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Fatima Esseili

*University of Dayton*, [fesseili1@udayton.edu](mailto:fesseili1@udayton.edu)

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## A sociolinguistic profile of English in Lebanon

FATIMA ESSEILI\*

**ABSTRACT:** This article provides an overview of the historical presence of foreign languages in Lebanon, focusing on English availability and contact from the eighteenth century to date. Through sociolinguistic profiling, the paper describes the users and uses of English, and it surveys Lebanese attitudes towards English. The article begins by offering a general overview of the country, its languages and cultures, and its ethnic and religious groups. It presents a description of users of English along with a characterization of how the interpersonal, instrumental, regulative, and innovative functions are manifested in the Lebanese context. The final section explores attitudes toward English. The paper argues that although Arabic is the only official language in Lebanon, English has expanded and integrated in the society, and it has a strong interpersonal and instrumental presence especially among the youths of Lebanon. English seems to function as a link language and an identity marker among many Lebanese who are proud of being multilingual and who view multilingualism as a national trademark.

### INTRODUCTION

Lebanon is a 10,452-km<sup>2</sup> country that is located on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Arabic is the official language of Lebanon, but similar to other Arab countries, a diglossic situation exists. In simple terms, diglossia is characterized by the use of standard Arabic (commonly referred to as *fusha*) and a spoken language, Lebanese Arabic (commonly referred to as *ammiyya* or *darijah*, meaning ‘colloquial’). The former is learned formally in schools and is

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\* University of Dayton. Department of English, 300 College Park. Dayton, OH 45469-1520. E-Mail: [fesseili1@udayton.edu](mailto:fesseili1@udayton.edu)

mainly, but not exclusively, used for publications (books, magazines, and newspapers), media, speeches, and government-related documents; whereas the latter is generally acquired as a mother tongue and is used in daily communication, news reports, some poetry forms, movies, TV shows, and soap operas, among others. Although diglossia is commonly the term used to describe the linguistic situation of Arabic in the Arab world, the issue is much more complex. A detailed description of diglossia in Arabic sociolinguistics is beyond the scope of this paper; however, a short account is fitting. Some scholars prefer to use the term ‘cognate languages’ to refer to the different varieties of Arabic due to phonological, syntactic, and lexical differences between the standard language and the varieties (Collin 2011). This call has been voiced in a number of Arab countries including Lebanon. The Lebanese poet Said Aql was probably the major proponent of this view as he went far enough to create Lebanese alphabet in a Latinized form, and he used it to write (and publish) a book of poetry called *Yara* (Esseili 2011). In Latinizing the alphabet and creating a corresponding letter for every sound, Aql believed that he was modernizing Lebanese and getting it closer to perfection in terms of spelling and pronunciation. His attempt to elevate the status of Lebanese to a national language, however, did not succeed because he ignored ‘the strong, socially embedded symbolic meanings of the [Arabic] script in religious, cultural and national terms’ (Suleiman 2013: 41).

In addition to Arabic, two minority languages, Armenian and Kurdish, are used within their respective communities. English and French are also widely taught as foreign languages in Lebanon and they are used for a number of functions. In fact, in addition to being considered an Arab country, Lebanon is one of the 57 members of the international organization of La Francophonie, and it has a very active French cultural center. This diversity in languages could be traced back to a variety of reasons some of which include the presence of different ethnic groups; the advent of western missionaries and the establishment of foreign schools and colleges in the

1800; the French mandate on Lebanon that lasted for about 25 years; the multiple immigration waves that occurred in Lebanon's history; the country's economy that depends primarily on tourism and services; and the belief among many Lebanese, according to Suleiman (2003), in Lebanon's civilizational mission in the East.

Lebanon's population is about six million<sup>1</sup>, a number that excludes the 1.5 million Syrian refugees and the thousands of foreign workers currently residing in the country<sup>2</sup>. As seen from the above discussion, Lebanon is characterized by its diversity in terms of ethnicities (Arab, Armenian, Kurdish), cultures (with western, Arabic, and Islamic influences), and religious affiliations (primarily Christians and Muslims, with 18 officially recognized religious sects). Arabs are the major ethnic group in Lebanon with about 95% of the population, while Lebanese Armenians constitute four per cent of the population and Kurds less than one percent. Identifying all Lebanese as Arabs, however, has been very problematic since the creation of modern Lebanon with its current borders. Some, primarily Lebanese Christians, believe that the Lebanese are a unique race that 'exists as the other existing races in Europe' and consider themselves as 'the Italian and English races' (Entelis 1974: 79); they also believe that the Lebanese are the descendants of the Phoenicians, thus having deeper historical connections with Lebanon than Muslims. In addition, and as the above discussion on diglossia shows, some Lebanese believe that the language spoken in Lebanon, Lebanese Arabic, is a language and not a dialect of Arabic (Salameh 2010). The issue of whether Lebanon is Arab or simply Lebanese goes back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the onset of an Arab national 'awakening' in Mount Lebanon when the Christians of Lebanon, primarily Maronites (a Christian oriental sect with communion to the Roman Catholic Church), wanted to establish a unique national identity that would distinguish them from a dominantly Muslim region (Salibi 1988: 44). Based on what Al-Alayli calls 'a geological-archaeological nationalism', Phoenicianism emerged (Suleiman 2013: 32). The issue

of Phoenician heritage was somewhat brought to a closure with recent genetic research which managed to uncover traces of the Phoenician Y chromosome within modern populations inhabiting six sites of the Mediterranean Sea, primarily ‘the coastal Lebanese Phoenician Heartland’ where both Muslims and Christians coexist (Zalloua et al 2008: 635). The study found that the Phoenician genetic signature could still be found in six percent of the male population investigated. Media hailed this discovery as a ‘unifying message’ in a fragile country divided by sectarianism<sup>3</sup>. A major implication of this finding is described best by Zalloua, the lead investigator, who stated that Phoenicianism is a ‘heritage’ for both Muslims and Christians, and that ‘[t]here is no distinct pattern that shows that one community carries significantly more Phoenician than another’<sup>4</sup>.

Since Arabic is the official language in Lebanon, and since Lebanon is surrounded by Arabic speaking countries with around 420 million speakers of different varieties of Arabic<sup>5</sup>, one would assume that the language that should be learned and promoted, and probably discussed in this article, to be Arabic, rather than English. After all, an English speaking country has never colonized Lebanon and Arabic should stand for national and regional unity and should be an identity marker among Arabic-speaking countries. That is not entirely the case, however, especially due to the political association of Arabic with Islam and terrorism (Esseili 2011; Joseph 2006), among other reasons. Although ‘all the Lebanese communities – Christian and Muslim – have historically spoken Arabic, and share the traditional level in what may be described in common language as an Arab way of life’ (Salibi 1988: 4), English is used in Lebanon for a variety of functions, including communication among speakers of Lebanese Arabic within the same country. In fact, language choice and language use in Lebanon seems to be operating in binaries: to empower and to confine, to promote and to discriminate, to unite and to divide.

