



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 8

Educational Challenges in the GCC in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This workshop brings together different elements of policy and curriculum, teachers and teacher identity, students and student identity, and social conditions that affect learning and teaching in the 21st century in GCC states in an effort to explore the resulting learning outcomes operating on a macro and micro-level in education in the GCC. In order to fully explore these elements, and in order to explore the possible ‘clashes’ (Huntington 1996; Gee 1999) and challenges within these elements at school and university levels in the Gulf, it is imperative to investigate the interplay between Western and Islamic discourses and how this interplay impacts the learning environment, learners and teachers. Consequently, we wish to examine the discourses employed in policy documents, curricula and textbooks/educational materials within the GCC educational context.

Education shifted globally in policy and curriculum in the 21st century especially after 9/11 in ways that are sometimes labeled as ‘neoliberal terror’ (e.g., Giroux 2004, 2008; Lipman 2004). However, most studies do not deeply investigate the Gulf context. Similarly, some international research has explored the role of cultural and geopolitical factors in shaping educational policies in the era of globalization of the 21st century

(Byram & Risager, 1999; Önlan, 2005; Risager, 2006; Pennycook, 2007), but most works do not have a Gulf focus (e.g., Clarke, 2007; Karmani, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Elyas, 2008a, 2008b). There are also some studies that have explored the theoretical reference of the global cultural flow (Hannerz, 2009; Appadurai, 2010) with a similar lack. Therefore, the frame of reference in the Gulf countries is not well examined. We hope to prompt the examination of applied and theoretical frames of references operating in the GCC and to probe the relevant aspects of scale and proportion, grounding and reference regarding education.

Description and Rationale

One important factor of education in the Gulf is the use of English as the lingual medium of education. Some theorists such as Ratnawati (2005) suggest that conflicting discourses affect and even hinder the teaching of English in Arabic and Islamic countries. On the contrary, others like Abuhamdia (1988) and Dahbi (2004) argue that Arabic “is not weakened by the domination of English and French media for science and development” (Abuhamdia, p.34) because Arabic is the language of the Quran which influences the “political policy, [and] practically ensures the primacy of Arabic language in Muslim societies” (Dahbi, p. 630). However, post 9/11 educational reforms have resulted in more English being taught within the GCC states and an increased influence of the Western curriculum in general. The GCC countries face the dilemma of responding to the pressure on governments and educators to promote the message of GCC as the cradle of Islam, and thus enact its fundamental Islamic identity through the promotion of Arabic language and culture, and responding to political as well as economic pressures to increase the use of English and teach Western culture in the GCC curricula. We wish to examine such statements as well as the role of cultural and geopolitical factors in shaping educational EFL policies in the GCC.

The influx of English in education is not only in response to political pressure. Other cultural influences such as access to information via the Internet result in the adoption of English as a medium of communication among techno-savvy students. This changes the ways in which students access and use language and also challenges teachers in how to appropriately engage with such students. We would like to explore how students incorporate, disregard or impose their native linguistic and cultural print (that is a complex result of their up-to-date networks). For example, do learners use non-Arabic tools and cultural norms as a result of the enforcement of English language as the vehicle of education? Does their education get hindered or enabled by the use of English as a learning medium? In an environment that wavers between Arabic and generally western, particularly American and English cultures, yet is not either, what kind of a lingua-culture do educators and learners create? Do they consequently become what one can call third citizens of the globe? What are the multitudes of language-related meaning potentials and social identities and local lingua-culture-scapes such conditions create?

There is also a common lack of distinction between different Gulf regions that usually blurs the focus and projection of investigations in the region. We hope to generate a better understanding of the specificity of each region by encouraging presentations that

highlight the distinct identities of the Gulf States and regions within each state. This will eventually result in designing well-targeted educational programs. Awareness and further research on the issues discussed above can greatly enhance the future possibilities of GCC countries.

Invoking the opposition between movement and stasis in modern life, Dennis Carlson, in his book “Leaving Safe Harbors” recommends the move out of the “safe harbors” of settled educational practices and philosophies in order to better address the challenges posed to schooling by the dynamics associated with globalization and multiplicity (McCarthy et al, 2009). We aim to do this in this workshop by examining common educational practices and understanding their strengths and limitations in order to arrive at a better situation that addresses today’s needs and challenges.

This workshop will focus on education in the GCC states in the 21st century. It is based on the assumption that education must support students in realizing their fullest potential and not draw them backwards. Thus, plans need to be focused and clarified to be effective and they need to incorporate as many variables of education as possible. Currently, there is limited objective research that explores the diverse aspects of education in GCC states from a critical perspective. We hope that by probing into issues that investigate the verbalized as well as the silenced aspects of education in the GCC, we will open focused debates on the issues that can shape the GCC in the coming years.

