

A Critical Analysis of the Language Policy of an International Baccalaureate Curriculum School in Abu Dhabi

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Abstract

Arabic is the official language of the UAE and the language of all federal authorities. However, English serves as the country's lingua franca and the primary medium of instruction in nearly all private educational institutions. The UAE has introduced a Language Education Policy (LEP) that emphasizes the importance of learning a second language (L2) in addition to the first language (L1), which refers to a person's mother tongue. Consequently, bilingual education has received increased attention in recent years, with the modernization of the UAE's education system and the promotion of a bilingual approach to teaching and learning being central objectives in the strategic plans of educational supervision bodies. This research aims to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the language policy in an International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum school in Abu Dhabi and provide recommendations. The school's language policy document is critically analysed, leading to several key findings, which are presented and discussed in this paper.

Keywords

Language Policy, Teaching Language, Language Acquisition

1. Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a multilingual and multiethnic country (Al-Bataineh, 2021). Arabic is the official language and the language of all federal authorities, yet English serves as the country's lingua franca and the medium of instruction in almost all private educational institutions. Many schools are required to follow policies regarding English-medium instruction, as these documents

indicate the schools' commitment to fostering students' linguistic competency in one or more languages. Due to recent local, national, and international realities, proficiency in two or more languages has become increasingly important (O'Sullivan, 2015). As a result, attention has recently shifted toward bilingual education in Arabic-speaking countries. For example, the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) implemented a strategic plan to revamp the UAE's education system by encouraging a bilingual approach to equip students with the communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills needed for the future.

It is well-known in the academic community that cultural, social, political, and religious factors play a significant role in shaping language policy. In an increasingly globalized environment, educational leaders worldwide believe that bilingualism is beneficial, leading to a rise in research in this field (O'Sullivan, 2015). This was highlighted by Crystal (1997 in O'Sullivan, 2015), who noted that 66% of the world's children are raised in a bilingual environment. In the UAE, a Language Education Policy (LEP) was introduced, emphasizing the need to learn a second language (L2) in addition to the first language (L1), i.e., a person's mother tongue (Godwin, 2006 in Dirar Shehadeh Musmar, 2018). Consequently, much attention has been given to bilingual education, with the modernization of the UAE's education system and the promotion of a bilingual approach to teaching and learning being central objectives of strategic plans by bodies like ADEC (Dirar Shehadeh Musmar, 2018). In this research, the language policy document of an International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum school is critically analyzed. While the policy claims to support bilingualism, only two subjects are taught in Arabic.

The rationale behind writing this paper is twofold: first, to critically analyze the implementation of a language policy in an Abu Dhabi school, and second, to explore a topic that has not been extensively covered in the UAE context. The paper will begin with a review of relevant research, followed by a discussion of the analytical process applied to the policy. In today's globalized academic world, fostering bilingual competence and using two languages for educational purposes with a high level of fluency is increasingly important and advantageous (Dirar Shehadeh Musmar, 2018). The significance of this research lies in the insight it may provide stakeholders regarding the critical role bilingual education policy in Abu Dhabi plays in ensuring its long-term viability and success.

1.1. Aims & Objectives

The primary aim of this paper is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the language policy at an IB curriculum school in Abu Dhabi. The specific objectives are:

- 1) To understand the language policy of an International Baccalaureate curriculum school in Abu Dhabi.
- 2) To determine the strengths and weaknesses of the language policy at an International Baccalaureate curriculum school in Abu Dhabi.
- 3) To recommend actions to enhance its strengths and mitigate its weaknesses.

1.2. Research Questions

Main Question:

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the language policy at an International Baccalaureate curriculum school in Abu Dhabi?

Sub-questions:

There are three sub-questions for this paper:

- 1) What does the language policy of an IB curriculum school include?
- 2) What are the advantages and disadvantages of the language policy at an IB curriculum school in Abu Dhabi?
- 3) What can be done to make the language policy more effective?

2. Literature Review

2.1. An Overview of “Language Acquisition” Theories

An L1 is a language acquired by an individual during early childhood (Sinha et al., 2009 in [Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015](#)). Since language acquisition does not occur in a vacuum, several basic theories have been developed to explain how the L1 is acquired, learned, and taught (Hickmann, 1986 in [Fletcher & Garman, 1986](#)). Some of these theories include the “Behaviourist” theory and the “nativist” theory. The Behavioural learning theory, also known as Behaviourism, focuses on how students learn. According to the founders of Behaviourism, Watson and Skinner, all behaviours are taught through interaction with the environment, while inherited factors have relatively little impact on behaviour ([Devaki, 2021](#)). In the classroom, students are passive participants; teachers provide knowledge as part of a stimulus-response system.

