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Teaching English in the context of educational policies in the GCC countries

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Abstract. After the discovery of oil in the Gulf countries, the number of labor migrants in these countries, mainly from South and Southeast Asia, as well as Africa, increased sharply. This led to the strengthening of the role of English as the language of intercultural communication, including the field of education: now a significant number of higher education programs in these countries are being taught entirely in English. This is due to a number of reasons, including the significant number of foreign (both skilled and unskilled) workers, as well as the desire of the region's leaders to transform their countries into regional and international economic and educational hubs. This study examines the language policy of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) countries in relation to English language teaching in secondary and higher education institutions. Existing studies, focusing mainly on the topic of globalization, pay little attention to the educational policies of the GCC countries in the field of teaching English. Considering this fact, the purpose of this study is to identify the features of the state policy of the GCC countries in the field of teaching English, as well as to identify the factors influencing the formation of this policy. By analyzing the legislation and practical methods of implementing the language policy, the dynamics in the field of teaching English in the countries of the region are shown. We have shown that the GCC countries are currently relying on Western models of education, including English-language higher education, which leads to a number of practical problems. In addition to this, the leaders of the countries of the region are attracting branches of leading Western educational institutions to the GCC countries. The prospects of this study include a comparative study of educational policies in other Arab countries, as well as further analysis of trends in English language teaching in the GCC region. This study contributes to the study of the language policy of the Arab countries and will be useful for Arabists and specialists in language policy.

Keywords: Persian Gulf, language policy, globalization, cultural identity, university branches, language teaching, Arab world

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Преподавание английского языка в контексте образовательной политики стран Совета сотрудничества арабских государств Персидского Залива

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Аннотация. После обнаружения нефти в странах Персидского залива в них резко увеличилось число трудовых мигрантов, преимущественно из стран Южной и Юго-Восточной Азии, а также Африки. Это привело к усилению роли английского языка как языка межнационального общения, в т.ч. в сфере образования: сейчас значительное количество программ высшего образования в странах региона реализуется полностью на английском языке. Это объясняется рядом причин, в т.ч. значительным количеством иностранной (как квалифицированной, так и неквалифицированной) рабочей силы, а также стремлением лидеров стран региона превратить их в региональные и международные экономические и образовательные центры. Рассмотрена языковая политика стран Совета сотрудничества арабских государств Персидского Залива (ССАГПЗ) в сфере преподавания английского языка в учреждениях среднего и высшего образования. Отмечено, что существующие исследования, концентрируясь в основном на теме глобализации, мало внимания уделяют образовательной политике стран ССАГПЗ в области преподавания английского языка, поставлена цель — выявить особенности государственной политики арабских стран Персидского залива в области преподавания английского языка, а также установить факторы, влияющие на становление этой политики. В результате анализа законодательства и практических методов реализации языковой политики показана динамика в сфере преподавания английского языка в странах региона. Установлено: страны ССАГПЗ делают ставку на западные модели образования, в т.ч. англоязычное высшее образование, что приводит к ряду практических проблем, кроме того, руководство этих стран активно привлекают филиалы ведущих западных образовательных учреждений. Перспектива исследования состоит в сравнительном изучении образовательной политики других арабских стран, а также дальнейшем анализе тенденций преподавания английского языка в регионе. Исследование вносит вклад в изучение языковой политики арабских стран и будет полезно востоковедам-арабистам и специалистам по языковой политике.

Ключевые слова: страны Персидского залива, языковая политика, глобализация, культурная идентичность, филиалы вузов, преподавание языков, арабский мир

Вклад авторов. Все авторы участвовали в разработке концепции исследования, сборе, обработке и анализе данных, написании текста рукописи, формулировке выводов.

