

Medium of Instruction Policy Change in Sudan: its Impact on the English Language Proficiency of Sudanese Medical Students

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Abstract

The decline of English language standards among Sudanese university students and graduates has become one of the issues preoccupying public opinion in Sudan. Media, employers, parents, and school and university teachers are concerned about the falling standards of English language among Sudanese students and graduates. The present study investigated the impact of the medium of instruction on the English language proficiency of Sudanese medical students. An English language-writing test was employed to assess the English language proficiency of two groups of students; namely, a group that studied through the medium of English, and a group that studied through the medium of Arabic. The English-medium students were second-year medical students at Khartoum University, Sudan, while the Arabic-medium students were second-year medical students at Gezira University, Sudan. A sample of 151 students was chosen from the former group, and a sample of 155 students was chosen from the latter group. An independent samples t-test was conducted. The findings indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in the English language proficiency of English-medium students and Arabic-medium students ($t = 12.369$, $p = .000$). Thus, English-medium students performed significantly better than Arabic-medium students in the English proficiency test.

Keywords: *medium of instruction, medium of instruction policy change, English language proficiency*

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Problem and Topic

English language has officially found its way into Sudan after the British colonization of the country in 1898. It was gradually introduced as an official language in governmental offices. Following the establishment of Gordon Memorial College, the first university college in Sudan, English was introduced as a medium of instruction and was taught as a second language. Subsequently, English was increasingly used as a medium of instruction in higher secondary schools and in most Sudanese higher education institutions. It was also increasingly taught as a second language in the intermediate and secondary stages.

In 1965, Arabic replaced English as the medium of instruction in Sudanese secondary schools, and as a result, English was reduced to a subject in the school timetable. Similarly, in 1990, Arabic replaced English as the medium of instruction in Sudanese

universities and higher institutes of learning. Accordingly, English has lost its status as the medium of instruction in those institutions to become a subject taught as a university requirement. The shift from using English as a medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary stages led to a change in the status of English in Sudan from a second language to a foreign language. At present, English is taught as a foreign language starting from the fifth grade until the third year of secondary school when students sit for the Sudanese Certificate Examination. Upon entering university, these students study English as a university requirement in the first two years.

There are many complaints among academicians, English language teachers, employers, students, graduates and the community at large about poor standards of English among Sudanese university students and graduates. Employers, for example, are “unhappy with the performance of those graduates in their implementation of language skills in real-life situations” (Siddiek, 2010:37). Illustrating this situation, Siddiek, (2010:37) explains that “it is a pity when you see a custom or passport officer dealing with a foreigner in the airports or in the government offices in poor English.”

English language instructors and those concerned with the English language issue in Sudan complain about the poor command of English among Sudanese university students. When students at Sudanese universities are asked to write a composition on a simple topic, they hardly fill a page, which is in most cases full of grammar, spelling and discourse errors. New students also face this acute problem of poor command of English. Al-Busairi (2008, cited in Siddiek, 2010:37) notes “the new university entrants come with very poor English or with no English at all. Most of them could hardly write a brief paragraph in simple English, and one out of four is unable to construct even an elementary sentence in English.” University students and graduates themselves complain about their inability to communicate in English. Some Sudanese university graduates, who intend to pursue their further studies abroad, in countries where the language of education is English, complain about-facing difficulties in keeping up with the education systems in those countries due to their poor command of English. Accordingly, they take a longer period and spend more money in order to improve their abilities in the English language.

Similarly, those students who graduate from Sudanese universities and who join Sudanese academic and research institutions to work as academicians and researchers always complain about their inability to participate in academic conferences overseas in which the language of proceedings is mostly English. These graduates also complain about difficulties facing them while writing their academic research in English. Again, Sudanese university students always express their resentment about the difficulties that they face when they refer to references, textbooks and academic articles written in English. Some Sudanese university graduates who intend to further their studies at universities, which require a certain pass rate in English proficiency tests such as the TOEFL and the IELTS, always spend more money and time in preparation for the exams.

