Involving English Teachers in National English Language Policies in the GCC

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English language teachers in the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) countries strive to adjust national educational objectives to their classrooms, particularly in Bahrain and the UAE. Most teachers appropriate curricula based on short-term goals entailing a compromise of national policies. Such appropriations stem from different levels of students in the classroom and national policies. Many English language teachers are highly critical of national English language policies, while others argue that such policies are unrealistic because they do not involve English language teachers. This situation results in a gap between national English language policies in theory and implementation in pedagogical practices. This paper proposes that education decision-makers of both Bahrain and the UAE can constructively involve teachers in developing national English language policies that cope with global trends of ELT pedagogy. Involving native Arab teachers in developing education policies is essential to counter current local economic conditions and marketplace challenges, standardise a national policy and preserve the native culture in a globalised world.

Key words: *ELT, ESL, English Language Policy, Language Education Policy, Education.*

Introduction

In Japan and the USA, the official language is not set by the national law despite being used in official procedures, courts and education. In other countries such as Singapore and China, language is specified with a decree in the national law (Silver & Steele, 2005). In the GCC

states (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf), English has become the first language in the marketplace and academic bodies without an official decree. Due to the significant role of English in academic and business sectors, students learn English as early as a preschool in most GCC states (MOE UAE, 2019). Most GCC states have developed strategic plans for Higher Education either by a five-year plan or a long-term strategy, such as the UAE Ministry of Education Strategic Plan (2017 – 2021) and the Bahrain National Strategy of Higher Education 2030 (MOE Bahrain, 2016). These policies and strategic plans are usually set by quality assurance authorities that regulate the procedures of higher education.

Consequently, the strategic plans have turned into procedures and measures of quality assurance rather than a national educational vision that seeks creativity and excellence. Such plans do reflect a national will to develop educational outcomes, but their endeavours would be more tangible and feasible if the realities of the classroom would be translated and integrated into these plans. Daily contact with students enables teachers to provide constructive feedback to policy decision-makers about the efficacies of learning outcomes. Therefore, teachers are considered the focal point of decision making (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996), which means that policymaking authorities require more active participation from teaching faculty members.

In national education policies, pedagogical processes consist of two educational priorities: structural priorities related to the education system, and classroom priorities. Silver and Steele (2004) argue that five structural priorities compose national language policies, including "time allocation, syllabus, assessment, textbooks and materials, lesson focus, and teaching approach. These are usually regulated by national educational policymakers or governmental bodies that manage educational sectors. At the classroom level, priorities are similarly set by coordinators and management bodies. Thus, most pedagogical priorities are introduced from top to bottom but not vice-versa. In Singapore and China, a national syllabus for English courses is used as a model to be appropriated to the classroom, according to Silver and Steele (2004).

Comparatively, in the USA and Switzerland, most schools benchmark their curricula with other schools to validate their efficacy. Similarly, English course curricula do not have a national syllabus in the GCC countries. In terms of assessment, most GCC countries follow strict rules from education authorities, but assessment policies periodically change via reform initiatives. However, such reforms are usually introduced by higher education management bodies rather than being a result of academic conferences that potentially offer more active involvement of academic faculty members in shaping policies. Hence, such initiatives do not achieve their intended outcome since they are subject to the teachers' interpretations and implementation (discussed more below)

Theoretically, educational policies are subject to reform to cope with the global progress of technology and knowledge. However, the reform of educational policies is very challenging. In Turkey, Öztürk & Aydın (2019) argue that most educational reforms failed because they "were mostly based on the curricular or content changes rather than systemic ones renewing the theoretical basis of these programs (p. 184-185)." This suggests that changes might include textbooks and course loads but not the theories that construct educational bodies. The GCC countries have authorities that regulate educational policies, such as the Council of Higher Education in Bahrain and the Ministry of Higher Education in Kuwait, but these policies are not unified when it comes to English. Therefore, in the same university or school, English textbooks are based on mixed curricula, including Oxford, Cambridge and Harcourt. Although such a condition implies a diverse educational background of English, it tends to be unstable and is subject to occasional change.

