

# **English Language as an Optional Course**

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In a meeting with one of the brothers at the Shura Council, a discussion came up between us about education and how to develop it. Since the issue being currently looked into by one of the committees of the council is educational curriculum, I was made to recollect a similar circumstance when I – among others – was requested by Shaikh Hasan ibn Abdillah Al Shaikh – may Allah have mercy upon him – to communicate my views concerning educational reform to him. In response to this request, I wrote him proposals that dwelt upon three things the Shaikh could not eventually act upon. For, he was moved from ministry of education to ministry of higher education a month after I submitted those proposals. That was perhaps in the year 1398 A.H. / 1976 C.E.

Today, I find the circumstances suitable to write these proposals anew, perhaps, the reader and the Shura Council will find it somewhat useful in reforming our country's education, driving forward the wheel of action and reform and playing a role in putting a stop to the nation's sufferings so that it can reclaim her strength and civilizational leadership by God's permission.

The first of these proposals is removal of English language as a compulsory course in public education and making it an optional course. This suggestion is born out of consideration of the special circumstances of Arab environment in general and Arab peninsula

in particular on one side, and because of the needs and priorities that must be considered in actualizing the greatest scientific and intellectual returns from the educational process and justifying the money being spent on the same.

It is observed that learning, education and skill requirements of the child of today's world is ever increasing and expanding. This makes it incumbent upon us to take a deep scientific look at our priorities. In recommending that English language be regarded an optional course in public education in our country, I am saying it from personal experience, work experience and travels and teaching in a number of Eastern and Western environments and countries; and from interactions with young children in our country who have good knowledge of English and those who wasted their efforts in learning it without gaining anything.

The Arab environment with its culture, history, linguistic heritage, demographical and geographical extension, linguistic homogeneity and abundance of its material potentialities will not allow that English language be treated as language of interaction and communication in the life of children of the Arab nation as is the case in some countries such as India and Nigeria whose citizens are divided by scores of competing languages – Malaysia can also be cited as an example for it is divided along ethnic lines like Malay, Chinese and Indians.

The situation of the Arab nation and Arab peninsula indicates that an Arab man feels the greatest attachment to his national language

and he is more adhering to the usage of his language in his daily activities than peoples of advanced countries such as Japan, France, Russia, Germany and China. Therefore, those Arabs who use English language effectively and productively are a tiny group that does not exceed one percent of the Arab populace and graduates of public education schools. This group consists of scientists, diplomats, big business people and those who assist them in their foreign relations.

Obviously, we are not concerned here about the few ones who freely roam about European and American streets in search of fun and pleasure and, in actualizing their goals, need only few words, terms and sentences that can be learnt from “Speak English in a Week” cassettes or what they pick from people’s mouths and tourism merchants.

What this means is that 99% of those who spent long years learning English will never really use the language in their lives. On the contrary, it is almost certain that will eventually forget it. So, we do not care about that tiny group of tourists whose use of English language of no productive significance.

If we consider the importance of the student’s time and things that should be prioritized for him and we consider aspects of negligence that our schools suffer from and the acute need for ensuring that every penny spent on public education is money well-spent; then we need to ensure that we save as much time as possible for studies and productive and useful activities. Therefore, it would be fruitful if

English language could be made an optional course for families that may want their children to learn the language. It is also pertinent that suitable atmosphere is provided and the course is treated with seriousness. By doing so, we would be saving legions of teachers who waste their time and that of most students in doing what they don't really like or benefit from.

When English language is made optional, all students who wish to study it – because they and their guardians realize its importance – will have a serious atmosphere and excellent potentialities that would make them acquire the language so perfectly that they would be able to effortlessly use it and be creative in it just like their first language.

On the other hand, teachers of English in optional classes will be serious with their students for it is only serious and productive students that will be left in their classes. The students who – and their parents – do not realize the importance of learning foreign languages and who only play with their studies and waste their time will be kept away. Also, weak students who find it difficult to understand and digest a foreign language are also kept at bay as opposed to what happens in the current system in which the language is made compulsory and the students are awarded undeserved passing grades regardless of their performance. This led us to the present situation whereby most students know very little of this language though it is possible for most of them – if they are willing and serious – to learn, in a matter of weeks, many times as

much what they learn from these schools in years. That is, of course, if a student prepares himself for serious learning and acquisition of the language.

Now the puzzling question is: How can the Arab nation catch up with the world of knowledge and civilization and take up its suitable position in the comity of nations? Where is the position of learning foreign languages generally and English language particularly? What shall we do to effectively deal with the language in a way that will help us get an answer for the scientific, technological and civilizational challenge that we are still unable to efficiently confront since more than two centuries till now?

To find answers to these questions, confronting the scientific and technological challenge have many faces that cannot be discussed here. Nevertheless, I am going to discuss only the linguistic aspect of this area. It is not unknown that intellectual creativity can only be with the first language. That is why any response to scientific, technological and civilizational challenge should be through learning knowledge, sciences and technologies with the first language, which here, is Arabic language. It is through participation of the Arab nation and allowing the wealth of its language to play a role in these fields that creative skills can be developed. Any isolation of the Arab nation and its culture and literature from staying in tune with civilizational development in these fields and keeping knowledge and skills as a jealously guarded prerogative of a selected few that approaches these fields only through a second

language (English in the Arab East, for instance) as is the situation with our university educated elites, will definitely lead to the nation's failure in reaching any creative phase. And the sciences and technologies so acquired will remain branded and characterized with subordination, imitation and backwardness.

Therefore, the correct and cost-effective solution does not lie in having all Arab children learn English language but in enriching their mother tongue, which is Arabic. The arteries of Arabic language should be connected with the inventions of human civilization in areas of science and knowledge in an economically efficient manner.

It is pertinent to realize that our educational institutions and our cultural performance are not characterized by efficiency and creativity in areas of social sciences that are studied in Arabic language because they are not supported by scientific translations. Likewise, we have not been efficient in areas of physical sciences and technology that are studied in English language because we study them in foreign languages.

Indeed, richness of the nation's culture and richness of its cultured children and actualization of its digestive and creative strength can only be achieved if teaching and knowledge acquisition are done in Arabic language, which is the first language and it is supported with translation of all useful sciences and knowledge that are found in other world civilizations.