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Exploring Linguistic and Cultural Diversity at EMI Universities in Kuwait



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Abstract

The present study explores cultural and linguistic aspects of diversity in the context of universities with English-medium instruction (EMI) in Arabic-dominant Kuwait. As with other Arabian Gulf countries today, Kuwait is experiencing a rise of linguistic and cultural diversity not only due to the use of English as a lingua franca by the multi-ethnic, multilingual society, but also because of the adoption of EMI in higher education. The present study focuses on multilingualism at EMI universities in Kuwait and the impact of cultural and linguistic diversity on the educational process. The mixed-method approach combines a survey with undergraduate Kuwaiti students ($N = 483$) and semi-structured interviews with international faculty ($N = 11$) at two EMI universities in Kuwait. The survey results indicate that young Kuwaiti bilinguals regularly engage in multilingual interactions characterized by fluid use of multiple languages both within the educational environment and at home. The patterns emerging from interviews with educators indicate that pedagogical approaches in a range of academic fields also reflect linguistic and cultural diversity in the context of higher education with EMI in Kuwait.

Keywords: Cultural diversity, multilingualism, English Medium Instruction, Kuwait

Introduction

Multiculturalism and multilingualism are not new phenomena, although recent pressures generated by the forces of globalization and the ubiquitous presence of the English language, especially in parts of the world where it is considered exogenous or intrusive, may have heightened the perception of cultural and linguistic cross-pollination. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, where

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Arabic is the official language, massive modernization efforts and the rapid pace of transformation have precipitated the need for a total overhaul of educational systems, necessitating the introduction of the English language in higher education (Botha, 2024; Elyas & Al-Hoorie, 2024; Hopkyns, 2024). The adoption of English programs in higher education has met with mixed reactions across the GCC, ranging from enthusiasm (Oraif & Alrashed, 2022), to disillusionment (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2011; Hopkyns, 2020), to calls for reintroducing Arabic as a medium of instruction at university in a form of bilingual higher education (Alazemi, 2020).

The proliferation of English-medium instruction (EMI) institutions of higher learning and professional training in the region, including Kuwait, was chiefly motivated by the pressing need to build capacity among nationals in order to facilitate economic and social changes (New Kuwait, 2024; Olver-Ellis, 2020) as well as technological integration (Botha, 2024). Although not an official second language in Kuwait, English has become vital for academic, technological, scientific and professional advancement, creating an ideal context for the exploration of multifaceted manifestations of linguistic and cultural diversity. The present paper thus explores the various facets of diversity within the context of higher education with EMI from the perspectives of students and faculty, shedding light onto the complex interplay of language and culture in this pluralistic landscape.

Literature Review

Recent studies of language and culture in Arabian Gulf countries have been inspired by linguistic and cultural diversity (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2011; Hopkyns, 2020; Siemund et al., 2021; Zoghbor, 2023). Rapid modernization in oil-and-gas-producing countries such as UAE, Qatar, or Kuwait has precipitated unprecedented societal changes resulting in cultural and linguistic superdiversity. Gulf societies today are comprised of minority citizens and majority expat communities representing different nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures from all continents. Furthermore, contemporary Gulf societies are multilingual and communicate using a range of languages in addition to English and various Arabic vernaculars including Gulf Pidgin Arabic (Avram, 2014). Local citizens are typically fluent in many Arabic dialects (e.g. the local dialects, Levantine Arabic, Egyptian Arabic), Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, but also English, often Persian, and occasionally Hindi and Tagalog. In addition, Gulf countries allow for many different educational models, including Arabic-medium instruction (AMI) and EMI, with schools and universities following various international curricula, most tertiary institutions adopting the EMI model, and some universities functioning as local branches of international campuses. The continuous interactions between culturally and linguistically different members of Gulf societies have created ideal conditions for exploring diversity.

Societal multilingualism may manifest itself in a variety of ways (Sanchez-Stockhammer, 2012). One of its most visible manifestations, particularly in the context of universities with EMI, is translanguaging (Hopkyns, 2022). Translanguaging relies on a non-essentialist view of language, whereby two or more languages are not seen as separate, self-contained entities but rather as ‘an integrated system which the speaker/writer draws upon depending on the need of the moment’ (Al-Bataineh & Gallagher 2018, p. 4). Recent studies in the Gulf (Hopkyns, 2022; Hopkyns & Hillman, 2024; Zoghbor, 2023) found that within EMI contexts, translanguaging is a strategy used by both students and instructors to facilitate the achievement of learning outcomes and to create a positive educational experience.

As is the case of other Gulf countries today, Kuwait is experiencing a rise of such phenomena as linguistic and cultural diversity, reflecting the dynamic interplay between traditional cultural values and contemporary global pressures including the adoption of English as the language of science, technology, and higher education, to the near exclusion of Modern Standard Arabic from those contexts (Belhia & Elhami, 2015; Elyas et al., 2023; Ntombela, 2023; Troudi, 2022; Zoghbor, 2023).

At the same time, Kuwaiti society is deeply traditional and immensely proud of its Arabic heritage and Islamic values (Alkandari, 2014), which are emphasized and highlighted in public and private domains of life. The present study explores various aspects of linguistic and cultural diversity within the context of higher education with EMI in Kuwait. In particular, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How does linguistic and cultural diversity manifest itself at EMI universities in Kuwait?
- (2) What is the impact of cultural and linguistic diversity on the educational environment at EMI universities in Kuwait?

The research methods combine a survey targeting students at two EMI universities in Kuwait and a semi-structured interview for selected faculty members representing various fields of study at one such university.

The Present Study

The study uses a mixed-methods approach in order to combine views of students, who are the largest group at the receiving end of the EMI model involving day-to-day experiences of hybrid linguistic and cultural practices, with the views of instructors whose pedagogical expertise, combined with extended local experience, guarantee in-depth observations of the learning environment under investigation. The survey data help detect patterns in language use (e.g., between English, Arabic, and preference for multilingualism) while interviews probe into pedagogical choices, identity/positioning strategies, institutional constraints, perceptions of student needs, and examples of cultural cross-pollination at universities with EMI.

Participants

The survey participants ($N = 438$) were undergraduate students at two private EMI universities in Kuwait representing the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and social sciences (languages, education, business, mass communication, design). The present sample includes only Kuwaiti nationals, with an age range of 17 to 27 years. The data collection instrument was an exploratory survey devised by the researcher, approved by the institutional review board (IRB) of the host institution, and distributed electronically using Google forms in the fall (November – December) of 2023. The questions were not indexed so no reliability or validity tests were performed. Participation was completely voluntary and anonymous; participants were not remunerated. No identifying information was collected. All participants electronically signed an IRB-approved informed consent form prior to taking the survey and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point. A total of 513 responses were collected and 75 were excluded from the present analysis due to listing a non-Kuwaiti nationality.