Research indicates that the clarity of national education policies has a significant role in standardising education outcomes. Hajisoteriou (2013) argues that there is a connection between the clarity of policy requirements and teachers' policy translation in the classroom. Many teachers face problems in implementing new assessment or accountability procedures due to unclear policies (Keenan, 2018). This process produces English language teachers that are aware of "policies" but little awareness of policy implementation. Other teachers abide by departmental policies, most of which do not translate the national policies (Li, 2010). In most GCC states, national education policies are often circumscribed to the elite management faculty members, resulting in a lack of awareness of such policies among teachers.

The Current Situation of National Language Policies in Bahrain and the UAE

Educational authorities have already developed some initiatives to implement national policies in the form of strategic visions in most GCC states. In the UAE, policies are already underway through the five-year strategic plans with specific targets (Table 1). The targets include average PISA scores (the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment) and Arabic skills. The PISA scores measure the students' level in reading, mathematics and science (OECD, 2019). PISA tests are carried out in English; hence, English language scores are presumed from the PISA results. This suggests that English is implicitly tested in PISA via reading, which comprises only one of the four language skills. The strategic plan of the UAE displays the Arabic and science targets, but those of English are embedded. Despite the will to initiate strategic plans, the significance of the English language is overlooked in such plans. This does not mean that the UAE is not aware of the importance of national policies and international standards as benchmarks, but further specific targets can be included more explicitly regarding the English language.

Table 1: MOE UAE, 2019

Main 2021 Targets

1	Average TIMSS Score	Among the top15 countries
2	Upper Secondary Graduation Rate	98%
3	Enrolment Rate in Preschools (public and private)	95%
4	Average PISA Score	Among the top 20 countries
5	Percentage of Students with High Skills in Arabic, According to National Tests	90%
6	Percentage of Schools with High Quality Teachers	100%
7	Percentage of Schools with Highly Effective School Leadership	100%
8	Enrolment Rate in Foundation Year	0%
9	Expenditure on Research and Development as % of GDP	1.5%

If implementing strategic plans has proved a significant success in most GCC states, constructing national English language policies could have rewarding results. First, implementing English language policies leads to standardised English language outputs. In addition, it leads to the standardisation of assessment tools and indicators, bridging the gap between the various tests of public and private educational sectors. This requires more involvement of teaching faculty in policy construction. Since teachers have rich expertise in the social, academic and economic backgrounds of their students, they can provide comprehensive feedback in developing education, especially in the case of language where assessment is different from that of science and mathematics. Teaching faculty members can play a significant role in formulating quality assurance regulations and measures. Consequently, quality assurance duties can be assigned to the respective teaching faculty. However, quality assurance authorities are independent entities in most GCC states, a situation that has the potential to increase bureaucracy. This can be avoided by involving teachers in shaping policies where quality assurance is assigned to teachers.

A national English language policy is essential to preserve native language and culture in the GCC region. According to Knott (2017), the English language is more than a course to be studied and assessed because it involves a shift in culture among learners. Most Arab students are proud of their English and American accents and language competence at the expense of the marginalisation of Arabic language. (Holes, 2011). Besides, the internationalisation

requirements of most universities allocate a percentage to international teachers. The preference is mostly given to native English speakers, which has turned the classrooms into "an inclusive corps of Anglo-Western TESOL practitioners, most of whom lack [….] the most basic structures of the Arabic language," (Karmani, 2005, p.95). This results in a culture shock at the expense of the native language and culture, a shock that stems from the classroom where "cultural distance between teachers and learners is a serious factor in the Gulf EFL classroom" (Syed, 2003, p. 339). Such cultural and linguistic encounters between teachers and students dislocate students in "a third place that is not part of any culture" (Baker, 2009). That is, learners lose their sense of self or identity. Knott (2017) argues that learning the English language entails the dissemination of a colonial culture, which distances native speakers from their own. In order to preserve their native culture and identity, some countries like Singapore have clear policies in appropriating textbooks to suit cultural and economic requirements (Tan, Koh & Choy, 2016). Singapore appropriated the Oxford English Course for Malaya by F. G. French with the assistance of English teachers from Malaya and Singapore (Tan, Koh & Choy, 2016).

