

*Virtual Linguistic Landscape of Saudi Arabia's Language Policy in
Higher Educational Institutions' Websites*

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Abstract

This study aims at examining Saudi Arabia's language policy through the virtual linguistic landscape (VLL) of the kingdom's higher educational institutions' websites. The study sought to reveal the languages evident in the university websites, their informational and symbolic functions, and the current language situation of the Kingdom. Results reveal that there are four available languages; English, Arabic, Spanish and French. However, most of the university websites only offered English and Arabic. Hence, multilingual accessibility was not strongly observed. The informational function reveals the speech communities present mainly spoke English and Arabic. Also, it is revealed that highly populous non-Arabic speaking expatriate nationalities were not recognized in terms of language inclusion in the websites, proving the value that the institutions assign to English and Arabic. On the other hand, English was deemed to be a tool to disseminate information to non-Arabic speaking users. In terms of language dominance, English emerged to be valued more than Arabic as reflected through most university websites' preference for English as their default language. The use of English was driven by international collaborations, global ranking efforts, benchmarking curriculums, preparation for Vision 2030, spread of Islamic faith, and better international representation. Considering all the findings vis-à-vis the Kingdom's language policy, the study reveals that the observed bilingual nature of university websites' VLL reflected the country's current language policy.

Keywords: Virtual Linguistic Landscape, Language Prestige, Informational and Symbolic Functions, Websites, Saudi Arabia

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Introduction

Studies on language use in public spaces have spurred research in semiotics, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and discourse analysis. Landry and Bourhis (1997) introduced the concept of 'linguistic landscape' (LL), focusing on language in public signs. Recent research has expanded to the 'virtual linguistic landscape' (VLL), as noted by Ivkovic and Lotherington (2009), which examines language use in digital environments. VLL mirrors LL by exploring language hegemony, policy, learning, and multilingualism. Biro (2018) emphasized that virtual signages enhance LL studies by examining community language practices. Despite its growing popularity, VLL remains a newer field requiring further research across various online platforms.

As countries adapt to an expanding global trade environment, the interplay between government policies and their sociocultural effects becomes increasingly important. One significant aspect of this is language policy, which encompasses the rules and laws that directly impact a nation. Language policy is defined as the outcome of a planning process aligned with national goals, including national language planning (Jernudd & Das Gupta, 1971). Governments exert influence over institutions, particularly education systems, to perpetuate language policies at various levels for diverse purposes. Shohamy (2006) emphasizes that authorities implement language policies not only directly but also through agents like schools and universities, which help disseminate both official and de facto policies. This highlights the mechanisms through which policies are executed and their implications.

In the context of virtual linguistic landscapes (VLL), the analysis of university websites reveals how language policy is manifested. Gomaa (2020) points out that the visibility and presence of language on these websites contribute to a perceived hierarchy of language within a specific context.

Symbolic and Informational Functions of LL and VLL

Linguistic landscape has two functions which are informational and symbolic (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). The informational function of LL serves as an attributive marker of the language community which lives in a geographical territory. Because of this, LL helps to make apparent the territorial restrictions of the specific language group staying in adjoined territories, through clear-cut language boundaries. On the other hand, the symbolic function of LL serves as an indicator of ideology due to the fact that languages have their own value and status, hence the prevalence of a particular language on public signs can symbolize the strength of a certain language community in a certain location. Not only does it show the vitality of the in-group's language, but it also shows how that particular language community can have control on key sectors, such as economy, media, education, and civil administration (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). On a different note, Ivkovic and Lotherington (2009) exclaims that the informational function is to state a fact and inform people of events and can be measured by the successful delivery of information and the relevance of the content presentation. On the other hand, symbolic function goes beyond the objective of informing and stating a fact, rather it involves the analysis language choice and its use to present the content.

Multilingualism and Virtual Linguistic Landscape

VLL, as an extension of linguistic landscape, also addresses questions about multilingualism, which is a given since VLL is delocalized, hence the languages available in the virtual space can cater to as many users as possible. According to Ivkovic and Lotherington (2009), multilingual options and choices have increased significantly due to the fact that the web is continuously evolving hence increase in multilingual capabilities through computer-mediated communication can be evidently seen.