Table 1 *Survey Participant Demographics*

		University A ($n = 154$)	University B ($n = 284$)	Both universities ($N = 438$)
Gender	Male	29 (19%)	58 (20%)	87 (20%)
	Female	125 (81%)	226 (80%)	351 (80%)
Majors:	STEM fields	42 (27%)	53 (18%)	95 (21%)
	Social Sciences	112 (73%)	233 (82%)	345 (79%)

As Table 1 shows, the sample ($N = 438$) is gender imbalanced and is dominated by social science students (see “Survey results” below).

The semi-structured interview participants ($N = 11$) were purposefully sampled from among full-time instructors and faculty members, representing various nationalities and academic disciplines. The interview questions were IRB-approved. The interviewees verbally agreed to participate after being read an IRB-approved consent form prior to the interview and their consent is part of the interview transcript. The interviews (25–35 min.) were conducted online in English and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. The recordings were subsequently destroyed and all identifying information was removed from the interview files.

Table 2 *Semi-Structured Interview Participants (Faculty, Instructors)*

Participant	Cultural background	Academic discipline	Experience in EMI programs in Kuwait (years)
1	Egypt	French language	21
2	Germany	German language and literature	13
3	Turkey	English Composition	18
4	UK	English Composition	12
5	USA	English Education	22
6	Macedonia	Applied Linguistics	7
7	USA	American Literature	4
8	Bulgaria	Mathematics	17
9	USA	Business	14
10	Turkey	Engineering	6
11	Germany	Psychology	7

As Table 2 shows, the interviewees constitute a diverse sample in terms of cultural backgrounds (European, North American, Middle Eastern, North African) as well as representing a range of academic disciplines. They also have substantial experience at universities with EMI in Kuwait (4–22 years).

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey consisted of six demographic questions (gender, age, nationality, university, field of study, highest academic qualification received), three education-related questions (primary and secondary school), and 15 statements where strength of agreement was indicated on a 4-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) about using Arabic and English for personal and professional reasons as well about the influences of the English language on contemporary Kuwaiti culture.

The interview questions focused on the experience of faculty members at Kuwaiti EMI universities including aspects such as intercultural communication, cultural adaptation, culturally-relevant pedagogy, and perceived barriers to academic achievement, thus probing into aspects of cultural and linguistic diversity affecting learning outcomes.

The quantitative data analysis utilized descriptive functions in Microsoft Excel while interview transcripts were analyzed using segmenting, coding, labelling and ultimately identifying patterns based on both deductive and inductive approaches, i.e. the pre-existing framework as well as trends emerging from the data. The framework consisted of patterns within linguistic diversity, cultural diversity, institutional and cultural constraints as well as identity negotiation strategies used by educators to “localize” the EMI model of higher education. The emerging trends were extracted from recurring themes in the transcripts indirectly related to cultural and societal norms underpinning student motivation, attitude toward education, and other factors affecting the local educational environment.

Results

Survey Results

The demographic survey shows that the majority of the respondents were 19–25 year-olds (67.9%), followed by 18 year-olds or younger (24.8%), with a small group of 26–35 year-olds (4.2%). The sample is gender-imbalanced, with male students representing only 20%, while female students comprise 80% of the total surveyed. This gender imbalance is not reflective of the actual student demographics at the participating institutions. In terms of university majors, the majority of students represent social sciences (79%), with STEM majors represented by 21% of the respondents. The participants were Kuwaiti nationals from multilingual backgrounds (see Figure 1 below).

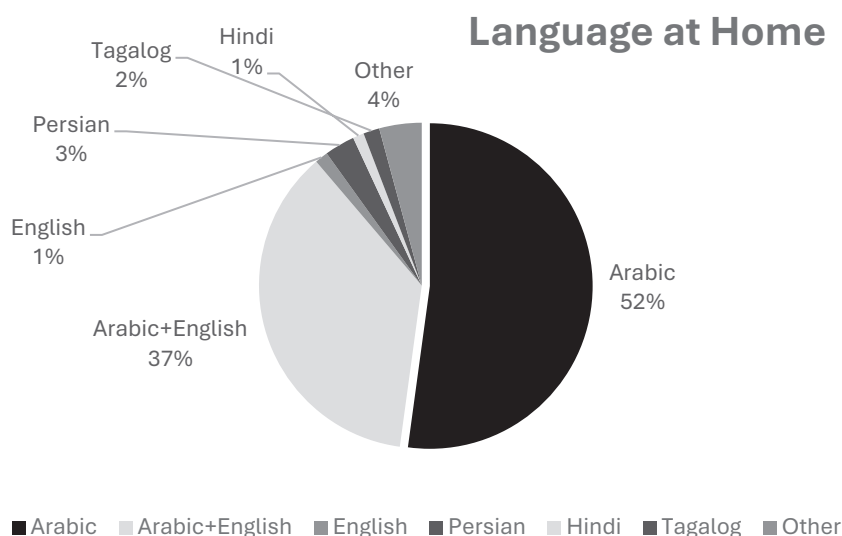


Figure 1 *Languages Spoken by Students at Home.*

As seen in Figure 1, Arabic-only was the most frequent language configuration at home (52.3%), followed Arabic and English (36.5%) in bilingual households, while English-only was chosen by six students (1.3%). Multilingual participants were exposed to a variety of languages in addition to Arabic and English at home: Persian (3%), Hindi (1%), Tagalog (1.6%), as well as French, Japanese, German, Slovak, Thai, and Turkish (less than 1% each). In terms of language of education prior to the EMI university, 43.4% of participants had attended Arabic language schools, 28.5% had attended English language schools, and 28.1% had graduated from bilingual Arabic-English schools.

The following are the results from the questionnaire probing into aspects of linguistic and cultural diversity, with responses to statements measured using a 4-point Likert scale.

Arabs must speak Arabic

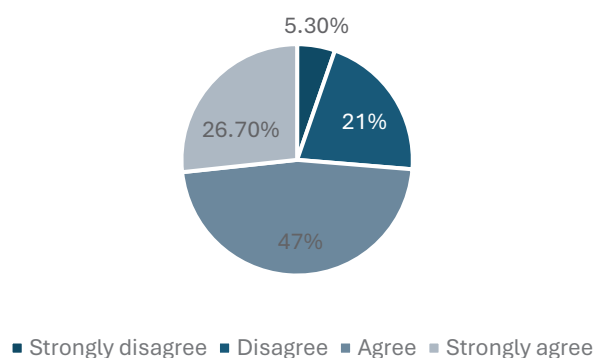


Figure 2 *To be Arab, One Must Speak the Arabic Language.*

As Figure 2 shows, a large majority of respondents (74%) recognize a link between Arabic language and Arab cultural identity, supporting the statement that in order to be considered Arab, one must speak Arabic. Nonetheless, 26.3% of respondents disagree, downplaying the link between the ability to speak Arabic and ethically and/or culturally identifying as Arab.