Potentials of Developing National English Language Policies in the UAE and Bahrain

National educational policies contribute to standardising the level of English language among the different educational sectors. Standardising levels of educational outcomes is one of the recurrent discussions in the GCC countries, where ministries of education, higher education councils and quality assurance authorities are responsible for policymaking. However, they are not directly in charge of curricula design or implementation. In Singapore, the Ministry of Education is in charge of "policy implementation and curriculum development designed to provide the human resources required to meet the country's economic growth" ((Tan, Koh & Choy, 2016, p. 145). This leads to creating language policies that serve the marketplace. Other countries like Turkey invest more in the policies of producing English language teachers. Hence, Bahrain and the UAE have two potential streams to develop: the curriculum and teachers' education.

A. **Curriculum Potentials**

Language education policies are influenced by political, social and economic factors (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004). In top-down paradigms, the teachers' role is limited to implementing these policies and translating them in the classroom, which entails either appropriation to the specific needs of the classroom or overlooking the assigned national policies. This creates a gap between policies and their implementation. In China, the gradual involvement of teachers' feedback in policymaking reflects decision-makers' awareness of the importance of teachers' role in this process (Table 2). China can serve as a model of integrating teachers in policymaking, which can be emulated in Bahrain and the UAE. It can

be introduced as an objective in the national policies or the strategic five-year plans of higher education.

Table 2: Li, 2010

English curricula for primary and secondary schools in the PRC

Year	Target schools	policy maker	Teacher involvement
1956	SS	Central: MOE	Nil
1957	JS	Central: MOE	Nil
1963	JS & SS	Central: MOE	Feedback
1978	PS, JS & SS	Central: MOE	Some input to syllabus & resources
1986	JS & SS	Central: SEdC	Piloting & feedback
1990	JS & SS	Central: SEdC	Piloting & feedback
1992	PS & JS	Central: SEdC	Piloting & feedback
1993	SS	Central: SEdC	Piloting & feedback
2001	PS, JS & SS	Central: MOE	Expanded involvement: repeatedly consulted and feedback

Notes: JS= Junior Secondary School; SS = Senior Secondary School;   PS= Primary School; MOE = Ministry of Education; SEdC = State Education Commission

With the emerging 21st century skills which link education to marketplace requirements and technology, the position of the teacher as the classic "master" has shifted into what Freeman and Johnson (1998) frame as "teachers as learners" (Figure 1). Involving teachers in language policymaking has been heightened by global trends such as learner-centredness (Freeman & Johnson, 1998), activating the role of teachers as language planners (Ashworth, 1985) and implementing 21st century curriculum skills (HEA, 2016). The 21st century teacher has become a participant, a partner and a learner, rather than the master who conveys knowledge to students (Öztürk & Aydın, 2019). Some scholars even view teachers as the centre of language policy (Ricento and Hornberger, 1996). Since teachers are the active contributors to constructing policies, language planning has the potential to shift from top to bottom to bottom-up. Thus, the teacher's role has become dynamic and vibrant, where teaching becomes a process that requires constant reforms according to the changes in both global conditions and the marketplace.

