

Transnational Higher Education- Linguistic Negotiations

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The IAFOR International Conference on Education 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The demand for transnational higher education, in particular UK education, has been high in countries where there is under- provision. Davis et al. (2000) raise concerns that most programmes are delivered overseas without significant adaptation, questioning therefore whether these programmes are relevant to local context, and appropriate with respect to different cultures, learning styles and language. Internationalisation of higher education in the UAE has been a recent phenomenon, with little subsequent research into the area. The study presented here draws upon the UK's one year postgraduate course in Initial Teacher Education which was adapted by a University in Dubai, as part of an ongoing collaborative venture to assist the University in its stated mission of providing a 'British' Education. A central aim of the UAE training programme was to develop teachers to teach mathematics and science in the English language in public schools thereby raising the quality of English language in these schools. By encouraging this promotion of the English language however it was clear that there could be tensions and challenges in adopting a global language hitherto little developed as a teaching medium. This adaptation of British education is investigated in the context of Dubai, drawing on the lived experiences of students and staff in attempting to make sense of the programme within a local context. It will be argued that tutors and students in offshore Dubai teacher education become 'selective cosmopolitans' who negotiate cross-cultural and linguistic influences pragmatically and ambivalently in order to make sense of the programme.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism ; internationalisation; cross cultural issues in teaching and learning; higher education; teacher education

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Introduction

The demand for transnational higher education, in particular UK education, has been high in countries where there is under-provision of higher education. Internationalisation of higher education in the UAE and the Gulf has been a recent phenomenon and there is little research into the area. Davis et al. (2000) raise concerns that most programmes are delivered overseas without significant adaptation. According to their study, only 28% of programmes were adapted to the local context. They raise questions therefore relating to whether the overseas programmes are relevant to the local context, and appropriate with respect to different cultures, learning styles and language. The aim of this article is to consider the adaptation of a UK postgraduate course within the UAE. In particular it draws on the lived experiences of students and staff in attempting to make sense of the programme within a local context. By encouraging the students to engage with the English language and promote its use in UAE schools it was clear that there could be tensions and challenges in adopting a global language hitherto little developed as a teaching medium. There has however been pressure on Emirati nationals to improve their competence in English language over recent years. . Despite the fact that Arabic is the only official language of the Emirate of Dubai, English is an essential medium of communication among its highly diverse expatriate population. It pervades its daily life, market, education and media. There is an emerging pattern of Arabic being replaced by English as the main language in some Emirati homes (Burden – Leahy 2009). There is also a perceived need to educate nationals in the English language to serve the global economy. Moreover, Emirati Government policy requires them to raise their competence level to occupy positions in the private sector. Dubai's higher education institutions use English as the main language of instruction and require a minimum English score to be eligible to enter university. There is therefore a perception that public schools in the UAE are failing to prepare students for higher education in English as they teach in Arabic.

The study reported here draws upon the UK's PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) programme, a one year course in Initial Teacher Education. This course was adapted by a University in the United Arab Emirate of Dubai, as part of an ongoing collaborative venture in which a partnership had been formulated with the UK University to assist the University in its stated mission of providing a 'British' Education. Funded by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority in Dubai a central aim and focus of the UAE programme was to develop teachers who could teach mathematics and science in the English language in public schools thereby raising the quality of English language in these schools. In this context the emphasis on the English language within the teacher education programme was central. Within the Emirate of Dubai however there is great variety in educational provision and curricula and this variety needed to be factored into any innovative practice in schools. There is clearly a divide between the public schools and the independent schools where English is the main medium of instruction. This emerged as a source of contention and challenge for the students, therefore it was felt that there was a need to investigate further, aiming to add to the field in relation to the adaptation of programmes abroad

Conceptual Context: Global Contact Zone

The study is conceptually located in the notion of 'Contact Zone' Pratt (1991). According to her, 'contact' zones are: 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in the context of highly asymmetrical relations of power' (p.1). Singh & Doherty (2004) expand this concept as 'global contact zones' to include sites of international higher education. Individuals in global educational contact zones come with diverse worldviews, histories and educational experiences and contest cross-cultural dilemmas through day-to-day pedagogical experiences. The business of exporting or importing higher education is not only an act of exchanging educational products but also ensuring the flow of ideologies, social values and cultural symbols.