However, one of the world’s leading linguists, Noah Chomsky, proposes a theory that suggests an alternative to the Behaviorist theory. Chomsky argues that humans are born with a gene that enables language learning, and there is an innate Language Acquisition Device (LAD) located within the brain responsible for the process. Once the L1 is learned, humans have the ability to learn additional languages during late childhood, adolescence, or adulthood ([Slabakova, 2021](#)). The L2 is often an official language required for education, careers, and other purposes ([Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015](#)). Linguistic research has focused on how L2 is acquired and whether L2 learning follows a similar pattern to L1 acquisition.

Several more theories about second language acquisition (SLA) have also been proposed, with one of the most significant being Stephen Krashen’s model. Krashen proposed five hypotheses to describe the SLA process ([Thaman, 2019](#)). His first theory distinguishes acquisition from learning. In acquisition, a language is learned subconsciously, similar to how an L1 is acquired in informal environments (*ibid*). In contrast, learning occurs consciously, usually in formal settings, when a pupil learns the language’s norms and grammatical structures. The second hypothesis is “monitoring”, which focuses on the accuracy of language use. The third hypothesis is the “natural order”, where learners acquire the language rules in a predictable sequence. The fourth hypothesis is “input”, which Krashen

claimed was the only way to acquire an L2—by receiving understandable input. The final hypothesis is the “affective filter”, which means that when a learner’s affective filter is high, they are less likely to learn the language. Thus, a positive learning environment is essential for effective language acquisition. Although Krashen’s monitor theory covered most aspects of L2 acquisition, it has been criticised by researchers and theorists for its lack of definitional adequacy (Gitsaki, 1998).

Bilingualism is simply defined as the ability to speak two languages fluently (Antoniou, 2019). The “threshold theory” is a hypothesis related to bilingualism that attempts to explain its cognitive impacts (Akhtar & Kartika, 2019). According to Cummins, bilinguals are divided into three categories: limited, partial, and proficient bilingualism (ibid). Individuals with limited bilingualism have a poor level of competency in both languages and experience unfavourable cognitive effects. Partial bilingualism refers to individuals who are proficient in only one language. Proficient bilingualism is the highest level of proficiency, where individuals are skilled in both languages, leading to positive cognitive consequences. In summary, threshold theory asserts that bilingual children must achieve certain levels of linguistic competency to avoid cognitive deficiencies. This point is particularly significant for any language policy document that schools in the UAE attempt to follow.

2.2. Teaching “Language” in Schools

Students learn through a variety of styles and techniques, including seeing, hearing, thinking, acting, logical and intuitive thinking, memorizing, and imagining (Chetty et al., 2019). Instructional methods also vary; some teachers teach by talking to students, while others host classroom discussions. Some focus on grammatical rules, while others highlight examples. Some prioritize memorization, while others promote understanding. The compatibility between a student’s distinctive approach to learning and the instructor’s characteristic approach to teaching determines how much a student learns in a class.

There are a variety of methods for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL); however, not all of them are effective in helping learners achieve their objectives. Therefore, the most effective methods must be chosen and implemented (Toro et al., 2019). For instance, the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) is a foreign language teaching approach that focuses on text translation, grammar, and vocabulary memorization (Biplab, 2018). GTM aids in the rapid increase of students’ vocabulary by avoiding complex definitions and long explanations. It is also convenient for teachers because they do not have to consider how to explain new words, and the use of audio-visual aids is not required. Despite its ease of teaching, GTM does not follow the natural order of language learning (Kaharuddin, 2018). Additionally, since the emphasis is primarily on grammar rules, it pays little attention to speaking and listening skills. Many linguists have rejected GTM due to its focus on grammatical rule memorization and translation, as well as its

neglect of speaking skills.

Consequently, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emerged as a modern approach aimed at helping students acquire implicit language skills, allowing them to participate in dialogue freely and naturally (Ellis et al., 2020). TBLT views language as a means of communication rather than a subject (Sholeh, 2020). Although TBLT has been praised for fostering a more learner-centered environment and enabling students to gain a better understanding of the target language, it has been criticized for being time-consuming and challenging for untrained teachers to adopt successfully.