Figure 1. Freeman & Johnson, 1998
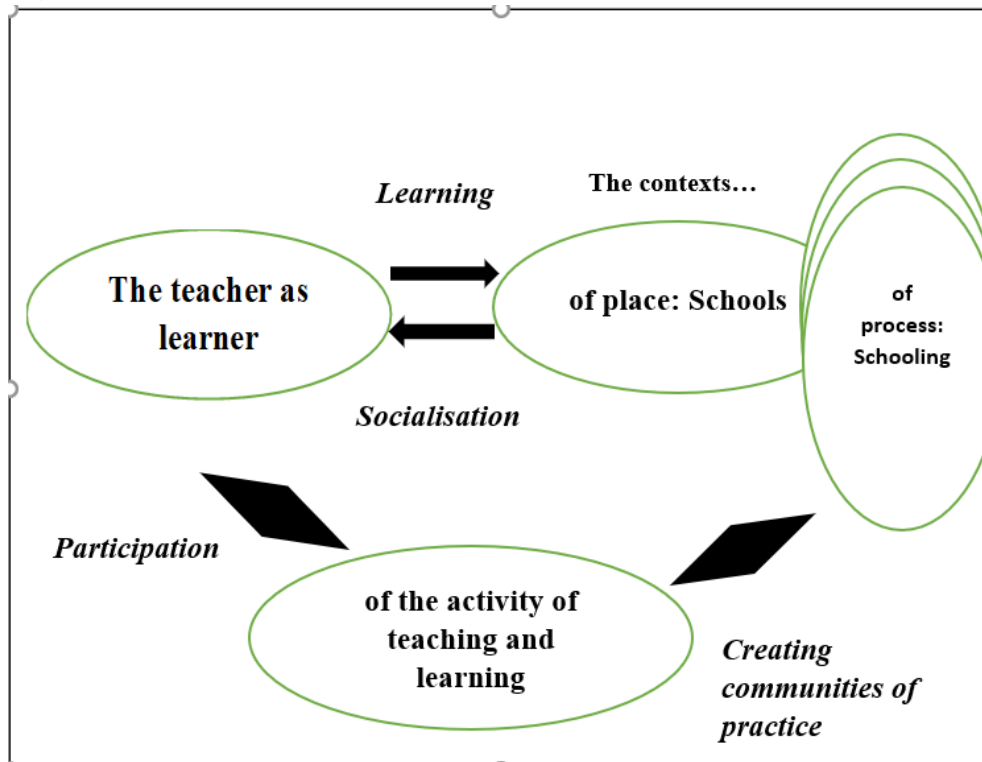
In most GCC states, most education policies are developed according to the UNESCO's programs and external quality assurance bodies. In Bahrain, there has been a long-term initiative to reform English language teaching as part of constant education reform (Abou-El-Kheir & MacLeod, 2017). The National Education Reform Initiative (NERI), launched in 2008, has achieved some of its targets, such as Bahrain Teachers College BTC and Quality Assurance Authority for Education and Training (QAAT, 2012; Haslam, 2011). Quality assurance authorities in Bahrain serve as auditors for education, such as the QAAT (now BQA), which is working on developing a "National Qualifications Framework and the development of a national curriculum" that cover the K–12 system (Abou-El-Kheir & MacLeod 2017). Despite all achievements in education policies, Abou-El-Kheir and MacLeod (2017) argue that there is a need to develop specific national English language policies for many reasons. First, the English language is a crucial requirement for recruitment (Karolak, 2012). Since there is a global trend of focusing more on science and technology in national policies, most countries unconsciously overlook national policies of the English language, including the USA (Reilly, 2010). Therefore, most (higher) education national policies in Bahrain and the UAE tend to embed their English language objectives in other objectives, such as the PISA objectives of the UAE and TIMSS in Bahrain. In China and Singapore, national English language policies and curriculum have led to producing students

that meet the marketplace needs where English language competencies are a mandate. Thus, Bahrain and the UAE can apply such strategies to improve their educational outcomes.