As a consequence, global educational context zones raise new moral, cultural, and pedagogical dilemmas. They 'unsettle our assumptions about teachers, learners and appropriate pedagogic strategies' (Singh & Doherty, 2004). These assumptions are important as global educational contact zones operate within asymmetrical power dynamics. The universities usually from the developed English speaking countries are invited as 'experts' in the global contact zone of developing countries. They enter through a variety of means such as partnerships, validation, franchise and branch campuses (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The United States, United Kingdom and Australia are leading providers of such international higher education (Bohm, et al., 2004).

The English language dominates global contact zones (Jordao, 2009, p.95). Its supremacy is increasingly established in the academic, scientific and technological sectors. Flowerdew & Li (2008, p.2) observe that English is 'by far the preferred language in the social sciences and the humanities' on a global scale. Teachers and students play a very important role in global educational contact zones. Teachers are at the forefront of confronting 'risks, moral dilemmas on behalf of their institutions and end users' as they navigate between upholding the ethics of cultural respect on one hand and providing acculturating experience of the linguistic and cultural orientation to Western higher education on the other hand (Flowerdew and Li,p.34). Students are also involved as active agents. They 'produce, co-construct and challenge the design of these programmes in and through day to day pedagogic interaction' (p.12).

In considering the participants in this study reference to Skrbis and Ian Woodward's (2007) 'ambivalent' and 'strategic' cosmopolitans is helpful as a conceptual frame of reference to analyze the engagement of students and educators in the process of adaptation of an overseas educational model. It is useful for three reasons. Firstly, it recognizes the intertwined relationship between cosmopolitanism and globalization, secondly, it takes into account a variety of forms of everyday cosmopolitanism and thirdly, it is meant to study the type of people that the participants represent. They are neither 'global elites' nor the 'globally dispossessed'. Skrbis and Woodward's framework helps to explain selective and paradoxical cosmopolitan negotiations that the participants of this study demonstrate. It is therefore in the above conceptual context, that the research questions here are identified:

How do teachers and students adapt Western education in the 'global contact zone' of a developing country?

What ambivalence and pedagogical challenges do they face in adapting a Western model in the context of the local?

Empirical context

Having situated the research problem in its conceptual location the empirical location of the study is now considered. Dubai brings together universities and students from highly diverse cultural, ethnic, national, historical and linguistic backgrounds. The educational providers hail from a multitude of countries and cater to over 12,000 students of many nationalities (DIAC, 2009). A mixture of discourses shapes Dubai's educational sphere. Firstly, there is a huge market of expatriate students seeking overseas education (Wilkins, 2001). Secondly, there is a recognition that Dubai needs to develop its capacity to compete in the global economy (Dubai Strategic Plan, 2015). Thirdly, there is a move towards transferring skills and knowledge from expatriates to UAE Nationals. Expats occupy the vast majority of the workforce, especially in the private sector. The participation of nationals in the private sector was as low as 1% in 1995 (Wilkins, 2001, p.7). There is a political desire to increase this number.

The adapted PGCE programme's initial impetus therefore was to facilitate the Emiratisation of teachers. In particular the main driving force of the programme was to facilitate the development of Emirati nationals who could deliver the subjects of Maths and Science in the English language. However in the absence of sufficient applications from Emirati nationals, the offer of sponsorship on the course was extended to other Arab students. The programme thus, brought together a diversity of Arab students from countries such as Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon. All of them identify themselves as Muslims. The lecturers involved in the adaptation come from diverse faith, national and cultural backgrounds.

In the above empirical context a subsequent sub set of specific research questions were addressed

What do participants perceive as challenges and benefits of the adaptation of the UK model?

What factors do they consider as highly pertinent in adapting the overseas model?

Which aspects of the programme do they appreciate?

Which aspects of the programme do they reject?