Through sociolinguistic profiling (Berns 1990), this article seeks to examine the influences that have shaped the status of English in Lebanon, its users and uses, and attitudes towards the language. The next section will provide a historical account of the presence of foreign languages in Lebanon as they interact with the native language. A description of the users and functions of English will be outlined afterwards, followed by an account of general attitudes toward English and its users.

### **THE LINGUISTIC CONTEXT OF LEBANON: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Modern Lebanon was part of the Ottoman sultanate for about 400 years (1516-1918). Since Arabs and Persians were more advanced in sciences, literature, and art at the time, the Turks borrowed a large amount of words from Arabic and Farsi, and they used Arabic alphabet ‘from the 11<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the 1920s’ when it was replaced by Latin alphabet (Saydam 2007: 13). Up until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there had been no threat to the status of Arabic since it was ‘the most prestigious and cultivated language of science and learning’ at the time (Joseph 2004: 210). The initiation of new ‘reforms’ called *Tanzimat*, however, and the rise of Turkish nationalism at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century began to raise questions about the extensive use of Arabic loan words in the Ottoman Turkish language, and to alienate Arab Muslims. Christians of Lebanon and Syria, on the other hand, had already been articulating nationalist sentiments (Salibi 1988: 46). Lebanese intellectuals used Arabic as a national language to inspire their fellow citizens to oppose the Turkification policies of the Ottomans (Suleiman 2003 & 2006; Salibi 1988). Such a strategy was further boosted by the temporary American missionaries’ encouragement of ‘interest in the Arabic language and cultural heritage’ (Salibi 1988: 44).

Midway through the Ottoman reign, schools in Lebanon were divided into private non-Muslim local schools, western missionary schools, and Ottoman public schools (Kobeissy 1999).

Even though the Jesuits had already been active among the Maronites of Mount Lebanon since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Salibi 1988: 43), the 19<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of bilingual school education in Lebanon where competing French, Russian, British, and American missionary schools dominated the intellectual and cultural milieu in Syria and Lebanon (Ziadeh 1957), and where both Arabic and a foreign language were used as media of instruction. French Catholic schools were founded in areas with greater concentrations of Maronites; while Anglican schools were founded in Druze dominated areas (Haddad 1997). The missionary educational enterprise at the time ‘assigned [Arabic] a literary function in education while foreign languages were assigned a scientific and modernizing function’ (Zakharia 2009: 217-218). Students in these schools ‘became known as “Jesuits” [French educated] or “American” [English educated], according to their syllabuses and the languages used in their schools’ (Constantine 1995: 115). Unfortunately, this categorization was often based on religious affiliation and it promoted the use of languages to entrench deeper sectarian division and to separate rather than unite. Thus, being bilingual in Arabic and French became associated with educated Christians, particularly a Maronite or Roman Catholic, while being bilingual in Arabic and English became an identity marker for Sunni Muslims, Druze, and Greek Orthodox Christians (Frayha 2004; Joseph 2004; Shaaban and Ghaith 2003). Although such a distinction was not always clear-cut with notable Greek Orthodox (for example, Georges Schehadé) and Sunnii Muslim (for example, Salah Stétié) writers who published in French (Haddad 1997), it remained de facto up until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another fact that attests to the influential power of missionaries could be illustrated by the dominance of American and British Protestant missionaries. Many Maronites, Greek Catholics, and Greek Orthodox converted to Protestantism so they could send their children to Protestant schools, and more specifically, to the Syrian Protestant College, which later became the American University of Beirut (Salibi 1988: 44).

When it was founded in 1866, the medium of instruction in the American University of Beirut was Arabic (Glass & Reuschel 1992; Jeha 2004). During that time, philosophy, natural sciences and medicine were taught in Arabic. The period was described by AUB Arabic professor, Jabr Dumit (1859 – 1930), as ‘triumph of Arabic over English’ (Glass & Reuschel 1992: 93). The use of English ‘was optional and the students’ knowledge of it was superficial and insufficient for them to undertake studies of sciences and literature in that language’ (Jeha 2004: 110). This remained the case until 1875-1882 when ‘the university saw just the opposite, namely ‘the period of the triumph of English over Arabic’ [which] had ceased being the “origin” and became one of two languages’ and second to English (Glass & Reuschel 1992: 93). Adopting English was gradual and it happened over a period of ten years (Jeha 2004: 107). Bashshur (1964) states that ‘the expansion of the university made it impossible to rely completely on Arabic-speaking teachers or on scientific sources translated into Arabic from English’ resulting thus in shifting the language of instruction into English (55). It seems that ‘the instructors in sciences were facing the problem of the unavailability of Arabic text books in the subjects required in the first three years of study’, Jeha (2004) states, which in 1869 ‘was the first sign of the unsuitability of Arabic as a teaching language’ (110). In addition to these two reasons, a memorandum to the Board of Managers published in AUB’s Annual Reports in 1876 provides a third reason for adopting English. The faculty stated that their graduates ‘have little access to the thoughts of the great men of [their] age’ and that ‘instead of reading in a language permeated with the spirit of *progress* in all departments of life, they either read not at all or are confined to books saturated with errors’ (111, emphasis added). Thus English was viewed as the language of progress. In adopting English, AUB was also ‘preparing to replace the natives who had been teaching the science courses in Arabic and appoint American lecturers and professors to those courses instead’ (122). This was shocking to many because the founders wanted the institution

‘to serve the interests of the people in Mount Lebanon and Syria’ and that was one reason why Arabic was adopted as a language of instruction to begin with (Jeha 2004: 122).

