

The Concept of the Literary use of English Language: The Case of the Arab World's EFL Environment

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ABSTRACT

This literature-based study explores the concept of the literary use of English language in an attempt to characterize the context of the Arab world's EFL environment accordingly. The literary use of English language construct is defined to be an in-between junction of multi overlapping set of sociolinguistic areas including Deci & Ryan; 1972, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) on Intrinsic vs. extrinsic motive of L2 acquisition; Schumann; 1978, Acculturation Model in EFL; Brown; 1980, Adaptation to a New Culture; as well as the CEFR 5 levels of EFL proficiency. The problem which prompted this study is both academic and societal where such “public use of discreet English” barely exist or has any public conventions. Conversely, the prevalent English through the Arab world's public life is either the daily communication one, or the (pragmatic) professional version in the contexts of the different disciplines. As a result, the absence of cultural arenas, literary conventions and consequently the literary figures/activists and the audience for such discreet English, is noted. This situation which opposes the very notion of English being the second language as most of the Arab countries recognize, has led to the public pragmatic view of English. This situation is problematic especially academically where, fewer college students today are interested in majoring in pure English majors such as in literature, linguistics or even in media. The method applied hence, is structured literature review conducted around the devised premises each of which is derived from the research questions, and enhanced with some statistical data. The study concludes –besides the low popularity of the literary use of English, with synthesizing the factors contributing to the problem. The root issues is found to the economic public orientation among the Arab populations in the recent decades. Whereas, the Islamic discourse is found to have filled this void of the literary use of English throughout the Arab world's EFL environment.

Keywords: Ceremonial use of English, Cross-culture communication, Literary use of English.

INTRODUCTION

Background

A great deal of today's pentagenarian Arabic speaking EFL learned individuals still live the memory of school days' English literature such as Don Quixote, Moby Dick, the Merchant of Venice and maybe memorize some Shakespearian verses. It is because back then during the 1970s, 1980s and as recent as the early 2000s, the school and the college English curricula were richer in English literature than they are today. This fact is evident as well in how the school premises and college campuses looked like those days. They used to have theaters, poetry recitation contests and other ways and forms of communicating artistic English. Now, whether or not globalization has brought cultures closer or apart, is a legal question to ask. At one point, our world has changed indeed and the global changes took several different forms and aspects. One way of looking to the global changes of course, the evident cross-culture interaction as a natural result of the advances of communication channels; mainly, the

internet. On the other hand, these communication channels are not equidistantly two ways, but rather wider on the inflicting cultures and narrower at the receptive ones. This is especially true with the English western culture and the rest of the world EFL cultures.

Problem statement

Does the use of English for EFL speakers have to be either informal or literature? Or in other words, can English language's cultural dimension be "jettisoned" in favor of more proactive use? When learning English is for a better job opportunity, and then after it is learned it is used solely within the workplace environment; this situation is everything but normal. However, this dichotomy of pragmatic rather than "cultural" motive of learning English language, ideally manifests in the 22 populations that constitute the EFL region termed as the Arab world. This is because the populations of this multi-state region and for the last five decades, have been learning English language mainly driven by the zeal for penetrating the job market as the workplaces requires. This is despite the already limited space English language has reserved itself in the public communication of the region, except limitedly in the organizations of some fields. Consequently, it may sound plausible rather than simplistic for the EFL learners of region to question the very validity of studying English for any "impractical" function such as literature and media. This non-workplace and non-daily life level of English communication though, happened to be scholarly recognized as the literary use of English Language. The concept is addressed within the folds of the key sociolinguistics sub-areas; mainly acculturation/adaptation, cross-culture communication as well as literature when it is used at the public rather than the academic level.

Objective of the study

The objective of this study is first to crystalline the "loosely" meaning of the term literary the use of English construct as opposed to literature use and daily life English among EFL populations. Then the study cites and examines the two selected EFL environments that share some commonality with the Arab world's on this regard. Finally, and based on the already solidified term the literary use of English construct, the study attempts to characterize the situation of the Arab world's EFL environment.