In China, Singapore and the USA, such policies used to be top to bottom, but with the turn of the current century, teachers have received more consideration in policymaking (Tan, Koh & Choy, 2016). This development contributes to bridging the gap between the teachers' implementation of policies and the objectives of the respective policies. The teachers' interpretations of education policies have often shaped their implementation of policy requirements (Hajisoteriou, 2013). It also results in misunderstanding policies and objectives in a way that does not comply with the policymakers' intentions and objectives (Tuytens & Devos, 2009). Some teachers are highly dedicated to their personal pedagogical beliefs and strategies, which leads to a variation in teachers' responses to educational polices (Rios-Aguilar, Canche, & Moll, 2012). Comparatively, if teachers become the constructive, shaping drivers of policy, interpreting policies will have less chance of being misunderstood. Roellke & Rice (2008) argue that it is more feasible to categorise teachers' translations in the classroom as information that could be employed in shaping policy rather than a distorted interpretation of education policies. It also suggests that teachers can serve as the database that leads to shaping education policies.

B. **Teachers Training Potentials**

In addition to the curriculum, English language teachers themselves compose an essential part of English language national policies. Recruiting English language teachers is challenging due to the controversial restrictions of educational authorities and quality assurance bodies. English Language Teacher Education ELTE programs face some problems in pre-service and in-service (Öztürk & Aydın, 2019).

One of the challenges of ELTE programs is that they are mostly theoretical. This is aggravated by the fact that many programs leave practical teaching to the final year of pre-service education. One recommendation is that future student teachers undertake fieldwork in schools by attending classes with cooperating teachers early on. Another problem is that prospective teachers do not get sufficient feedback on their performance during training. In Turkey, some pre-service teachers claim they get more mentorship during other shorter programs such as CELTA than in their training courses (Öztürk & Aydın, 2019).

The third problem is that ELTE programs overlook the 'affective side' of the teaching process, where some courses are offered in the native language of the teachers rather than in English (e.g., education psychology, philosophy and sociology). Some GCC states have implemented a gradual shift in teacher education courses where some courses are taught in English. Other GCC states have launched fully-fledged teacher education programs that are

delivered solely in English, such as BTC in Bahrain (Bahrain Teachers College). Another challenge is insufficient instruction in assessment literacy and implementation. Some programs limit such knowledge to one course or even to a unit in a course (Öztürk & Aydın, 2019). A significant problem relates to the quality of the teacher trainers and the perceptions of cooperating teachers of their roles in pre-service ELTE. Some of these educators might not be prepared to support pre-service teachers due to a lack of proper training. Therefore, ELTE can implement clinical teacher preparation where the student teachers, mentors and cooperating teachers give mutual feedback and collaborate to ensure that the expectations of each stakeholder are met (Matsko et al., 2020).

Other problems pertain to streaming teachers in ELTE. Teachers in Turkey (Öztürk & Aydın, 2019) are trained to teach students of all age groups without undergoing age-group specific training. Pre-service teachers in Turkey take only one course related to teaching specific age groups, namely 'Teaching English to Young Learners' (Öztürk & Aydın, 2019). Comparatively, some GCC countries have made strides in streaming teachers. In Bahrain, BTC offers customised training courses that specifically prepare teachers to teach the first and second cycles of school (UOB, 2019). Another significant challenge in ELTE is updating education to cope with global trends (Knott, 2017), such as integrating technology ICT, which is often overlooked by some teachers. Others rely on technology without adequate explanation of the subject matter (Tong et al., 2018) due to misunderstanding the 21st Curriculum Learning Design (CLD) skills and rubrics (HEA, 2016). According to the 21st CLD rubrics of ICT, students need to utilise their ICT knowledge to solve real-world problems, which integrates different fields of knowledge and leads to interdisciplinary education. Most teachers are not trained to teach interdisciplinary courses; hence knowledge integration becomes challenging.

