POLICY PAPER

SHEIKH SAUD BIN SAQR AL QASIMI
FOUNDATION FOR POLICY RESEARCH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Discourses on globalization and knowledge societies have encouraged an increasing number of governments to institute bilingual education policies to develop citizens' fluency in English and a native language. To diversify the country's economic activity, extensive bilingualism in Arabic and English has long been a goal of governments in the United Arab Emirates. Previous bilingual education policies have, however, seen limited success. To raise English learning outcomes, the UAE introduced a policy in 2017 that designated English as the medium of instruction for technical subjects in grades 10-12. Utilizing questionnaires and interviews with school teachers and school leaders, this study investigates the processes by which they are embedding this policy in government schools in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah. The results indicate that the policy is broadly well-resourced. Despite concerns regarding the variable quality of professional development and teacher recruitment processes, teachers and school leaders have positive views regarding the policy's impact. The paper concludes by providing recommendations on how teacher recruitment and professional development processes can be improved to assist in the implementation process.

Bilingual Policy Implementation in Ras Al Khaimah

Alexandra Hall-Chen, University of Oxford

Introduction

Economic, cultural, and political concerns at the global level have prompted an increasing number of governments to initiate education reforms to facilitate bilingualism in both a native language and English (Sammons et al., 2014).

Attempts to raise English language learning outcomes have been a feature of the United Arab Emirates' (UAE's) education system since its establishment following the UAE's independence in 1971. In recent years, reforms initiated by the UAE government to improve the quality and outcomes of English language teaching in government schools have seen limited success. Stagnant learning outcomes in English have severe implications for Emirati students' ability to access both employment and government-funded tertiary education, the latter of which is predominantly conducted in the English language.

In September 2017, the UAE introduced a nationwide policy mandating that educators teach scientific subjects in Grades 10-12 through English Medium Instruction (EMI); the subjects would also be taught predominantly by native English-speaking teachers to address low levels of English proficiency (Gobert, 2019). The policy forms part of the wider Emirates School Model (ESM) initiative to standardize curricula and examinations across the UAE (Al Nowais, 2017).

This paper seeks to provide insights into the processes by which educators are embedding the UAE's bilingual education policy in government schools in Ras Al Khaimah. Specifically, the paper examines how teachers realize the policy in classrooms and how they respond to barriers in implementation. The following sections will discuss the topic's context and the research methodology employed in the study before giving an overview of the findings and resultant policy recommendations.

Context

Gulf states have extensive experience with bilingual Arabic/English education. Nevertheless, the dearth of literature on the implementation of bilingual education policies in the region poses challenges to understanding the issues (Garcia et al., 2017). Within the UAE, there is a lack of research on EMI outside of the Abu Dhabi and Dubai contexts. The available literature suggests that previous bilingual policies in the UAE have been beset by recurring issues relating to top-down implementation, poor stakeholder communication, and the importation of policies unsuited to the UAE context.

The first systematic attempt to modernize the national education system through reform occurred in 1994 when 'Model Schools' – marked by better funding, higher entry requirements, and teaching of mathematics and science in English – were introduced (Ridge et al., 2017). However, the Model Schools were heavily criticized for their lack of male Emirati teachers, lack of integration of special needs students, and teachers' widespread tendency to conduct mathematics and science lessons in Arabic (Gobert, 2019).

More recent initiatives have coupled EMI with a drive to increase the use of student-centered pedagogies (Farah & Ridge, 2009). The Madares Al Ghad program, instituted in the 2007-2008 school year, introduced a new curriculum into 50 government schools. In this curriculum, mathematics and science were taught in English to match international standards and prepare students for higher education in the medium of English in both the UAE and overseas. However, the program was discontinued in 2015 due to high costs, difficulties in recruiting bilingual teachers, and concerns around the impact on students' Arabic proficiency, and the Madares Al Ghad schools returned to the Ministry of Education (MOE) public school curriculum (Ridge et al., 2017; Gobert, 2019). Furthermore, attempts to reduce teacher-centered and textbook-driven teaching were undermined by a failure to align assessment methods with the new teaching methods (El Gamal, 2018).

Similar issues undermined the Public-Private Partnership reforms in which the MOE hired for-profit and non-profit private school providers and educational management consultancies to run its schools, with a focus on raising English learning outcomes. The Public-Private Partnership Reforms were dissolved in 2011 after considerable investment due to a desire to 'Emiratize' the system. Al Hassani (2012) found that the professional development provided during the reforms lacked relevance to EFL teachers' needs and relied too heavily on the one-shot workshop model.