Studies on multilingualism open more opportunities to look into language choice and provide a safe space for minority languages. For instance, in a study conducted by Thorne and Ivkovic (2015) who looked into plurilingual interaction on Youtube, their study revealed that the commentsection of Youtube and other social media platforms open opportunities to study multilingual processes. Although cyberspace propagates the use of many languages as in the case of Sperlich (2005) who underscored that although English is the lingua franca in virtual space, other languages have been increasingly visible and that multiple language access and exchanges have been made possible through multilingual pages, some research also exclaims that the use of English in cyberspace hinders the propagation of other languages online.

Language Policy and Planning and Virtual Linguistic Landscape

VLL can also provide substantial insights about language policy and planning. In fact, languagepolicy and planning has a key role in linguistic landscape (Hult, 2018), which is the physical counterpart of VLL. For instance, the relationship between LL and language policy can be seen in the studies of both Cenoz and Gorter (2006) who investigated multilingualism in the Netherlands and Spain. Their study revealed that public signs in Spain were dominated by the minority language as compared to the signs in the Netherlands, hence, reveals the stronger language policy in Spain which was aimed at protecting and propagating the use of Spain's minority language. In another study by Rosendal (2009) on Rwanda-French bilingualism and Rwanda-French-English trilingualism, his study revealed that the positioning of languages on signs in markets and newspaper affects not only the people's usage of both the national and official language, but also the status of non-African languages.

Linguistic Landscape and Language Situation in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Vision 2030 was announced in April 2016 by the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as an introduction to the country's shift in its strategy to better achieve global status as an economic force. Despite the country's rich natural reserves of oil, the decrease of international use for this resource is central to the government's tactic to shift its investments towards cultivating the manpower that is its youth. Hence, one of the more significant ways to carefully develop its human capital is through the crafting of an educational sector that caters to adaptability in an ever-changing market (Alzahrani, 2017). With these, the scarce linguistic landscape studies done in the kingdom reflects the country's efforts to embrace multiculturalism which is manifested through bilingual public signs in both the physical world and the virtual space.

Language Policy and Planning in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's national and official language is Arabic which can be classified into three: Classical Arabic, Standard Arabic, and Modern Standard Arabic (Alhaider, 2018). There are

about 220,000,000 Arabic speakers in the world and Arabic is one of the most used languages on the internet as revealed in the research conducted by Benaida and colleagues (2018). Based on the official educational policies as stated by the Ministry of Education, Arabic is the medium of instruction in all subjects; however, students are taught at least one foreign language which is English. Students, especially in the public schools are strongly encouraged to read, write, and speak Arabic in order to maintain students' mother tongue and avoid code-switching which may impair their proficiency in Arabic (Payne & Almansour, 2014). Furthermore, Arabic is a major subject and is taught at all levels regardless of the type of school--public or private.

Despite the important and beneficial results of the earlier research on virtual linguistic landscape, further investigation on language choice, language representation and language policy are needed because cyberspace offers varied, complex network of information. In addition, majority of the research done using these networks focused their data analysis using either government-run websites and portals or social media platforms. Hence, little research is done in order to examine the linguistic phenomena in privately-owned websites across different genres.

Statement of the Problem

The study generally aimed to examine the language policy of Saudi Arabia as manifested in the virtual linguistic landscape of both the government and private universities. Specifically, this study will answer following research questions:

- 1) What languages are evident in the websites of public and private universities?
- 2) What informational and symbolic functions do the languages in the websites reveal?
- 3) How do the languages used reflect the language policy and the language situation in the Kingdom?

Theoretical Frameworks

The first framework is Ivkovic and Lotherington's (2009) informational and symbolic functions of VLL. The informational function conveys facts and events, measured by effective communication and content relevance. The symbolic function analyzes language choice and its presentation.

The second framework is Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) three-conditional model, which offers insights into language choice through three conditions: 1) the sign-writer's skill, 2) the presumed reader, and 3) the symbolic language condition.

The third framework is Fasold's language prestige (2006), which explains that language prestige encompasses not only the dominant language but also the preferred languages within speech communities.