The last set of problems concerns the preservation of native identity and culture. English language policy stakeholders need to be aware of the damage to the native language, which makes the internationalisation of ELT courses come under question (Internationalization entails that most universities have a certain percentage of international teachers in the faculty, usually 20%; and most courses are delivered in international contexts, such as English and Business books which transfer an international culture). It is time to create a policy that preserves identity by employing more native teachers and integrating more local contexts. In Bahrain, BTC requires its B.Ed. applicants to be Bahraini citizens, which ensures that the majority of teachers in Cycles 1 and 2 are Bahraini. Moreover, there are also some challenges to the ELTE programs in the in-service programs. The main challenge is that in-service teachers are sometimes not given an induction into real teaching and are expected to teach on their own without being monitored. This, in turn, reflects ELTE inconsistency and insufficiency compared to pre-service, where student teachers have theoretical and practical training (Öztürk and Aydın, 2019).

In order to overcome the challenges of ELTE programs, Öztürk and Aydın (2019) propose a self-explanatory four-level model (Figure 2). In the selection process, they suggest implementing an integrative test of all the required proficiency skills needed for prospective teachers as well as introducing attitude and aptitude tests to measure teachers' willingness to teach. The scholars cite the successful ELTE experiments of Singapore and Finland, where interviews were conducted in addition to integrative aptitude and attitude tests. Similarly, prospective students at BTC in Bahrain undergo aptitude tests and an interview by the MOE, and they should meet the general requirements of the University of Bahrain (UOB).

Figure 2. The suggested model for ELTE in Turkey (Ozturk & Aydin, 2019)
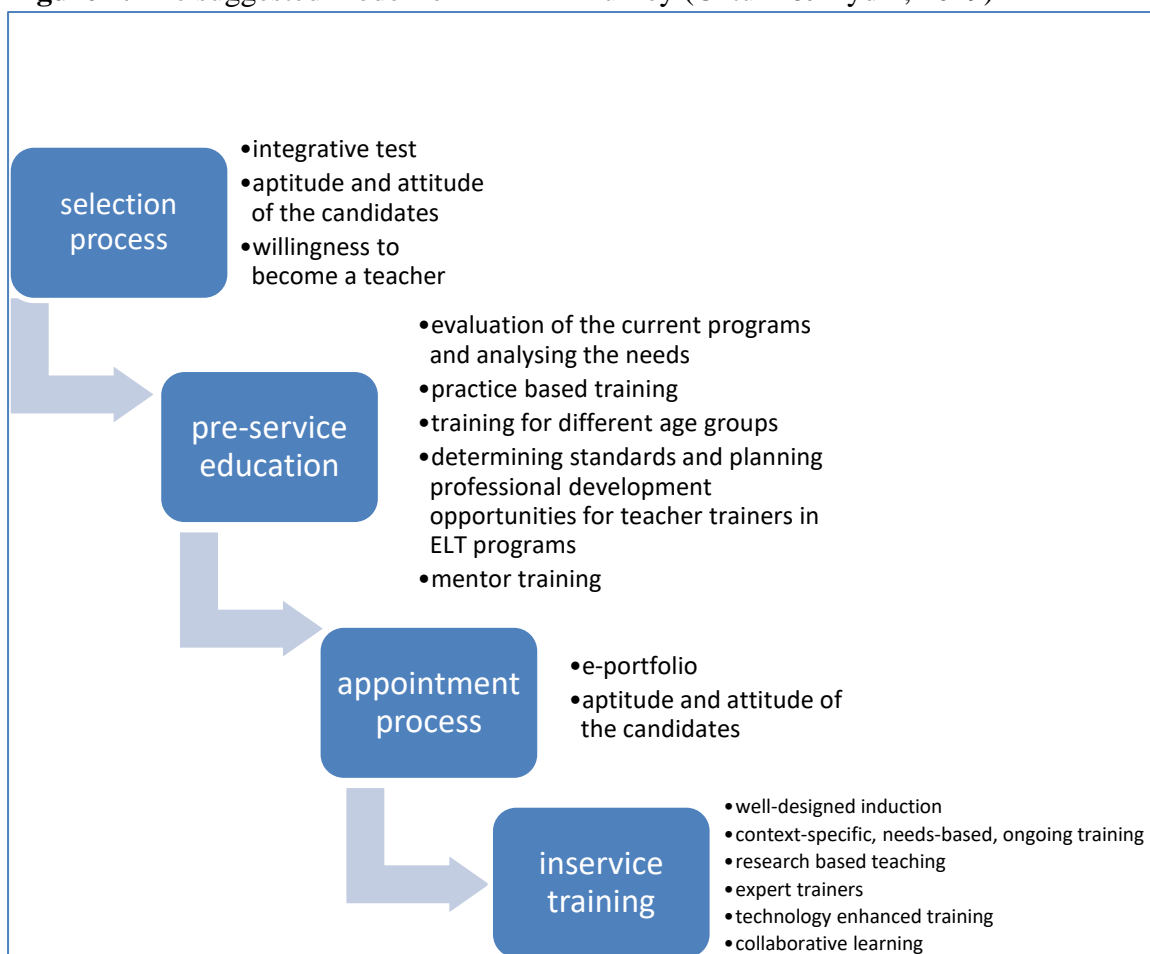
In the pre-service education process, the scholars (2019) suggest training teachers for different age groups, among other reforms, which was already implemented by BTC in Bahrain. For instance, specialist pre-service teachers of Arabic, Maths and Science, or English in Cycle 1 teach grades 1–3, and those in Cycle 2 teach grades 4–6. In order to teach students at higher school levels, teachers must hold a Postgraduate Diploma in Education