Thus, Zakharia’s (2010: 159) assumption that foreign languages in general ‘were assigned scientific and modernizing function, as languages of progress’, modernity, and ‘up-to-date identity’ makes sense in light of this faculty memorandum. She further argues that such a shift in the language of instruction at AUB necessitated a change in the language of instruction in the schools whose students wanted to attend AUB and universities and colleges of the same caliber. It also meant that many students from under-resourced schools became disadvantaged and lacked access ‘to elite universities’ and ‘to certain university majors’ (160), thus creating an association between foreign languages and economic mobility and increasing the social inequality gap. Such statements are confirmed by a 1964 study on the role of two private universities (AUB and the University of Saint Joseph) in the national life of Lebanon. Bashshur (1964) discussed the differential patterns of recruitment and selectivity into the two universities and found that foreign languages (English in the case of AUB) played a role in either ‘facilitating or impeding a rise in the status of particular segments of the population’ (121). Specifically, he found that selection at AUB had ‘two aspects’ through which ‘the university erects specific barriers against the admission of some prospective students by stressing academic and tuition requirements’ (121). The ‘most important barrier’, he maintained, was ‘English as a medium of instruction’ (122). He also found that the two universities were ‘fairly selective in terms of the socio-economic backgrounds of their student bodies’ where ‘about two-fifths of the students [came] from upper-class positions, two-fifths from middle-class positions, and one-fifth from lower-class position’ (168). While this study is outdated, it does reflect how foreign languages were used at the time.

With the downfall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of WWI, Lebanon was placed under the French mandate and French, which had been already in use in Lebanon through the Jesuits,

became an official language along with Arabic. The French endorsed private education (local and foreign) that promoted their language and culture (Kobeissy 1999). Before the mandate, French was restricted to private and religious schools; with the mandate, it 'became a compulsory subject in the public schools as well' (Kaufman 2004: 11). Soon after, the use of Arabic was limited to 'history, geography, ethics, civic education, social sciences, administrative law and literature' and French took over the rest of the subjects (Constantine 1995: 129). Curriculums in private and foreign schools (and public schools by extension) followed mostly the French education system.

After independence in 1943 Arabic became the only official language, but 'the French language and culture ... remained very much part of the Lebanese identity' (Bourhis 1982: 45). Lebanese Christian elites sought 'a dual identity' through bilingualism in French and Arabic, whereas working-class Muslims rejected this identity embracing Arabic and Arab identity (Bourhis 1982: 45). Such a schism in attitudes among citizens of the same country escalated to what was perceived by Muslims as 'social inequality' in higher education in 'favor of francophile Christians' (46). To address this problem, in 1946 the Lebanese government 'made English an official alternative to French in the bilingual system of schooling' (Zakharia 2009: 218), but this did not alter the status of French; nor did this status change when the government made Arabic a medium of instruction in private and public schools in grades one through six (Shaaban and Ghaith 1999). A major reason was that private foreign schools in the fifties 'were exempted from teaching Arabic, and government examinations in mathematics and sciences were offered in Arabic, French, and English' (Zakharia 2010: 160).

During the Lebanese civil war (1975 – 1991), and in the absence of a centralized government, the private sector controlled education thus continuing the trend of promoting foreign languages at the expense of Arabic. By the end of the civil war, 72% of the Francophones in Lebanon were still Christians; however, 61.5% of the Francophones perceived English to be

more useful than French (Abou, Kasparian, and Haddad 1996). Another study found that although half of Muslims associated French with Christians, the majority of the participants did not associate it with either religious group. English was perceived to be more important than French on the international level, but the two languages were rated equally important on the national level (Ghaleb and Joseph 2000).

In 1997, the government initiated a curriculum reform aiming at promoting trilingualism: bilingualism in Arabic and either French or English, and competency in a second foreign language. Thus, students learn the humanities and social sciences using the Arabic language, they learn natural sciences and mathematics using a foreign language (either French or English) in grade seven (with many schools beginning as early as grade one or two), and they learn a second foreign language (either French or English) as a language subject (Esseili 2014). While the educational reform aimed at creating a citizen ‘committed to the Arabic language as an official national language’ (Ghait and Shaaban 1996: 103), decree number 5589 stipulated that English or French could be used as languages of instruction in any school, local or foreign.

With the establishment of new American schools and universities in post-civil war Lebanon, English received an extra boost and it became an essential mode of expression in various instrumental, interpersonal, regulative, and innovative functions. The emergence of English as an international language of business, trade, technology, and communication played an additional role in promoting a language that had already been in use in Lebanon since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This was reflected in the nineties’ school curriculum reform that allowed using English (or French) as languages of instruction for mathematics and sciences. Thus, using English as a medium of instruction was no longer restricted to missionary or foreign schools as it used to (Ghait and Shaaban 1995).

## **USERS OF ENGLISH**

When discussing the linguistic landscape in Lebanon, Suleiman (2003) acknowledged that English is one of the four major languages (Arabic, French, Armenian, and English) that characterize the linguistic and cultural scene in Lebanon, but he disregarded English from his discussion because it did not ‘impact significantly on the conceptualization of national identity *for Lebanon*’ (204), which might have been true at the time but not so much today. Suleiman attributed that insignificance to the natural spread of English in the world as the language of communication and business.

Thirteen years later, and based on the functional framework proposed by the Kachruvian concentric circle model, Lebanon could be classified as an Expanding Circle country where English is primarily taught as a foreign language but is not yet an institutional variety. Such a definitive classification, however, is not entirely accurate. Evidence suggests that Lebanon has some of the characteristics of an Outer Circle context even though an English speaking country has never colonized it (Annous 2006; Esseili 2011). Such a situation is not uncommon as Berns (1995: 9) pointed out that the circles overlap and some countries may have a ‘dual’ membership. In addition, the distinction between ESL and EFL ‘appears to be more valid when applied to the contrast between city and countryside’ (Kirkpatrick 2007: 28).

English in Lebanon functions mostly as a performance variety where users ‘rely upon a native rather than a nativized model as the acceptable standard and norm to approximate’ (Berns 1990: 57). Despite being norm dependent, the Lebanese have nativized a number of English words, phrases, and sometimes sentences into their daily communication where code-switching and code-mixing are very common, even in some university settings where English only is expected (Esseili 2011; Bahous, Nabahani, & Bacha 2014). In addition, when it comes to the English language curriculum, a number of locally designed textbooks and instructional materials

in public schools and some universities have been developed to suit the needs of the local population (Esseili 2014).

The exact number of users of English in Lebanon cannot be accurately determined, but if we only consider the number of learners who use English at the school and university levels (ages 4 – 21), we find it to be about 20% of the population, which is estimated at six million. As for proficiency in English, if we take the academic year 2013 – 2014 as an example and if we only examine contact hours during the learners' nine years of education at the school level, we find that by the time the 45.1% of students who study English as a first foreign language (FFL) graduate from Lebanese high schools, they will have been exposed to about 690 (sciences) to 840 (humanities) hours of English. In contrast, students who study English as a second foreign language (French being their FFL) will have been exposed to 360 contact hours of English<sup>6</sup>. This number might slightly vary depending on whether the school is public or private; many private schools begin teaching the foreign language as early as grade four or five rather than seven.