Method

This research aimed to examine the language policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as reflected in the virtual linguistic landscape of educational institutions, utilizing a descriptive qualitative design. This approach facilitated the analysis of the languages used, available, preferred, and the target audience of the websites studied. Due to the information overload on

websites, not all content was analyzed; instead, selective focus was applied, a process described by Guest and colleagues (2012) as "winnowing data."

Corpora of the Study

The study's corpora consisted of public and private Saudi university websites accessible via search engines like Google, including 18 sites from six provinces: Makkah, Riyadh, Eastern, Madinah, Asir, and Al-Qassim. Purposive sampling was employed to select these provinces, allowing the researcher to effectively address the research question (Creswell, 2014). The provinces were chosen based on factors like population, location, and the presence of at least one public and one private university.

Data Analysis

First, each website was analyzed for the languages used on the front page and in the language tab, with a frequency count identifying the most common language across the sites. Second, this frequency data allowed for an analysis of the informational function of VLL, revealing different speech communities. Third, language dominance and preference were assessed using the frequency count, designating the most frequent language as dominant. The order of languages in the translation lists was also recorded. Fourth, Spolsky's and Cooper's (1991) three-conditional model was applied to examine language choice in depth. Fifth, the symbolic function of VLL was analyzed to uncover the reasons behind language dominance and preference. Next, the value assigned to each language by the university websites was examined to determine which languages held more prestige among local speech communities. Finally, the initial interpretations and analyses were compiled to assess whether the VLL of the university websites accurately reflect these findings.

Results and Discussion

Evident Languages in the Websites of Public and Private Universities

A key aspect of linguistic landscape studies is the collection of languages in public spaces, with sign counting being a primary focus (Barni & Bagna, 2015). Similarly, virtual linguistic landscape studies gather data on languages used online, providing insight into linguistic communities and territorial boundaries.

To identify the prominent languages, frequency counts recorded the languages available on the websites. The analysis categorized the websites into three groups: 1) monolingual, 2) bilingual, and 3) multilingual. Of the websites analyzed, 11% (2) were monolingual, 83% (15) were bilingual, and 6% (1) was multilingual. The available languages included English, Arabic, French, and Spanish.

Table 1: Languages Available in the University Websites

Languages Available	Number of Universities	Percentage
English	18	100%
Arabic	16	89%
French	1	6%
Spanish	1	6%

Table 1 outlines the languages available on university websites. All universities provided English, often as the default language on their landing pages. However, only 89% (16 universities) included Arabic, with King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals and Prince Mohammad bin Fahd University offering only English.

Regarding French, only King Abdulaziz University provides this option, reflecting the decline in French teaching in the kingdom since its removal in 1970 (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2016; Hudhayri, 2021). King Abdulaziz University also offers Spanish, which accounts for 6% of the total options across the 18 universities. These findings align with Korpela's (2003) research on the prominence of multiple languages in international communication.

In terms of multilingualism, only King Abdulaziz University offers accessibility to English, Arabic, French, and Spanish, allowing users to select their preferred language on its website (see Figure 1).

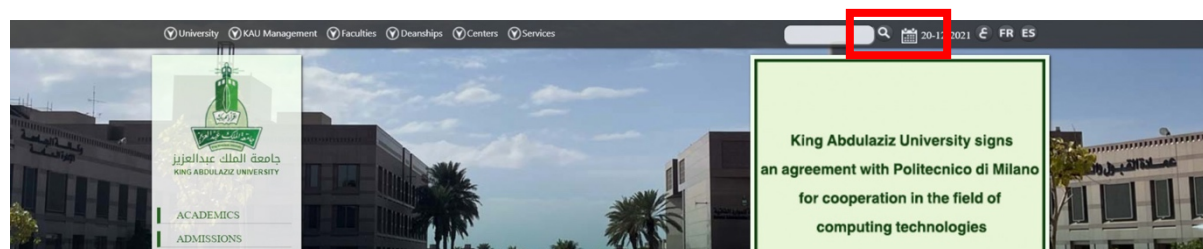


Figure 1: King Abdulaziz University's Multilingual Accessibility Option

Table 2: Number of University Websites With English and Arabic Options

Default Language	No. of Universities	Percentage
Universities with both English and Arabic as available languages	16	89%
Universities with only English as the available language	2	11%
Total	18	100%

Most universities provide a bilingual option, allowing users to choose between Arabic and English, which enhances user comfort while browsing for information. This aligns with

Farivar's (2011) study, which found that website audiences feel more at ease when information is presented in their language rather than merely translated.

