

Book Review:

Neoliberalism and English language education policies in the Arabian Gulf

Arab Journal of Applied Linguistics
e-ISSN 2490-4198
Vol. 5, No. 1, July 2020, 100-104
© AJAL
<http://www.arjals.com/>

Barnawi, O. Z. (2018). *Neoliberalism and English language education policies in the Arabian Gulf*. Routledge Research in Language Education. 223 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-24465-8 (hbk), 978-1-135-27671-7 (ebk). \$160.25.

Reviewed by Habib Abdesslem, King Khalid University, KSA & University of Manouba,
Tunisia

In his book, *Neoliberalism and English language education policies in the Arabian Gulf*, Barnawi argues that for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries' education and economic policies to succeed in promoting English among their local citizens, they have to take into consideration a number of realities on the ground. These include the locals' demography (in comparison to expatriates'), their economic power, cultural values, and attachment to Islam and the Arabic language. He explains that although most of the people living in the GCC states are convinced of the importance of learning English as "a must-own currency" (p.87) to achieve scientific, technological, social, and economic success, many among the local population have reservations as to the compatibility of certain neoliberalist principles and practices with Islamic values and teachings. He asks "On what basis, therefore, could

governments in the Arabian Gulf harmonise Western doctrines with Islamic traditions and values, which embrace solidarity (*tadamun* in Arabic), collegiality, collectivism, and social alliances among their nationals?" (p. 6). Barnawi calls on governments to organise conferences, seminars, and workshops and to sponsor research projects dedicated to the theme of "Islam, Neoliberalism, and education policies" (p. 173), rather than give a free hand or grant franchise to international institutions and their affiliates to open universities and private schools, sell teaching materials and tests, provide consultation and accreditation services at exorbitant prices, and organise conferences to advertise their views, services, and products. Thus, Barnawi is not against adopting neoliberalism, but he is calling for restraining it and domesticating it.

The book has 12 chapters. The first four Chapters set the scene for Chapters Five to Ten where the author provides in each of them an account on one of the GCC states' education policies. Chapters Eleven and Twelve compare the education policies in the six states and envision the future of English in the region. I provide a synopsis that I hope will give the reader a taste of each Chapter in the book.

Chapter One explains key concepts in neoliberalism and points to its adverse effects on nations and individuals. It claims that neoliberalism has turned education into a commodity and individuals into marketable "neoliberalist subjects" (p. 13). Chapter Two describes the socio-political context that led to the creation of the GCC in 1981 and the changes that member states had to undergo, especially following the 09/11 attacks. Chapter Three provides a critique of Globalisation as the outcome and driving force of neoliberalism and it offers a very brief account on the policies the GCC countries have adopted (p. 33).

Chapter Four contends that neoliberalism has not received much attention in the applied linguistics research conducted in the Middle East and provides an outline that the author will, to some extent, follow in the six chapters (Chapters 5 to 10) he devotes to the six GCC countries (p.40).

Chapter Five explains that in its attempt to move towards a knowledge-based economy, Saudi Arabia has proceeded in the internationalisation of its education system, especially following the 2030 Vision of 2016, by adopting a number of policies. In this Chapter, the author presents the 1980 and the 2020 Saudi Ministry of Education Strategic Objectives (pp. 52-59) and undertakes a very illuminating comparison between them. He reports on interviews he had with parents (p. 61) and university students (p. 64) and relates incidents from the media (pp. 67-70) regarding learning English and adopting western style social practices.

Chapter Six reveals that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has gone further than Saudi Arabia in adopting neoliberalism through English (p. 87). This has been due to the country's demographic situation, its fast-growing economy, and its forthright orientation towards globalisation. According to Barnawi, the neoliberalist policies the state has adopted have destabilised members of the indigenous community, as many feel that their native language and culture are undermined.

Chapter Seven shows that Qatar, like the UAE, has been fully engaged in neoliberalism. It went even further in adopting English as a medium of instruction, especially by reducing Arabic and Islamic studies classes. However, following the growing disenchantment of the native population with massive privatisation and workforce

migration that turned their country into “all men's land” (p. 96), a total shift in policy took place in 2012 (p. 107). Arabic is now reinstated as the medium of instruction in state schools and at Qatar University. This change of policy, Barnawi argues, has complicated things even further for the local population (pp. 107-110).

Chapter Eight is devoted to Oman. Oman has opted for a very cautious adoption of neoliberalism. For instance, Oman does not have international branches of universities. Although English is taught from Grade 1 to Grade 12, the majority of high school graduates fail their university admission exams and they have to pay for remedial classes that they take in private schools. The Omani youth who seek to replace highly skilled expatriates on the job market are clearly at a disadvantage on account of their poor command of English.

Chapter Nine is devoted to Kuwait. In this country, English is taught at all school levels. It is also used as a medium of instruction in international schools and universities. Kuwaiti parents are concerned that the choice they are given to send their children to private schools or to government schools is costly. According to Barnawi, the choice they make affects their children's prospects. Government schools are free and reinforce the students' cultural values, but they reduce their competitiveness on the job market.

Chapter Ten is on Bahrain. Bahrain has been among the first countries in the region that opened its doors to international schools and branches of Western universities. Government schools are free for all, but at tertiary level non-Bahrainis have to pay for their studies. Because Bahraini government school graduates' command of English is poor, they are not admitted to study for hard science degrees (p. 161). This has contributed to a high rate of unemployment among them and maintained the need for overseas experts.

Chapter 11 maintains that all GCC countries have moved from education as a social good to education as an economic good. It points to the main consequences of these policies on the local population. Chapter 12 suggests that for the GCC countries to achieve social harmony, preserve their cultural identity, and realise genuine economic, technological, and scientific progress, they have to tame neoliberalism and rethink their education policies.

Readers who choose to read the whole book will notice that there are repetitions. These repetitions are mainly due to the fact that each of the Chapters dealing with the six countries is self-contained. Readers may notice that there are a few typological errors (p. 43, P 2, L. 1; p. 76, P.1, L. 18 & 23; p. 112, P. 2, L. 11; p. 130, P. 2, L. 14); three typos affect information accuracy (p. 27, P. 3, L. 7; p. 151, P. 3, L. 3 & 4; p. 161, P. 1, L. 29-30). This list is intended to alert them.

Researchers in Education, Applied Linguistics, History, Sociology, and Political Science who are interested in the region or in neoliberalism as a world phenomenon can benefit from Barnawi's exposition and discussion. I consider *Neoliberalism and English language education policies in the Arabian Gulf* an invitation to GCC scholars and stakeholders to attend to their countries' two-speed education in order to help them avert any potential dire consequences.