Exposure to a language, however, does not guarantee proficiency. In a poll published in 2007, it was found that 87.7% of passing students in the Brevet exams (official middle school exams) received failing grades in English and Arabic. Another study revealed that 49% of middle school teachers and 54% of high school teachers believed that the results of the 2009 – 2010 official exams did not reflect their students' actual level<sup>7</sup>. That is half of the teachers, which is also a sign of mismatch between teachers' beliefs and students' achievement on official exams. Most recently, Esseili (2014: 110) found that public teachers in Lebanon believe that their students are not well prepared for official examinations due to lack of proficiency in foreign languages. Teachers follow one of two extremes: they either conduct 'more than half of class time' in Arabic or they conduct the class solely in a foreign language without explaining concepts in the students' native language. Students end up failing because they find it difficult to express

themselves in a foreign language or because they do not understand the concepts. These findings were corroborated by a recent study that found a direct correlation between taking the test in a language ‘spoken by the students in everyday life...whether such language is the mother tongue or a foreign language...[and] improving student scores and performance in mathematics’ and science (Abdulla & Skaf 2015: 21). The study reported that some teachers communicated in Arabic with their students during science and mathematics classes when the language of instruction should have been either French or English. This practice, the report explained, leads to failure in standardized tests due to lack of understanding of test items (for example, lack of familiarity of meaning of concepts used in exam questions).

Another lens through which we can look at English language skills is examining demographic information and average scores from TOEFL and IELTS, two widely used tests in Lebanon. Table 1 presents a comparison of score results of Lebanese individuals who took both tests in 2015<sup>8</sup>. According to TOEFL’s score interpretation published by ETS, the average Lebanese test taker is high intermediate in reading (22 – 30), high in listening (22 – 30), and fair in speaking (18 – 25) and writing (17 – 23). As for IELTS, the average general training score of 6.5 indicates that the users could be described as ‘competent’<sup>9</sup>. When looking at the individual test takers, however, we find that 45% of them scored 7 and above, which suggests good to very good users of English, compared to 22% who scored 5.5 and below<sup>10</sup>.

Table 1. Average score for Lebanese test takers for 2015

	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Total
TOEFL	20	22	22	22	86
IELTS	6.3	6.7	6.6	6.1	6.5

Both tests provide a general idea related to academic users of English who generally rank as competent or good users. Again, these scores are not representative of the entire Lebanese population; we do not have information related to the number of test takers, and the scores reflect individual academic abilities.

## **USES OF ENGLISH**

English has no official status in Lebanon, but it is used for instrumental, interpersonal, regulative, and innovative functions in the country.

### *Instrumental*

There are 41 private institutes of higher education in Lebanon and one state university. Of these, only 32 are full universities and the rest are either colleges or religious studies institutes.

The medium of instruction in the state university is mostly Arabic and French, whereas in the rest of the full universities it is as follows: English (10 universities); English and French (8 universities); English and Arabic (4 universities); Arabic, English, and French (6 universities); Arabic (2 universities); and two undetermined. The majority of these universities are modeled after American systems of education. Language choice at these universities could be attributed to practicality and economics first and foremost. When the University of Balamand was founded, for example, it started as a trilingual university (Arabic, French, and English), but it experienced what Annous (2006: 180) called ‘an identity crisis’ due to the lack of a ‘clear policy regarding the language of instruction’ that ended up in failure. To rectify the situation, the university shifted to English in the 90s, Americanized the institution, and hired more “native speakers” of English (Annous 2006). Another example is that of the University of Saint Joseph where French is the medium of instruction. Wanting his student population to be competitive and to have ‘a good command of English’, the president of the university introduced the Sufficient and Necessary

English Program in the late 90s, and mandated that students ‘can only receive their university diplomas after having passed the Georgetown University English Proficiency Test’ (Minkara 2013: 105). Such university decisions are mostly ‘strategic’ on the academic, cultural, and professional levels, as one administrator explained.

Medium of instruction in higher education, especially in prestigious (for example, the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese American University) or in demand private universities (for example, Lebanese International University), often dictates parents’ language choice for their children at the school level. Being a brand-name university graduate is perceived to be valuable in terms of prestige and of economic advantages both in Lebanon and in the Arab world. When looking at the issue of foreign languages in schools, two factors are to be considered: the percentage of schools that use Arabic-English versus Arabic-French as media of instruction, and the percentage of students who opt to be taught in either mode. Following the 1994-1997 curriculum reform, schools have used either French or English as a medium of instruction in natural sciences and mathematics, have used Arabic for social sciences and humanities, and have taught a second foreign language in grade seven. Examining data related to language choice trends since the academic year 2004 – 2005 reveals that Lebanese schools have been witnessing a shift in the preferred language of instruction as depicted in Table 2. In ten years, the percentage of schools that used Arabic-French as a medium of instruction has decreased by 17%. On the surface level, this might be seen as a regression in the status of French in Lebanon; however, the percentage of schools that use both foreign languages has increased by 16%. Such an increase might be interpreted from a practical perspective: Arabic-French schools added Arabic-English sections to cater to the growing needs of their diverse student population. But it also indicates that administrators see both French and English as valuable additive languages and they are not yet ready to give up on French – a view that is not shared by students

as the next section outlines.

Table 2. Percentage of schools by first foreign language as a medium of instruction 2004 – 2015

	04-05	06-07	07-08	09-10	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14	14-15
French	56.5	55.7	55.5	53.3	51.6	50.9	50.1	48.6	39.5
English	21.6	21.6	21.8	24.7	25.5	25.7	26.4	27.1	22.7
Both	21.9	22.7	22.7	22	22.9	23.4	23.5	24.3	37.9
Total schools	2799	2812	2805	2882	2790	2786	2777	2789	2874

When it comes to the percentage of students who opt for French as a FFL versus English, we observe that the latter has been increasing to the detriment of French as seen in Figure 1. Twelve years ago, the percentage of students who used English as a FFL was 35.8%. In 2014 – 2015, the percentage became 46%<sup>6</sup>. That 10% gain for English is a 10% loss for French. If this trend continues, as it obviously will, English will likely replace French as the preferred language of instruction among students; however, this process might take decades. The historical relationships between France and Lebanon and the fact that being trilingual and multicultural has been an identity marker for the Lebanese might slow down this process (Esseili 2011).