Students and graduates from the Sudanese medical faculties are one group of the Sudanese university students and graduates who suffer from the problem of poor English standards in Sudan. Although practising medicine in Sudanese hospitals and clinics does not require the use of English, except in very special cases, doctors’ professional developments requires attendance at international conferences, writing

and publishing research in academic journals and keeping up with the developments in the field, all of which require a good command of English on the part of the doctors. After graduating from the Sudanese medical schools, most doctors prefer to travel to other countries for further specialization in their field. Such countries include India, Malaysia, Ireland and England, where the study requires a good command of English

Education in general and tertiary education, in particular, requires literacy in one of the knowledge-producing languages such as English. English is the most widely used language for academic communication including the writing of references, textbooks, and research articles. Weakness in students' and graduates' abilities in English deny them the privilege of keeping up with new discoveries and developments occurring in their respective fields because they only have access to materials written in their language, which in most cases is not a knowledge-producing language. In this regard, some Sudanese university students complained that the sciences they are studying are outdated. All of these problems are said to directly or indirectly relate to the deterioration of English language standards among Sudanese university students and graduates.

To identify the causes of the deterioration of the standard of English language among Sudanese university students, the fingers of blame are always directed towards several factors such as lack of suitable curricula, lack of qualified English language teachers, lack of motivation on the part of students and above all Arabicization. To illustrate, Arabicization is the policy implemented by the government of Sudan in 1991 to use Arabic as the medium of instruction in Sudanese universities replacing English, which had been used as a medium of instruction since the establishment of the first Sudanese university in 1902. Since the implementation of this policy, public opinion, media, academicians and students have been blaming Arabicization for the deterioration of English standards among Sudanese university students and graduates. Accordingly, this study investigates this claim by focusing on examining the impact of Arabicization policy on the English language proficiency of Sudanese medical students.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

It is argued that using the second language as the medium of instruction enhances the second language learners' proficiency. Using English as the medium of instruction is supposed to have positive effects on the English proficiency of English medium students. The objective of this study is to *evaluate the English language proficiency of students who studied through the medium of Arabic and students who studied through the medium of English.*

2. Literature Review

2.1 Impact of Medium of Instruction on Motivation of Students

Investigating the impact of the medium of instruction on language learning and teaching, Poon (2004) examined the impact of the compulsory Chinese-medium

instruction policy on English language education, Chinese language education and language use in Hong Kong. To assess the impact on English language education, the Hong Kong Policy Research Institute commissioned to conduct a survey on students' attitudes and motivation for language learning in March 2002. This study concluded that Chinese medium instruction has an "adverse effect on English language learning" because it weakens the students' motivation to learn English.

Poon's study supports the belief that motivation is an essential contributing factor for second language learning (Gardener & Lambert, 1972). Similarly, Agban (2000) investigated the effect of the University of Khartoum students' unawareness of the need for English on their motivation and achievement. He concluded that the use of Arabic, not English as a medium of instruction rendered the students unaware of the need for English and, therefore, they have low motivation and achievement in the English language.

2.2 Impact of Medium of Instruction on Exposure to Language

Exposure to language is an important factor in language acquisition (Garcia, 1995). In this connection, Poon (2004) argues that the Chinese medium instruction policy does not merely weaken students' interests in English, but also limits their exposure to the language. In the same fashion, Chan's (1997 as cited in Poon, 2004) large-scale study involving 59 schools and more than 5000 students in Hong Kong supports the claim that the relationship between the actual amount of English used by teachers during lessons and students' progress in the language is statistically significant. Similarly, Beardsmore (1998) argues that to obtain sufficient levels of meta-linguistic competence, it is not enough to teach the language as a subject.

To further illustrate the importance of exposure to language learning, Poon (2004) used Malaysia and the Philippines as examples of countries where the shift from English to Bahasa Malaya in the case of Malaysia, and from English to Tagalog in the case of the Philippines led to a drop in the level of English standards. He maintains that Malaysia changed its medium of instruction from English to Malay in the wake of the 1969 riot, 12 years after independence. After putting the 'all Malay' policy in place for more than three decades, it is found that the standards of English have fallen and the number of English speakers has considerably reduced (Ozog, 1993 as cited in Poon, 2004).

In the case of the Philippines, Poon (2004) states that the Philippines experienced a decline in English standards but to a much lesser extent after switching the medium of instruction of certain subjects from English to the national language after independence in 1946. Appel and Muysken state (1987: 67) "English had been the language of instruction in Philippine schools for many years, the government decided in 1957 that Pilipino should be used as the only medium of instruction in Grades 1 and 2, with English being used as the primary medium of instruction in Grade 3." Poon (2004) adds that, following the change of medium of instruction, the percentage of the Filipino who claimed to be able to speak English dropped from 65% in 1980 to 56% in 1990 (Gonzalez, 1998 as cited in Poon 2004). Poon (2004) concludes that the lessons emerging from these post-colonial situations are that for a society to continue competence in L2, it must continue using it as medium of instruction, not merely as a subject for study. Once the L2 is relegated to a subject for study rather than a medium

of instruction, conversational competence ceases and only the difficult path of reading through translation and using a dictionary becomes the alternative (Gonzalez, 1993 as cited in Poon, 2004).