Arabic as a source of pride

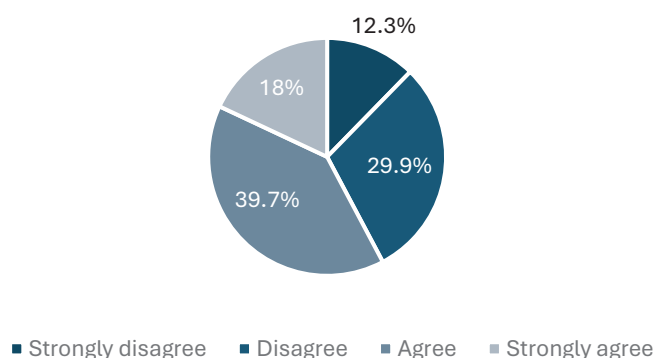


Figure 3 *Speaking Arabic Language Well Is a Source of Pride.*

As Figure 3 shows, the ability to speak Arabic well contributes to experiencing a sense of pride for the majority of the respondents (circa 58%), with 30% disagreeing and 12% strongly disagreeing with the statement. In other words, fluency in Arabic connects the respondents to a shared Arabic heritage, in terms of linguistic and cultural traditions. However, as 42% of the respondents do not support this statement, multilingual speakers may derive pride from the ability to move comfortably between diverse languages and cultures, thus enriching their identity.

In response to the statement that Kuwaiti homes should be strictly monolingual in Arabic, 39% agree, while the majority (61%) disagree, which indicates that multilingualism is the accepted linguistic norm among the respondents.

Figure 5 presents reactions to the statement that all Kuwaitis should also be able to speak English, reflecting a prevalent positive attitude toward bilingualism among the respondents. Since 80% of the participants believe that in addition to Arabic, all Kuwaitis should be fluent in English, a very strong preference for multilingualism over monolingualism is confirmed in the current sample.

Speaking Arabic only at home

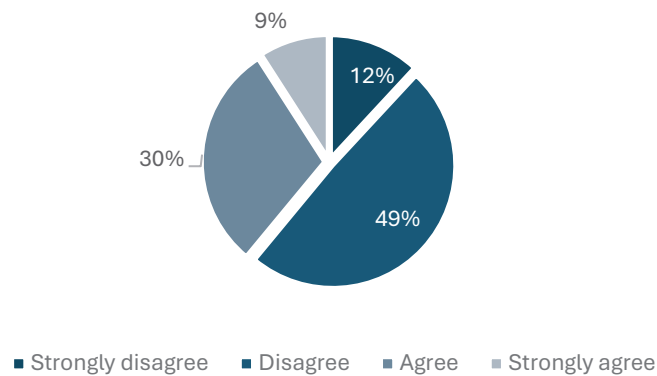


Figure 4 *Arabs Should Speak Arabic Only at Home.*

Kuwaitis should speak English

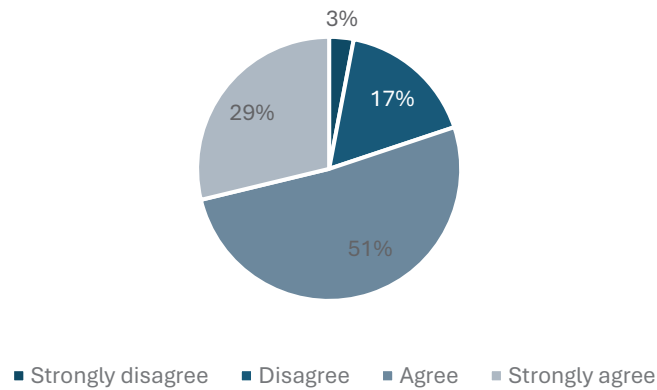


Figure 5 *All Kuwaitis Should Also Speak English.*

Learning English early

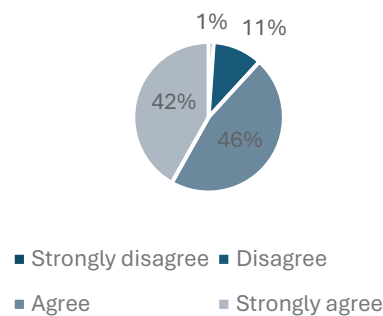


Figure 6 *It is Important for Kuwaiti Children to Learn English Early.*

Figure 6 shows that the overwhelming majority of respondents (88.2%) believe in the importance of exposing Kuwaiti children to the English language as early as possible, with virtually no one strongly disagreeing and only 10% disagreeing with the idea. Thus, not only is multilingualism the preferred linguistic model among the respondents, but crucially, early bilingualism seems to be a priority for the next generation of citizens.

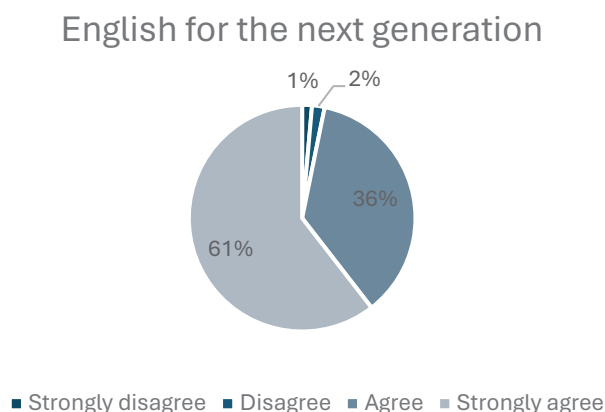


Figure 7 *I Will Make Sure That My Children Speak English.*

The statement about the importance of teaching English to the next generation produced the strongest positive agreement, with virtually all (circa 97%) respondents agreeing (36%) or strongly agreeing (60.5%) with this view. The results imply that the English language might become even more pervasive in the next generation of Kuwaitis. It also shows that Kuwaiti students at EMI universities have accepted the English language as a permanent feature of the country's linguistic landscape.