METHOD

The study is based on a mix of case study and literature review, as instrument for collecting the data. One set of the collected data is pertinent to the case study, includes exploring the status quo of the Arab world's EFL environment, profiling the literary figures as well the settings and audience of this form of language use. The literature consulted for this type of the data includes both official statistics and reports on the status quo of the overall Arab world's English language's level of proficiency, degree of acculturation and the level/type of English communication prevalent in the public life.

Data collection

The target data is of two types, literature review findings and statistical data in form of curated lists profiling the public literary figures who are active in public the literary use of English. The profiling lists are curated through citing the main stream media, social media as well as the other informal platforms that may exist. The category of the public literary figures targeted though, excludes those who are engaged in: workplace English, daily communication English and informal English settings. In contrast, the public literary figures are those who are engaged in formal, cultural, artistic and/or eloquent English in public venues and contexts dedicated solely for this purpose. Profiling and enlisting the public literary figures extends through the span of 10 years beginning 2014 to 2024. For the purpose of contrast, a sample of non-Arab EFL environment; namely, Kenya and Malaysia. On the other hand, the key sources consulted for the data relevant to the Arab world's EFL environment includes a list the pan-Arab English educational entities; namely:

- Association of Arab writers in English Language
- Arab Writers Forum
- General Union of Arab Writers & Authors
- Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)

Participants

As stated earlier, rather than taking the bulky 400 million population size of the Arab world's 22 countries, the study takes a selected sample on regional basis. The regional sampling is by picking two countries from each of the three Arab sub-regions as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The Selected Arab Sub-regions.

Africa Region	Gulf States Region	Larger Syria Region
Egypt	UAE	Syria
Sudan	Saudi Arabia	Jordan
Libya	Oman	Lebanon

The sample includes nine nominated countries –three from each sub-region, based on their levels of EFL proficiency as well as the popularity of English language, besides the geographic consideration. Whereas, the Frank-phone Arabic speakers of North Africa are excluded, i.e., Tunisian, Moroccan, Algerian and Mauritians; even though their educational systems recently started to embrace English language and adopt it in the academia.

Questions of the study

1. How can the literary use of English be contrasted to the typical literature and daily use ones?
2. What ideal instances of literary use of English EFL environments that can be compared to the Arab world's?
3. How can the Arab world's literary use of English be characterized?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Examining the concept of the literary use of English, begins with the definition given by Abdulkhaleq & Al-Qahtani; 2015, as, “the artistic use of the English language through literary devices and techniques to create meaning, evoke emotion, and enhance a text's style”. Furthermore, the study elaborates that, it is an area in-between three overlapping socio-linguistic domains and encompasses several levels and themes of using the language in creating artistic and impactful written works. The description of “in-between three overlapping socio-linguistic domains,” is explained by Yeves (2000) as to refer to Schumann; 1978, Acculturation Model in EFL and Hull; 1997, cultural representation. Whereas, an additional dimension that contributes to framing the concept of the literary use of English is Hansen & Liu; 1997, Social Identity and Language whose three components: social psychology, linguistics, and second language acquisition (SLA) polarize the same nation. So, the take-away from these sets of definitions of the literary use of English contract, can be exemplified in the chart below:

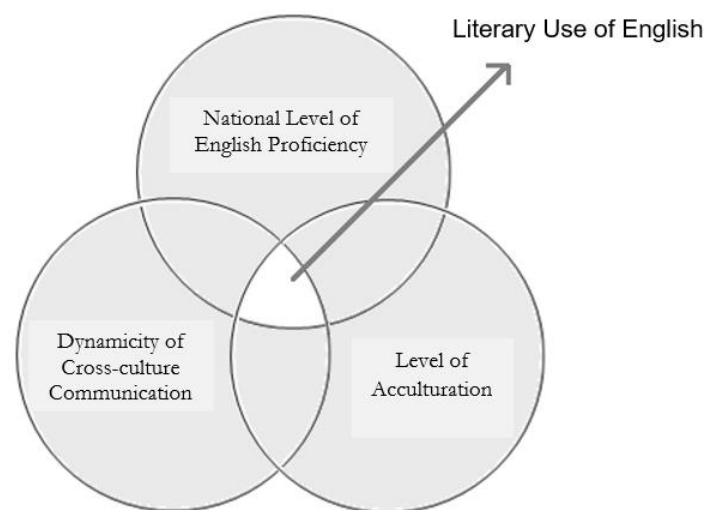


Figure 1.

Therefore, the common denominator that joins the three perspectives of looking at the concept of the literary use of English, is acculturation and cross-culture communication. In return, cross-culture communication is always co-addressed along with L2 learners' level of proficiency which according to Canagarajah (1999) is determined by tools such as the CEFR 5 levels of EFL. Meaning, it is at the Independent or Proficient users of English do EFL learners start to demonstrate cross-cultural exploration and produce artistic works (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014).

Whereas, how the concept of the literary use of English is distinct from the other forms/levels of English communication including literature, is addressed in several studies. A key distinction is rather a correlation for Elyas & Picard (2010) who propose that, the literary use of English includes but not restricted to literature; giving instances of cross-culture dialogues such intellectual, social, political besides other scenarios that involve L2-L2 or L2-L1 individuals. Whereas, for Bashehab & Buddhapriya (2013) “while bilingualism itself can enhance the appreciation of English literature, the L1 or L2 cross-culture exchanges involves authentic language input and output in the context of the bilingual's own perspective and taste”. Furthermore, the setting is a point of distinction emphasized by Pessoa, Miller, & et al (2014) stating that, the public setting wherein the literary use of English is exchanged is of a reciprocal nature; i.e., particular situations urging a metacais language. The same perspective is worded by Al-Qahtani (2015) that concept emanates from and develops in abreast with L1 speaker's impetus of communicating in the foreign language to apply, practice, or show his/her familiarity with L2. A fresh perspective of contrasting the literary use of English as opposed to celebrating English literature, is that in the context of the first, an L1 learner's interest of celebrating his/her L1 language skills, cultural understanding, and cognitive abilities (Schumann, 1978). This is unlike the situation of celebrating English literature where the ambiance is rather exclusive in both terms; the addresser and the audience, rather than the public stage at large.

The instances where the literary use of English is prevalent, is a pivotal area to cast light on, and it is present in the literature of EFL topics as well as in SLA. First sociolinguists such Bemstein; 1970, and Basil; 1971, both single out some former British colonies whose populations have emerged with English culture influence than others. Furthermore, the study by Selvi & Yazan (2017) name some of these countries of the world with the highest English language proficiency and happened to be mention by Basil countries. These are non-European countries where English is the official language including Zambia, Malaysia, Philippines, Kenya and several others. On the other hand, the Nigerian decorated author Wole Soyinka; 1994, commenting on his Man-Booker Prize 2018 award, describes the Nigerian literary environment to variety from the linguistic behaviors as well as cross-dialect advantage for the locals. One instance of a literary use of English can be inferred from several articles on the frequent cultural venues held in UAE, mainly in Dubai. According to The New Arab (2015), since UAE has posed itself a global cultural hub besides an economic one. Dubai has become a fusion point for almost every nationality and culture with multination events held throughout the year. However, an opposing view comes from an exiled UAE citizen, Al-Taweel, who protests the “loss of the national entity” for the western culture. Among his statement is that, what is called global culture venues are in fact one-way endeavor meant by to westernize the UAE society (The New Arab, 2015). The opposition figures could be referring to the absence of the Emirati citizens' engagement in these conventions and venues; meaning they are mostly foreign-foreign cultural interaction. A pit different situation is in Egypt where the renewed Al-Azhar University's Center for English Language is in engaged in several cultural efforts and programs dedicated to cultural dialogue, such as an "English for Interfaith Dialogue" program according to the British Council; 2018. Among the details of the center profile is that, it adopts a cultural exchange program with the UK as well as it caters for the Egyptian tourism industry by qualifying tourist guides and interpreters. Well, whether or not this Azhar Center is an ideal context of literary English, it arguably is; except that it is still an academic entity. The online ARAB KITSCH (2023) which is a chronicle of the Arab and Middle Eastern culture in English language, maybe another instance of literary English. The platform publishes a list of the events they sponsor and among the list of the scheduled events are theatrical shows acted by American players, poetry reading and monologues co-performed by Arabs and English speaking guests.

