Instagram posts, and extracts from TV shows were collected. English lexical items and

constructions were identified, and quantitatively and qualitatively analysed.

Participant observation took place in cafes, restaurants, sports clubs, and seaside chalets. I carefully observed the use of English during people's spontaneous speech. I interviewed 40 informants of different genders, ages, and educational backgrounds. Their age ranges from 19–61, and their level of education ranges from high school to PhD level. I spontaneously opened the floor for discussion without mentioning that I was examining the status of English.

In the following section, the role and status of English in the state of Kuwait is discussed in the light of Kachru's (1983) functions, namely, the instrumental function, the interpersonal function, and the imaginative/innovative function.

The instrumental function

Kachru (1983: 42) states that interpersonal function refers to, 'English as a medium of learning at the various stages in the educational system in the country'. In Kuwait in the 1920s, English was introduced into the educational system as a foreign language. In 1921, the Al-Ahmedia school was established, which offered compulsory English courses among other courses. All the levels of state education, including higher education, were free. The general education system in Kuwait consists of four levels, i.e. kindergarten, or nursery (lasting for two years), primary (lasting for five years), intermediate (lasting for four years) and secondary (lasting for three years). Schooling at primary and intermediate level is compulsory for all students aged 6–14. English is taught for four hours a week throughout the four years in both primary and intermediate schools and for seven hours a week in the secondary schools.

At the university level, in most colleges such as those teaching medicine, engineering, science, business and journalism, English is the medium of instruction. In other departments in Arts and Humanities colleges, at least three general English courses are compulsory. All students who have been admitted to join the university are required to take an entrance English proficiency test. Moreover, the government of Kuwait allots a huge part of its annual expenditure budget to be spent on educational scholarship. A significant number of Kuwaitis are granted full scholarships to study in English-speaking countries. Upon their arrival back home, most of the scholarship students show a remarkable proficiency in the English language. Moreover, many Kuwaitis are

occasionally sent by their employers in both the government and private sector to attend conferences and seminars in locations throughout the world, with English being the language of such academic events.

Besides the conventional state schools, two educational schemes exist in Kuwait, namely, the English/American private school and the bilingual private school. In the English/American private school, English operates as the only medium of instruction through a total immersion program where all subjects, except for Arabic and Islamic studies, are taught in the students' second language, which is English. In the second type of scheme, a partial bilingual program is employed, where both Standard Arabic and English are used side-by-side as languages of instruction until the child reaches the age of nine. From then onwards the students are instructed in English only (Akbar, 2007). There are tens of private British and American schools in Kuwait where the medium of instruction is English. Some of the most popular ones are New English School, Gulf English School, Kuwait English School, British School of Kuwait, Bayan Bilingual School, the American School of Kuwait, the American International School of Kuwait and the Kuwait English School.

The interpersonal function

The interpersonal function is performed in two senses. First, interpersonal function 'is performed as a *link* language between speakers of various, often mutually unintelligible, languages and dialects in linguistically and culturally pluralistic societies.' Secondly, the interpersonal function 'is performed by providing a code which symbolizes modernization and elitism' (Kachru, 1983: 58). One main aspect of the interpersonal function of language is that it symbolizes prestige. English in Kuwait is now becoming the most prestigious language, not only for educated people but also for those who show a poor command of the language. The interpersonal function in Kuwait includes media, technology, and business. For example, if we take fashion, we find that most Arabic color terms are replaced by English terms, such as *pink*, *orange*, *black*. Kuwaitis now take their little children to a *school* not to the *madrassa*, the Kuwaiti equivalent. Computer technology terms are all in English. Terms such as *website*, *computer lab*, *save*, *file*, and many others are frequent in Kuwaitis' daily talk. In the world of communication, terms such as *iPhone*, *iPad*,

Instagram, *Twitter*, *WhatsApp*, *iMessage*, and many others are borrowed from English. Sport is another field where English terms are extensively used. Terms such as *goal*, *corner*, *offside*, *linesman*, *penalty*, and many others are very frequent.