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Introduction

Throughout their history, the countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Persian Gulf (GCC) have been strategically important for European States due to their geographical location. Since the 16th century, the region has attracted the attention of European powers, which led to the establishment of control over key territories. The Ottoman Porte annexed the territories of the current GCC countries to its empire in the 16th century, and by 1568 had established control over the holy cities of Mecca and Medina [1]. In the period from 1820 to 1915, the British Empire signed protection treaties with the countries of the region. Even after the countries of the region gained independence, British influence remained in them.

The 1973 oil embargo drew the attention of the world community to the GCC countries, as the world's leading economies realized their dependence on oil resources concentrated in this region. The growth of production after the embargo played a key role in the spread of English in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf region [2]. A sharp increase in oil revenues has turned the region into one of the richest and most economically developed in the world [3].

Before the States of the region became oil exporting countries, education in them was informal and based on an oral religious tradition. However, with the discovery of oil, the states of the region began to actively invest their revenues in modernization programs, including the development of the educational system. Long-term development programs have been developed aimed at training local personnel to replace foreign labor in key industries. One of the main elements of these programs was the reform of the K-12 education system and the opening of branches of foreign educational institutions. This allowed local students to receive Western education (mainly in English) without leaving the region [4].

The goal of this study is to establish the features and trends in the field of English language teaching in the GCC countries.

The policy of teaching and learning English in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf

As already noted, the development of the States of the region since the discovery of oil reserves has been proceeding at an incredible rate. Within a generation, the population has grown significantly, and cities have become modern megacities. Over the period of 10–20 years, school education systems have evolved from traditional religious schools to modern national educational systems. Kuwait, as the first country in the region to discover oil, faced the difficulties of reforming education earlier than

others, but all GCC states have similar characteristics and face similar challenges in the development of education systems. The main features of these systems are:

1. Until the mid-1990s, the focus was on the K-12 system, but today the priority has shifted to higher education. English is the official language of instruction of many universities in the region [5; 6].
2. The GCC countries allocate significant funds for education. In 2017, about \$150 billion was spent for these purposes¹.
3. Despite significant investments, the expected return in the form of a balanced educational system has not yet been achieved. In addition, dependence on foreign teachers complicates the learning process for local youth [7].
4. A large percentage of students graduate from school without having sufficient English language skills necessary for higher education. This leads to the fact that many students spend up to two years on preparatory programs to improve their language skills [8].
5. The GCC countries generally continue to debate the role of the English language in education. While employers need employees with the skills and abilities of the 21st century, the government often does not fully understand how to combine the demands of globalization with traditional Arab-Muslim values in the field of education [9; 10].
6. Despite these debates, due to the involvement of foreign educational systems and institutions in the region, there are more branches of foreign educational institutions in the GCC countries than in any other region of the world [11].
7. Branches of foreign universities are an integral part of the educational policy of the GCC countries on economic diversification. Each country has a long-term national development plan, in which a special place is given to the education system to shape the country's future².

State policy on attracting branches of foreign universities as a factor in the development of English language teaching

The growing demand for better local higher education intensified after the events of September 11: students did not feel safe while studying in the United States, hence the increased need for better higher education in the GCC countries [11].

¹ GCC spends 150bn year on education but challenges persist. *Arabian Business*. 2017. URL: <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/industries/education/gcc-spends-150bn-year-on-education-but-challenges-persist-658572> (accessed: 26.01.2025).

² Successes and shortcomings of GCC economic “Vision” documents. *Arab Development Portal*. 2017. URL: <https://arabdevelopmentportal.com/blog/success-and-shortcomings-gcc-economic-%E2%80%9Cvision%E2%80%9D-documents> (accessed: 27.01.2025).

Over time, educational managers in the region embarked on the path of attracting branches of large Western educational institutions in order to diversify the economy and transform the countries of the region into large educational centers. Of course, the entire educational process in these branches takes place in English [12].

The GCC region holds a leading position in the world in terms of the number of branches of higher education institutions. Of the 75 countries with branches of Western universities, the largest number is located in the UAE [13].