Case Description

The Arab world refers to the Arabic speaking region that occupies a huge land area extending across Asia and Africa with a total population of roughly 400 million. Politically, the countries of the Arab world belong to either of three sub-regions: the Gulf 6 states in the Arabian Peninsula, larger Syria Arabs and the African Arabs. The populations of the region vary in the popularity of English language among their populations and relatively in their level of proficiency.

The Arab world's level of English proficiency

The Arab world's overall level of English proficiency is widely evaluated and characterized in the region's abundant literature of English language learning and teaching. The global EF English Proficiency Index; EPI, 2021, rates it be generally “very low” with the exception of UAE population rated as “low”. This is indeed indicative of how much embattled this region of EFL is. The same low leveling is assessed by English Foundation (EF), in its EPI Global Ranking of Countries and Regions 2024 where the High Proficiency in the world's 22 country ranking between 550–599 out of world's index total of 249 country. The same result is confirmed by the other recognized international standard test of English proficiency including IELTS, TOEFL, the Pearson Test of English (PTE) and the CEFR 5 levels, where in none of them does the region scores average or medium (AWEJ, 2022).

English Acculturation in the Arab World

The Arab world's level of English acculturation is described by Al-Qahtani; 2016, as being “complex and varied phenomenon, marked by culture conflict”. The study argues that, there are historical reasons why the populations of the Arab region lag behind in English as a second language; first rejecting, then later on limitedly adopting and currently striving to catch up. Other supporting views bring about the religious-cultural factor including Hansen & Liu; 1997, who argue that, the Arabic language-Islam strong bond has been behind rejecting anything foreign including languages. This same perspective of language-culture bond though among the Arabic speaking populations, is taken to be a contributor to the preservation of the Arabic culture and literature. Meaning and necessarily indicating this is at the cost of English language.

The rates of college intake and output of the students who choose English language as their major, is another important indicator of the status quo of English language education in the Arab world. Studies by Al-Qarni; 2015, addresses the drop of the Arab students' interest in majoring in “pure” English language; referring to literature and linguistics. Whereas, the study by Abdulkhaleq & Al-Qahtani; 2015, confirms the same issue and extends the main reason to be economic and prompted by the developmental orientation of the societies resulting in pro-productive college programs at the cost of disciplines like humanities and language. Furthermore, statistics provided by the Arab Open University (AOU), an institution of multi Arab nationals, in its 2021 report publishes the graph below shown the students' rates of enrolment in English language and literature programs:

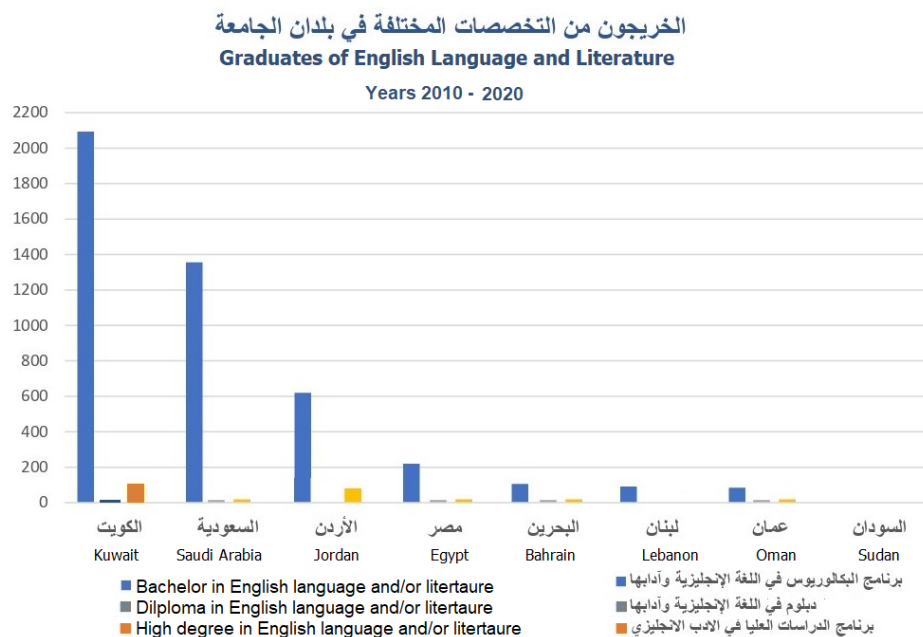


Figure 2.

Source: Arab Open University; <https://www.arabou.edu.kw/ar/faculties/language/Pages/statistics.aspx>

Diagnosis and Findings

In this section of the paper, a through diagnoses of the Arab world's case of the literary use of English language, is conducted. The diagnoses process follows the order of faking each of the study question as a premise, and then stating the finding(s) under each.

Having the concept of the literary use of English language formulated, as being non-workplace English, not daily English and non-informal English exchanged in purely cultural/artistic settings, the case in hand can be diagnosed accordingly. It is evident that the literary use of English language is not prevalent enough in any of the Arab world's 22 EFL populations. This outcome consequently resulted in the absence of the events, venues and the audience for such ceremonial artistic/cultural level of English in the public arena. Also, a reciprocal factor is determined which is the wide disinterest of the college EFL learners majoring in pure English language as the low ratio of college intake and output indicates. the average Arabic speaking school graduates are saturated with Arabic literature from the school years according to Rahmani (2006) who cites the school contents: pre-Islamic era literature of before 500 ad; the Umayyad era poetry and prose of mid-6th century; the Abbasid era poetry and prose of until 8th century; and then the modern era of Arabic literature. Meaning literature-wise, the Arabic speaking school graduates cultured wide enough and deep enough in their Arabic language literature, and necessarily have developed taste and esthetics and interact with it in their post-school life as adults. Considering the presumption posed by Bin-Hojail; 2006, that it was that during the pre-2000 period the educational systems'

curricula were richer in English literature and started to dwindle thenceforth. The data is collected sources of data included both recognized Arab entities literary of on the public orientation. The percentages of the college students majored in English language and/or literature i.e., writers, poets, public speakers revolve around three areas; writers, poets, critics. However, the religious figures category is considered for the inseparable Islamic-cultural themes of discourse for the Arabic speaking populations.

Are there EFL populations where the literary use of English ideally exists? the Kenyan and the Malaysian English EFL environments, were the answers. The Kenyan and the Malaysian English EFL environments' literally use of English, is plausible and like the rest of the world's top one the two nations enjoy satisfactory CEFR levels of English proficiency. A closer look on the Kenyan and Malaysian case of the literary use of English, is curated from sources including GPI Int.; 2023, Journal of the African Literature Association; 2018, besides several online sources , is given in a data table below:

Table 2. Kenyan vs. Malaysian Literary Influencers- 2010-2020.