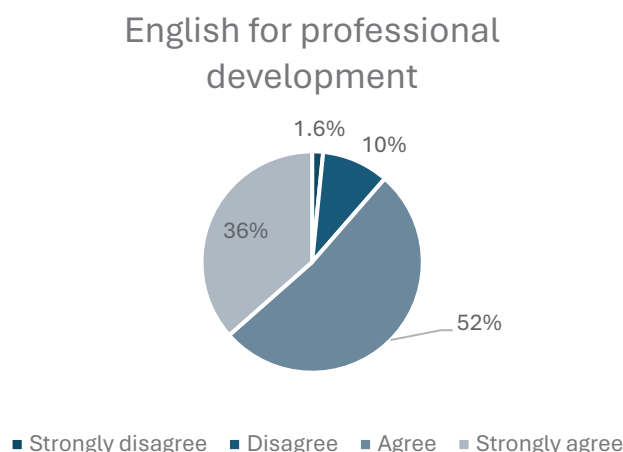


Figure 8 *The English Language Is Essential for Professional Development.*

As Figure 8 shows, 88% of the respondents consider the English language essential for professional advancement, indirectly supporting the observation that those who speak good English have more education and career opportunities in Kuwait.

Figure 9 illustrates agreement with a statement that Modern Standard Arabic is essential for professional development, with 57% supporting the statement. Among those, only 14% strongly agreed, while over a third of the respondents to the previous statement (36% in Figure 8 above), emphasizing the importance of English rather than Arabic for professional development.

As Figure 10 shows, the majority of the respondents (circa 60%) consider knowledge of the English language to be a source of pride. This suggests that proficiency in English is viewed positively among the participants, perhaps both as a sign of educational achievement and communicative competence.

Arabic is essential for professional development

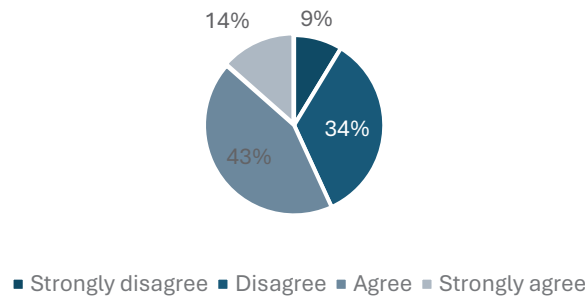


Figure 9 *Fusha (Modern Standard Arabic) Is Essential for Professional Development.*

English as a source of pride

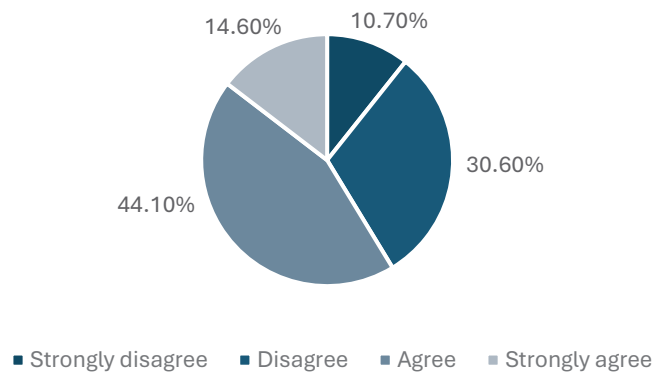


Figure 10 *Speaking English Well Is a Source of Pride.*

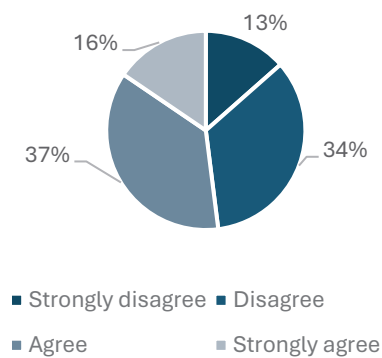
At the same time, the same respondents also expressed pride in their Arab identity and in speaking Arabic (see Figure 3), indicating that pride in English proficiency does not replace or diminish pride in their first language, but rather coexists with it. Thus, English seems to be essential not only for professional purposes (extrinsic motivation) but also for personal ones (intrinsic motivation). The responses show that linguistic pride can encompass both English and Arabic, reflecting comfort with bilingual identity.

Several statements concerned attitudes about potential cross-linguistic influences between Arabic and English.

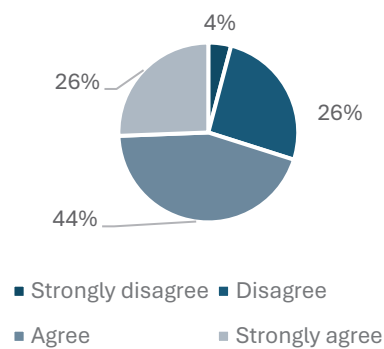
The statement about high proficiency in the English language (see Figure 11) potentially weakening an individual's knowledge of Arabic elicited approximately evenly-split responses, with 53% of students agreeing with the statement.

The results show that a clear majority of respondents (70%) agree that speaking Arabic is more important than speaking English, while 30% disagree. This suggests that most participants place a higher value on maintaining and using their first language, reflecting a strong sense of linguistic and cultural identity. However, the fact that nearly one-third of respondents disagree indicates that there is also recognition of the importance of English, possibly due to its role in education and employment. Overall, the responses point to a diversity of attitudes toward language importance, where Arabic remains central to identity, but English is also acknowledged as valuable.

English weakens Arabic

**Figure 11** *Knowledge of English Weakens Arabic Language Skills.*

Arabic more important than English

**Figure 12** *Speaking Arabic is More Important Than Speaking English.*

English vs. Arabic proficiency

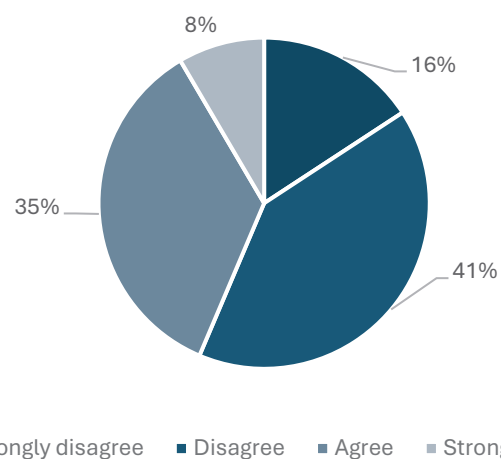
**Figure 13** *High English Proficiency Is Detrimental to Proficiency in Arabic.*

Figure 13 suggests a divided perception among the participants regarding the relationship between Arabic and English. Since 41% of the respondents disagree and 16% strongly disagree with the view that proficiency in English is to the detriment of the native Arabic, it seems that the majority deny the potential negative influence of English on Arabic. This implies a positive view of additive bilingualism experienced by the participants, who believe it is possible to maintain strong skills in both languages. Nonetheless, over 40% believe that English proficiency negatively impacts Arabic proficiency, suggesting a subtractive view of the participants' individual bilingualism and a view that the languages are in competition with each other.