2.3 Key studies Concerned with the Impact of Medium of Instruction Change

Many studies have supported the belief that the use of the national language as a medium of instruction has an adverse effect on the second language. Ragenran, (2010) evaluated the impact of the 2010 Malaysian educational policy introduced to replace the existing English-medium for the teaching of math and science. 73 Form One students from Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Taman University were involved in this study. A set of questionnaires containing 50 questions were distributed to the students. The results revealed that the change in the medium of instruction had a negative impact on the students' English language usage.

Mohammed (1991) investigated the effect of the medium of instruction policy change, that is, the Arabicization of the secondary schools, on the English standards of Sudanese university students and graduates. The subjects of the study were the preliminary year biology students and the teachers at the University of Khartoum. The instruments used were a questionnaire and document analysis. He concluded that the Arabicization of general education has led to "a change of the status of English language in Sudan from a second language to a foreign language and deterioration of English standards among Sudanese students and graduates" (Mohammed, 1991: 13).

Correspondingly, Giallani, et al, (2010) analyze the effects of the medium of instruction on students' achievement in the subject of English at the secondary level. The participants of the study were 310 students. The instrument was a multiple-choice item test in the subject of English. Comparing the means of English medium students and Urdu medium students, the results reveal that the English medium students did better in the subject of English. Similarly, Mzokwana (2008) investigated the factors that might have affected the pass rate of grade twelve learners with specific reference to the English subject in schools in the Libode district. The participants of the study were 165 grade twelve learners and 6 English language teachers. All of them were selected from senior secondary schools. Using both qualitative and quantitative research designs, the study identified some factors affecting the pass rate of grade twelve learners with specific reference to the English subject. The factors included the non-implementation of English as a medium of instruction, the non-availability of teaching facilities, and the influence of the mother tongue on the English subject.

There is much evidence to support the belief that using the second language as a medium of instruction enhances the students' ability in that second language. Wong (2009) investigated the effectiveness of using English as the sole medium of instruction in Hong Kong. The preferences of two non-native English language classes under two different teaching policies were compared. These two classes were also examined for any potential correlations with improved English proficiency. In one English class, an English only policy was strictly enforced, while in the second class the use of Cantonese was permitted. Instruments used were a questionnaire, an English language test and an interview. Results revealed that not only did the class under the strict policy have a stronger preference for English as the sole medium of

instruction but their English proficiency had also increased than that of the more Cantonese-tolerant class.

Furthermore, Saeed (2012) evaluated the impact of the medium of instruction on the achievement level of students at higher secondary stage in Hyderabad Region of Sindh. He analyzed the effect of the change of medium of instruction on students' performance. The instrument used was a questionnaire. The population of the study was principals, teachers and students of government and private colleges. The findings show that English as a medium of instruction plays a significant role in the learning outcomes of students and it improves their English language skills.

Similarly, Nisar and Ahmed (2011) investigated the difference in performances of students of English and Urdu medium schools at higher secondary level in Pakistan. The population of the study consisted of all students enrolled during 2005, 2006 and 2007 in government degree colleges in Rawalpindi. Two-degree colleges (one male and one female) were randomly selected and 730 students enrolled during 2005, 2006 and 2007 were included in the sample. Data were collected through personal visits to the colleges. The findings revealed that students of English medium schools performed better than the students of Urdu medium schools in the subjects of English and physics.

Likewise, Mohammed (1999) investigated whether the changes in educational policy have affected the standard of English at the secondary school stage in Northern Sudan during the period 1965-1995. Samples of the study were selected from students who studied through English before Arabicization, students who studied through Arabic post-Arabicization as well as teachers. Instruments used included statistical information, reports, interviews, and questionnaires. Results show that changes in educational policy had a negative impact on the standard of English at the secondary school stage in Northern Sudan during the period 1965-1995.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research approach to address the objectives of the research. The study exploits an English language test to collect data pertaining to the English language proficiency of Arabic-medium students and English-medium students at Gezira University and Khartoum University respectively. Primary data were collected from the students studying at Khartoum University and Gezira University.