We also aim to generate new ideas and revisit older ones in order to assess their current viability. We hope to generate active debates that investigate and eventually exchange and modify ideas regarding 21st century education by exploring the historical conditions that influence education in the GCC. The workshop will explore the issues of reference, educational discourses at play, focusing and targeting long, medium and short term goals, technology and learning, meeting the specificity of different GCC states as well as issues of unemployment that are a result of the current educational policies.

We would also like to investigate the diverse range of practices, materials and policies in ESL classrooms in the GCC, as well as the challenges of enforcing English as a medium of learning and the impact of this on education in the GCC. Furthermore, the workshop aims to examine education policy documents, curricula, and textbooks from the perspective of cultural flow in the GCC to examine if and how they have changed in the 21st century. We also hope to explore the challenges that meet educators and learners due to the infiltrating power of the Internet and smart phones, which provide new channels and ways of learning and new social networking opportunities.

The concept(s) the workshop proposes to explore would encourage and facilitate the emergence of new thought and would generate incisive papers and presentations that discuss different aspects of our current condition in the GCC. We hope that the research conducted for the purpose will make a significant contribution to understanding the Gulf region and its current developments.

Anticipated Papers

This workshop aims to attract papers that investigate the conditions of education in the GCC countries. These include (but are not restricted to) topics such as:

- Competing discourses within the educational GCC scene
- Current debates on education in the GCC
- 21st century educational shifts in the GCC
- Social conditions as they affect and as affected by educational strategies
- The education of women
- Designing education to generate a modern workforce
- Research in the GCC countries
- The use of English as the medium of teaching and learning
- English as lingua franca
- Relevance of education to current issues pertinent to GCC states
- Types of educational programs offered in school and their possible future impacts
- Special programs offered in response to special local needs
- Using modern technology and modern technology education
- The characteristics of GCC students and teachers: student and teacher identity and students as autonomous learners.

Workshop Director Profiles

Dr. Ahmar Mahboob is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney. He is the co-editor of 'Questioning Linguistics' with Naomi Knight (2008), 'Studies in Applied Linguistics and Language Learning' with Caroline Lipovsky (2009), and 'Applicable Linguistics: Texts, Contexts and Meanings' with Naomi Knight (2010). He also edited the internationally acclaimed book on non-native English speakers in TESOL, 'The NNEST Lens: Nonnative English Speakers in TESOL' (2010); and, with Namali Tilakartna, authored the White Paper 'Towards A Principles Based Approach for ELT Policies and Practices' (2012) for TESOL International. Dr. Mahboob, along with Eden Li, are co-authors of 'English Today: Forms, Functions and Uses' (2012). His current book projects include 'Genre Pedagogy in Higher Education: The SLATE Project' (co-authored with Shooshi Dreyfus, Sally Humphrey and Jim Martin); and two edited volumes: 'Language and Identity across Modes of Communication' (with Novi Djenar and Ken Cruickshank), and 'English in a Multilingual Context' (with Leslie Barratt). In addition to these books and edited volumes, Dr. Mahboob has published over 45 papers.

Dr. Tariq Elyas is an assistant professor of Applied Linguistics at King Abdelaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. He obtained his Ph.D. from the University of Adelaide, Australia. He holds an M.A. in American Literature from the United States and a graduate degree in TESOL. Dr. Elyas also received a Chevening Fellowship from the UK where he obtained a degree in International Law and Human Rights from the University of Nottingham in England. He has presented and published in a broad variety of international conferences and journals and is the winner of the 2008 Bunday Prize for English Verse, Australia and Emerald Publication Reviewer of the Year 2010. His

interests are: Global English, Teacher Identity, Policy Reform, Human Rights, International Law, Language Rights, and Pedagogy

Dr. Khadijah Bawazeer is an assistant professor of English Literature, criticism and translation at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. She obtained her Ph.D. from the University of Leicester in postcolonial feminism and her MA from the University of California, San Diego. Dr. Bawazeer works on translation, writing and editing. She has a weekly column in the Saudi newspaper, *Saudi Gazette*. Besides book reviews, she has written articles on history. She is currently working on a book about learning English in Saudi Arabia taking into consideration the specific cultural and study patterns of Saudi students, the natural processes of language acquisition, student's autonomy and their familiarity with the Internet and smart phone technology. Dr. Bawazeer spent last summer as a visiting professor to Clare Hall College at Cambridge University and is in the process of publishing a translation of a book on Artificial Intelligence.

Selected Readings

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Lipman, P. (2004). "Education Accountability and Repression of Democracy post-9/11." *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 2 (1).

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