Negative Impact of Western culture

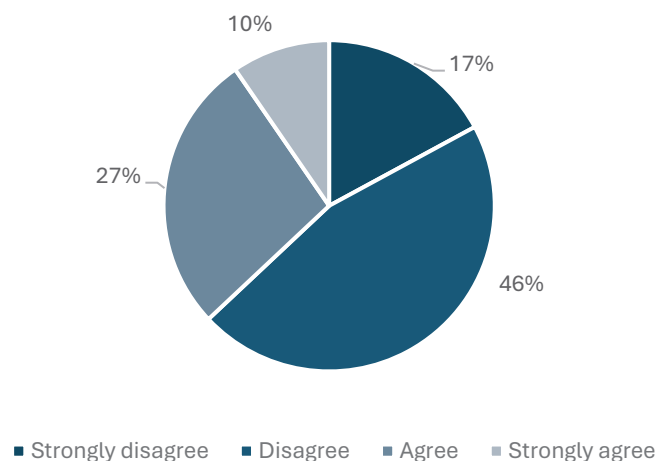


Figure 14 *Western Culture Negatively Impacts Kuwaiti Culture.*

Regarding cross-cultural influences, the majority of respondents (63%) disagree with the view that Western culture negatively influences Kuwaiti culture, while 37% believe this to be the case, regardless of the positive attitude toward Arabic-English bilingualism. Thus, there seems to be a higher acceptance of linguistic diversity as opposed to manifestations of cultural diversity in the current sample.

Foreign ways abroad

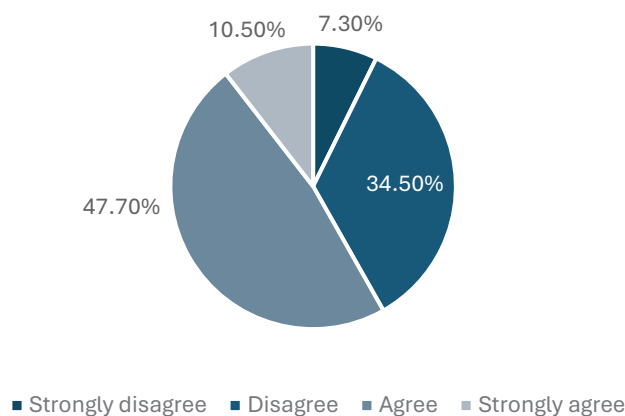


Figure 15 *Kuwaitis Abroad Should Adapt to Foreign Ways of Life.*

Regarding cultural adaptation when visiting foreign countries, Figure 15 shows that over half of the respondents (58%) believe that when travelling abroad, Kuwaitis should adapt to the cultural norms of the host country. This suggests an openness to intercultural engagement and flexibility in cross-cultural contexts. This response may indicate that these individuals value cultural adaptability and see it either as a form of respect or practical adjustment when interacting with other societies.

Interview Results

The interview questions were designed to probe into linguistic and cultural aspects of the educational environment at EMI universities in Kuwait to determine the impact of diversity on the teaching process and the achievement of and learning outcomes. The analysis of the transcripts of interviews with faculty at Kuwait EMI universities revealed several themes regarding potential impact of linguistic and cultural diversity on higher education with EMI, such as English proficiency, critical thinking skills, cultural taboos, and cancel culture. In terms of pedagogical responses, the demands of the educational environment, such strategies as imposing self-censorship, translanguaging, scaffolding, and deploying cultural sensitivity were identified.

Aspects Influencing the Educational Environment

English Proficiency. Faculty generally agreed that most students exhibit low English language proficiency upon admission, and their initial progress in English competency is very slow. One observed that the low proficiency problem is compounded by limited literacy skills in the students' native language. This combination creates significant challenges to achieving learning outcomes, especially in contexts requiring strong literacy skills, critical thinking, and creativity in programs such as literature, linguistics, education, history, sociology, or political science.

Limited English proficiency may also become an issue in the teaching of additional foreign languages (e.g. German, French) to Arab students in the EMI context, i.e. using English as a medium of instruction when explaining how a third language works. The language of instruction can be a barrier to achieving learning outcomes. As one language instructor observed, teaching foreign languages through English to students in Kuwait who may not have a strong grasp of the English language to begin with poses significant challenges. They suggested that switching to Arabic when teaching certain concepts, especially those related to languages whose grammar is very different from both Arabic and English, is more effective and enhances understanding. For example, using English to teach French to Arabs adds an additional layer of complication and may prevent students from making progress. This observation highlights the importance of linguistic proficiency in facilitating effective learning of the subject matter.

Critical Thinking Skills. Almost all of the interviewed faculty believe that critical thinking, open-mindedness, and creativity are challenging for Kuwaiti students in EMI settings and that this is at least in part due to the fact that they are operating in an additional language. Some faculty observed that many students struggle with both social and academic language, which makes it difficult to engage in higher-order thinking and advanced conversations. Other students possess communication abilities sufficient for peer-to-peer and student-instructor interactions, but there is a gap between their social language skills and the more complex academic language required for deeper discussions. This is a more serious problem in social sciences than in STEM fields, where students rely more on numeracy and analytical reasoning skills.

One of the themes emerging from the interviews is that classroom dynamics can be affected by a number of factors which have cultural underpinnings. For example, language instructors explained that language classrooms require frequent and systematic peer-to-peer and student-instructor interactions

through oral performance, and that in addition to cultural, religious, and political taboos, personality factors such as shyness, fear of public speaking, as well as gender dynamics may significantly influence classroom participation. Though oral performance and communicative ability are always among the intended learning outcomes in a language course, students may hesitate to speak up or express opinions in class due to cultural norms and societal expectations. These factors may hinder active participation and open dialogue in the classroom, impacting the overall learning environment and the achievement of intended learning outcomes (ILOs).

Academic integrity with such values as honesty, fairness, and responsibility in learning, as well as attitudes toward learning, including motivation, effort, and respect for knowledge, are deeply influenced by culture. Some interviewees claimed that attitudes towards education among higher education students at EMI universities in Kuwait, including the perceived importance of performance indicators over genuine learning, as well as the increasing numbers of cases of academic misconduct may negatively affect the educational environment and student motivation. One faculty member observed that “cultural norms of respect for hierarchy and authority coupled with the expectation of negotiating for grades influence teaching practices and interactions between instructors and students.” Thus, the overwhelming desire on the part of some students to boost their GPA prompts them to exert unfair influence on the instructors in a desperate attempt to renegotiate their grades using various tactics. This can lead to challenges in maintaining academic standards and fairness in assessment, especially in the case of external pressures on instructors to accommodate student demands.