The current study found that 89% (16 universities) utilized both languages on their websites, while 11% (2 universities) exclusively used English: King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals and Prince Mohammad bin Fahd University. King Fahd University was a pioneer in using English as a medium of instruction (EMI) for courses like medicine and engineering, highlighting its strong emphasis on the English language (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2016).

Table 3: University Websites and Their Default Languages

University Websites	No. of Universities	Percentage
University websites using English as their default language	10	56%
University websites using Arabic as their default language	8	44%
Total	18	100%

Table 3 shows that most university websites, including King Saud University, Al Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud University, and others, use English as their default language. This facilitates access to information for foreign visitors, while Arabic speakers must locate the language option to switch to Arabic.

Specifically, 56% of the websites default to English, while 44% (8 universities) use Arabic, including King Faisal University and King Khalid University. This setup aids Arabic speakers, making navigation easier, but non-Arabic speakers must convert the page to English.

These findings align with Payne and Mansour's (2014) study, which indicated that English competes significantly with Arabic, posing a potential threat to national identity and local beliefs in favor of Western influences.

The Informational and Symbolic Functions of the Languages Used in the Websites

Informational Functions of the University Websites

The languages documented on the websites indicate that: (1) Saudi Arabia has non-Arabic speaking communities; (2) minority languages representing small linguistic communities are absent; (3) both Arabic and English serve as communication mediums. Additionally, following Ivkovic and Lotherington's (2009) definition of informational function, (4) the primary purpose of university websites is to deliver essential information.

The Presence of Non-Arabic Speaking Nationalities in Saudi Arabia

The informational function reflects the language community in a territory (Bourhis, 1992). The virtual linguistic landscape of university websites reveals both the speech communities and territorial restrictions in the study regions. Results show that the population is nearly split between Saudis (56%) and foreigners (44%). Among foreigners, Indians, Syrians, and

Pakistanis are the predominant nationalities, as noted by Global Media Insight (2022) and the United Nations (2019).

This cultural and linguistic diversity has created competitiveness among speech communities (Holmes, 2013). Habtoor (2012) highlighted that nearly half of Saudi Arabia's population consists of non-Saudis from various geographical backgrounds, contributing to a rich cultural and linguistic environment. Table 4 presents the population of Saudis and non-Saudis in each province of Saudi Arabia as recorded by the General Authority for Statistics in 2017.

Table 4: Population of Saudi and Non-Saudi in the Major Provinces in Saudi Arabia

Province	Population				Total
	Saudi	Percentage	Non-Saudi	Percentage	
Riyadh	4,583,751	57%	3,430,927	43%	8,014,678
Makkah	4,516,577	53%	4,041,189	47%	8,557,766
Eastern	3,090,272	65%	1,697,103	35%	4,787,375
Asir	1,750,131	79%	461,744	21%	2,211,875
Madinah	1,376,244	65%	756,435	35%	2,132,679
Qassim	1,009,543	71%	414,392	29%	1,423,935

The population data indicates that more than half of residents in the provinces are Saudis, reflecting the government's efforts to enhance education, trade, and technology, which encourage Saudis to remain in the kingdom. Additionally, the Vision 2030 initiative attracts foreigners, aiming to position Saudi Arabia as a leading global country by boosting tourism and business.

Notably, in populous provinces like Riyadh and Makkah, the populations of Saudis and non-Saudis are nearly equal, suggesting a rich diversity of speech communities and increased language interaction. In contrast, provinces like Eastern, Asir, Madinah, and Qassim show a significant disparity between Saudis and non-Saudis.

Analyzing the specific populations and available languages reveals distinct speech communities in different provinces. For instance, in Qassim and Madinah, universities further apart tend to reflect differing language preferences; while the closer universities default to Arabic, the more isolated university opts for English.