Due to the widespread use of English around the world, the number of non-native English-speaking teachers has surpassed that of native English speakers. Generally, there has been a favorable attitude toward native L1 English speakers, with the belief that they are superior in terms of speaking and pronunciation. As a result, it is often preferred to learn English under the supervision of a native speaker. However, although many people consider native speakers to be better, Lewier and Bilmona (2010) in Gurkan & Yuksel (2012) suggest that non-native L2 English teachers may, in some instances, be superior to native speakers and that students may benefit more from non-native speakers. According to Medgyes (1994) in Gurkan & Yuksel (2012), non-native speakers have several unique and advantageous characteristics; for example, they can detect and address students' potential L2 language problems and communicate with students in their own mother tongue. Although non-natives can indeed be effective teachers, they often feel insecure when compared to natives. According to Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) in Gurkan & Yuksel (2012), native speakers are often considered more competent users of English, leading many students to prefer them for developing language skills such as speaking, writing, reading, and listening.

2.3. Language Policies in Schools

A language policy in an educational institution encompasses all language-related practices, management, and beliefs (Cushing, 2021). Although teachers may view the language policy as merely a document, it is, in reality, a fundamental set of philosophies and practices that should be implemented through appropriate pedagogies (Anyidoho, 2018). Schools play a crucial role in developing a child's language competency, and this development occurs through mechanisms outlined in the language policy, such as pedagogy, curricula, rules, and tests (Sah, 2022).

The school language policy reflects the interests and perspectives of the entire school community, allowing pupils to learn in their language of instruction as well as in regional and national languages (Hashimoto & Glasgow, 2021). Learning more than one language can enhance a person's cognitive ability and social development (Bialystok & Craik, 2022). Consequently, the language policy is implemented in alignment with the school's vision and mission statements, which encourage pupils to recognize and value cultural diversity and respect all languages.

3. Critical Analysis of the Policy Document

3.1. Analysis Methodology

There are multiple ways to analyze a policy document. According to [Hudson & Lowe \(2009\)](#), such analyses can be conducted at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. Additionally, policy document analyses can include a horizontal approach, which critiques all aspects of the policy, or a vertical approach, which focuses in detail on a specific aspect of the policy document. In this research, a vertical approach has been adopted to address the research objectives and aims.

The language policy document includes a lengthy list of headings, such as: 1) language philosophy, 2) language of instruction, 3) essential agreements for teaching language, 4) host country language: modern classic Arabic, 5) English language learners, 6) standard forms of language, 7) English as a first language, 8) mother tongue maintenance and development, 9) meeting diverse learning needs, 10) language and the primary years program, 11) primary years program English as an additional language practices, and 12) mother tongue. For this paper, as part of my vertical deep dive into strengths and weaknesses, I focus on analyzing the following sections of the language policy document:

- Language philosophy.
- Language of instruction (LoI).
- Essential agreements for teaching language: beliefs and practices.
- Host country language: modern classic Arabic.
- Mother tongue maintenance and development.

3.2. Analysing the “Language Philosophy” Statement

On page 2 of the language policy document, there is a clearly stated language philosophy for the school. This philosophy emphasizes the importance of bilingualism as a medium of instruction, aiming to challenge, nurture, and develop both L1 and L2 language speakers. According to the philosophy statement, language is central to all learning and communication within the curriculum, helping students grow as independent thinkers and proficient multilingual communicators. Students are expected to enhance their ability to think and learn, improve their social skills and values, and acquire knowledge through language.

The language philosophy statement is the main strength of the policy document because it clearly articulates the educational leaders' expectations for the school environment. Furthermore, the school's language philosophy is supported by the Ministry of Education (MoE) policy and youth vision, which assert that high-quality education fosters a generation with innovative thinking and continuous self-learning skills, preparing them to adapt and thrive in the future ([Baker, 2017](#)). Moreover, the MoE emphasizes that language learning is a crucial aspect of modern education, and schools offering bilingual education provide a valuable alternative to monolingual education.

3.3. Analysing the “Language of Instruction” Statement

As stated on page 3 of the policy, the school's LoI is English. Consequently, all

subjects are taught in English except for Arabic, Islamic studies, and UAE studies, which are taught in Arabic due to the importance of Arabic cultural heritage and religion. His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan (may God have mercy on him) emphasized the importance of preserving national identity and the Arabic language (Baker, 2017). Although the school aims to make all students fully bilingual in Arabic and English, the predominance of English as the LOI has undeniably impacted Arabic literacy negatively (Cullinon et al., 2017 in Al-Issa, 2017). Despite Arabic still being spoken at home, Arabic proficiency has noticeably declined in recent times and has increasingly been marginalized. This situation represents a weakness within the policy. Given that the school is bilingual, the number of English-taught subjects should be balanced with the number of Arabic-taught subjects. This view is supported by other researchers who believe that students should receive equal exposure to both Arabic and English (Al-Issa, 2017).