The most apparent single antecedent to the federal bilingual policy discussed in this paper was Abu Dhabi's New School Model, introduced in 2009/2010. The New School Model mandated that all government schools teach students in both English and Arabic from Kindergarten onwards. In addition to a greater emphasis on English as a subject, mathematics and

science were taught in English, alongside a focus on student-centered pedagogy (Gobert, 2019). The policy remains in place, but its top-down implementation has raised concerns (O'Sullivan, 2015) and the extent to which the native English speaking teachers brought in to teach EMI subjects are sufficiently qualified (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2011).

Research Methodology

This study sought to investigate the factors enabling or constraining the implementation of bilingual education policy in Ras Al Khaimah through the following questions:

- In what ways does school leadership and the MOE support school staff in implementing the bilingual policy?

- How effective is the professional development provided to EMI teachers?

- What barriers do EMI teachers face in implementing the bilingual policy, and how do teachers respond to these barriers?

- Are there early indications of the bilingual policy's impact?

In order to answer these questions, this study employed a mixed-methods approach. Semi-structured, online interviews were used to generate in-depth, rich qualitative data on participants' perceptions and attitudes (Gale, 2001). The interviews, which lasted approximately 30 minutes, were carried out with eight expatriate EMI maths and science teachers and two Emirati school leaders from Cycle 3[1] government schools in Ras Al Khaimah. The school sample consisted of two all-girls schools and one all-boys school; all three schools taught mixed ability cohorts.

Online questionnaires were also used to elicit views from a wider range of educators. The questionnaires were open to school leaders and EMI teachers in all school types in Ras Al Khaimah to provide potential points of comparison with the interview data. The questionnaire received 48 responses, of which four were from Emirati nationals and 44 from expatriates. 27 of the questionnaire responses were from English teachers, seven were from mathematics teachers, nine were from science teachers, and five were from school leaders. 28 of the respondents worked in private schools, while 20 worked in government schools

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[1] Cycle 3 refers to Grades 10-12.

Findings and Discussion

Teacher Professional Development: High in Frequency but Variable in Quality

Frequent sessions of professional development (PD) are a key feature of the EMI policy. Most teachers spoke of receiving weekly training sessions, entailing a mixture of information on curricula and assessment, sharing best practices, training to use technology, and pedagogical training:

> ". . . nearly every week, we get professional development, we get assessments, if not the face to face meetings." – Cycle 3 mathematics teacher

> "Every Wednesday, you have an interactive session on different topics, and we have groups of teachers, where we share resources with each other." – Cycle 3 biology and health science teacher

Moreover, evidence suggests that professional development takes place via different platforms, a factor that has facilitated a smooth transition to online professional development during the COVID-19 pandemic. This played a role in garnering the broader trend of satisfaction with the support given to teachers in overcoming the barriers associated with moving to distance teaching and learning:

> ". . . for distance learning, I got a lot of support... So we have a workshop in a week called 'one best thing'. In that workshop, all the teachers from around UAE, they will share one best thing we encountered in a week." – Cycle 3 biology and health science teacher

Regarding the quality of the professional development received, however, respondents' views were mixed. Evidence from the questionnaires points to high levels of satisfaction with the training received; several interviewees described benefitting from professional development that centered teachers' experiences and expertise by focusing on sharing contextually relevant examples of best practice:

> ". . . you can all have different ideas and you can all have these similar problems in the classroom, say behavior problems or something like this

and, you know, someone could share something that they're doing in the classroom, or our lead teacher can tell us like, 'Why don't you try it like this?'" – Cycle 3 health sciences teacher

Another interviewee spoke of schools tailoring the availability of professional development according to teacher performance. This factor is particularly useful in raising the quality of low-performing teachers. The teacher noted:

> ". . . one of my colleagues, she was struggling a lot. So, they put her in a special training program for three months, which was very helpful for her. So all kinds of support we are getting from MOE. [They're] very supportive." – Cycle 3 biology and health sciences teacher

At the same time, several interview respondents voiced concerns that the high quantity of training masks underlying issues regarding the quality of the training and that the emphasis of the professional development is to fulfill mandated quantity requirements rather than to actualize improvements in teaching quality:

> ". . . it isn't pitched at the right level... A lot of it seems just like busywork. It's like you have to do a certain amount of hours of PD. And so let's just give them this quiz to do. Tell [them] it'll take an hour, it takes like four minutes." – Cycle 3 health science teacher

Some respondents also raised concerns about the extent to which the professional development successfully addresses the bilingual policy's specific needs. In cases where content and language learning are integrated, teachers must receive training that addresses teachers' skills in both areas (Sammons et al., 2014). Most interviewees described receiving professional development on general pedagogical skills – with an emphasis on interactive, student-centered teaching – but not on language pedagogy. Less than half of the questionnaire respondents reported having received professional development explicitly relating to aiding pupils to study technical subjects in English. Furthermore, when asked to specify what further professional development they would find useful in implementing the bilingual policy, nearly half of the respondents cited language-centered training, including language pedagogy and language practice, suggesting significant demand among teachers for such training.

Several interviewees also raised concerns regarding the extent to which the professional development they receive is relevant to the realities of their classrooms, suggesting a disconnect between professional development aims and the on-the-ground reality that undermines its utility.

> ". . . they're making us do the training in the style that we should be teaching in terms of it being facilitative… we can't do that. Because our boys won't stand up and do activities… if you have to get through the entire curriculum, you can't waste 10 minutes, every lesson, moving them from one table to another. So it can be a little frustrating at times." – Cycle 3 health sciences teacher

> ". . . the ideas are great, but sometimes I feel it's hard to apply them." – Cycle 3 mathematics teacher

In responding to what would be most effective in supporting them to implement the bilingual policy, several interviewees expressed a desire for a greater amount of training focusing on teachers collaboratively sharing best practice:

> "they could record like a really experienced teacher who [is] giving the kinds of classes they want us to give the students, and we join the class and watch the teacher how he's dealing with the students." – Cycle 3 biology teacher

> "more tips from teachers as opposed to being driven by the training team who do not stand up in front of kids all day, every day." – Cycle 3 health science teacher

The interview and questionnaire data suggest that the bilingual policy is well-resourced in terms of the quantity of professional development available to teachers. However, questions remain about the quality and relevance of the professional development provided to EMI teachers of technical subjects; the data suggests that the need for teachers to develop language pedagogical skills alongside subject pedagogical skills is, at times, overlooked. Furthermore, although mechanisms are in place to monitor teaching quality, interview data suggests that additional support is required to help teachers translate training content into classroom practice.

Barriers to Implementing the Bilingual Policy in the Classroom

Students' Lack of English Proficiency Compromises Understanding of Scientific Concepts

Interview and questionnaire data both suggest that students' English skills constitute a significant barrier to the bilingual policy. Given that the MOE is introducing bilingual policy for Cycle 3 students – who have hitherto studied technical subjects in Arabic and learned English as a foreign language rather than as a medium of instruction – it is perhaps unsurprising that, in many cases, students do not possess the English proficiency necessary to understand scientific concepts. When asked how often students' English skills are sufficient to understand the content of course textbooks, the most common answer (47% of respondents) was 'sometimes.'

One questionnaire respondent suggested that the requirement to learn not only difficult scientific concepts but also to learn them in a foreign language represents a burden which frustrates students' learning processes, a sentiment echoed in interviews:

> ". . . they are really lagging behind in the English skills which they are supposed to have at this level… they are in a, like, I think about a 12-year-old child or a 10-year-old child level when they're actually 14 or 15-years-old… They are not able to understand the word meanings and all these things. We have to explain each one of them. And this is the real problem that I face." – Cycle 3 mathematics teacher

Multiple respondents emphasized scientific terminology as particularly problematic for students; given that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curricula generally do not include scientific terminology, students are unlikely to have been previously exposed to such complex vocabulary:

> "There are lots of students whose English isn't yet good enough to be able to be taught complex subjects in English… effectively, I'm teaching them Greek and Latin." – Cycle 3 health science teacher

Some teachers did, however, note a significant and rapid improvement in students' English skills, suggesting that the barrier may, for the most part, be short-term in its disruptive effects:

> ". . . they [didn't] know a single keyword in math in English. It was really horrible in the beginning... but at the end of term one, term two, term three, you could see that they are speaking [to] each other, they're trying to speak [to] each other in English." – Cycle 3 mathematics teacher

