
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Language Use and Claimed Proficiency of Saudi Students at Undergraduate Level Spoken in Asir Region of Saudi Arabia

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| ABSTRACT

The present paper involves comprehensive socio-psychological features of the Saudi student community at the undergraduate level in the Asir region of Saudi Arabia. It seeks to look at their sociolinguistic profile to understand the influence of the majority ethnic/linguistic community with their language on this group. It focuses on the language maintenance and language shift of the Saudi student speech community living in the Asir region of Saudi Arabia and tries to study and understand their linguistic usage, patterns of language use, identity, status, and patterns of language use occurring in this community. The paper is an attempt to postulate where this linguistic battle is likely to lead. In this regard, many socio-psychological variables were taken and analyzed quantitatively. As for the linguistic profile of Saudi students, all the language speakers are native speakers of Arabic, and most of them are familiar with Arabic.

| KEYWORDS

Linguistic profile, Language Use, Claimed Proficiency, Maintenance and Shift.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Arabic is the official language as well as the native language of Saudi Arabia. Al-Quran, which is the holy book of Muslims, is written in Arabic, and therefore, this language is the holy language of the Muslim population all over the world. Due to the impact of Islam on the life of people in Saudi Arabia, Arabic is the language preferred in almost all spheres. It is used in almost all domains: formal and informal. Arabic is used throughout the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabian government emphasizes the learning of Arabic in terms of reading and writing, so it is the only language used in basic education, without the interference of any additional foreign language. However, this is not linked to religious purposes since Islam does not forbid the learning of other languages (Aljohani, 2016).

English is considered a second language of Saudi Arabia, and it does not enjoy the status of an official language in Saudi Arabia. It is used and taught as a second or foreign language. There are multiple views about the exact date when teaching English as a foreign language was introduced in the Saudi education system. According to Baghdadi (1985) and Al-Shabbi (1989), the introduction of English in the Saudi educational system at the elementary level dates back to 1924, when the General Directorate of Education was established. Al-Hajailan (1999) and Zafer (2002) argued that English was first offered to be taught in Saudi schools in 1937. Niblock (2004) held the view that ELT was introduced before the emergence of KSA as a state in 1932, whereas Al Shahrani (2016) argued the exact date of the introduction of English in the Saudi Arabian education system is unknown.

Also, since 2005 the Kingdom has been trying to reduce its economic dependence on the oil industry and develop a knowledge-based economy to match those of first world countries. This resulted in a tremendous revolution in education in the country, and the number of universities in KSA increased from only 8 in 2001 to 28 government and 8 private universities in 2015. This sudden

expansion of educational institutions at all levels had a significant effect on the teaching/learning of English in the country. Faruk (2013) specified that today nearly all universities and colleges in the Kingdom have English departments and English language centers. He further added that presently English is the medium of instruction in medical, engineering, and other science colleges. In the government/public school curricula, English also was introduced gradually during this period. It was first introduced in grade 7 in 2003 and then in grades 5 and 6. Since 2012 English teaching has been introduced in grade 4 (ages 9-11) of elementary education. Due to a tremendous shift in the teaching and learning of English in the Kingdom, the language has enjoyed a new status in the country. The Ministry of Education clearly stated the current objective of teaching and learning English in KSA along with official guidelines. According to the Ministry of Education (MOE) (2002), 'The aim of teaching English in the secondary schools is to have the public attain a standard which will permit him [sic] to make ready use of desired materials in English, and which will enable him [sic] to communicate satisfactorily, according to his needs, in both spoken and written forms'.

In a recent report issued by the MOE (2020), it was specified that English teaching would be introduced from grade one in Saudi government/public schools. Thus, things are changing for good, and since the government realizes the importance of English as an internationally intelligible language, it is showing more keenness in promoting English language teaching/learning in Saudi Arabia.