3.1.1 Participants

There were 151 students in the English medium group, and 155 students in the Arabic medium group. The participants of this study were enrolled in second-year medical classes at the Faculties of Medicine at Khartoum and El-Gezira universities. Medical students of Gezira University were selected for the study because they were comparable to medical students of Khartoum University upon entry as they are the two best faculties. Initial differences are likely to be insignificant; hence, pre-testing

is impractical and may not be necessary. Gezira University is also a good example of a university, which uses Arabic as a medium of instruction.

3.1.2 Instruments

The instrument employed to carry out this research is an English language test

3.1.2.1 The Writing Test

In order to gather data on the English language proficiency of the Arabic and the English medium students, an English language-writing test adopted from the IELTS was used. This test was used to answer whether there is any significant difference in the English language proficiency of the Arabic and the English medium students. The test employed in this study consisted of one question requiring the respondents to write a composition in not less than 250 words on the following topic: *'In many cities crime is increasing. Why do you think this is happening? What can governments do to help reduce the rate of crime?'* The aim of this test is to assess the respondents' proficiency in writing in English.

The test was administered to the second-year medical students at Khartoum University and the second-year medical students at Gezira University. Three of the English language teachers working at the Center for Pre-University Development (CELPAD) at the International Islamic University Malaysia graded the scripts of the test. Teachers of English working at CELPAD have long and good experience in setting, administering and grading of exams. They graded the scripts of the English Placement Test conducted at CELPAD. These teachers relied on the following IELTS writing band descriptors (adapted from <http://www.ielts.org/researchers/>) to grade the scripts of the test.

3.2.3 Data Collection Procedures

The English language-writing test was administered to the second-year students at the Faculty of Medicine, Khartoum University and the Faculty of Medicine, Al-Gezira University. The cooperation of the English language instructors who teach these students the EAP course was sought. The time of the test was 40 minutes in which all of the 306 students completed the test and submitted the scripts. Three of the English language teachers working at the Center for Pre-University Development (CELPAD) at the International Islamic University Malaysia graded the scripts of the test. These teachers relied on the IELTS writing band descriptors to grade the scripts of the test.

3.2.4 Data Analysis

A t-test was used to discover whether there is a significant difference between the scores obtained by the two groups. In particular, an independent-sample t-test was employed in this study to find out whether there is a significant difference in the English language proficiency of English medium and Arabic medium students. The independent-sample t-tests were run between the scores obtained by the two groups of students.

4. Findings and Discussion

Primarily, this research sets out to investigate whether there is a difference between the English language proficiency of medical students who studied through the medium of Arabic and those who studied through the medium of English. To this end, an independent-samples t-test was carried out to compare the mean of English language proficiency scores for Sudanese English-medium and Arabic-medium medical students. The descriptive statistics of the two groups in reveals that the mean for the Khartoum students group (4.3775) is higher than that of Al-Gezira students group (2.7548). That is, Khartoum University students' group has on average higher proficiency in English than those of Al-Gezira University students' group.

Group Statistics

	UNIVERSI	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
RESUT	Khartoum	151	4.3775	1.14741	.09338
	Al-Gezera	155	2.7548	1.14723	.09215

Independent-samples test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
RESUT	Equal variances assumed	.172	.678	12.369	304	.000	1.6226	.13119	1.36450	1.88079
	Equal variances not assumed			12.369	303.788	.000	1.6226	.13119	1.36449	1.88080

The Levene's Test for Equality of Variances in Table 4.31 shows that the T value is 12.369, there are 304 degrees of freedom, and there is a significant difference between the two groups (the significance is less than .05).

As alluded to above, this research aimed at finding out whether there is a significant difference in the English language proficiency of the medical students of the University of Khartoum, who study through the medium of English, and the English language proficiency of the medical students of Al-Gezira University who study through the medium of Arabic. The results of the test show that there is a significant difference in the English language proficiency of the Arabic medium students (medical students of Gezira University) and the English medium students (medical students of Khartoum University). This implies that the English language proficiency of medical students of Khartoum University was comparatively better than that of the medical students of Al-Gezira University.

The fundamental question is why the medical students of Khartoum University performed better than the medical students of Al-Gezira University in the writing test? The answer to this question revolves around the fact that in the case of the Faculty of Medicine of Khartoum University, the medium of instruction is English and in the case of the Faculty of Medicine of Al-Gezira University, the medium of instruction is Arabic. If we take the Faculty of Medicine of Khartoum University first, where English is used as a medium of instruction, we find firstly, practice and writing in English, especially writing of assignments, reports, answering exam questions and taking notes from references, textbooks and lectures, have definitely developed the writing proficiency of the medical students of that university.