3.4. Analysing the “Essential Agreements” Statement

The policy document includes a section titled ‘Essential Agreements,’ which serves as an unofficial contract between teachers and the school. It outlines what is expected of teachers in terms of language teaching and learning and highlights some of the school’s achievements in language development. For instance, the school aimed to elevate each student’s literacy and proficiency in both Arabic and English to the highest possible level. On the one hand, this section can be viewed as a strength because it provides language teachers with clear expectations. On the other hand, it has a notable weakness: the achievements and goals listed are not truly measurable. For example, although the school aimed to improve students’ literacy skills, many students excel in speaking and listening but struggle with literacy. According to numerous teachers, the weakest skills among students are reading and writing (Gobert, 2019).

3.5. Analysing the “Host Country Language” Statement

On page 5, the policy addresses the importance of Modern Classical Arabic. This section of the policy document has an admirable goal: achieving proficiency in Modern Classical Arabic for students. In addition to English, Modern Classical Arabic is also an official language in workplaces and education in the UAE, making it an important means of communication (Salameh, 2018). However, this section can be considered a weakness, and possibly the weakest part of the entire document. Firstly, the term “Modern Classical Arabic” is incorrect; the accurate terminology used by linguists is “Modern Standard Arabic” (MSA). Secondly, the brief paragraph that highlights the importance of MSA is inadequate. The policy should present clear objectives and guidelines for teaching and learning MSA at the school, similar to those provided for English. It seems that this section was added merely to fulfill a requirement, without offering any clearly measurable aims.

3.6. Analysing the “Mother Tongue Maintenance” Statement

On page 6, the policy addresses the preservation and development of the mother tongue. It explicitly states that 98% of the students are locals, and the school aims to help them maintain their mother tongue during Arabic, UAE, and Islamic studies, as their mother tongue is Arabic. However, this section of the policy can be seen as a weakness because it fails to differentiate between the local (UAE) dialect of Arabic and MSA. The policy does not clarify whether it is referring to MSA, Classical Arabic, or the local dialect. This distinction is linguistically significant because, as Noam Chomsky and other linguists explain, there is a substantial difference between local dialects of Arabic and MSA, a phenomenon known as “diglossia.” Diglossia refers to the use of different versions of the same language in different contexts (Fishman, 2020). For example, when students study religious texts such as Hadiths and verses from the Qur’an in Islamic studies, they encounter Classical Arabic, which must be translated and explained to them in MSA. Additionally, when students learn Arabic poetry at school, they often struggle with ambiguous words and rely on teachers to explain the meanings.

4. Discussion

Recall that the aim of this paper was to 1) understand the language policy, 2) analyze it by identifying its strengths and weaknesses, and 3) make recommendations for potential improvements. Having identified the strengths and weaknesses in the previous section, this section addresses two main themes that emerged from the critical analysis of the policy and concludes with recommendations.

4.1. The UAE’s “My Language Is My Identity” Campaign

In the UAE, the government has observed that young Emiratis are becoming weaker in Arabic while becoming stronger in English. Their mentality, attitudes, and beliefs are increasingly aligned with Western culture, leading them to think more in English than in Arabic. According to Masri (2020), the issue is not just that English is the LoI but also that it has become the language of off-campus communication between students and, in some cases, family members. In response, the MoE launched a campaign called “The Arabic Language is Our Identity,” aimed at preserving the Arabic language (Sebugwaawo, 2021). As a result, schools were advised to maintain the Arabic language by teaching MSA properly to promote local heritage and culture.

However, this goal is not being adequately achieved because students do not spend enough time studying MSA. Consequently, most Arabic speakers use their colloquial language, and even when they use standard Arabic in class, they often switch automatically to colloquial Arabic while speaking (Salameh, 2018). Furthermore, the majority of students have only acquired the Arabic dialect, which they learned from their family members at home (Thomure, 2019). It should be noted that linguists such as Noam Chomsky have described Arabic as a diglossic language, involving the coexistence of two closely related varieties of Arabic. On

one hand, native Arabic speakers use their own colloquial dialect; on the other hand, they must learn MSA because it is esteemed in professional, governmental, and religious contexts. However, many native Arabs lack proficiency in MSA, to the extent that learning it feels like learning a foreign language. In fact, approximately 30% of students are unable to adequately read or write in MSA (Eisenchlas, Schalley, & Guillemin, 2013). Therefore, policymakers and Arabic language educators should address this issue by providing students with more time and resources to study MSA (Thomure, 2019).