2. Method

This study is based on the analysis of the speech of hundred and seventy (170) language users of the Saudi student community at the university level. Out of 170 students, 100 were male students, 70 were female students, and all of them were studying in different faculties of the University. The age group corresponds between 18 to 22 years, and all of them were native speakers of Arabic. The study of the socio-psychological features of the Saudi student community at the undergraduate level in the Aseer region of Saudi Arabia was carried out by means of a sociolinguistic questionnaire, which was administered to one hundred and seventy language users at one test site, i.e., King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia. Language users were asked questions about which domain; they have acquired the languages and their views about their language and identity.

2.1 Overview of the Method

Study	Method	Brief Description	Focus	Sample Size
Socio-psychological features of the Saudi student community at the undergraduate level in the Aseer region of Saudi Arabia	Sociolinguistic questionnaire	15 questions	Contexts of Acquisition of Arabic, English, and Arabic-English	170 subjects from King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia

3. Linguistic Profile:

All the language users are native speakers of Arabic, and most of them are familiar with English. From an educational perspective, English is taught from grade 5th onwards; thus, it can be said that the Saudi Students community in the Asir region of Saudi Arabia function in two languages, i.e., Arabic and English, but all the two languages are distributed along different domains. The first variable which was studied in this regard was the duration of the use of these two languages by the speakers of the Student community and is discussed as follows:

4. Duration of use:

Fig.1.1 depicts the duration of the use of Arabic (V.10) and English (V.11) by the language users.

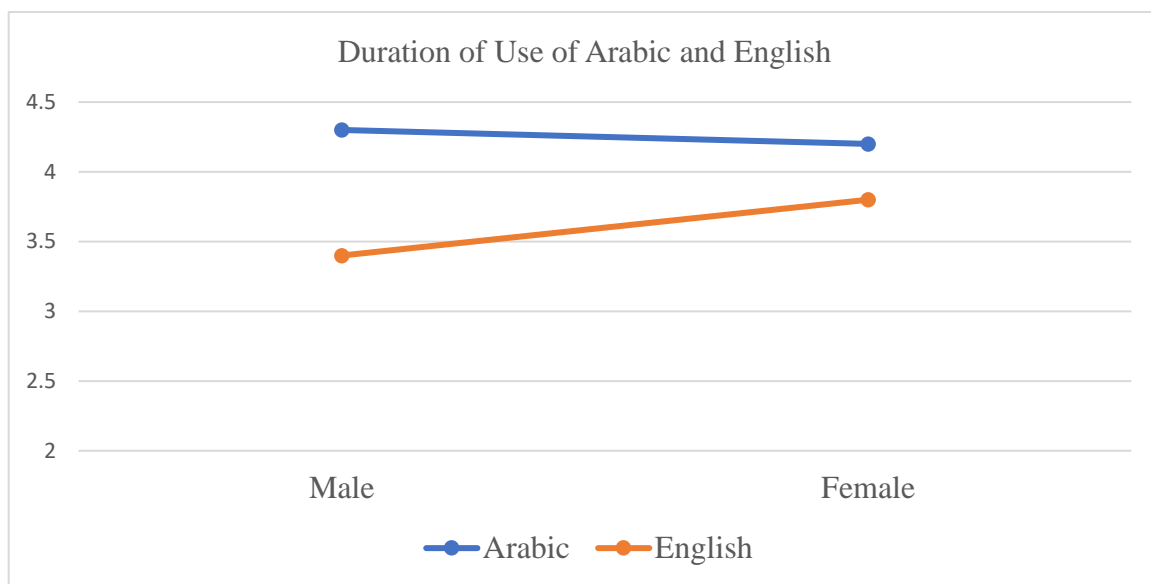


Fig. 1.1: Duration of use of Arabic and English

Figure 1.1 represents a graphic representation of the duration of use of Arabic and English speakers of Saudi students at the undergraduate level. This graph gives a clear picture that male students use more Arabic as compared to female students, and there is a slight increase among female students in the duration of use as compared to male students. The finding can be as females are more vocal than their male counterparts, and they take their studies more seriously.