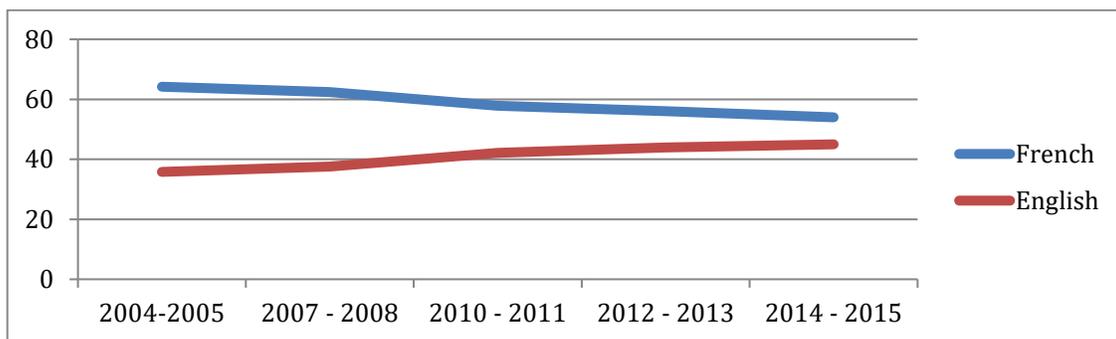


Figure 1. Percentage of students who opt for English or French as a first foreign language

In addition to schools and universities, there are a number of centers dedicated to the study and promotion of English in Lebanon. AMIDEAST (America-Mideast Educational and Training Services), which works in collaboration with the American Embassy in Beirut, and the British Council are among the top players in this field. Such institutions, among other, often offer language classes and teacher-preparation workshops. Other professional organizations dedicated for the teaching of English include TESOL Lebanon and the Association of Teachers of English in Lebanon (ATEL). Various universities in Lebanon organize workshops, seminars, lectures, and annual national, regional, and international conferences on the teaching and learning of English.

Since Lebanon's economy depends primarily on tourism and services, foreign languages, especially French and English, are encouraged and required. The school curriculum itself emphasizes the instrumental use of these languages for conducting business and for regional and international communication. A survey of job advertisements posted on Bayt.com and Monster.com, for example, reveals that proficiency in at least one foreign language is always a requirement. Often, that foreign language is English, not French. Many job ads list proficiency in Arabic, English, and French as 'a plus' under 'required skills'. This can be seen even in organizations that date back to the 60s. 'How is your English' was the first question that recruits got asked in their interview to the Middle-Eastern associate organization of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (Minkara 2013: 112). English was a requirement to become a member. In addition, since the target job market for Lebanese graduates is the Gulf, one university administrator explained, universities 'are keen to equip them with the language that facilitates the easy access to this job market' and that's why all of the scientific and technical courses at that university, and the majority of other universities, are offered in English (Minkara 2013: 105).

### *Interpersonal function*

With the rise of English as the language of social media, many of the domains of language use shifted from Arabic and French to English. In contrast to other Expanding Circle contexts where English use outside the classroom might be viewed as snobbish or pretentious, the use of English in daily communication in Lebanon reflects modernity, coolness, and hip culture. Most importantly, it reflects a detachment from the negative image associated with Arabic post September 11 (Esseili 2011). Such interpersonal use is especially popular in areas around American universities and schools, pubs, clubs, and movie theaters. In addition, many Lebanese parents opt to use English (and/or French), rather than Arabic, to communicate with their pre-school children in order to facilitate the acquisition of these foreign languages and because they perceive English as a valuable commodity. They believe that these children will pick up Arabic anyway. Some Lebanese have shown resistance to this trend. Non-governmental organizations such as *Feil Amr* ('The Imperative') and *Ana Al-Alam* ('I am the world') have organized festivals to encourage the use of the Arabic language and to combat the excessive use of English and French in communication. While such initiatives have not been very successful in slowing down the use of foreign languages, they managed to raise awareness about the urgency of this issue. A survey of three major Lebanese newspapers (*Annahar*, *Assafir*, and *Al-Akhbar*) with Facebook pages reveals that the majority of comments on political articles are posted in Lebanese Arabic with occasional comments written in Arabizi ('Latinized Arabic'). When it comes to politics, Arabic is the preferred language. In contrast, when it comes to personal interaction on social media (for example, Facebook and Twitter) and text messages, different forms of communication are used ranging from Arabizi, English, Arabic, or a mix of two or three languages. The choice of communication form is sometimes dictated by ease of typing, habit, or laziness (Esseili 2011). In



announcements in professional job settings (universities included) take place mostly through English. In addition, announcements on the national airline, Middle East Airlines, are in three languages (Arabic, English, and French). Safety instructions are in Arabic and English with French subtitles displayed on screens.

Lebanon used to have two francophone TV channels, but they were shut down in the mid 1990s. The existing eight TV channels all broadcast in Arabic while offering a wide range of shows where TV anchors consistently use Arabic with occasional use of English or French words. The frequency of code mixing correlates with the TV station. For example, show hosts on LBCI and MTV, traditionally affiliated with Christians, tend to use more foreign words than those working in networks owned by Muslims such as Future, Al Manar, and NBN. This is partly because the former networks have been engaged in adapting many of the western shows such as “Dancing with the Stars”, “Splash”, “Celebrity Duets”, “The X Factor”, and “Family Feud”, to name a few. The Arabic version of “Celebrity Duets” often hosts two types of Lebanese singers: those who sing in Arabic only, and others who normally sing in flawless English and/or French with the celebrity participant. The latter group sings western songs that are very much familiar to the audience. Many of the programs on these TV stations were named using English words (for example, Project Runway, Top Chef, Lip Sync Battle, Hashtag, Alive, Voyage, Relooking, My Rights, What’s Cooking, Get Fit, Family, Press Review, etcetera), but their substance is mostly in Arabic.

In addition to TV channels, there are 34 radio stations with 11 having either English (Mix FM, Radio One) or French names (Nostalgie, Mont Liban). Many of these stations play songs and broadcast programs in foreign languages. There are also a number of news websites, and one daily newspaper, the Daily Star, that are published in English. The Daily Star was founded in

1952 ‘to serve the growing number of expatriates’ in Lebanon and other Arab countries, and ‘to introduce the region to non-Arabic readers’<sup>11</sup>. It has both Lebanese and foreign journalists.