Sites and sample

The research reported here was undertaken by two researchers. One researcher focussed their study on interviews with participants on the course and the course educators and managers. The other researcher undertook more in depth fieldwork in order to obtain a richer and fuller understanding of the field. Purposive interviews were initially undertaken with policy makers and curriculum leaders in the UAE and the UK. These interviews mainly served to provide contextual and background information regarding the programme. Course documentation relating to validation and review was also scrutinised. Focus interviews were held with the Mathematics, Science and English lecturers. Focus groups were held with all current students (11) on the programme. Four of these participated in follow up interviews. Students who completed their training the previous year and were now teaching (3 out of 8) were also interviewed. As the interviews progressed it became clearer that the classroom emerged as a site in 'which diverse lived experiences and disparate ways of being and knowing come together to negotiate the sometimes collectivizing cultural practices of traditional education' (Alexander, 2003, p.423). Thus it was decided to primarily focus on the student perspectives. The interviews with the lecturers and the focus groups with students became key primary data sources, the documents served to provide factual understanding and observations helped to provide corroborations with what the participants expressed. The interviews with other stakeholders and questionnaires were used to understand the broader context.

The interviews fell on the continuum of what Powney & Watts (1987) identify as 'respondent' and 'informant' type interviews. In the 'respondent' type, the control of the interview lies with the interviewer who directs the discourse in order to satisfy his or her questions, though not necessarily in a prescribed order. In an 'informant' interview the goal is to obtain insights into the perception of an informant rather than making them respond to predetermined questions. The approach adopted varied on this continuum but was closer to the 'informant' type helping to identify unexpected or unanticipated answers which suggested 'hitherto unthought-of relationships and hypothesis.'

Data analysis

In analysing the data Miles and Huberman's 'fairly classic set' of six common moves as described by Punch (2005, p.194) were adopted. All the interviews and focus groups were transcribed. Three key components of Miles and Huberman's framework were utilised: data reduction, data display and drawing and verifying conclusions. Using the techniques of data display pieces of the data were ordered in a logical flow and kept changing their places as the data analysis progressed. This was not a linear process but occurred in several stages of re-assembly. Conclusions were drawn and verified. Original research questions were refined to ensure that the analysis and research questions shared a close link. This study intended to understand how students and educators experience and engage with the adaptation of the UK's teacher education model in the context of Dubai. Skrbis and Woodward's (2007) conceptualization of 'ambivalent' and 'strategic' cosmopolitanism helped explain the engagement of the students and educators. In this way discourses and counter-discourse on globalization led to an exploration of the tensions between openness to globalization and the fear of loss of local culture

English as ‘Globalization’ versus the loss of Arab identity’

In a consideration of the responses to interviews it became clear that the use and emphasis in the programme on the English language was viewed as being both beneficial and challenging. Students and lecturers interviewed considered English as a means to ‘develop’. They view it as the language for academic development and the language of science, research and higher education. The participants acknowledge a correlation between participating in the global economy and education in English. It is viewed as affording them increased economic mobility. The participants accept it as lingua franca (Jordao, 2009) and are enthusiastically seeking to acquire it. The resistance to English from the public schools where the students were placed for teaching experience had not been anticipated by most of them. One of the students stated,

We need to be realistic that the world around us is using English everywhere and we need to make the students and schools understand. Knowledge has to be applicable- so we have to use English.

The students are active consumers of English. They consume it as the language of popular music, advertising, satellite broadcasting, home computers, and video games. After their lectures and during the breaks they are hooked to the internet which offers 90% of information in English (Chang, 2006). Some students however perceive English also as a threat to their identity. It is important to distinguish that the students do not view English as Western domination but are apprehensive of the survival of Arabic. A threat to Arabic means a threat to their religious and cultural identity and ‘Arab point of view.’ For some students language and religion are deeply interconnected.