The significant correlations between the duration of use of Arabic and English with other variables are examined below.

4.1 Duration of Use of Arabic (V.10)

	V.1	V.2	V.7	V.9	V.11	V.27	V.38
V.10	-.468**	-.276**	-.553**	-.499**	-.463**	.357**	-.261*
V.42	V.58	V.69	V.70(a)	V.74(a)	V.79	V.110	V.114
-.262*	-.526**	-.343*	-.337*	-.407*	-.412*	-.270*	-.315**

Table 1.1: Significant correlations of V.10

The above table shows the following important results:

V.10, i.e. 'Duration of use of Arabic', shows a significant negative correlation with V.1, i.e. 'Age' ($r = .468$), i.e. as the age of students at the undergraduate level increases, the use of Arabic decreases correspondingly.

V.10, i.e. 'Duration of use of Arabic', shows a significant negative correlation with V.2, i.e. 'Gender' ($r = -.276$). This indicates that male students use more Arabic as compared to female student counterparts. It is because male students take pride in speaking in Arabic in different domains.

V.10, i.e. 'Duration of use of Arabic', shows a significant positive correlation with V.27, i.e. 'Family's Fluency in Arabic' ($r = .357$). This indicates the influence of family on individual linguistic preference.

V.10, i.e. 'Duration of use of Arabic' correlates negatively with V.7, i.e. 'Level of Education' ($r = -.553$), V.8, i.e. 'Educational Institution' ($r = -.463$), V.9, i.e. 'Medium of Instruction' ($r = -.449$). From these negative correlations, the students who speak more Arabic have a

low level of education, and people who use less Arabic as compared to others have a higher level of education, have generally been educated in prestige schools, and the medium of instruction in schools has been English. The reason behind this is that education and, along with it, contact with English play a major role in the language choice of the student at the individual level. Furthermore, the linking of education and associated languages with prestige is also observed to be influencing the duration of the use of Arabic.

These correlations go on to indicate that education conflicts with the use of Arabic. Education is, thereby, observed to be one of the main factors which are leading to a shift from Arabic to English. It is observed that private educational institutes are very important sources for increased uses of English as compared to Government institutions. In spite of the fact that Saudi students are proud of their Arabic mother tongue, the wave of globalization has touched them as well, and they are conscious of the fact that English is the only way to 'good things in life'. Although the English language is used to a minimum level in their society, they are fully aware of its importance in the modern world.

V.10, i.e. 'Duration of use of Arabic' correlates negatively with V.11, i.e. 'Duration of use of English' ($r=-.463$), V.38, i.e. 'Family's fluency in English' ($r=-.261$), V.58, i.e. 'Claimed proficiency in English' ($r=-.526$). These correlations indicate that students' use of Arabic declines with increased use of English. Also, the use of Arabic decreases when they claim a higher proficiency in English among their family members, their own higher English proficiency. Also, it is not uncommon to watch formal discourses among bilingual students interspersed, if not entirely in English, even in their own area. Another important aspect which was observed was the use of English when educated students interact with educated non spoken Arabic speakers.

V.10, i.e. 'Duration of use of Arabic' correlates negatively with V.69, i.e. 'Visual exposure' ($r=-.343$), V.70, i.e. 'Audio exposure' ($r=-.337$), V.74, i.e. 'Reading preferences', i.e. ($r=-.407$), V.79, i.e. 'Writing preferences in terms of personal memos' ($r=-.412$). These correlations indicate that Saudi students, who have good exposure to mass and print media, their duration of use of Arabic is low. The reason behind this is that most of the mass media programs. Saudi students prefer to watch English programs. They have positive attitudes towards Hollywood and web series which are telecasted in the English language.

V.10, i.e. 'Duration of use of Arabic', correlates negatively with V.110(a), i.e. 'View about the medium of instruction' ($r=-.270$), and V.114, i.e. 'Acquisition contexts of English' ($r=-.315$). These correlations indicate that informants who use Arabic maximally feel that the medium of instruction should be Arabic. From these language consultants, it was also observed that they had acquired English from educational institutions.