In the UAE and Qatar, governments have created “free trade” zones for education. These zones were created to attract the best Western universities and colleges to the GCC region. In the early years, to attract foreign institutions to create these new free zones, colleges and universities were not even required to comply with local accreditation standards [14]. Today, leading Western educational institutions such as New York University and others have branches in the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain. We are also witnessing several similar initiatives in Saudi Arabia, where modern Western college buildings have been built that can accommodate up to 3,000 students. As part of its College of Excellence initiative, the Government has extended invitations to several leading international educational institutions to open branches in Saudi Arabia. Institutions such as Niagara and Algonquin Colleges now have campuses in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia [15].

Romanowski et al. [9. P. 23] argue that education policy makers should “understand and adapt to the role of the Arabic language and cultural context in educational reforms, rather than importing educational policies and practices”. When studying the educational policies of the countries of the region, researchers concluded that the educational system should adapt to local cultural realities, and not vice versa. However, not all of them are so categorical. For example, Farah Baig [16. P. 3] notes the importance of the interpenetration of global and local cultures (what he calls the term “glocal”) and sees no problems in opening branches of Western educational institutions in the GCC countries and a fully English-speaking educational process. In any case, such a policy by the authorities further increases the role played by the English language in the education sector of the countries of the region. The prestige of English-speaking universities leads to the opening of more private schools, where education also takes place in English.

Problems and challenges in the field of English language teaching in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf

In most GCC states, the government considers Western education systems as a model to follow, since they, in their opinion, guarantee the development of students’ skills that employers want their employees to have [10]. However,

significant investments in education have not yet led to the expected results, as students often show a low level of English proficiency and lack the skills necessary for employment in multinational companies. Governments are seeking to reorient citizens to work in the private sector in order to reduce dependence on foreign labor and reduce the burden on the budget.³

To date, the introduction of Western educational models in the GCC countries, including teaching in English, has not raised the level of education to the desired level, but has caused controversy about the declining role of the Arabic language, the loss of cultural identity and the undermining of religious values [9]. The main problems that the GCC states are currently facing in their education systems are:

1. Improving students' academic performance, their proficiency in English and other skills necessary for successful employment.
2. Preserving the traditional Arab-Muslim culture without abandoning Western values and the education system.

Traditionally, the leaders of the GCC countries have implemented reforms fairly quickly, and policy development has often been conducted without sufficient testing. As a result, educational reforms were often interrupted due to ideological differences or public pressure [17].

Unfortunately, due to rapid reforms, education systems have been created that are in a state of almost constant change and do not actually prepare graduates for higher education or subsequent employment. As a result, local students have been trying for several years to achieve the required level of English proficiency after graduating from high school, which will allow them to study in Western educational institutions.

Conclusion

The GCC countries differ in size, resources, and approaches to reform and modernization, but they are united by their dependence on foreign labor and the use of English as the main language of business and education. The leadership of the countries of the region considers English as a key element of strategies for diversifying the economy and increasing graduate employment. The growth of oil revenues in the 1970s allowed the GCC monarchies to invest in various educational initiatives.

³Fattah Z. A ghost army of workers is paid to do nothing in the Gulf. *Bloomberg Politics*. 20.06.2018. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-20/workers-paid-to-do-nothing-a-ghost-army-that-haunts-gulf-rulers> (accessed: 28.01.2025).

The desire to see rapid results of educational reforms led to the introduction of Western educational models, most of which assumed the adoption of English as the language of instruction. Further reforms have led to the creation of educational clusters by the Governments of some countries in the region to attract foreign educational institutions to the region. These branches are focused on attracting not only local and expat students, but also students from other regions.

The initiatives to raise the level of education have also led to negative social consequences, namely the fear of losing cultural identity and religious values due to the weakening of the position of the Arabic language. Moreover, fully English-speaking higher education is an additional negative factor for students, many of whom are forced to spend a year or two on preparatory courses due to insufficient English proficiency.

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