Saif: *We will need to build religion upon the language. For example, when you read the Quran you are not going to read the Quran in English. You are going to read it in Arabic.*

Nasir: *I mean you know our language is a very important part of our lives. If you don’t speak Arabic or read Arabic that means you have lost half of the things. You don’t understand your identity.*

Saif: *‘Then, we are not Arabs any more, khalas (finished)’*

The Arabic language is important to them as it is the language with the symbolic capital of the Quran (Vaish, 2008, p.463). It has been the language of high prestige for Arabs. Though Muslims across the world speak numerous languages; it is Arabic which is important to Muslims of different linguistic groups. Their fear of the loss of Arabic is enhanced by the multicultural environment of Dubai whereby some of them they fear that Arabic has been relegated to marginalization and inaccuracies.

English and Arabic: A Space for Both

As a way to resolve the ‘opportunity’ versus ‘threat’ dilemma, a majority of the students recommend bilingual teaching in public schools. Some of them recommend subject-wise division of English and Arabic. They suggest the use of English for maths and science and the use of Arabic to teach subjects such as history and

geography. Some of them suggest mix-language use. One of the students shared his experience:

Ehsan: I remember in college, one of the doctors who is Arabic wanted to teach us a concept. She was speaking in English and repeating and repeating for one hour, and we were not able to understand and then suddenly she decided to say in one word what does that mean in Arabic. So like she said, 'Majkur.' And when she said that, all of us 'yeah, ahhh, OK.' ...mix Arabic and English, so it will be the best, we can get the idea 100%.

The students are however, ambivalent about the degree of emphasis on English versus Arabic within the programme and their teaching placement schools. Some of them suggest that Arabic should be used to explain the concepts and terminologies that are to be taught in English. This is, they suggest, because there are certain terms which are difficult to translate in Arabic, while some concepts are difficult to explain in English. Conversely, another group of participants suggest that English should be the primary medium of instructions and only when children do not understand in English should the teacher resort to Arabic. A few recommend the complete use of English from the middle years onwards while a few others favour it being introduced at the early primary grades.

Their bilingualism can be seen as an attempt to resist perceived totalitarian effects of globalizing forces. It is considered as a way of preserving indigenous language as well as adapting outside language. This can be seen in the context of the debate which suggests that the choice of English as medium of instruction connotes 'prestige' and 'power' to foreign language over the native language. UNESCO's Education Position Paper (2003, p.14, cited in Mayall, 2008) argues that:

'The choice of language in the educational system confers power and prestige through its use in formal instruction. Not only is there a symbolic aspect, referring to status and visibility, but also a conceptual aspect referring to shared values and worldview expressed through that language.'

In the English-Arabic debate what is perceived as at stake is a loss of 'status and visibility' for the Arabic language (Mayall, 2008). Thus bilingualism is considered as a way of preserving the local while going global. One of the students asserted that,

If we are not going to use English in all subjects, they (the public school students) will stay low..(if) you are going to use Arabic all the time they will not develop.

A few students however would like Arabic to stay as the only medium of instruction. They believe that maths and science can be taught in the local language and technical terms can be developed in Arabic. Their views reflect a sense of pan-Arab concern for the future of Arabic as a language of scholarship (Troudi, 2004). One student expressed these concerns strongly

I totally disagree with it. First of all you have to consider the students. They are very weak, underachiever students in their age. You have to compare them with the students of other countries. They are underachievers in their own language. If you

teach them in English, they, I don't feel, will learn too much. If they are going to be studying everything in English they are going to lose their native language and culture.

These students argue against bilingual teaching in schools because this decision not only affects students learning but it also is a 'decision about ... which society's values to transmit' (Findlow, 2005, p.22). They do not undermine English but suggest alternate ways of improving English which does not have to take place in schools. One of the students commented,

They have to find another way to improve English. For example me and Amin, we learnt English by practice, you know... We finish high school and all the classes were in Arabic. We graduated and we went to universities and we did not face problems in English at all...learning a second language is acquisition.

There appeared to be a correlation between participants' backgrounds and their emphasis on the use of English as language of instruction. None of the students questioned English being the medium of instruction in tertiary education. It is also interesting to see that the three non-Arab educators support the use of Arabic as the medium of instruction, and it is the Arab educator who welcomes the idea of bilingual teaching. In the main the lecturers support the alternate ways of teaching English. One of them even exclaimed, 'Why would an Arab country want to teach in English?' Another suggested,

To bring up the importance of English they don't have to switch the curriculum, all they need to do is focus on the syllabus of English and I don't think they should start imposing English on other subjects...I think the perception of English as the main language here has to change.

