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Special Issue Theme: Transcultural Communication across Academic Spaces: Views from the Middle East and North Africa



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Introduction – Transcultural Communication across Academic Spaces: Views from the Middle East and North Africa

This special issue aims to build on and extend current intercultural and transcultural communication research that has examined issues of language, culture, and power in higher education institutions, formal and institutional policies, and classroom practices in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The special issue is timely as it provides a range of current investigations that serve as a significant resource for intercultural and transcultural communication researchers and policymakers at a time when English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) programs, particularly in the MENA region, are receiving substantial attention. As a collection of empirical studies situated in diverse national contexts, this special issue also aims to address the need for empirically grounded work in the region. Hence, the collection of articles in this issue aims to shed light on the current intercultural and transcultural communication knowledge base, views, policies, and practices in the MENA region to pave the way for reforms in institutional policies and conceptual and empirically informed research recommendations in relation to intercultural communication education.

As internationalization continues to expand across educational institutions, especially in the Global South, including the MENA region, the need to include transcultural communication as part of a well-rounded curriculum has become more widely recognized by researchers and practitioners alike

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(R'boul, 2025; R'boul & Saidi, 2023; van den Hoven & Hopkyns, 2025). Transcultural communication has been defined as interactions “through and across, rather than in-between, cultural and linguistic boundaries, thus ‘named’ languages and cultures can no longer be taken for granted and in the process, borders become blurred, transgressed and transcended” (Baker & Sangiamchit, 2019, p. 427). In this sense, this perspective reflects a post-modernist understanding of cultures and languages where modernist labels and categories do not match reality, and thus, are rejected. In a region dominated by Arabic as the official language, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and EMI, other foreign languages such as French (which indeed has earlier roots in countries such as Syria and Lebanon) and, more recently, Chinese, are also asserting their presence in academic programs.

Contemporary academic programs in the MENA region centered on internationalized curricula and the use of ELF involve the co-existence of multiple cultural perspectives and promote interactions in which culture functions as a dynamic entity as individuals co-construct meanings (McConachy, 2018). Such interactions can be seen as sites for cultivating cultural empathy and epistemic openness (Elyas et al., 2023), generating dialogic and intercultural synergies (Tian & Link, 2019), and materializing linguistic hybridity as a dynamic sociocultural resource (Calafato & Tang, 2019). They further instantiate translingual practices as performative acts of meaning-making (Hopkyns, 2020), operate within intersecting and deterritorialized scapes (Hillman, 2023), and contribute to the evolving articulation of Islamic sociolinguistic ecologies (Bhatt et al., 2025). They may also give rise to particular local contexts of research writing (Bhatt & Chen 2025) where scholars’ writing practices are shaped by shifting institutional demands, multilingual repertoires, digital-affordances, and spatial-temporal constraints, all negotiated in relation to cultural values, power relations, and mobility, thus demonstrating the dynamicity of culture as a meaning-making resource (Fang & Elyas, 2021). However, it is important not to overlook what Bhatt et al. (2022) describe as higher education’s language problem. This relates to the tensions and inequities that emerge when English is privileged as the primary medium of knowledge production and dissemination, often marginalizing other linguistic resources and epistemologies (see also R’Boul, 2022). The issues of linguistic, cultural, and epistemological diversity make transcultural educational spaces fertile grounds for conducting research on the linguistic ecology of educational institutions, extant communication practices, as well as pedagogical interventions across the curriculum. Such a focus also targets and underscores the development of intercultural and transcultural communication skills and an appreciation for diverse cultural perspectives in multilingual and multiethnic MENA contexts.

Though national and local cultures and languages continue to impact communication styles, transnational communication relies on more inclusive, diverse, and complex approaches to linguistic and cultural interactions and experiences, which ultimately transcend national borders and transforms cultures (Baker & Sangiamchit, 2019). This takes place in academic spaces of fast-changing cosmopolitan countries across the MENA region as well. This is further accelerated by globalization, improvements in information and communication technologies, and international trade. What is more, the recent rise in artificial intelligence and its applications have the potential to be game-changers since they have the capacity to lead to a significant shift in current ways of doing or thinking about education. It is crucial that internationalized education enable such transformations, scaffolding and modelling increasingly complex translingual, transcultural, and trans-modal communication across various social contexts.

Considering the discussion above and informed partly by the principles of post-colonial theory and intercultural philosophy (see R'boul, 2022), the aim of this special issue is to highlight diverse practices of intercultural and transcultural communication across academic spaces in the MENA region and contribute to the relevant body of research in the MENA region, where work has been scarce. Considering these goals, five articles were selected for inclusion in this special issue.