Absence of Minority Languages

Analysis reveals that while university websites reflect existing linguistic communities, they lack representation for minority languages spoken by foreign nationals whose primary language is not Arabic. According to Table 4, although 16 nationalities are noted—8 of which were listed by the United Nations in 2019—none of the languages spoken by non-Arabic speakers appear on the websites. While Yemenis, Egyptians, and others speak Arabic, nationalities like Indians, Pakistanis, and Filipinos use languages not represented.

This absence highlights that, despite their significant populations, these languages are not recognized on university websites, reflecting the dominance of Arabic and English. This situation aligns with Kelly-Holmes and Pietikainen's (2013) observation that minority languages can be overlooked even when they form a sizable demographic. This contrasts with findings from Ivkovic and Lotherington (2009) and Kelly-Holmes and Pietikainen (2013), which advocate for multilingualism and the acknowledgment of minor languages on websites.

English as a Medium of Communication

The absence of minority languages on the websites indicates that English not only represents a major linguistic community but also serves as a lingua franca for non-Arabic speakers. This suggests that both Arabic and English are used by university website creators to communicate with their audiences.

Analysis of language presence shows that four languages are available (as noted in Table 1), with only one university offering French and Spanish; the rest provide only Arabic and English. English is the default language for 56% of the websites (10 out of 18), while Arabic accounts for 44% (8 out of 18). This highlights that the lack of representation for minor languages necessitates the use of English to reach non-Arabic speakers.

These findings align with Gomaa's (2020) study on Bahrain's government e-portal, where Arabic targets Arabic speakers and English addresses non-Arabic communities, emphasizing linguistic rights despite the exclusion of other languages.

University Websites as a Means to Deliver Information

In addition to territorial restrictions and the representation of linguistic communities, the study examined the informational function of university websites, focusing on their ability to convey facts and reference events (Ivkovic & Lotherington, 2009). This analysis revealed that the primary purpose of these websites is to provide vital information about the universities, emphasizing the efficiency and relevance of their content.

For Riyadh province, all universities included sections like "About Us," colleges, research, faculty, student life, news, e-services, and social media links. Important updates are found in the main content area as users scroll. In Makkah, common tabs include "About the University," research, student experience, admissions, and social media. News and announcements are prominently displayed on the landing page. In the Eastern province, universities feature sections on background, faculty, student life, and research, with facts and figures available in the website body. Asir province websites provide links for languages, contact details, and colleges, along with news and announcements in the body. Qassim universities offer links like language options, university background, admissions, and e-services, while also featuring news and employee portals. Lastly, in Madinah, common links include language options, student and staff information, research, admissions, and services, with news and statistics presented in the body.

Symbolic Functions of the University Websites

The languages featured on the university websites reveal several symbolic functions: (1) the rapid spread of English; (2) its status as a prestigious language to attract students and faculty;

(3) its importance as a language to learn; (4) its role as a gateway to global growth; and (5) the influence of location on language choice.

The symbolic function of these websites reflects underlying ideologies linked to language preferences. As Landry and Bourhis (1997) noted, this function indicates the importance certain communities assign to specific languages, highlighting their strength and control over sectors like education. The status and prestige associated with particular languages further explain their prevalence.

Three key theories guide this examination of the websites' symbolic functions: Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) three-conditional model for language choice, which incorporates the presumed reader condition and symbolic language condition, and Ivkovic and Lotherington's (2009) insights. Additionally, the status and prestige attributed to specific languages are underscored by Fasold's (2006) concept of language prestige.

The Fast Spread of English

The data in Table 1 shows that all 18 universities (100%) offer English for website navigation, while 16 universities (89%) provide Arabic alongside English. According to Table 3, 56% of the universities use English as their default language, compared to 44% that default to Arabic.

Despite Arabic being the official language of Saudi Arabia, English has become the dominant language on these websites, reflecting its role in disseminating information in the kingdom. This trend mirrors findings by Giannakouloupoulos and colleagues (2020), which noted English's prevalence across various EU websites, including monolingual sites that sometimes use English instead of the national language. Similarly, Nunes-da-Cunha and colleagues (2019) highlighted how institutions strive for global reach through English, which has become the common language in Europe. Additionally, Mongeon and Paul-Hus (2016) found that English is the most-used language in academic journals, indicating a preference among non-native authors to publish in English.