4.2. The Challenge of Implementing a Language Policy

Having analyzed the policy document, it is evident that there is a mismatch between the policy's goals and the actual outcomes. The policy seems to have a Wishlist of goals focusing on enhancing students' bilingual skills, particularly oral communication, but these goals are presented without measurable outcomes. It is insufficient for students to focus solely on oral communication; they must also be able to read and write in the target language (Pratiwi, 2016). For example, IELTS exam results in Abu Dhabi show that students consistently perform well in the speaking and listening sections but underperform in the reading and writing sections. Thus, the most challenging components of the IELTS test for students are writing and reading (Sultana, 2021). In writing, IELTS examinees are required to produce a substantial number of words in a short amount of time, which is difficult to achieve without a thorough understanding of lexical resources. Additionally, students struggle with time management in reading, cannot employ appropriate reading strategies, and have difficulty deducing meaning from the text.

Another example is that most universities in the UAE require students to participate in a foundation year program to strengthen their reading and writing skills. The UAE has developed an educational strategy mandating that students enrolled in higher education institutions complete a foundation year in English (Gobert, 2019). Despite the emphasis on English learning in K-12 education, English proficiency has often been deemed insufficient for admission to tertiary institutions. Moreover, according to tertiary lecturers in UAE government institutions, many students do not meet the English literacy requirements for studying at an English-medium institution. Instead of relying solely on communication, schools should also emphasize reading and writing to increase students' vocabulary and meet literacy standards (Spanou & Zafiri, 2019).

4.3. Recommendations

Based on my critical analysis of the policy, I would make the following recommendations. Firstly, it is important to focus more on teaching MSA. In the UAE, Arabic is crucial not only for communication but also for formal workplaces, education, and religious contexts. Unfortunately, many Arabic-speaking students have not mastered formal Arabic speaking, reading, and writing skills despite years of study. This issue arises because students do not spend adequate hours

learning MSA, and the choice of teaching methods can also be a fundamental issue that learners face when learning Arabic.

Secondly, the policy document lacks specificity regarding whether teachers are focusing on local dialects, MSA, or classical Arabic. Additionally, the three modules (Arabic, UAE, and Islamic studies) are insufficient for the policy to claim that the school operates a bilingual system, given that 90% of subjects are taught in English. The school should place greater emphasis on the Arabic language to achieve a higher level of proficiency. Measures should be taken to enhance the quality of Arabic language learning and improve students' Arabic language skills (Zurqoni et al., 2020). Incorporating student-centered methods like role-playing and cooperative learning can actively engage students. Integrating digital tools and culturally relevant content, including literature and media, makes Arabic more accessible and relatable. Early exposure, a supportive language environment, and ongoing assessment can further strengthen language skills. Investing in teacher development and encouraging parental involvement fosters a holistic approach, while extracurricular activities like Arabic clubs or drama teams provide additional practice outside the classroom. Together, these efforts create a dynamic and effective Arabic learning environment.

Regarding the English language, students are generally proficient in listening and speaking due to the emphasis on oral communication by many teachers, while reading and writing skills are often neglected. Therefore, teachers should focus more on literacy skills. Hafiz and Tudor (1989) in Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016) suggested that exposing students to a wide range of useful resources significantly impacts their L2 competence. Additionally, exposure to various lexical, syntactical, and textual elements enhances writing and reading skills. Additional exposure involves immersing students in diverse vocabulary, complex sentence structures, and various text types. Through reading different genres and practicing with synonyms, complex sentences, and varied text structures (like narratives and essays), students develop a stronger grasp of language flexibility, enhancing both reading comprehension and writing skills. These recommendations are based on research and can guide the effective implementation of the planned language policy.

In conclusion, this paper adopted a vertical approach to analyze the language policy, identified the strengths and weaknesses of the language policy at an IB curriculum school in Abu Dhabi, and made recommendations for improvement. The policy emphasizes bilingualism, promoting students' ability to communicate effectively in more than one language. However, in practice, the policy does not sufficiently prioritize the Arabic language, as only three subjects use Arabic as the LoI, which constitutes a major weakness due to inadequate exposure to Arabic. Therefore, it is recommended that students be exposed to MSA as equally as they are exposed to English. Additionally, while most students excel in listening and speaking, they struggle with reading and writing, which represents a significant weakness. Language policymakers should establish clear, measurable, and achievable goals that focus on literacy skills, not just communication.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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