So, it was observed that English usage directly leads to a decrease in the duration of the use of the Arabic language. Saudi students who claim higher proficiency in the use of English and who have more visual exposure in terms of English mass media will consequently use less Arabic.

4.2 Duration of Use of English (V.11)

	V.2	V.3	V.6	V.7	V.8	V.9	V.10	V.12	V.27
V.11	-.502**	.537**	.524**	.609**	.569**	.616**	-.463**	.625**	-.379**

V.45	V.55	V.56	V.57	V.58	V.59	V.60	V.61
-.573**	.283*	.281*	.263*	.639**	.643**	.539**	.547**

V.62	V.63	V.64	V.70(a)	V.74(a)	V.110(a)	V.114
.488**	.422**	.346**	.258*	.288*	.338**	.412**

Table 3.2: Significant correlation of V.11

V.11, i.e. 'Duration of use of English' correlates significantly positively with V.7, i.e. 'Level of education' ($r=.609$), V.8, i.e. 'Educational institution' ($r=.569$), V.9, i.e. 'Medium of instruction' ($r=.616$). These correlations indicate that consultants who use English frequently, have higher levels of education, have been educated in better education institutions, and the medium of instruction was English. This, in a way, is a pointer towards the factors influencing the higher use of Arabic, which seems to stem from educated institutions and corresponding factors.

This can probably be attributed to the higher English proficiency group being more in contact with English using communities. Their higher claimed Arabic proficiency could probably be attributed to a feeling of Arabic identity after contact with non-Arabic speakers.

V.11, i.e., 'Duration of use of English' significantly and positively correlates with V.70(a) 'Audio and Video exposure' ($r=.258$), V.74, i.e., 'Print preferences' ($r=.288$), V.110, i.e., 'View about the medium of instruction' ($r=.338$) and V.114, i.e., 'Acquisition contexts of English' ($r=.412$). These correlations indicate that language consultants who use English maximally also have good audio/video exposure in English, and the same is the case with reading preferences. They mostly listen to and watch programs in the English language, and reading preferences, such as in terms of magazines, newspapers, and books, are in English. They have acquired English in schools and feel English should be the medium of instruction.

V.11, i.e., 'Duration of use of English' correlates negatively with V.2, i.e., 'Gender' ($r=-.502$), V.10, i.e., 'Duration of use of Arabic' ($r=-.463$), V.27, i.e., 'Family's fluency in Arabic' ($r=-.379$). These correlations indicate that those who use Arabic more are females, and Arabic is used exclusively used at the family level. Again, it is natural to find that these language consultants show higher use of Arabic and claim higher Arabic fluency in their families. So, to gain some resemblance of prestige, these language consultants point out their family's fluency in Arabic. This was also observed in the interaction with the language consultants, where the second language after Arabic to be acquired is English along a prestige continuum.

5. Claimed proficiency:

Fig. 5.1 depicts the claimed proficiency of Saudi students in Arabic and English graphically.