Websites' Utilization of English as a Means to Attract Students and Faculty

The emergence of English as the dominant language on university websites prompted the use of Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) three-conditional model to analyze language choice motivations. The first condition, regarding the sign-writer's proficiency, underscores the need for accurate information dissemination. While many websites underwent proofreading, some errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation were evident, indicating varying proficiency levels. For instance, typographical errors included misspellings like "univeristy" and unnecessary capitalization in titles.

The second condition, the presumed reader condition, focuses on the language users are expected to understand. All websites offered both Arabic and English, targeting local and international audiences. English is employed to appeal to a broader audience, as noted in Giannakouloupoulos and colleagues (2020). Universities using English as the default language also aim to attract international collaborations.

The third condition, the symbolic value condition, connects to Ivkovic and Lotherington's symbolic function. Websites were categorized into three types: (1) English-only, (2) English

as the default language with Arabic options, and (3) Arabic as the default with English options. King Fahd University and Prince Mohammad bin Fahd University exemplify English-only sites, indicating a preference for a global audience. Most universities used English as the default, reflecting a desire for international recognition, while Arabic-default sites aimed to attract Arabic-speaking visitors.

The prioritization of Arabic underscores its cultural significance, especially given Saudi Arabia's status as a center for Islamic teachings. Initiatives to promote Arabic in education and business further reinforce its importance. While some universities provide English options, key content often remains in Arabic, indicating a focus on local Arabic-speaking populations. Overall, these findings reflect a balance between global aspirations and local cultural identity.

English as an Important Language to Learn

The dominance of English on university websites aligns with findings from various studies (Kelly-Holmes & Pietikainen, 2013; Ivkovic & Lotherington, 2009; Berezkina, 2018; Koskinen, 2013) that highlight English as a lingua franca and the most utilized language online. In Saudi Arabia, where English is the official foreign language, its strong presence on university websites, alongside Arabic, reflects its significance. This mirrors Huhtala and colleagues (2021), who noted English as a neutral choice online, and Lee (2016), who emphasized its prevalence on social media, even among those with lower proficiency.

These findings support earlier claims by Burchfield (1985) and Coupland and Bishop (2007) about the international prestige of English, which can lead to feelings of deprivation for those who do not speak it.

To further validate these conclusions, Fasold's (2006) concept of language prestige illustrates how academic communities assign value to languages. Analysis shows that 10 out of 18 university websites use English as their default language, with 2 using it exclusively. This dominance reflects the high regard for English within the universities and their communities, as evidenced by the order of language presentation on some websites.

The high prestige associated with English indicates its importance as a language to learn, serving as a gateway to scientific knowledge and the propagation of Islamic faith (Elyas & Badawood, 2016). English's status is further reinforced by its inclusion in educational curricula and scholarship programs that promote study in English-speaking countries (Alshahrani, 2016).

English as a Gateway to Global Growth

The findings align with Saudi Arabia's current socio-political and economic context as it seeks to thrive on the global stage. The prestige that academic communities assign to English reflects its importance in the global market, supported by analytical data. Learning English benefits Saudis and enhances the country's economic capacity for global relations (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Politically, English aids the Saudi government in expanding its military capabilities (Cordesman, 2002).

This aligns with the economic goals outlined in Vision 2030, as universities recognize the need for linguistic adaptation through international collaborations, faculty diversification, and

partnerships with prestigious institutions. For example, KFUPM has been a pioneer in using English as a medium of instruction (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2016). Higher education institutions are also focusing on improving students' English proficiency, as it is essential for engaging in international scientific and trade activities, reflecting this in their missions and objectives.

Influence of Location on Language Choice

A significant finding from the analysis reveals a connection between language preference and location. In three of the six provinces—Asir, Qassim, and Madinah—Arabic is prioritized on university websites, reflecting their demographics: 79%, 65%, and 71% Saudi populations, respectively. This suggests that language choice is influenced by the dominant speech communities in these areas. This aligns with Giannakouloupoulos and colleagues (2020), who noted that culture, geography, and population shape language use on websites. Similarly, Hippala and colleagues (2019) and Loikkanen (2020) found that location heavily influences language choices on social media.