Cultural Taboos. As most liberal arts faculty members observed, Western cultural concepts can seem alien to students from the Gulf, particularly those of a nuclear family structure, independence and self-reliance of young adults, and stages in the life of adolescents. Students are often surprised by Western lifestyles, such as that of leaving home for education, which contrasts with their family living arrangements. Despite the unfamiliarity, these cultural differences do not present a challenge for achieving learning outcomes, according to the interviewed faculty members. Students are already aware of Western lifestyles through media, entertainment, and online interactions but recognize that such lifestyles are unattainable within their societal norms. The interviewed faculty believe that students mostly accept traditional societal norms which allow them to achieve a comfortable life, understanding the irrelevance and impracticality of living like their Western counterparts in their context. Well-known examples from Western media (e.g., the sitcom *Friends*) are seen as unrealistic and “almost like science fiction” to students in Kuwait. Social norms are self-reinforcing, making it difficult to understand, let alone accept Western ways of living. Thus, student expectations are realistic and tailored to the accepted social norms.

One interviewee observed that the teaching environment in Kuwait shares similarities with their previous experience in Turkey, including such cultural constraints as religious and political taboos and the need for self-censorship. They believe that Kuwaiti society is conservative, traditional, and overly sensitive, where topics related to sex, religion, or politics are avoided. They opined that discussing sex-related topics may carry strong connotations of immorality, while the sacredness of religious beliefs is absolute and indisputable. Society exhibits unquestionable respect for political authority and strong national pride, so that any critical remarks may be considered confrontational and dangerous for national unity.

All interviewed faculty were aware of the conservative religious rules, including gender dynamics, which in liberal arts courses require a careful handling of teaching materials in terms of content selection and types of interactions with students. Care is taken to avoid graphic content in literature classes to prevent awkward situations, recognizing that students may still be aware of such content outside the classroom context. One interviewee recalled an incident where a male instructor in a language course

was terminated for showing a film with sexual content to a female audience, which resulted in a wave of complaints. Another faculty member was reprimanded for selecting poetry with overt references to carnal pleasures. Faculty tend to scan textbooks for any mention of sex, illicit substances, and religion to avoid causing offence and getting into trouble with the students, parents, and the university administration. These examples underscore the necessity for the recognition of strict cultural boundaries and the need for acute awareness of negative consequences for transgressors.

While all faculty recognize that cultural taboos limit the selection of topics for assignments, these restrictions do not directly affect the ability to teach certain subjects, especially in the STEM fields, but may hinder critical thinking and open discussions in social sciences. Instructors impose self-censorship and students themselves avoid controversial topics to stay within the expected cultural norms, leading to a lack of open expression. The restrictions result in fewer opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking, as they prefer to stay within their intellectual and cultural comfort zones. Challenging existing norms or critiquing social or political issues may lead to severe consequences for both students and faculty who allow or encourage such liberal exchange of ideas.

Cancel Culture. One interviewee observed that Kuwaiti society has created a specific form of cancel culture on social media, where local influencers may face backlash for making controversial political statements or for critiquing societal norms, leading to avoidance of such discourse. Another interviewee opined that subcultures alternative to the mainstream narrative do exist in Kuwaiti society but are marginalized and must remain discreet to avoid public backlash. Another interviewee observed that activism of any kind is generally not advisable for faculty, who are seen as somewhat public figures coming into systematic contact with Kuwaiti youth, and therefore should avoid disclosing their views on sensitive political, religious, and social issues. They opined that expressing political or religious opinions may be construed as unprofessional, so remaining unengaged or neutral is a safe option.

Pedagogical Approaches

The interviewed faculty members had developed several pedagogical approaches to bridge the cultural divide and mitigate language barriers, including the following strategies: imposing self-censorship, translanguaging, scaffolding, managing expectations, and deploying cultural sensitivity. They are discussed one by one below.

Imposing Self-Censorship. The interviewees successfully navigate cultural and societal taboos by imposing strict censorship on material and topic selection to align with accepted norms and avoid conflict. The approach involves assimilating into the local cultural milieu rather than challenging existing norms, which can lead to friction and resentment. One interviewee suggested that adapting to the cultural environment is essential for professional success, as well as for maintaining a harmonious relationship with all stakeholders and ensuring a satisfactory teaching experience.

As seen above in the section “Cultural Taboos”, most faculty admit that topic selection for reading and writing assignments is carefully tailored to avoid politics, religion, social issues, and other sensitive areas, instead focusing on neutral subjects like the environment, technology, health, diet, exercise, etc. This approach helps reduce anxiety and nervousness among students, who may be reluctant to engage in a discussion of issues deemed as unfit for public debate by society. One interviewed faculty member argued that appropriate topic selection and “staying within the safe zone” ultimately improves students’ ability to think critically, conduct research, and express themselves in English. They believe that topics should be selected based on what the students are familiar and comfortable with, avoiding sensitive or anxiety-inducing subjects.

One interviewee also recognized that student values and beliefs are diverse. Kuwaiti students come from various ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, and the prevalent attitude, fostered by the successive rulers of the country, is that of national unity, tolerance, and respect for diversity. The faculty emphasized that this creates a peaceful climate of coexistence in Kuwait for many diverse groups within the country in terms of nationality, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture.

Most faculty opined that the external influence of Western ideas on the deeply internalized cultural norms and beliefs of students is limited. While social media offers a window into different lifestyles, values, and mindsets, it does not fundamentally alter the students' core belief system. Several faculty members observed that many students travel extensively, and some have had experience living or studying for prolonged periods in Western countries; yet those international experiences are not seen as directly relevant to the students' local cultural environment and do not visibly influence their behavioral norms. Thus, exposure to Western ideas and lifestyles contributes to the climate of tolerance but does not lead to acceptance, especially if such ideas or lifestyles contravene religious and cultural norms of the students.

Translanguaging. The faculty members interviewed observe that Kuwait EMI universities do not follow a strict English-only policy in all cases. With the exception of English courses, such as English foundation, grammar, writing, linguistics, literature, and education, instructors may resort to using a mix of English and Arabic where necessary to enhance understanding. This is an important pedagogical tool in STEM fields, especially utilized by math and engineering faculty.