Issues Around Student Behavior and Confidence Undermine Implementation

The interviews also revealed that teachers and school leaders consider student behavior and classroom management substantial barriers to policy implementation. Interviewees raised concerns around students' motivation to apply the requisite effort to learn English outside of the classroom, and the limits to the difference that they as teachers can make:

> ". . . we have a seven-hour working schedule... they also need to put in some sort of effort, right? I think some of the students are not ready to work extra like from home." – Cycle 3 mathematics teacher

Teachers also highlighted low student confidence as a powerful barrier to implementing the bilingual policy. Confidence appears to be a particular issue for students who have hitherto learned technical subjects in Arabic and are consequently unsure of their English proficiency. The resultant reluctance to engage in classroom activities undermines their progress in both English and the technical subject:

> ". . . they have that mindset [that] it's too hard for them [but] as soon as I give them a translation, they're like 'oh my god, we know that'... they are having this kind of hurdle in their mind only that it's difficult." – Cycle 3 biology and health sciences teacher

However, it should be noted that ¬- as discussed above in relation to students' general English skills ¬- several interviewees suggested that student confidence, for the most part, constitutes a temporary barrier, which requires intense support at the outset of the policy but may present less of an issue as students become acclimatized to EMI.

The possibility of acclimatization, however, appears to be gendered. Several interviewees suggested that behavioral issues present a more significant barrier in boys' schools due to their privileged position in the job market.

> "I'm used to dealing with angry boys. Basically, these boys are not angry. They just don't care because their whole life is mapped out for them." – Cycle 3 health science teacher

This finding suggests that education represents a means for girls to accrue the cultural capital necessary for career advancement traditionally denied to them:

> "The girls seem to have a different work ethic. I think they are kind of aiming for universities... the boys, when I was teaching them, I felt like they were leaning towards the police force of the UAE. And there's actually no requirements from school, so it was easy for them, like school was, I suppose, maybe like social time where they got to meet their pals and they'd still [get] a good job at the end of it." – Cycle 3 health sciences teacher

An underlying theme concerning obstacles to implementation revolved around difficulties arising from the transitional period of the early stages of policy implementation. Concerns about students' English proficiency and student confidence, for example, were frequently qualified by statements indicating a belief that said barriers would become less influential as the policy becomes more embedded in the system. However, it is clear that there are considerable barriers to implementation in the short- to medium-term that require support from educational authorities to mitigate their impact on student outcomes.

Teacher Strategies to Overcoming Barriers to Implementation

The Utilization of Codeswitching to Support EMI

Codeswitching[2] in bilingual classrooms is well-established as a tool for securing both content learning and language learning (Cahyani et al., 2018; Sakaria & Priyana, 2018). Proficiency in both Arabic and English is not a requirement of EMI teachers in the UAE (Gallagher, 2011), but due to the high proportion of

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[1] Codeswitching refers to the practice of alternating between two or more languages in a single conversation.

foreign teachers in the UAE who originate from other Arabic-speaking countries (such as Jordan, Syria, and Egypt), many EMI teachers can speak both languages. Half of the questionnaire respondents reported using Arabic in their classrooms to explain concepts that students struggle to understand in English, lending credence to Holmarsdottir (2005)'s finding that many bilingual teachers prioritize ensuring comprehension of subject matter over achieving a pure English classroom environment. There was considerable variation in the percentage of classroom speaking time that these teachers reported conducting in Arabic, suggesting a lack of uniformity in how teachers utilize their bilingualism to support students' learning.

In interviews, bilingual teachers spoke of leveraging their bilingualism where necessary as a means of helping students to understand subject content:

> ". . . if the teachers have both languages to teach such subjects like math and physics and biology and chemistry it will be more effective to teach the students… [I have students] all the time coming to me and [telling] me, 'teacher, we didn't understand these subjects, please explain for us in Arabic so we can understand what's happening.'" – Cycle 3 biology teacher

> ". . . having a bilingual teacher who can speak both Arabic and English… is important as they may struggle with some words and concepts that need to be explained in Arabic." – Cycle 2 English teacher

Teacher bilingualism was considered particularly important in helping lower-ability students, echoing Elmetwally (2012)'s finding that lower-ability students had particularly positive experiences with the use of teacher codeswitching:

> "English-speaking teachers will find it difficult to communicate with the weak student, and thus, the weak student will not get the right to education." – Cycle 3 science teacher