There is much evidence to support the belief that using English as a medium of instruction enhances the students' ability in English. Wong (2009) found that English as the sole medium of instruction students' proficiency had also increased than that of the more Cantonese-tolerant class. Saeed (2012) found that English as a medium of instruction plays a significant role in the learning outcomes of students and it improves their English language skills. Nisar and Ahmed (2011) revealed that students of English medium schools performed better than the students of Urdu medium schools in the subject of English.

Secondly, the continuous exposure to English when reading references, textbooks, and listening to lecturers and lab technicians has definitely developed the writing proficiency of medical students of the university. There is evidence in the literature that exposure to language is an important factor in language acquisition. Poon (2004) argues that the Chinese medium instruction policy does not merely weaken students' interests in English, but also limits their exposure to the language. Additionally, he maintains that after putting the 'all Malay' policy in place for more than three decades, it is found that the standards of English have fallen and the number of English speakers has considerably reduced due to lack of exposure to English. Poon (2004) concludes that the lessons emerging from these post-colonial situations are that for a society to continue competence in L2, it must continue using it as a medium of instruction, not merely as a subject for study. Beardsmore (1998) contends that to obtain sufficient levels of meta-linguistic competence, it is not enough to teach the language as a subject.

As the results of the medical students of Al-Gezira University were further scrutinized, it was found that they did not do well in the writing test. This is mainly due to the fact that they were studying through the medium of Arabic. This, in turn, did not provide a genuine opportunity to develop the skills of writing among the medical students of Al-Gezira University, because they were not exposed to continuous practice in English language writing skills like the writing of assignments, reports, answering exam questions, and taking notes, all of which were performed in Arabic. Moreover, the use of Arabic as a medium of instruction did not provide sufficient exposure to English to assist students to acquire an additive language to enable them to develop their writing proficiency in English.

There is still much evidence in the literature to support the belief that using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction has an adverse impact on the second language learning. Ragenran, found that the change in the medium of instruction had a negative impact on the students' English language usage in Malaysia. Mohammed (1991) concluded that the Arabicization of general education has led to a deterioration of English standards among Sudanese students and graduates. Giallani, et al, (2010) revealed that the English medium students did better in the subject of English in Pakistan. Mzokwana (2008) found that the non-implementation of English as a medium of instruction affected the pass rate of grade twelve in South Africa learners with specific reference to the English subject.

Although the medical students of Al-Gezira University were enrolled in English language courses as a university requirement in the first and second years, their writing proficiency in English was not up to the standard. The courses were very important for these students as they kept them connected to the English language. However, the problems caused by the course were that they were insufficient and did not provide sufficient opportunities for practice and exposure to English.

5. Conclusion

It was argued that using Arabic as a medium of instruction has weakened the Sudanese university students' abilities in English language. This study investigated the impact of using Arabic as a medium of instruction on the English language proficiency of Sudanese medical students. Sudanese medical students were chosen as the population of the study because unlike the students of other specializations, medical students in Sudan are the only students part of whom in some universities pursue their studies through the medium of Arabic, and part of whom pursue their studies through the medium of English. The sample of the study was chosen from the medical students of Khartoum University and the medical students of Al-Gezira University. An English language writing test was used to test the English language writing proficiency of the medical students in the two universities to assess the impact of the medium of instruction on their English language writing proficiency. An independent-samples t-test was carried out to figure out whether there is a significant difference in the English language writing proficiency of the two groups.

The results of the current study indicated that Arabicization has an adverse effect on the English language proficiency Sudanese medical students. The implication of these results is that English

the prescription of more teaching in Arabic is likely to perpetuate the problem of English language among these students. Using English as a medium of instruction, on the other hand, will contribute a solution to this problem. Using English as a medium of instruction will increase the motivation of students to acquire English, because English is linked to their academic needs and self-actualization. Using English as a medium of instruction can also contribute to solving the problem of English language in general education where students enter the university with very limited English proficiency. However, as soon as these students complete the first or the second years of their study, we find that their proficiency in English has improved remarkably. Using English as a medium of instruction creates a conducive environment where students can be extensively exposed to English practice and can, therefore, acquire English in record time.

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