Another translanguaging strategy is acknowledging and accommodating students' dialects and accents, as well as making allowances for gaps in their English proficiency, which helps make students more comfortable with speaking in front of others. In particular, English faculty are aware that students mispronounce words, make grammatical or lexical mistakes, or follow non-standard sentence structure rules, but in an effort to increase their engagement and motivation in the classroom, some instructors disregard linguistic shortcomings, focusing instead on positive aspects of student performance, such as content, organization, or appropriate use of sources. These adaptations help bridge communication gaps and create a more inclusive learning environment, where students feel empowered and encouraged to participate actively.

Translanguaging also involves the use of Arabic in peer-to-peer interactions and the use of Arabic sources in projects and research papers. Instructors observe that when engaging in peer feedback or collaborative assignments, students often discuss the details in Arabic, although the deliverables are produced in English. They also help each other understand instructions and feedback in English by translating words and phrases into Arabic.

A separate issue is the teaching of foreign languages, such as French or German, in an EMI context. The instructors who do speak Arabic often switch to it when discussing grammar concepts in order to eliminate the additional complexity represented by EMI when teaching a third language. This strategy successfully resolves the issue of limited English proficiency, helping students achieve learning outcomes.

Scaffolding. In an education environment which de-emphasizes independent learning and where students tend to rely on detailed, step-by-step instructions, scaffolding is essential to support learning and gradual autonomy. Many students in the EMI contexts may also have limited English proficiency, which further increases their dependence on clear instructions, examples, and teacher modeling. Scaffolding helps bridge both the linguistic and cultural gaps that can hinder comprehension and participation.

All of the interviewees agreed that a de-emphasis on independent learning and a tendency of students to rely on instructors to facilitate the achievement of learning outcomes necessitates a deployment of supportive teaching strategies. Most faculty agree that the pedagogical approach at EMI universities in Kuwait is geared toward creating a constructive classroom experience by modeling, simplifying, guiding with questions, and generally using active learning strategies designed to increase student motivation and engagement. Students expect detailed guidelines and continuous feedback at every step of the task completion, even at more advanced stages of education, with examples directly relevant to the task at hand without the need to extrapolate or use analogies. In addition to step-by-step guidelines for all assignments and projects, students often expect continuous encouragement and rewards for every manifestation of effort and achievement in class.

One faculty member contrasted this approach with those of the US and Germany, where university students are treated as responsible adults, capable of independent learning, self-regulation, and self-motivation. Since private higher education institutions in Kuwait strive to be more supportive and hands-on, the expectation is for faculty to guide students very closely every step of the way, ensuring they follow guidelines, meet deadlines, and achieve outcomes, akin to a high-school approach in Europe or the US.

Deploying Cultural Sensitivity. Most faculty members emphasized developing a deep understanding of cultural norms and sensitivities to foster trust and effective communication with students. Most international faculty at EMI universities feel generally competent at addressing cultural barriers through empathy and respect, recognizing the importance of building positive teacher-student relationships and promoting a supportive learning environment where students are encouraged to engage actively and authentically. For example, avoiding sensitive issues and never critiquing any aspects of the local culture are seen by the international faculty as effective pathways to gaining respect and trust of students.

A further way of exercising sensitivity is to adjust assessment methods. Some faculty opined that minimizing the impact of high-stakes exams and instead opting for collaborative in-class assignments and project-based assessment teaches students how to express ideas clearly, listen actively, and negotiate meaning, enhancing their language skills. Also, projects help develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills, while working collaboratively on real-world projects pushes students to analyze, evaluate, and create solutions rather than memorize information. In addition, rotating team roles and shared accountability foster initiative, time management, and reliability.

As one faculty member observed, another aspect of deploying cultural sensitivity relies on understanding differences between collectivist and individualistic cultures and their impact on the educational environment. While most of the interviewed faculty come from cultures where individual achievement is paramount (USA, Europe), attributed to students' effort, engagement, ability to think critically, and act independently, cultures of the Middle East (e.g. Egypt, Turkey, Kuwait) emphasize reliance on family or the broader community, collaboration, and shared responsibility. Broad cultural differences should be taken into account when designing course activities and assessment in order to integrate diverse pedagogical approaches.

Discussion

The present section addresses the study's research questions, repeated below for convenience.

RQ (1) How does Linguistic and Cultural Diversity Manifest itself at EMI Universities in Kuwait?

The survey results reveal that linguistic diversity is not only an integral part of the educational experience, but also an integrated component of the participants' social lives. Among the student

respondents, about half grew up speaking only Arabic at home, while the other half identified as early bilinguals, having grown up speaking English, Persian, Hindi, Tagalog, and other languages in addition to Arabic. The majority believe in the importance of multilingualism at home, and virtually all recognize that the next generation of Kuwaitis should be exposed to English, preferably as early as possible. These findings differ from those of Ahmadi (2017) and Alazemi (2020), who found that students at public universities, which use both Arabic and English as the medium of instruction, perceive the presence of the English language as disadvantageous vis a vis Arabic, especially in the context of higher education in Kuwait.

In the current sample, students see both Arabic and English as relevant to their future professional lives, and do not necessarily believe that fluency in English may result in lowering their proficiency in Arabic, reflecting the additive view of bilingualism. This contrasts sharply with the previous study by Alazemi (2020) which found that public university students blame the shift to English in higher education for stifled progress in the development of their skills in Arabic as well regretting its status being reduced to the language of social interactions only, rather than that of higher education. Nonetheless, the current study's participants see the Arabic language as a hallmark of both local (Kuwaiti) and regional (Arab) identities. At the same time, the majority perceive fluency in both Arabic and English as sources of pride, implying a high degree of plurilingualism.

The analysis of the interview transcripts with international faculty highlights the complex impact of cultural factors on higher education in Kuwait and the strategies employed by the interviewees to navigate cultural constraints. By adapting teaching and assessment methods, implementing translanguaging and scaffolding, and deploying cultural sensitivity strategies, international faculty effectively overcome barriers to learning and create an inclusive and engaging environment, conducive to achieving the intended learning outcomes. Employing these strategies is crucial for international educators working in multicultural and diverse educational settings, particularly in the Arabian Gulf countries.

In terms of minimizing the potentially negative impact of cultural constraints on the achievement of learning outcomes by undergraduate students at EMI universities in Kuwait across diverse academic programs, the present study found that faculty members adopt pedagogical approaches which highlight students' strengths and capitalize on the educational and social experiences of students. Anxiety reduction and increased participation can be achieved by employing strategies such as avoidance of sensitive issues, careful selection of assignments which maximize student engagement in the classroom, as well as exploration of culturally relevant and appropriate topics for assignments and classroom discussion. The interviewees also emphasized a diversity of cultural and religious beliefs among students and a limited impact that access to social media and global entertainment have had on the core cultural values of students in EMI contexts in Kuwait.