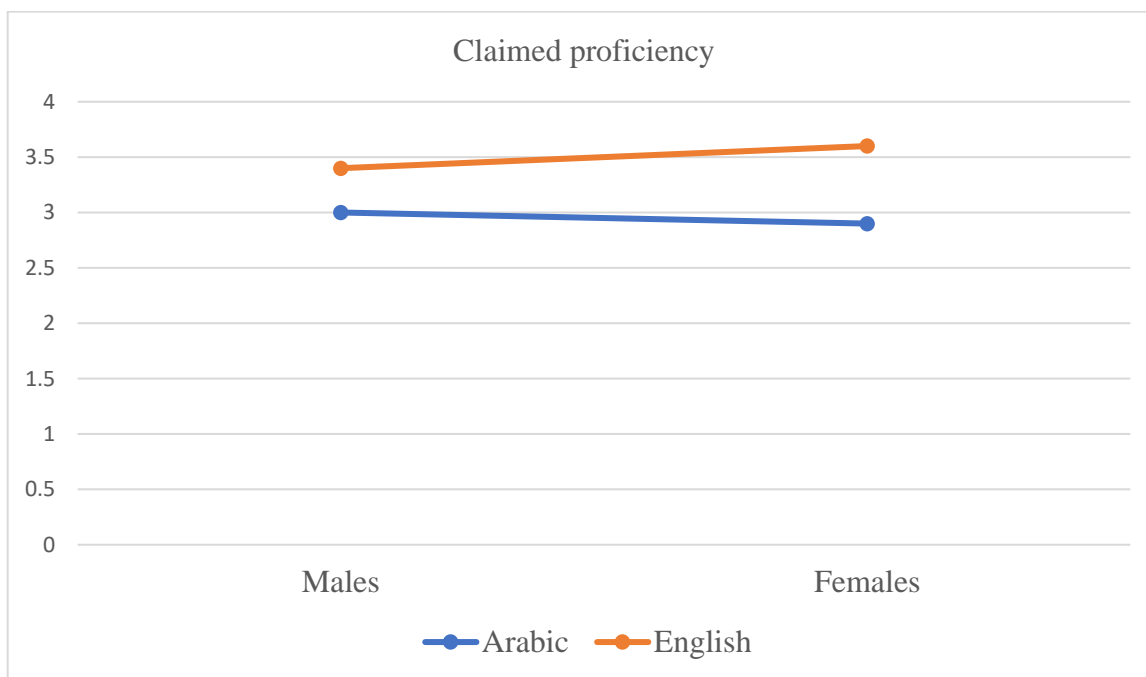


Fig. 5.1: Claimed proficiency in Arabic and English

The language consultants claim a high proficiency in English and the least proficiency in Arabic. High claimed proficiency in English is because all the speakers know the script of English and they practice it on a daily basis. From the graph, it is also clear that females claim more proficiency in English as compared to their male counterparts.

5.1 Claimed proficiency in Arabic (Vs. 54-57)

Proficiency in Arabic was elicited in terms of four skills- Understanding, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. Table 3.6 shows the mean scores in these four skills.

	Understanding	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Males	4	3.80	3.20	2.50
Females	4	3.70	3.00	2.00

Table.3.6: Mean scores of claimed proficiency in Arabic.

Table 3.6 clearly shows that out of four components of proficiency, i.e. Reading, Writing, Speaking and Understanding, two skills, Reading and Writing, have gone down. Proficiency in terms of Understanding is maintained among the student communities, and speaking skill appears to be on their way. The claimed proficiency in Arabic also declines as we move from 'Understanding' to 'Writing'. The decline is steep, especially from oral to written form. Also, the decline is seen among the females mostly in two skills, i.e. in Reading and Writing; it may be because females care less about these two skills. So, in all probability, this low score in reading and writing skills is because of the lack of practice in reading and writing Arabic. It may also be because of this that right now, their less concentration on Arabic. Comparatively, males have more reading and writing skills than females. Thus, it can be concluded that they are more proficient in two language modalities of Arabic, i.e., listening and speaking.

5.2 Claimed proficiency in English (Vs. 58-61)

	Understanding	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Males	3.36	2.9	3.10	2.5
Females	3.40	3.00	3.20	2.9

Table 3.7: Mean scores of claimed proficiency in English.

From Table 3.7, it becomes clear that females have the highest English language skills. In fact, a large majority claimed to be able to speak it well. Most of these subjects also claimed to be able to read English. So, it might be recognized that those who have gone to school would most likely have at least some ability in all four skills, i.e., Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. During the field survey, it was found that a higher percentage of females were able to speak English than males. Coming across from Understanding to Writing, it is clear among both genders that Understanding and Reading are at a higher level while Speaking and Writing are at a lower level. The reason behind this might be that both genders get fewer speakers of English for communication, and only at the university level do they use English exclusively. In the case of other domains, Arabic is being given the most preference. So, in general, it can be said that a maximum of the males have at least some proficiency in English, with young speakers more inclined towards English.

6. Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to understand the language use and claimed proficiency of Saudi students at the undergraduate level. Another objective was to understand the impact of English on Arabic in terms of language use. To examine this issue, data were elicited from a set of student communities at the undergraduate level belonging to different ages, gender, and socio-economic groups. The main aim of the data was to understand the socio-psychological tendencies in the direction of language preferences, the changing patterns of language use and linguistic assimilation.

The study examined various features associated with students at the undergraduate level. Besides Arabic, the English language is also used by the student community in different domains. Normally a shift from Arabic to English was observed among the students at the university level, and a major shift was found among female students as compared to male counterparts. This study has also shown that the use of Arabic decreases with a decrease in age. Younger generations show more positive attitudes to the use of English. Education is one of the important factors in introducing English, and the wave of globalisation has important implications for them. The current generation of students is motivated to teach English and use it as a medium of instruction. It was also observed that educated students tried to use English as a way of communication with non-native speakers of Arabic, and they take it as pride in the exposure to the second language.

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**Appendix
Questionnaire**

1. Name _____ 2. Age _____ 3. Gender _____
4. Please give the names and addresses of the educational institutions you have attended please give the medium of instruction as well.

Level of education	Educational institution	Medium of instruction
Primary level		
Intermediate Level		
Secondary Level		
University Level		

5. For how much time do you use Arabic and English each day? Indicate by putting a (✓)

Time duration	Arabic	English
All the day		
More than half the day		

Half the day		
Less than half the day		
A little		

6. Do you live in nuclear family or joint family?

7. Using the scale below provide the information about your family members in terms of their proficiency in Arabic and English and state their level of education and their occupations as well.

Proficiency in Languages (Arabic, English)	Points
Very good	4
Good	3
O.K.	2
Very little	1
Nil	0

Relation	Education	Occupation	Proficiency in Arabic	Proficiency in English
Grandfather				
Grandmother				
Father				
Mother				
Husband/Wife				
Brother				
Sister				
Son				
Daughter				

8. Indicate your knowledge of Arabic in terms of the following skills by putting a tick (✓) in the appropriate box.

	Very good	Good	Moderate	Very little
Understand				
Speak				
Read				
Write				

9. Indicate your knowledge of English in terms of the following skills putting a tick (✓) in the appropriate box.

	Very good	Good	Moderate	Very little
Understand				
Speak				
Read				
Write				

10. State the language in which you

(a) Watch

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely
T.V. programmes			
Plays			
News			
Films			

(b) Hear

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely
Radio programmes			
Plays			
News			
Songs			

(c) Read

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely
Newspapers			
Magazines			
Books			

(d) Write

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely
Letters to friends			
Letters to relatives			
Personal memos			

11. Which languages do you use to speak to your teachers and other students inside and outside the educational institutions? Please indicate them in below table below.

Language used to speak to			
Teachers		Students	
Inside educational institutions	Outside educational institutions	Inside educational institutions	Outside educational institutions

12. Which language would you prefer in place of worship for preaching?

13. Considering songs, do you remember songs from any language? Please mention.

14. From which language do you remember stories?

15. Indicate the language you usually use for

I. Writing to your relatives, friends (intimate correspondence). II. Writing to your boss, business associates (formal correspondence).

III. Speaking to your father about domestic affairs

IV. Speaking to your children formally.

V. Speaking to your children informally in office.

VI. Speaking to your male colleagues about personal affairs in the office.

VII. Speaking to your female colleagues about official affairs in the office and social political and social problems.

VIII. Speaking to your spouse about political and social problems. IX. Speaking to your friends about political and social problems.

X. Speaking to your friends about personal problems.

XI. Speaking to the shopkeepers in your locality.

XII. Speaking to doctor regarding health.

XIII. Asking God for something.

XIV. Dreaming

XV. Thinking

XVI. Naming days of week while talking casually