Literary Genre	Kenya	Malaysia
A. Authors and literary figures	22	31
B. Media/ social media activists	36	48
C. Public speakers and cultural activists	8	12

The figures in the comparison Table 2 above, shows the results of Category (A) "Authors and literary figures," to be in favor of Malaysia with 22 vs. 31; then, Category (B) "Media/ social media activists," rendering 36 vs. 48 in favor of Malaysia too; whereas the result of Category (C) "Public speakers and cultural activists," rendering 6 vs. 12 in favor of Malaysia. Noteworthy here is that, these numbers should be taken along with the overall high per-nation CEFR EFL leveling of EFL proficiency. As provided in the paper by NgMado (20012), the Kenyan and the Malaysian cultural arenas are dynamic vividly rich in:

- Frequency of English programs in national TV and radio
- Frequency of cultural conventions and debates
- Prints of daily and periodical journals
- Academic-public interaction on social and cultural occasions
- Cross-culture events involving foreign parties and diasporas

A positive answer therefore can be drawn for the 2nd research question of whether or not some ideal instances of literary use of English EFL environments exist to compare/contrast the Arab world's situation to. While the disproportionality in terms of population sizes is on favor of the Arab world, the levels of English acculturation and proficiency are in favor of the Kenyan and Malaysian EFL population. However, the upshot of reciprocal variance still discounts the Arab world's level of literary use of English since the statistical data of Table 1 shows minimal figures of 8 and 12 in the number of public speakers and cultural activists are still above those of the Arabic world's EFL environment.

Now, based on the criteria derived from the above Kenyan and Malaysian English EFL environments, we can characterize the Arab world's literary use of literary English be characterized. Unlike it is with English, the Arab world's public arenas are rich and dynamic with fus'ha (classic) Arabic as well as Arabic literature. As Rababa'h; 2005, argues though, it is natural for Arabic language (L1) to be dedicated as much room and activities. The Arab world's public cultural arenas is impotent as described by NGI (2021) and the situation reflects in the growing deterioration of the student's creative English writing skills as the curated data on Table 3 below:

Table 3. English Literary Features in the Arab world.

Population	Published and notable Literary figures	Media/ social media activists	Public speakers and cultural activists
Egypt	14	12	8
Sudan	3	2	1
UAE	13	3	4
Saudi Arabia	8	6	3
Syria	4	1	2
Jordan	8	2	5

A fleeting look on Table 2 above shows how few the personalities who play a public role in their countries' literary use of English. With the maximum number standing at 14 published and notable literary figures, in Egypt –the most populous of all, and 13 in UAE, the number is insufficient considering the combined population of above 100 million in both countries. On the other hand, the 9 lows of 1, 2, 3 and 4 scores indicate an overall low number of such actors who might invigorate the literary arenas. The Arab world's cultural arenas are almost void

of notable media figures programs' presenters, public figures and social media influencers (Erotro, 2004). The overall modest English language proficiency among the Arabic speaking EFL populations, maybe one reason as noted by Suleiman; 1983, Rababa'h; 2005, Elttayef; 2017, and others. However, and as stressed earlier, the Arab world's English literature crisis extends through both levels: the learners and the educational systems, since the curricular level as well is highlighted by researchers such as Al-Hosni; 2014.

CONCLUSION

A few conclusions can be drawn from examining the Arab world's EFL environment of over 400 million population, as of its of literary use of English language; on top of which is the anomaly of the abject condition. Otherwise, such huge EFL environment is expected to be prolific enough as to give birth to a decent number of literary figures, literary conventions and literary activists who may polarize a slice of the audience. The root cause of this disparity is found to lie in the public economic orientation towards English learning and teaching across the academia and consequently across the cultural atmosphere at large. This public economic orientation has reflected in the Arab academia as well where English language for the EFL learners has become a mere booster for job opportunities. As a result, as well, no audience or venues exist for such literary English communication in the academia, media or public arena. On the other hand, the only presence of the literary use of English language is the Arab world's EFL environment is found in the arena of comparative relation, i.e., Islamic discourse flaring all the public venues, social and main stream media. The factor which qualified the Islamic discourse for filling the void of literary use of English is that, the Islamic texts and Arabic language happened to be inseparably interrelated. Not to mention the fact that the Islamic discourse is the restless impetus for inter-faith, cross-culture and intra-cultural communication and exchanges with the non-Arabic speaking Muslims outnumbering those who are by far.

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