Sarah Hopkyns and Melanie van den Hoven, as researchers who collectively have spent over two decades teaching in the United Arab Emirates, have observed a growing interest in East Asian languages and cultures amongst Emirati university students, especially with regard to Chinese, Japanese, and Korean cultures. Such interest is argued to stem from popular culture, soft power, and top-down strategic influence. Although research in the region often centers on Arabic and English, this specific study sheds light on third languages, other than Arabic and English, and their use and effects on trans-cultural and translingual identities, which provides implications for individual students' linguistic and cultural identities. In this sense, the study contributes to the field in a unique and meaningful way by focusing on what has not been sufficiently studied up until now (i.e., third languages in the Gulf region). The study presents data from female Emirati university students, collected through questionnaires ($n = 40$) and semi-structured interviews ($n = 2$). The paper highlights and explains how K-Wave Manga/J-lit passion shapes language preferences and transcultural identities of the participants in this specific context. The study reveals a strong interest in the East Asian languages of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean culture and demonstrates ways in which these languages interact with translingual and transcultural identities of these individuals. The results also indicate how the participants actively assess the target languages and cultures in comparison to their mother tongue and culture and achieve a sense of transcultural identity. As a conclusion, the study calls for broader recognition of third language use in Gulf universities and underlines the implications of this novel situation for language policy and education. In a nutshell, the study showcases the complex nature of transcultural communication, and it demonstrates the current cultural exchanges that have been taking place recently in the MENA region.

Acknowledging the fact that English is now the most commonly used language for internationally recognized academic publications, Sandhya Rao Mehta and Victoria Tuzlukova examine academic publishing in English as a cross-cultural process through which Arabic-speaking scholars must navigate global academic norms to be accepted into the international research community. Set in Oman, using Habibie and Flowerdew's (2023) framework on the globalization of scholarship within English for Research Publication Purposes, this study aims to explore the rhetorical strategies these scholars use, the challenges they face, and how they assert their linguistic identities according to these factors, based on qualitative data obtained from unstructured interviews with eight Omani researchers in a public-funded university in Oman. The study sheds light on the ways in which the scholars speaking Arabic negotiate the pressure to publish in well-ranked and indexed English language publications by conforming to the established protocol as well as asserting their unique linguistic identities. The analysis suggests that early-career scholars in Oman value English language publishing as a marker of institutional and professional achievement. Yet, they also state that they would much appreciate better support systems in terms of training and mentoring. The paper highlights the tensions between conforming to dominant publishing standards and the desire for institutional recognition in a specific way. It also critiques unequal access to opportunities to publishing in and through English and calls for more inclusive policies and pedagogical support to make sure that researchers from different backgrounds are considered and their participation in academic circles is ensured. In other words, this study calls for inclusive publication opportunities as well as increased pedagogical support for scholars seeking to participate in the English language academic community. Hence, it may be stated that this study unearths issues around the role of ELF and how it specifically affects scholars in Oman with regard to academic publishing. In this sense, the study offers implications for other countries in the MENA region since they are situated in a similar socio-cultural context.

In the next study in this special issue, the context is Türkiye, and Gülümser Efeoğlu explores interculturality in field-specific elective courses of a pre-service English as a foreign language teacher training program at a state university in Istanbul. Given the role of English as a global lingua franca, integrating interculturality and aspects of intercultural communicative competence into English as a

foreign language teaching is essential. Yet research, especially in the MENA region, is limited. The study argues that foreign language teacher training programs should be updated and revised to include elements of interculturality in response to the increasing focus on cultural diversity worldwide. This is also supported by other researchers since the effectiveness of these changes in achieving culturally diverse foreign language teacher education is still uncertain (e.g., R'boul & Saidi, 2023). Türkiye has recently implemented changes in language teacher training to include more courses including aspects of interculturality. However, it is unclear whether these courses are truly contributing to a more culturally diverse curriculum, which is one of the focal points in Efeoğlu's study. A critical thematic analysis of culture-related courses potentially related to interculturality is employed, following the two-steps proposed in Lawless and Chen (2018) in order to assess information provided in course outlines on course content and descriptions of culture. The results that there is confusion regarding how to define culture. In addition, the study reveals traces of Anglophone paradigms (i.e., those of British and American English) embedded in instructors' materials and content choices across data sources. Although the dominance of English can be expected within this pre-service English as a foreign language teacher training program, a stronger connection to the intercultural communicative competence and/or interculturality literature could be preferred to foster intercultural awareness.