To a large extent, the use of Arabic in bilingual classrooms was considered a powerful means of aiding students' learning, particularly during the early stages of implementation, during which academically weaker students and students who have previously learned in Arabic struggle to transition to EMI. Therefore, the evidence supports previous research suggesting that judicious use of Arabic can be a powerful tool to support bilingual education in the UAE (Elmetwally,

2012; Kennetz et al., 2020). As the bilingual policy is further extended to include lower ability academic streams, particular consideration should be given to the deployment of bilingual teachers to ensure that weaker students› academic progression is not compromised. As some authors have suggested (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2007), this might take the form of prioritizing the recruitment of bilingual teachers and the provision of explicit teacher training on bilingual pedagogy. It might also take the form of some degree of Arabic training for native English-speaking teachers, particularly in scientific terminology (Sammons et al., 2014).

Utilizing Peer Support in Mixed-ability Classrooms to Prevent Learners from Falling Behind

Although the UAE's education system utilizes academic streaming, all of the teachers interviewed reported teaching mixed-ability classes. Several teachers, particularly those unable to speak Arabic, viewed the mixture of abilities in their classrooms as a resource upon which they could draw. This support works in two ways. First, it is an aid in the translation of key vocabulary and concepts from English to Arabic. The following statement from a teacher exemplifies this.

> ". . . if I don't know the term in Arabic, the high ability students might help me in order to announce to the class what is the term in Arabic." – Cycle 3 mathematics teacher

Secondly, teachers described high-ability students assisting weaker students by explaining key terms or concepts in Arabic. Thus, students utilize their own multilingual skills to prevent weaker students from falling behind.

> ". . . they will explain the answer to me and once they understand it fully and answer to me completely… they will also explain the same answer in Arabic for some of the misunderstanding students if there are any just in case, so everyone is like up to date." – Cycle 3 mathematics teacher

Facilitating and utilizing peer support in mixed-ability classes is an essential tool for teachers in overcoming issues caused by weaker students' lower levels of English proficiency and subject knowledge, particularly for teachers who do not speak Arabic and cannot employ their multilingualism as a tool.

Institutional Support Received by EMI Teachers

Tensions between School Leaders and Teachers

The quality of relationships between teachers and school leaders had both positive and negative elements. When questionnaire respondents were asked how confident they would feel in raising concerns about the policy to their school leaders, the responses were generally positive but with significant variation.

Several interviewees reported beneficial and constructive relationships with their school leaders, conveying that school leaders acted as an additional layer of support for day-to-day issues that threaten to undermine policy implementation. For example, one teacher responded:

> ". . . the administration always have my back as a teacher and if there was ever an issue, like, we know they'd be on it straight away." - Cycle 3 health sciences teacher

Another teacher described the process through which their school leadership intervened to assist them in securing additional academic support for students struggling with the transition to EMI, thereby acting as an intermediary between departments and a key driver of a whole-school approach to underachievement.

Other evidence, conversely, suggests strained relationships between school leaders and teachers. One teacher reported receiving no support from school leadership in terms of interventions for underachieving students, implying that the degree of support is highly dependent on the school context and the individual relationships between school leaders and their EMI teachers:

> "It tends to be done a lot on an individual teacher basis... but there isn't, that I've seen, a great deal of support from the school administration for that." - Cycle 3 health sciences teacher

The same teacher suggested that the poor relationship that exists between some EMI teachers and their school leaders may be owed in part to cultural differences ¬- particularly in terms of the teaching styles of foreign teachers - and the lack of trust between parties which such differences engender.

Indeed, one of the school leaders interviewed expressed frustration at what they considered to be foreign teachers overreacting to students' behavioral issues:

> ". . . some teachers come and do not accept the bad behavior from the students, and they make a big problem for students if he [does] anything wrong, so, [the teacher] has to be more open to understand that students are still students and they sometimes have some problem." - Cycle 3 principal

Another school leader conveyed the belief that issues relating to the efficacy of teacher professional development reflect a lack of motivation on the part of teachers, rather than the quality of the training:

> "the Ministry's wasted loads of money on teachers who don't want to be trained. Some of them, okay, they go to their training, okay, and they come back, they just killed the three or four hours." - Cycle 3 principal

The quality of teacher-school leader relationships, therefore, appears to vary considerably in quality. While there are cases in which school leaders effectively support teachers to overcome barriers to policy implementation, evidence also suggests the existence of considerable tension between teachers and school leaders.