English is extensively used in Kuwaiti media, especially in TV shows and programs. Besides the existence of a Kuwaiti channel that broadcasts in English, most presenters, especially Kuwaitis of the new generation, extensively switch to English in the programs broadcast on the other Kuwaiti channels. The titles of most programs on the Kuwaiti Arabic channels, such as those on sport, fashion, youth shows, songs and music are also in English. For example, some programs broadcast by Kuwaitis on Kuwaiti TV channels have the following titles: 'I Wish', which is a program similar to 'Star Academy' where participants compete in fashion, cooking, and administration. Other programs are 'Spotlight', 'Retweet', 'Good Morning Kuwait', 'Auto-Trader', 'E-xtra Time', 'Safari', 'Champion' and 'Red Carpet'. In all these programs and many others, English is extensively used throughout. A considerable number of Kuwaitis, both males and females, entered the social media world by launching their own YouTube channels and Kik app personal blogs, where they mostly use English rather than Arabic. Examples of Kuwaiti YouTubers who mostly use English are *Q8tyboys*, *irlandii*, *How to be Kuwaiti*; examples of Kuwaiti bloggers who use English are: *248am*, *Danderma*, *His & Hers*, *Couch Avenue*, *Z District*, *Confashions*, and *Kuwaitiful*; examples of Combo blogs (mixing English and Arabic) are: *Banana Q8*, *Francom*, *Pink girl*, *13 cups*, *Khaleejesque*, and *Q8 all in one*.

Stanlaw (1987) states that loan words in Japan symbolize modernity and sophistication, and that the advertising business makes the most of this. This applies to the Kuwaiti situation as well. For example, in the business world and due to the fact the Kuwait is a wealthy state, Kuwaitis of the young generation started recently to run their own private businesses, such as restaurants, cafes, mobile purchase centers, and computer and internet centers. Most of the names that are given to their businesses are in English. For example, 'Star One', 'Soft Island Computer', 'New Look', 'Soft Click', 'Kuwait Leaders', 'Quick Solutions', 'Chocolate Bar', 'Lorenzo', 'Cozy Coffee House', 'Breakfast and Brunch', 'Nestle Toll House', 'Home Berry', and 'Brown Diamond Café'.

Technology has brought Kuwaitis into close contact with the English language. Kuwait being a wealthy state, the majority of Kuwaitis of the new generation, if not all, own a PC, and an iPad and iPhone. The use of computers and the internet has become an essential tool in schools, colleges and universities, and consequently has put students in contact with English, given that a large portion of the information available on the web is in English. Just recently, the news was released that the Ministry of Education will distribute 80 thousand laptops to all students and teachers in all Kuwaiti secondary state schools (*Al-Siyasa*, 21 October 2014). There are two daily English newspapers, i.e., *Kuwait Times* (published since 1961), and *Arab Times* (published since 1977).

Imaginative/innovative function

The imaginative/innovative function refers to, ‘the use of English in various literary genres. In this function, the non-native users of English have shown great creativity in using English in “un-English” contexts’ (Kachru, 1983: 58). As a matter of fact, there are a number of radio and television broadcasts in English. The Ministry of Media in Kuwait actually launched a radio channel back in 1973 which is devoted to broadcasting programs in English, Farsi, Urdu, and Tagalog languages. Broadcasting starts at 8 am in the morning and continues until 12 am at night. Six hours only are devoted to Farsi, Urdu, and Tagalog, whereas the rest of the 16 hours are devoted to English. In addition, another radio channel, ‘Super Station’, broadcasts a variety of programs in English. On TV, Kuwait TV Channel 2 is on the air 24/7 and broadcasts all its programs in English. As to the press, there are three daily English newspapers - *Kuwait Times*, *Arab Times*, and *Daily Watan*. The newspapers provide local and world news, reviews on the stock exchange, information on health, fashion and beauty, together with analysis and reports on political, social and business issues. Also, young novelists of the new generation are moving towards writing short stories and novels in English. Examples of narratives written in English are *What’s wrong with Faris* (2012), an English novel written by the Kuwaiti novelist Dhari Buyabis, *The Hidden Light of Objects* (2014), an English short-story collection written by the Kuwaiti novelist Mai al-Nakib, and *The Elephant in the Room: Stories and Articles from Anglophone Kuwait* (2014), an English short-story collection written by the Kuwaiti novelist Nada

Faris. There are also a number of English magazines in Kuwait such as *The City*, *KTM*, *Student-Talk*, *Bazaar*, *Kuwait Forum*, *Kuwait Life*, *Kuwait This Month*, and *EN.V*.

Attitudes and prestige

English is seen as the most prestigious language among all of those spoken in Kuwait, such as, Kuwaiti Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic (Dashti, 2004; Akbar, 2007; Taqi, 2010). It is used by a huge number of Kuwaitis of all ages. Many scholars who investigated attitudes of Kuwaitis towards the use of English (e.g. Alshaar, 1997; Malallah, 2000; Al-Bustan & Al-Bustan, 2009; Alenezi, 2010; Al-Rubaie; 2010; Al-Othman & Shuqair, 2013) arrived at the conclusion that Kuwaitis perceive people who extensively use English in their everyday conversation as highly educated and socially more respected. For example, Malallah (2000) conducted a research study on Kuwait University undergraduates to investigate their attitudes towards the English language. She found out that the more a student is exposed to the English language, and the more a student needs the English language either for present studies or their future career, the more positive his/her attitudes appear to be towards the language. Akbar (2007) investigated the way people from different age groups and school settings evaluate the major spoken varieties in Kuwait. Her study revealed very positive attitudes towards the use of English. When visiting cafes, restaurants, shopping malls, parks and all other social gatherings, one can notice that Kuwaitis, especially those of the new generation, feel very confident conversing in English.