The impact of cultural constraints on educational outcomes varies, with private school graduates being better able to take full advantage of opportunities afforded by universities with EMI and advancing academically faster than government school graduates, according to the interviewed faculty. The former, having experienced British or American curricula and having spent their formative years (K–12) exposed daily to the linguistic and cultural values of Anglophone cultures are more comfortable navigating intercultural and multilingual spaces created within a university with EMI.

Although cultural specificities in Kuwait do exist, the interviewees largely highlighted the fact that cultural differences do not fundamentally impede achieving learning outcomes in the STEM fields or in most social sciences. Nonetheless, in literature and language classes, the challenges lie in aligning teaching materials with cultural norms, eliminating certain topics, and managing student expectations

within the societal constraints. Instructors practice intercultural sensitivity, self-censorship, and provide appropriate content warnings, while also adapting their teaching style. They aim to create a supportive classroom environment which deemphasizes independent learning, recognizing a culturally-sanctioned reliance of students on external help from their extended families for academic, financial, emotional, and practical everyday life support.

The interviewed faculty recognized the diversity of the student body and various family values, educational background, and career aspirations of the students as potential sources of academic motivation. While they believe that intrinsic motivation and family support play crucial roles in students' success, extrinsic factors such as job market competitiveness may also influence their academic choices and efforts, especially that in the current economic climate competition among nationals on the job market is growing, necessitating more reliance on individual effort and achievement.

Overall, the interviews revealed various facets of cultural diversity within the education environment under consideration, including religious and political taboos, and the resultant the need for self-censorship, as well as societal limitations due to gender dynamics, interdependence of young adults on family and government support, and a specific model of diversity and tolerance, leading to avoidance of critical attitudes and elimination of sensitive topics from public discourse. While these constraints may affect the joy of teaching and limit open discussion opportunities, especially in liberal arts and social science courses, they do not necessarily impede the achievement of learning outcomes in terms of practical skills acquisition. The international faculty members at EMI universities adapt to these constraints by imposing strict self-censorship and by partially assimilating into the cultural milieu. The focus in higher education thus shifts away from holistic education towards the development of practical skills and employment readiness.

RQ (2) What is The Impact of Cultural and Linguistic Diversity on The Educational Environment at EMI Universities in Kuwait?

The educational processes at higher education institutions with EMI are heavily influenced by both the language of instruction and by the adaptation to the local cultural model. In terms of the EMI requirements, faculty members observe that students, especially public-school graduates, continually struggle with the linguistic demands of their programs, particularly in social science courses, where reading, writing, and other communication skills are crucial to academic success. Since low English proficiency may affect content acquisition and higher-order cognition, including critical thinking and analytical skills, the faculty deploy such strategies as translanguaging, scaffolding, modified assessment, and other pedagogical tools to facilitate achieving learning outcomes. The faculty members report lowering expectations regarding student independence, allowing for step-by-step submission of complex assignments, as well as for the use of external assistance (tutoring centers, writing labs) and collaboration on projects.

From the cultural perspective, the faculty members utilize strategies which maximize adaptation to the prevalent local norms. This includes the acknowledgment of linguistic and cultural diversity and inclusive classroom practices, as well as avoidance of topics likely to cause dissent or disengagement among students. It appears that the interviewed faculty engage in the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), initially proposed as "culturally relevant pedagogy" by Ladson-Billings (1992). It is a framework which acknowledges, legitimizes and incorporates students' cultural perspectives into the educational experience, including the curriculum, learning outcomes, teaching material, instructional methods, and assessment. The main goal of this inclusive approach is to increase student motivation, engagement, and ultimately achievement of critical learning objectives. CRT may have many different intended outcomes. In the US context, CRT was designed to help close the achievement

gap for students from underrepresented racial or ethnic backgrounds, helping minority students see themselves and their cultural values represented in the mainstream educational environment. In the context of Kuwait, the framework is utilized to promote intercultural understanding, as well as creating a positive learning environment and a sense of belonging in the academic community. From the pedagogical perspective, the adoption of CRT methods can help educators become more effective in a culturally diverse teaching environment by emphasizing intercultural skills, overcoming cultural biases and reducing barriers to learning. The framework prioritizes inclusivity and legitimization of multiethnic perspectives in education, thus emphasizing unique and culturally relevant ways of learning.

There are several limitations of the current study. First, the convenience sample of survey respondents is relatively small. Second, the responses were elicited from students at only two EMI institutions, the oldest, most established, and centrally located ones, while many more exist in the country. Third, the sample is imbalanced for gender and has a low percentage of students in the STEM fields, so the results cannot be interpreted as representative of the whole student population at EMI universities in Kuwait. In addition, the number of participating faculty members in semi-structured interviews is low, and only one representative per scientific discipline took part. Future studies should address universities with EMI in various parts of the country, not only in the central urban areas, as well as recruit more students in the STEM fields and more faculty representatives from different academic disciplines.

Conclusions

The present study identified manifestations of linguistic and cultural hybridity at EMI universities in Kuwait as seen from the perspectives of students and faculty. While language and culture barriers may interfere with the achievement of learning outcomes in higher education with EMI, the climate of linguistic and cultural adaptation fostered by the international faculty helps create an inclusive educational environment, facilitating academic success. The positive view of the English language among the students, and the desire to master it for both professional and personal reasons, while maintaining proficiency in Arabic, are signs of a positive attitude to multilingualism in the sampled population. The interviewed faculty members have spontaneously adopted culturally-sensitive pedagogical approaches within the context of their EMI programs. Although the benefits of diversity were not discussed in the current study, future studies should focus on the advantages of EMI institutions in countries such as Kuwait, in line with Smith (2008), who argues that individuals “who occupy hybrid spaces benefit from understanding both local knowledge and global cosmopolitanism. Those who can easily cross barriers in a world of amorphous borders have an advantage” (p. 4).

Despite its conservative leanings, a vibrant, diverse, and cosmopolitan Kuwaiti society represented by the participants in this study is a unique blend of cultural elements, resulting in a distinctive form of linguistic and cultural diversity. The country’s rich history, rooted in Arab traditions, strong regional ties, and international trade relations has successfully integrated with modern global trends, particularly in the realms of business, science, technology, and higher education. This linguistic and cultural diversity mirrors the interconnectedness of Kuwait with the local, regional, and global communities. A young, educated, multilingual generation of Kuwaiti nationals compose a complex and multifaceted cultural and linguistic landscape that is both rooted in tradition and open to the influences of the wider world. This fusion of cultures and languages not only defines Kuwait’s modern identity but also highlights the adaptability and resilience of its people in the face of evolving global dynamics.

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