The Impact of the MOE's Support and Recruitment Policies on Policy Implementation

The support teachers and school leaders receive from the MOE also shape their decisions about policy implementation. As with interviewees' perspectives on school leadership, views on support from the MOE were mostly positive but with some critical feedback.

A facet of MOE support, which multiple interviewees emphasized as highly effective, was the lead teacher system, whereby each teacher is assigned to a subject-specific lead teacher who works across the emirate as a level of support between teachers and the MOE. Interviewees highlighted the availability and approachability of lead teachers as crucial strengths:

> ". . . they're there any time during the day or the night with you if you need anything or if you want to talk, they're very good." - Cycle 3 health sciences teacher

However, concerns were raised about certain aspects of the relationship between the MOE and schools in implementing the bilingual policy. For example, one school leader pointed to an overwhelming number of initiatives at the ministry, cluster, and school level as complicating implementation:

> ". . . there are too much things going on. So the cluster manager will make initiatives and different fields the same thing the Ministry will do initiatives in the same field. So many, many initiatives." – Cycle 3 school leader

Moreover, both of the school leaders interviewed raised concerns about the quality of the foreign teachers assigned by the MOE to teach in their schools. The school leaders' criticism reflected concerns in the literature regarding overseas recruits lacking teaching experience or knowledge of language pedagogy (Hamidaddin, 2008; Ridge et al., 2017; Thorne, 2011). They noted particular issues regarding the recruitment of foreign teachers without teaching qualifications and teaching experience and the implications this has on the quality of their teaching:

> ". . . once you have CELTA, it doesn't mean that you are a teacher. This year I have, for example, maybe four teachers, okay, who are not teachers... they should have at least one year experience as a teacher. Because teaching in UAE is different. So the teachers should have a foundation in [their] country." – Cycle 3 school leader

> ". . . some teachers come in for example in biology or in English, but without any education certificates to understand how to deal with the students or in classroom situations, so they have good experience and subjects but don't have any experience in teaching... we must hire teachers from foreign countries according to their subjects and their certificate, not just hire any teachers because he just understands and speaks English." – Cycle 3 school leader

One school leader spoke at length about the importance of foreign teachers understanding the community's culture in which they teach in order that they can inculcate behaviors and attitudes in accordance with the local culture. They argued that the current lack of cultural understanding is a significant hindrance, echoing concerns in the literature that Emirati teachers are concerned that foreign teachers may transmit cultural and behavioral patterns that run counter to conservative Emirati culture (Ibrahim et al., 2013; Sadek, 2016; Solloway, 2018):

> ". . . foreign teachers don't know about the cultures for Arab students and don't know how to deal with Arab students." – Cycle 3 school leader

Several interviewees believed that the training that foreign teachers receive to acclimatize them to Emirati culture is insufficient. The training received varies, but two teachers described undertaking a three-day course on local culture in which the various rules and regulations of teaching in the UAE were explained, with little discussion of the implications of cultural differences on teaching styles and classroom management. Another expatriate teacher described the gap between the cultural training and classroom reality as the following:

> "[The training] didn't really focus on the educational, cultural differences. It was more about the Islamic way of life and those kinds of cultural differences. It certainly [did not address] most of the problems that we find we're up against." – Cycle 3 health sciences teacher

The Impact of the Bilingual Policy on Students' English Language Skills

Despite the concerns outlined above, interview and questionnaire participants were overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the impact of the bilingual policy so far. Nearly all participants responded that the policy had either a strong or some positive impact on students' English skills in questionnaires. Interviewees also generally concurred with this view, with many observing a clear positive progression in students' English skills as the policy becomes embedded in the system:

> "I have noticed that they are getting better... they're getting a lot more exposure to the English language, which is helping them." – Cycle 3 health sciences teacher

> "Now we're in term three, we started this in term one, and I see... a really massive improvement with them with some of the students, especially in English." – Cycle 3 biology teacher

Teachers also perceived the current policy implementation period as a transition period in which the policy is not implemented uniformly across the system. This transition period precludes the policy›s full impact, which will not be felt until students learn technical subjects in English from the beginning of their formal schooling. Several teachers argued that the MOE should not expect significant impact in the short term:

"... you know, it needs time. And if they're willing to give it time they'll get fantastic results." – Cycle 3 health sciences teacher