### *Regulative function*

While the Arabic language has the lion’s share in the legal and administrative system in Lebanon, French and English are relatively used for some legal functions. According to article 11 of the Lebanese constitution, standard Arabic is the official language of Lebanon, but French, which used to be an official language before independence, could be used in certain cases to be determined by law. Up until the civil war, ‘French laws pertaining to business operations...were so deeply rooted in Lebanon that... French doctrine and jurisprudence [were] very often used and quoted by Lebanese judges and lawyers’ (Wickersham & Nsouli 1971: 300). Law materials were ‘written in Arabic or French’ with ‘a limited number of materials in English’ (305). Today, being the official language, all government-related announcements, documents, and publications are in standard Arabic. In fact, out of the 241 books that have been published by Lebanese judges since 1960 and that are listed on the Ministry of Justice’s website, only six are in French and one is in English. In addition, all legal forms and applications are in standard Arabic. For example, in order to become a member of the Lebanese Association of Certified Public Translators, an individual must fill out a form using *only* Arabic – a condition specifically listed on the association’s website.

When it was established in 1919 at the beginning of the French mandate on Lebanon, the Lebanese Bar Association wanted Arabic to be the only official language of Lebanese courts<sup>12</sup>. Lebanon had about 1,500 attorneys, ‘most of whom [were] French-speaking and educated in the French and Lebanese systems; only a very few have studied or received training in the United States or England’ (Wickersham & Nsouli 1971: 304). At the present there are about 10,000 Lebanese lawyers registered in the two bar associations in Beirut and Tripoli. Of the conditions

stipulated to become an intern, an individual has to sit for oral and written exams. The committee interviewing interns in the oral exam ‘checks whether the internship applicant masters the Arabic language and is fluent in foreign languages, especially French or English.’ In addition, the written exam includes a translation section to test the applicant’s ability to translate from French or English into Arabic and vice versa – a condition without which the applicant would be denied to join the legal system. Applicants get tested on different subjects including general legal knowledge where the applicants may choose to discuss this subject in Arabic, English, or in French<sup>13</sup>. Likewise, Lebanese judges must have a good command of standard Arabic as well as a command of either French or English. While Lebanese Arabic is used in courtrooms, a live translation into standard Arabic takes place in order to record court proceedings whereby the judge restates what the suspect has said and the court recorder handwrites the report (Khachan 2010). Documents written in foreign languages must be translated into Arabic in order to be used before a Lebanese court, and court proceedings cannot be conducted in any foreign language<sup>14</sup>.

Most majors in Lebanese universities require fluency in at least two languages, but there are majors that require fluency in three languages. In Lebanon’s only state university, for example, enrolling in the Center for Languages and Translation requires passing an entrance exam in Arabic, French, and English. Fluency in these three languages is also a requirement in the translation programs at the University of Balamand and the Lebanese International University. Other universities, such as the Lebanese American University, offer a BA in translation in two languages (Arabic and English) with French being optional.

Government web pages are a country’s gateway to its citizens and to the world. They function as points of reference, and they are crucial to disseminate information, enhance services, save time and effort, and engage with the public. In a way, they reflect the image (linguistic, cultural, or political) the administration wants to impart. The Lebanese government’s online

presence can be investigated through webpages designed for the presidency of the republic, the parliament, the council of ministries, the national army and security forces, 21 ministries, and 61 public institutes. Information on these websites is primarily disseminated in Arabic, but other languages are available as well. Figure 3 exhibits the choice of language(s) used by these 88 venues where half of them displayed information in two or three languages, 26% in Arabic, 14.7% in English, and 9% did not have a functioning website. It is worth noting that 8% of the Arabic-only websites had links to either English, or English and French, but the links were either broken or under construction.

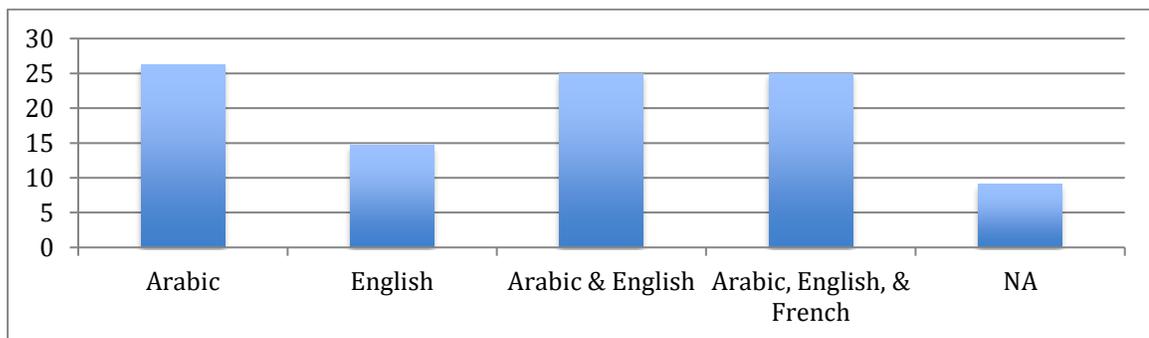


Figure 3 Language of information on government-related websites

It is safe to conclude that when it comes to Lebanon's internal affairs, information is primarily available in Arabic (for example, Ministry of the Displaced, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Public Works and Transportation, and Ministry of Social Affairs). When it comes to the country's international image, three languages are used as in the case of the Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Information, and Ministry of Justice. When it comes to finance and economy, English is the default language such as in the case of the Ministry of Finance and other public institutions (for example, Basil Fuleihan's financial institute, Economic and Social Council).

The presence of English in the legal and administrative system in Lebanon can also be seen in contracts offered by American universities or universities that follow the American system of education. In some cases, contracts are offered in both Arabic and English (for example, University of Balamand); in other cases they are offered in English (for example, American University of Beirut). The Lebanese Civil Aviation conducts its business mostly in Arabic and English unless they are dealing with a francophone country such as Algeria and France (personal communication 2016). Finally, language used to regulate or control conduct including traffic and street signs is mostly in Arabic and French with the exception of certain neighborhoods in the capital where English is also used. Many of the regulatory signs in the airport use three languages in this order: Arabic, English, and then French.

### *Innovative function*

In contrast to many Expanding Circle contexts, the use of English in various literary genres in Lebanon could be traced to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with Adab Al-Mahjar (Immigrant Literature) that was initiated in the United States with eminent writers such as Ameen Rihani, Gibran Khalil Gibran, and Mikhail Naimy. These three authors have become famous for writing philosophical books in the English language, namely the Book of Khalid, The Prophet, and the Book of Mirdad respectively. English was the authors' second or third language, and while they immigrated to the US, they maintained strong ties with their homeland. Their writings (themes, plots, settings, characters, and language depicted through metaphors and similes) reflect Lebanese and Arab culture, spirituality, traditions, and beliefs. At the present, a number of novelists who emigrated from Lebanon (for example, Rawi Hage and Rabih Alameddine) publish regularly in English. In addition, novels and poetry of other Lebanese writers who write in Arabic have been translated into English. These include Abbas Beydoun, Elias Khoury, and Hanan al-Shaykh, to name a few.