Marta Tryzna's paper argues that Kuwait is experiencing a rise of linguistic and cultural diversity not only due to the use of ELF by the ethnically diverse, multilingual society but also because of the adoption of EMI in higher education institutions. As Kuwait embraces English in its higher education system, which often sidelines Modern Standard Arabic, a younger and multilingual generation navigates between local traditions and global influences at the same time. Taking these observations into consideration, the study analyzes cultural and linguistic aspects of diversity in the context of EMI universities in Kuwait. Set in an Arabic-dominant yet globally influenced context, the study investigates the linguistic and cultural manifestations of diversity and their impact on educational processes by specifically focusing on how translingualism and cultural blending are experienced by students and educators alike. Utilizing a mixed-methods research design and collecting data from two EMI universities, the study explores how hybridity manifests itself at such universities and what the impact of cultural and linguistic diversity is on the educational process. The results indicate that young Kuwaiti students regularly engage in multilingual interactions characterized by fluid use of multiple languages both within the educational environment and at home. Pedagogical approaches in a range of academic fields also reflect linguistic and cultural diversity. While language and culture barriers might be expected to interfere with the achievement of learning outcomes in higher education EMI contexts, the climate of linguistic and cultural diversity facilitates academic success. The positive view of the English language among the study participants and the students' desire to master it for both professional and personal reasons, while maintaining proficiency in Arabic, are concrete signs of linguistic diversity from an emic perspective. The participants adopt culturally sensitive pedagogical approaches in response to the cultural barriers identified. These results and findings imply that future studies should focus on the advantages of EMI institutions in countries such as Kuwait. This is in line with Smith's (2008) study, which 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). The study also concludes that despite its conservative leanings, a vibrant, diverse, and cosmopolitan Kuwaiti society represents a unique blend of transcultural elements. The country has successfully integrated with modern global trends, particularly in the realms of business, science, technology, and higher education. In other words, according to Tryzna, this linguistic and cultural diversity mirrors the interconnectedness of Kuwait with local, regional, and global communities. A young, educated, and multilingual generation of Kuwaiti nationals navigates effortlessly between various cultural and linguistic spheres, which enables the emergence of a complex and multifaceted cultural and linguistic landscape. 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.

In Yemen, Abdullah Al-Eryani examines intercultural communication in university-level English as a foreign language programmes. While analyzing foreign language education in this specific context, the study takes the learners' needs into consideration and extends the topic beyond grammatical competence in order to include the ability to communicate appropriately in intercultural contexts. However, this study highlights that integrating intercultural communication into foreign language curricula remains a challenge, particularly in relation to curriculum design and pedagogy. Using corpus-based analysis of course specifications and a faculty questionnaire, the study explores how intercultural communication is addressed and perceived. The findings of the study show that intercultural communication is insufficiently incorporated into Yemeni English as a foreign language programmes. Some major challenges were observed including superficial treatment of intercultural communication patterns, an imbalance between linguistic and cultural dimensions, ineffective pedagogy, limited classroom practices, and inadequate exposure to the target culture.

Taken together, the five articles featured in this special issue provide a rich and multifaceted understanding of how language, identity, and interculturality intersect across diverse pedagogical and cultural contexts in the MENA region. Although each article focuses on a different national setting (i.e., Kuwait, Oman, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen), the studies are united by a shared interest in examining how global linguistic and intercultural flows reshape local practices, policies, and identities. What emerges from the diverse contributions in this special issue is a sketch of a region undergoing swift and dynamic changes in its sociolinguistic and educational landscapes. Whether through the influence of Korean popular culture, the demands of global academic publishing, the push for intercultural and transcultural competence in pre-service teacher education, or the evolving nature of EMI in higher education, all five studies indicate the need for more inclusive, flexible, local, and critically reflective foreign language education practices. The studies collectively call for the recognition of multilingual realities and hybrid identities, and it is suggested that educational systems adapt themselves to the current social and global developments. In this sense, this special issue contributes to the growing body of literature that challenges monolingual and monocultural paradigms in the field of foreign language education and focuses on interculturality in academic settings. By foregrounding local voices and experiences from the MENA region, researchers, policymakers, and educators are invited to engage in deeper and more nuanced dialogues considering the future of foreign language education in an increasingly interconnected world.

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