This suggests that the Arab participants' concern for Arabic is primarily not as the language of academia but as the symbol of identity. The Arab students seem to perceive the need for learning Arabic at a young age and not in a higher education setting, as the assumption is Arabic is acquired by then. For them Arabic is an anchor which should be cultivated in school before they move on to accepting global trends through higher education in English. As if they need as Vaish (2008, p.451) quotes the 'cultural ballast' which prevents one from being swept away in the tide of globalization. Arabic in this sense becomes the language of childhood and 'roots' and English language becomes their 'wings.' Several students on the other hand, questioned uncritical adaptation of English and Western models in local context.

'100% English' to '75% Arabic'

On examining further the main aim of the government's sponsorship of the programme i.e to embed English as the medium of instruction in Maths and Science some interesting issues arose. When asked which language the students prefer to use while teaching maths and science in school, paradoxically even those who said that Arabic should continue to be the central medium of instruction, acknowledged that they find it easier to teach in English instead of Arabic.

Saif (Maths trainee): *I will face a lot of difficulties, specially, if they want to change some mathematical terms into Arabic.*

Ehsan (Science trainee): *Yeah, I think it is much easier for me to teach in English especially some scientific terms, because there are many scientific terms that we have been taught, that I don't know in Arabic.*

The school teaching experience therefore posed new cosmopolitan dilemmas as the PGCE intended to train teachers to teach maths and science in English when the public school students do not have the linguistic competency for such a sudden shift after having studied in Arabic for years. During their school placements, the lesson plans designed to teach mathematical and scientific concepts turned into English vocabulary classes and school teaching practice became very challenging

Some students asserted that they had faced mockery and resistance from the public school students for teaching in English.

Saif (Maths trainee): *Some students will come and embarrass us. 'Where do you come from? Oh, you are an Arabi! Then why don't you speak in Arabic? Why are you teaching in English, you are an Arabi.'*

The language policy of the adapted programme therefore became a point of general contestation. As the students began to practice the teaching of maths and science in English in public schools during their school placements, they often faced resistance from various sources. The media heightened the debate. Additionally the students were often undermined by the private schools for not having the first language level competency to teach in English. Questions about the status of Arabic as a serious language of scholarship and Arab identity were raised. It was decided that this policy needed to be reviewed and that in order to continue to be able to work in partnership with schools the language policy would be decided at school level. The head of the programme argued that

This programme was written with a particular partnership programme in mind- one that is central to the UK. It cannot and does not translate well here. We really are not addressing this issue well. Training teachers is not the same worldwide. I dispute this. We need to reconsider how we import and adapt.

Linguistic negotiations

In considering the linguistic negotiations, using Skrbis and Woodward's framework, it can be surmised that the participants demonstrate the attributes of strategic and ambivalent cosmopolitans. They approach English as a means to take advantage of globalization. At the same time they raise concerns in terms of its impact on Arabic and religious-cultural identity. English is valued as the language for academic and economic success while Arabic is considered as the language of identity, social life and religion. The students' ambivalence comes from how can both languages, English and Arabic be negotiated without one compromising the other. Whilst all of them agree on a bilingual policy, they differ in terms of 'how' it can be achieved. The overseas model of PGCE is adapted within these cosmopolitan negotiations. Cosmopolitan dynamic is seen as something that goes on in all societies (Delanty,

2006). The assumption is that culture contains capacities for learning and transforming. Viewed as such, Arab society can be seen as a historically dynamic process, assimilating, negotiating and developing new relations between self and other. In this light the debates around Arabic and English and global and local become internal to the process. Global is not seen as outside it but inside it. The findings reflect internal processes in which new relations are being developed within Arab world.

The imperatives of importing the UK's teacher education model in its original intention could be viewed as 'un-cosmopolitan' as it sought to replace Arabic as the language of maths and science in public school and switch the public school students' ways of knowing and learning. However, the very idea of 'adaptation' implies cosmopolitan openness to negotiate with the local context. Following the language controversy, the programme negotiated strategically with shifting debates within the global, political and local context. The amount of teaching undertaken in the English language was curtailed.