Borrowings, nativization, and transliteration of English words are very common in Lebanese Arabic. Technology related terms such as Internet, website, link, computer, laptop, mouse, CD, disc, keyboard, hard drive, tablet, scanner, printer, phone, and DVD, to name a few, have been all borrowed from English. Borrowing has not been limited to technology, additional fields include sports and related terms (football, goal, penalty, tennis, volleyball, basketball, gym, dunk), shopping (jeans, mall, T-shirt, boots, sandals, Uggs, sale), food and drink (diet, hamburger, hotdog, ketchup, fries, mayonnaise, ranch, crispy, wings, coke, beer, ice cream, pub, café, cafeteria, snack), and travel (ticket, cruise, check-in, checkout, hotel, transit, boarding, gate). Other borrowings include words such as film, video clip, data, club, kilometer, kilogram, credit card, visa, and bank. Although Arabic words have been coined to express many of these terms, and some have already been in existence, the English equivalent remained trendy. In addition to borrowing, nativization has been increasing among Lebanese and Arabs in general whereby English words undergo morphological reconstruction to fit Arabic syntax. Thus, ‘I checked my email’ becomes *shayyakit emaili* following the structure of Arabic sentences whereby number and gender are marked by adding suffixes to verbs and nouns. Doubling or germinating the middle radical of the verb (that is, adding the Arabic *shadda*) transforms the word into the causative or intensive states. Likewise, ‘I saved’ becomes *sayyvit* in Arabic, ‘I parked’ is *parrakit*, ‘get out’ is *awwit*, ‘I am hyper’ is *hyparit*, ‘I am depressed’ is *dapprasit*, so on and so forth. Transliteration is also popular especially on social media and texting. Popular examples include the use of *tanks* (which is the nativized Lebanese version of ‘thanks’) in Arabic alphabet. Other nativized words or sentences include ‘It’s okay’ where the Lebanese have transliterated it into Arabic and now use it as one word, *itsoke*.

Innovation can also be seen in creative design projects using two or three languages. The designs could be printed on posters, T-shirts, and mugs. Figure 4 shows a Lebanese design brand

called *Art 7ake* ('word Art') that showcases the innovative use of Arabic words depicted in images combined with English text. On the left, the Arabic word for 'tea' is *shay* which is pronounced as the English word 'shy', hence the image of a tea bag. Such a design would look and sound weird to an English speaker who does not know the Arabic word for 'tea'. In the middle picture, the word 'mouse' means *far* in Arabic, which explains the mouse picture. The right side picture uses the same concept design: 'tore' in English means 'ox' in Arabic. An Arabic speaker who looks at these designs would find them funny, trendy, and innovative as described in the comments on the original posts<sup>15</sup>.



Figure 4 Art 7aki innovation

Another example of innovation could be seen with Mukagraf, a local studio for designing greeting cards, where 'a combination of languages' is used 'to break established conventions'<sup>16</sup>. The studio owners state that the use of Arabic, French and English expressions 'are blended within the card message to reflect the contemporary way of communication in the region' believing that this strategy makes their cards 'personalized, easy to relate to and appealing.' Such a statement shows to what extent blending languages has become so common in Lebanon. Figure 5 shows the use of Arabic, Arabizi, English, a mix of French and English, and English and Arabizi in greeting cards.



Figure 5 Mukagraph Greeting Cards

Innovation could also be seen in the very few Lebanese singers who attempted to sing in English. The most famous is probably Gus Farah who in the early eighties had songs airing internationally (for example, 'Echoes' and 'Love is free for all'). Contemporary singers include Haifa Wehbe's 'Breathing into You' and Ghassan Rahbani's 'My Religion'. Although many critics would classify the latter two songs as 'mediocre' rather than innovative, they do show an attempt at being innovative through the use of English with a Lebanese spirit.

## ATTITUDES

The status of foreign languages in Lebanon is deeply connected with the Lebanese incessant quest to define their identity in a way that sets them apart from *the other*, be it their next-door Muslim/Christian neighbor or their Arab neighbors. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lebanese Christian elites believed that Lebanon is a bridge that connects the East and West, and that this role could be served best 'by maintaining a dual identity through French/Arab bilingualism' (Bourhis 1982: 45). The idea that Lebanon possessed *one* language only, Arabic, was out of the question because the ownership of that language would have had to be Muslims (Joseph 2004). At the same time, Christians of Lebanon have considered Arabic and the cultural identity associated with it to be as

important to them as it is to Muslims (Frayha 2004; Joseph 2004). In contrast, and during the same period, working-class Muslims embraced Arabic and Arab identity with many opting to learn English instead of French. They believed that Lebanon is part and parcel of the Arab world and that Arab heritage and culture should be encouraged. They also believed that the promotion of French at the expense of Arabic is ‘a form of linguistic imperialism’ (Shaaban and Ghaith 2002: 561). Curriculums at the time reflected such a view. The sixties witnessed a revision of school curricula and a move toward Arabisation whereby foreign languages were viewed as ‘expressions of “cultural colonisation”’ (Frayha 2004: 173).

With the curriculum reform at the turn of the century, the government hoped that trilingualism would become the norm. Studies conducted at the beginning of the new millennium indicated that French was declining, English was gaining momentum, and the correlation between religious affiliation and foreign language seemed to be dwindling (Abou, Kasparian, and Haddad 1996; Ghaleb and Joseph 2000; Joseph 2004). Shaaban and Ghaith (2003), however, reported that religion was still a factor that determined linguistic attitudes. In terms of science, technology, and business, English was perceived as more useful than both Arabic and French, where Arabic was reserved for daily communication and French for culture (Shaaban and Ghaith 2003). Similarly, university students had a more favorable attitude towards English perceiving it to be easier to learn than French and Arabic (Diab 2006). In fact, being French or English educated has been considered as an identity marker for many Lebanese students (Diab 2006 & 2009).

The overuse of foreign languages in Lebanon has been critiqued by many public figures including comedians, singers, music composers, and playwrights (for example, Charbel Rouhana’s famous *Hi, Kefak, Ça va?* song or ‘Hi, how are you, OK?’; and Hiba Tawji’s most recent song, *Balad El Tanaqud* or ‘the country of contradictions’). Such critiques, however, have

been mostly received as “funny”, “cute”, and “cool” since they boosted the Lebanese’ image of themselves as multilinguals. Voices that consider English as a threat to the native language have been very minimal. With the exception of one campaign (*Feil Amr* or ‘the Imperative’) that was launched in 2010 to raise awareness of the dangers of abandoning the mother tongue and the overuse of foreign language, no other organization has active. Occasionally, some senior TV hosts would emphasize the strict use of Arabic in their shows. For example, the host of the Arabic version of “Who Wants to be a Millionaire”, George Kurdahi, a well known Lebanese journalist and show host, asked one of the participants to use Arabic, ‘or else [he] could go and participate in the English version of Who Wants To Be a Millionaire’ (episode 21 2016). Other TV hosts tend to translate into Arabic any foreign words used by their interviewees (for example, Nishan).