Furthermore, and due to the fact that English is a global language and extensively used in the world of technology and seen as a social and ‘economic mobilizer’ (Yong and Campbell, 1995: 384), the language that is mostly used by Kuwaitis in WhatsApp and Instagram applications is English. Salem (2013) investigated the impact of technology (BBM and WhatsApp application) on English language use in Kuwait. He found out that English is used to a great extent by Kuwaitis in social media. As most text messages have abbreviated language, some of the abbreviated examples that he cites are: *luv*, *Thnx*, *2day*, *B4*, *CU*, *ASAP*. In addition, I collected a considerable number of English tweets and WhatsApp texts by Kuwaitis, a sample of which is presented in Examples 1 and 2.

Example 1. Two Kuwaiti female friends are writing to each other:

- A. I was there from 6:30 until 10:30 this morning. I'll hopefully be there on either Sunday or Monday.
- B. Ok so can I come at 9 on Sunday?
- A. Check please before you go there.
- B. Inshaallah (hopefully)

Example 2. A Kuwaiti female sending a tweet to her son:

- Hammood (nickname for Mohammad), I'm at the Philadelphia airport waiting to fly to New York in one hour. The airport is fully wified.

During participant observation, many Kuwaitis claimed that English has historical roots in Kuwait. Having said that, they actually refer to the fact that Kuwait was a British protectorate until 1961. Interestingly, some informants brought up the issue of how Kuwaitis have completely replaced some Standard Arabic lexical items with the English borrowed equivalents, despite the fact that their equivalents in Standard Arabic do exist. Table 1 shows some of the English borrowed lexical items and their unused equivalents in Standard Arabic. These Standard Arabic equivalents have never been used by Kuwaitis when conversing in Kuwaiti Arabic.

Several participants also mentioned how proficiency in spoken English and written English is one of the first priorities required for most jobseekers. Most participants mentioned that the importance of the English language is evident in the fact that a large number of Kuwaitis enrol their children in private English schools, despite the fact that the cost of tuition is rising. Although they enrol their children in private English schools for different reasons, they claim that the main reason is that they want their children speak good English. Some claimed that it is interesting to see many

religious and devout Muslims, who think highly of Arabic as the language of the Qur'an, enrolling their children in English schools.

What was also interesting was realizing that the allied forces' liberation of Kuwait in 1991 has had a great influence on the positive emotional feelings Kuwaitis have towards British and American people. This is consequently reflected in their attitudes towards the English language. Hence, some participants mentioned that they prefer to use English with their children to encourage them to use English in different social domains. They believe fast-food restaurants are one of the reasons behind the spread of the English language. Fast-food restaurants are places where English is mainly used, even if the salesperson comes from an Arabic-speaking country. When the researcher asked about the status of English in Kuwait, all of the participants agreed that English is now playing an important role there. They claimed that the use of English has spread into many different domains. In the past, they said that the use of English was limited to academic settings, whereas now English is used at home and in social gatherings, in banks, hospitals, etc. They claimed that whenever they get together with their friends, for example, in coffee shops, in a hotel lobby or even when shopping, they sometimes interact either in English or by mixing English with Kuwaiti Arabic. Some mentioned that even at home, they use a lot of English with their brothers and sisters, especially those who had degrees from Britain or the United States of America.

Conclusion

The current paper discusses the role and status of English in Kuwait by employing Kachru's (1983) model of non-native Englishes. The current paper shows that the use of English by Kuwaitis is apparent in the instrumental function, the interpersonal function, and the imaginative/innovative function

Table 1: English borrowed lexical items and their equivalents in Standard Arabic

Lexical item	The pronunciation of the English borrowing	The pronunciation of the Standard Arabic equivalent
<i>tyre</i>	ta:jir	ʕaḍḡala
<i>telephone</i>	tilifon	ha:tif
<i>radio</i>	ra:du	miḍjaʕ
<i>cashier</i>	kaʕer	muḡasib

(but not in the regulative function), which are illustrated with a range of examples. The analysis also shows that Kuwaitis view English as a prestigious language and that they use it as a sign of social glamour. Overall, English is becoming an increasingly important language in the Arab world, and Kuwait, as a tiny country in the Arabian Gulf, is not an exception.

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