The results show that students and educators demonstrate shades of ambivalent and strategic cosmopolitanism in the way they negotiate with the cross-cultural consequences of international education. Language and culture are central features of their everyday ambivalence and strategic cosmopolitanism. Hence, the issue of language can also be viewed essentially as an issue of culture. In terms of linguistic negotiations the study shows that there is a shift in the current English versus local language debate. The literature frames the debate in terms of which language should be the primary medium of instruction in public schools in several developing countries: English or the local/national language. The findings prove that there is a shift in the debate as it is no more about English or local language but about English and local language, both being considered equally important as languages of instructions in public schools. The question the participants of the study face is how to establish the significance of both languages without one compromising the other.

Conclusion

This research aimed to gain insights into how students and educators experience and engage with the adaptation of the UK's teacher education model in the context of Dubai. The results show that students and educators demonstrate shades of ambivalent, strategic and signs of critical cosmopolitanism in the way they negotiate with the cross-cultural consequences of international education. The study pictured the everyday complexities that teachers and students face in pedagogical interactions in the global contact zone. They are open to the UK's educational model and English through the 'opportunity' versus 'threat' discourses. The students welcome English as 'wings' to go global and seek 'roots' in the language connected to their cultural or ethnic identity. They value overseas education but they expect it to be sensitive to their culture. Western models are welcomed as they are perceived as offering opportunities to learn about the richness of the other. The adaptation of the UK model and accreditation by the UK based university is a valued commodity in this perspective. There is a growing homogeneity of ideas around the desirability of international education and the significance of English as a lingua franca and as a language of academia and research. On the other hand, there is hybridization as the participants bring in their diverse cultural repertoires and local realities which actively

contribute to the contextualization of international education. Western education and English will retain their visibility in Dubai but the people are reshaping, adjusting and negotiating to see 'what suits them best'. Global educational contact zones are, thus, spaces whereby academic agents straddle between the 'global' and the 'local' through their selective cosmopolitan pedagogical interactions. It is difficult to generalize the findings of this study for all the programmes delivered offshore. Contact zones are 'constructed and reconstructed anew' as people with diverse historical, cultural, linguistic, educational trajectories come from anywhere and go anytime. Therefore, global contact zones can only exist relationally. They are not, 'a one-time event nor is movement or travel in only one direction' (Singh & Doherty, 2004, p.12). Although an attempt has been made to capture the complexity of these lecturers and students' experiences in international education, it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions with regards to the consistency of the participant's cosmopolitan reasoning. As Calcutt et al. (2009, p.180) points out one's cosmopolitanism can depend on the social circle the individual keeps. This was a specific group based in a specific conversational context.

What the study does illustrate however are the real difficulties of attempting to transfer 'successful practice' from one area to another. As Jacques (2005) notes in relation to Japan, western values are not universal and too often there is a fickleness of western attitudes towards a transforming region. In this case study the move to adopt English as the main method of instruction was insufficiently developed and considered at the planning stages. It appears that efforts to engage in the global market have produced contradictory pressures and an ironic impasse in the required qualitative changes. The students highlight an important dimension of communicability which reflects on the relationship between language and culture. In negotiations participants have to translate their local languages 'with meanings often compromised' as 'education in a foreign language gives concepts slightly different meaning' (Askeland & Payne, 2006, p.740). The very idea of 'adaptation' implies cosmopolitan openness to negotiate within the local context. The Western educational model will retain its visibility in Dubai but the people are reshaping, adjusting and negotiating to see 'what suits them best' (p.46). It may be that the model is adapted considerably in the future. Global educational contact zones are, thus, spaces whereby academic agents straddle between the 'global' and the 'local' through their selective cosmopolitan pedagogical interactions as the participants bring in their diverse cultural repertoires and local realities which actively contribute to the contextualization of international education. In summary the new cohort of PGCE and the educators will begin to participate in a new discourse of linguistic cosmopolitanism under the changed linguistic realities.

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