However, Sulaiman Al Rajhi University and University of Prince Mugrin differ from this trend; both use English as their default language despite being in Qassim and Madinah. Their choice is driven by collaborations with international entities, which enhance the credibility of their academic programs.

Language Policy and Language Situation in the Kingdom As Reflected by the Virtual Linguistic Landscape of the Websites

The analysis reveals a strong connection between language preference and location, highlighting three key points about bilingualism in Saudi Arabia: (1) alignment of virtual linguistic landscape (VLL) with local languages (LL), (2) emphasis on English, and (3) bilingualism in cyberspace, with English serving as a lingua franca for minor linguistic groups.

Bilingualism is evident, as 15 out of 18 university websites offer both Arabic and English. Despite English being the dominant language, some universities in Saudi-majority areas still use Arabic as their default. This finding supports prior studies (Blum, 2014; Alhaider, 2018; Alfaifi, 2015) that consider Saudi Arabia bilingual based on linguistic landscape analyses.

The prevalence of English on university websites reflects its growing significance in the kingdom, especially for communication with the increasing foreign population (Al-Tamimi, 2019). The government recognizes the need for English in science and technology and aligns its language policies with global economic integration.

Although Arabic remains the official language, the dominance of English on these websites challenges previous claims of a heavily multilingual virtual landscape (Almoaily, 2019; Ivkovic & Lotherington, 2009), as only Arabic and English are primarily used. Notably, this trend underscores the limited recognition of other foreign languages, emphasizing English as a common ground for non-Arabic speakers. This aligns with Kelly-Holmes and Pietikainen (2013), who noted that English is often used to address diverse audiences.

The current language situation reflects the country's language policy, where both English and Arabic are officially recognized. English holds a prominent role, supported by historical

policies to teach English as a foreign language (Al Haider, 2018). The shift towards English in education and the economy illustrates the government's efforts to modernize and adapt to globalization (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2016; Al-Tamimi, 2019).

The focus on English also arises from socio-political motivations, as language policy evolves alongside trade and modernization efforts. The emphasis on English, especially post-9/11, reflects a desire to foster cultural acceptance and promote a peaceful image of Islam (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2016; Payne & Mansour, 2013). The Ministry of Education's policies aim to prepare students to engage globally while maintaining cultural integrity (Elyas & Badawood, 2016).

Conclusion

The study examined the virtual linguistic landscape of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia to analyze the government's language policy as reflected on their websites. A sample of 18 university websites from the most populated provinces was analyzed using the informational and symbolic functions (Ivkovic & Lotherington, 2009; Landry & Bourhis, 1997).

The analysis revealed that 15 out of 18 universities offered bilingual options in English and Arabic, reflecting the speech communities in their regions. However, minor linguistic communities of migrants and foreigners were largely unrecognized on these websites, indicating a lack of inclusivity. English was primarily used to present important information to foreign users, while Arabic dominated in areas with a higher Saudi population.

The study also highlighted that the dominance of English as the default language was a strategic choice to cater to international audiences, aligning with the kingdom's efforts to globalize its education system. The use of English signifies its prestige and importance for information dissemination, especially in academic contexts.

Applying Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) three-condition model, the study found some websites contained language errors, impacting the sign-writer's skill condition. The presumed reader condition underscored that universities in mixed-population areas targeted foreigners, while those in Saudi-dominant areas focused on local Arabic speakers.

Furthermore, the websites' preference for English reflects a broader trend towards embracing globalization, consistent with the kingdom's Vision 2030 initiative aimed at attracting foreign investment and talent. Partnerships and collaborations with internationally recognized universities were crucial factors influencing the language choice, enabling these institutions to leverage global academic standards and enhance their credibility. Additionally, the analysis pointed to a growing recognition of the role of English in scientific and technological fields, illustrating how language policy is shaped by economic and educational imperatives. This shift not only aims to improve the proficiency of Saudi students but also positions the kingdom as an emerging hub for international education and commerce. Overall, the findings underscore the complex interplay between language use, cultural identity, and globalization in Saudi Arabia's academic landscape.

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