On a more official level, the Arabic Language International Council was founded in 2008 by the Arab Universities Union with its headquarters in Beirut, Lebanon. The Council’s main goals include promoting the Arabic language and its use by encouraging publications in Arabic; by developing textbooks, curricula, courses; and by supporting various organizations and initiatives that adopt Arabic as a cause. While the council has not been very active and it has no social media presence (for example, its Facebook page does not have one single post), it has been involved in organizing the International Conference on the Arabic Language, which was launched in Beirut in 2012, but has been consistently convening in the UAE since then. This council and annual conference, however, has not been able to modify people’s perception and attitude towards foreign languages in Lebanon especially considering the trend among many Lebanese to view French and English as ‘elite’ languages due to their perceived utility in terms of economic mobility (Bahous, Nabahani, & Bacha 2014: 355).

Attitudes toward English in Lebanon are generally very favorable (Esseili 2011). The

Lebanese are keen on using English and/or French even when they are not very proficient in these languages. Such a trend, using so-called imperfect English, has been receiving a backlash from comedians, bloggers, and satirical Facebook pages. A number of famous Lebanese singers (for example, Elissa, Cyrine Abdalnur, and May Hariri) have been criticized and publically shamed for using misspelled hashtags on Twitter and Facebook, for mispronouncing English or French words (for example, “tanks” instead of “thanks”), for incorrect word use as a result of transfer (for example, using “he/she” instead of “it” because the latter has no Arabic equivalent; “lost my flight” instead of “missed my flight”), and for messing up the structure of English sentences. Reporters and TV anchors have been also engaged in a similar trend. For example, the host of the Lebanese satire entertainment program on LBCI, Hicham Haddad, made fun of one of his colleagues on another channel because she pronounced words like “manicure”, “pedicure”, and “collagen” with Lebanese flavor, knowing that these words have been nativized for a long time. Tony Khalife, another Lebanese TV host, took offense at a journalist who claimed that ‘he did not know how to speak proper Arabic, English, and French’ and who had also attacked the Emarati singer, Ahlam, for not knowing how to speak ‘proper English’. In his turn, Khalife criticized the ‘linguistic genius’ of the journalist and corrected her mispronunciation of French and English words while encouraging her to ‘fix her language’ before she ‘attacks’ the pronunciation of other people. Many more on other shows have engaged in public shaming of others who did not use standardized English or French. In fact, rarely does one see this need to prove oneself as cultured, educated, refined, and elitist through the use of foreign languages and at the expense of the native language, which is perceived *démodé* (‘outdated’) to use a French word that the Lebanese use routinely. It would be absurd for Simon Cowell, for example, to use French words on American Idol when the singing and interaction are all taking place in English. Yet, in Arab Idol (and other similar Arabized shows like Arabs Got Talent), we find Lebanese

judges infusing their sentences with foreign words and we see them ridiculing their fellow judges for their incorrect usage or mispronunciation of foreign words.

This idea that foreign languages make individuals *better* at some level has been perpetuated in different ways including through some Lebanese scholars. Of the four Lebanese scholars interviewed in one case study, for example, three addressed the value of foreign languages in general and English in particular in promoting tolerance, liberation, and political activism. To one scholar, learning foreign languages ‘encourages tolerance and exposes individuals to diversity’ where language is a ‘channel of acculturation’ (Minkara 2013: 112); To another, English exposes a person ‘to the concept of liberalism as a way of life’ (p. 116) where reading in English can inspire a person to resist non-violently (for example, reading about Ghandi and the speeches of Martin Luther King) (117). To a third, living in the UK enabled her to become ‘more tolerant toward differences’ (120). In fact, the view that there’s *one* flawless English can also be seen among such scholars where one political scientist professed that he learned ‘speaking “real” English’ in the UK (116), suggesting that the English taught in Lebanon is not very authentic. While there is no doubt that being multilingual and multicultural can broaden perspectives and enlighten a person’s world, the suggestion that one can only be “tolerant” of differences or “liberal” when they learn foreign languages, particularly English, or when they live in foreign countries, is self-deprecating to say the very least. It ignores the rich history of Arabs with its Christian and Muslim philosophers, poets, journalists, and novelists. A monolingual speaker of Arabic (or any other language) is very much capable of being exposed to the concepts of “liberalism” and “tolerance” in different ways including reading classics in Arabic literature or translated work. Similarly, a bilingual person is very much capable of being engaged in inhumane practices or in promoting divisive and sectarian ideologies.

## CONCLUSION

Although Arabic is the native language of Lebanon, English is being used for various interpersonal, instrumental, innovative and regulative functions. English is sometimes used by itself; at other times it is used in combination with Arabic and/or French in code switching and mixing situations. While English in Lebanon does not function as a link language among speakers of ‘nonmutually intelligible indigenous languages or dialects’ as is the case in India, for example (Berns 1990: 53), it is a link language and an identity marker among many speakers of Lebanese Arabic who view multilingualism as a unique cultural and social trait that distinguishes them from non-Lebanese.

While language choice in the education system is mostly strategic and driven by economics, critical planning is needed in order to overcome the many challenges outlined above and elsewhere. On the one hand, foreign languages play an important role in shaping the Lebanese consciousness in terms of cultural and social identity. On the other hand, foreign languages are working against many Lebanese students who attend under-resourced schools and who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Such students often fail middle and high school official exams partially due to their inability to fully comprehend science and mathematics in a foreign language and/or due to their teachers’ lack of proficiency and their use of code-switching when delivering lessons (Esseili 2011 and 2014; Abdulla & Skaf 2015). The perception that the native language is not good enough promotes discrimination that can also be seen in job opportunities in major Lebanese cities where proficiency in a foreign language is a must. Some public figures and the average Lebanese who use foreign languages to look trendy are sometimes ridiculed for their accents, mispronunciations, or wrong usage. Despite such critiques, a number of English words, phrases, and sentences have been nativized and/or transliterated into Lebanese Arabic. Further research in the areas of linguistic discrimination, language and identity, language

and social/national cohesion, and perceptions toward the ethnolinguistic vitality of languages is very much needed in Lebanon.

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