(PGDE) or equivalent (UOB, 2019). In the appointment process, student teachers can be evaluated via e-portfolios and aptitude and attitude tests. Measuring student teachers' attitudes towards teaching is vital in the evaluation process since it ensures that prospective teachers are well-prepared for real-life teaching. In the last process, teachers are not left on their own. Rather, training is continued in addition to introducing career development programs for in-service teachers, which involves research opportunities and collaboration with peer and expert teachers. Additionally, these programs improve teachers' skills in integrating ICT in the classroom.

Conclusion

National English language policies are crucial to education reform and for preparing students for the marketplace, in both Bahrain and the UAE. The clarity of national English language policies is significant in policies' implementation in the two GCC states following the examples of Singapore, China, and Turkey. National English language policies can be developed in two ways. First, by enhancing partnerships between quality assurance authorities and teachers, which can be consolidated through more workshops and conferences to spread awareness of national policies. Second, teachers can provide more consultancy by developing self-assessment procedures that measure the feasibility of national policies. Both Bahrain and the UAE have developed their quality assurance bodies, but they can cooperate more closely with teachers to develop policies, especially in higher education. Such an approach decreases the chances of misinterpreting policies, which are usually translated according to teachers' understanding (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). Also, national English language policies tend to overlook the impact of the English language on culture. Since learning a language involves a shift in culture, English language policies have substantial responsibility in setting the limits of teaching English as a technical language rather than importing a western culture. This point can be developed by customising textbooks to enhance national culture and training teachers within the national framework context. Another way is to create a balance in teaching courses using both languages, Arabic and English, following the international schools' example in Bahrain (Rugh, 2002).

In short, this paper attempted to discuss the current situation of English language policies in Bahrain and the UAE, and how to develop these policies by following examples from countries such as Turkey and Singapore. Bahrain has imported programs from other countries, which has led to bypassing native language and culture in addition to importing the flaws of the original programs. Comparatively, the UAE has also developed plans without specifying English language policies since it is embedded in the PISA tests. Therefore, both Bahrain and the UAE need to develop national English language policies that suit their culture, heritage, and identity. At the same time, the rich and diverse experience of reputable

countries can serve as a model that can be customised to correspond to the social, political, and economic conditions of these two respective GCC states.

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