"I see this project as a long term goal. If anybody will expect them to evolve as a student, after one year, it's not possible, but [by the] time they will reach the 12 standard, they will be much better than what they are right now." – Cycle 3 biology and health sciences teacher

Such views imply that the MOE should not be deterred if a large impact is not visible in the short term. In general, education policies take time to embed in systems and effect change in learning outcomes (Borman et al., 2003). A common pitfall of education policymaking is frequent change and disruption to education systems. The UAE has initiated multiple policies to raise English language learning outcomes in recent years, which were discontinued due to insufficient impact; however, the current policy will require additional time and resources to be systematically embedded and effect change.

Policy Recommendations

This paper has focused on the barriers teachers face in the day-to-day implementation of the 2017 bilingual education policy in Ras Al Khaimah›s government schools and their strategies to overcome them. The results indicate issues relating to teacher recruitment, professional development, students' English proficiency, and student behavior undermine policy implementation. Teachers responded to these concerns in a multitude of ways, including utilizing bilingualism and peer support. The following section outlines recommendations on how the implementation processes could be improved.

Reviewing Teacher Recruitment Processes

The MOE should give serious consideration to their approach to teacher recruitment for EMI classrooms. The focus on recruiting native English-speaking teachers – in cases where they have limited teaching experience, qualifications, or both – is unlikely to raise students' learning outcomes in the long term. Candidates with prior teaching experience, particularly in teaching students whose first language is not English, should be prioritized. Priority should also be given to bilingual English/Arabic teachers, regardless of whether English is their first language, especially as the policy is expanded to include more lower-ability students.

Updating Professional Development to Reflect the Needs of the Bilingual Policy

Policymakers are encouraged to review the professional development provided to EMI teachers. Specifically, the training provided to foreign teachers upon arrival in the UAE should include a greater emphasis on the pedagogical implications of cultural differences and preparation for the context-specific challenges that teachers are likely to face. Furthermore, ongoing professional development would benefit from a greater focus on EMI environments› specific needs, including training on the appropriate use of bilingualism to support EMI. In case an EMI teacher is monolingual, basic training in the Arabic language may enable them to ease students' transition to EMI. Policymakers should also consider the form that the professional development takes. A reliance on workshops and seminars is unlikely to effect behavioral change, whereas a blended model that combines such approaches with more ongoing and embedded forms such as mentoring, coaching, and professional learning communities may be more successful.

Providing Teachers with Needed Support

EMI teachers may benefit from additional support to tackle student behavioral issues, particularly in boys' schools. This support may take the form of professional development relating to classroom management but should also encompass the fostering of a school environment in which poor student behavior is considered a structural problem rather than a failing of individual teachers. In addition to improving EMI

learning environments, improving behavior in boys' schools will aid in addressing the persistent gender attainment gap in the UAE.

The Need for Intensive Support for Students During the Transition to EMI

Whereas Abu Dhabi implements EMI in technical subjects in its NSM in Grades 1-3, Ras Al Khaimah implements EMI in its technical subjects in later grades. This late immersion model has important implications for students› need for support to transition from Arabic-medium instruction to EMI. Policymakers should consider how to ease this transition; for example, they could integrate scientific vocabulary into EFL curricula and encourage teachers to use their bilingualism judiciously.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

Several limitations are present in interpreting the results of this study. The limited population sample did not include Emirati and English teachers› views in the set of interviews, both of which would potentially have afforded alternative insights into policy implementation realities. The sample size of questionnaire respondents was also too small to enable broad conclusions about the UAE's EMI teaching population as a whole.

Due to the limitations discussed above, research examining the perspectives of a larger group of teachers - particularly Emirati teachers, to enable comparisons between nationalities - is needed. The field would also benefit from research into the perspectives of civil servants on the policy reform process to assess not only the policymaking process but the points of convergence and divergence between policy as text and policy as practice. Further research is necessary to understand the impact of the bilingual policy on the relationship between socioeconomic status and learning outcomes, both in terms of mastery of subject content and access to EMI higher education institutions. Longitudinal research on the policy›s long-term effects on students' English and Arabic proficiency and their subject content knowledge would also provide further insights.

Authors

Alexander Hall-Chen is an Education Policy Advisor for CBI and a recipient of the Al Qasimi Foundation's Oxford University Scholars Grant.

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