

Policy and Practice: Bilingual Teachers' and Students' Identities in Saudi University English Departments

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Abstract

Despite the increasing promotion of English as the medium of instruction (EMI) in Saudi higher education under KSA Vision 2030, the use of EMI within English departments remains largely implicit, informal, and inconsistently implemented. In the absence of clearly articulated language policies, English-only (EO) expectations function as implicit norms, creating tensions between language institutional ideologies and the reality of bilingual classroom practices. This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design involving 21 bilingual Saudi instructors and 174 undergraduate students from English departments at six universities across different regions of Saudi Arabia. Data were collected through surveys, asynchronous written interviews, and focus group discussions, analyzed using descriptive statistics and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis.

Findings were integrated during the interpretation stage to provide a comprehensive understanding of EMI practices and language ideologies. The results indicate substantial ambivalence, anxiety, and identity struggle in addition to strong instrumental support for EMI. Participants continuously relied on Arabic as a cognitive and affective resource to aid understanding and communication, even while they valued English for academic and professional progress. These findings imply that current EMI practices operate within a realm of negotiated bilingualism rather than pure monolingualism, underscoring the need for more explicit, context-sensitive language policies that acknowledge and manage Arabic's pedagogical role. This study positions instructors and students as active agents who strategically negotiate language use to balance learning, identity, and wellbeing, and are encouraged to be involved in shaping language policy decisions.

Keywords: English as the medium of instruction, code-switching, English-only policies, Saudi higher education, emotional, professional, and linguistic identities

1. Introduction

In Saudi Arabia, English has shifted from being taught as a foreign language to becoming the language of instruction and communication in many higher education contexts, despite not being the first language (L1) of the majority of the population (Elyas & Al-Hoorie, 2024). This shift reflects the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA) Vision 2030 (2016) agenda, which positions English as a key resource for supporting economic modernization, enhancing graduates' global competitiveness, and strengthening English language proficiency across higher education.

In an emerging context such as Saudi higher education, the implementation of English as the official language of instruction remains largely informal and inconsistent and is often contested (Al Zumor & Abdesslem, 2022). The development and implementation of English as the medium of instruction (EMI) policies have been characterised by limited public consultation, stakeholder engagement, and systematic policy analysis (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017; Louber & Troudi, 2019). Empirical studies of EMI in Saudi higher education have revealed that instructors and students frequently encounter significant linguistic and communicative challenges. Many instructors resort to strategies such as simplifying English or code-switching to Arabic to support their students' comprehension (Alanazi & Curle, 2025) and students generally find these practices useful and supportive (Almatrafi, 2023; Oraif & Alrashed, 2022). While these practices can enhance learning, they may contradict institutional language-use policies, thus creating tensions between official expectations and classroom realities.

These tensions are particularly evident in English departments, where EMI is implicitly assumed to operate. Faculty members are expected to teach curricula in literature, translation, and linguistics entirely through English, while both instructors and students are predominantly L1 Arabic speakers who are expected to attain high levels of English proficiency (Alnasser & Almoailly, 2022). Despite increased attention to these tensions, few scholars have explored how those directly involved experience them. In the present study, we explored how institutional language policy was experienced and enacted in classroom practice from the perspective of bilingual Saudi instructors and students in English departments. Specifically, we investigated how these policies shaped their emotional, professional, and

linguistic identities, and how they influenced classroom interactions. The aim of the study was to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. How do institutional language policies shape bilingual instructors' emotional and professional identities within English departments at universities in Saudi Arabia?

RQ2. What are students' perceptions and lived experiences within classrooms in English departments?

RQ3. How do language policies implemented in university English departments influence classroom dynamics and student–instructor communications?

While recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized *multilingual* and *translingual* perspectives to capture the fluidity of language practices, this study employs the term *bilingual* because its empirical focus is on the relationship between Arabic and English as the two principal languages shaping participants' educational experiences and identity construction.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Framework

For this study, we considered it essential to delineate the differences among the overlapping terminologies associated with language policies to build a clear conceptual framework. Contemporary definitions of language policy extend beyond the perception of policy as official, macro-level texts produced by governments or agencies. Policy is increasingly perceived as the outcome of the interplay between macro-level regulations (governmental or institutional rules) and micro-level practices (departmental norms, classroom interactions, and individual decisions). Johnson (2013) defined language policy as any “policy mechanism that influences the structure, function, use, or acquisition of language” (p. 9), with mechanisms comprising formal documents and implicit practices, beliefs, and everyday decisions.

In this study, we define English-language policies (ELPs) at the departmental level as all accepted or practiced policies and regulations, official or unofficial, written or verbal, explicit or implicit, which govern the use of English within the department. This definition encompasses expectations concerning the utilization of English versus Arabic in educational settings, instructors' convictions regarding suitable language applications, learners' perceptions about engagement and evaluation, and habitual choices that affect language use and acquisition. In this regard, teachers not only mandate language policy but also implement it via everyday academic procedures.

Another term associated with ELP is EMI, commonly defined as “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English” (Macaro, 2018, p. 19). Although EMI is often associated with improvements in English proficiency, it differs from approaches such as English for Academic Purposes and English for Specific Purposes, which explicitly prioritize language development and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), in which both content and language objectives are integrated intentionally (Coyle et al., 2010; see also Galloway & Rose, 2021, for a summary). In numerous EMI contexts, language acquisition is regarded as incidental rather than a defined educational objective (Galloway & Rose, 2021).

Although EMI is sometimes associated with fields such as engineering, medicine, or business, in which English mainly serves as a medium for conveying specialized knowledge, its implementation inside English departments reveals a more complex situation. In English departments, English serves as both the medium of instruction and the subject of analysis. Teachers conduct courses in literature, linguistics, and translation in English; nonetheless, they predominantly emphasize disciplinary knowledge over systematic language development. Consequently, the advancement of language proficiency may be presumed rather than explicitly emphasized in pedagogy.

This dual orientation situates English departments at a unique crossroads between EMI and conventional English-language teaching (ELT). In contrast to traditional ELT environments in which the primary objective is language acquisition, English departments frequently emphasise disciplinary expertise while upholding standards of advanced English proficiency. Such expectations may establish implicit English-only (EO) standards that discourage or limit the use of Arabic. EO policies are frequently rationalized based on the conviction that immersion enhances exposure and competency; the concept has historically been linked to conventional ELT paradigms (Phillipson, 1992). Collectively, these conceptual contrasts highlight the complexity of language-use restrictions in English departments and establish the theoretical basis for analyzing how teachers and students engage with, understand, and navigate these policies in practice.

2.2 Tensions Between Arabic and English in Higher Education: The Arab World

Top-down policy initiatives, often linked to national and institutional internationalization strategies rather than to pedagogical considerations, have driven ELPs in the KSA (Elyas & Al-Hoorie, 2024). Despite ongoing governmental initiatives, there is a persistent gap between policy objectives and students' actual language proficiency, highlighting obstacles to implementing EMI in Saudi higher education (Aljehani & Modiano, 2025; Elyas & Al-Hoorie, 2024; Troudi & Jendli, 2011). Investigations of policies pertaining to the use of English and Arabic in higher education in the KSA and the broader Arab world (Abdel Latif & Alhamad, 2023; Al Zumor & Abdesslem, 2022; Alanazi & Curle, 2025; Al-Issa, 2017; Aljehani & Modiano, 2025) have revealed that these policies may not only hinder academic performances but could also contribute to students' anxiety, disengagement, and alienation from their linguistic and cultural identities. Given these challenges, educators and students have adopted diverse strategies of resistance and accommodation in their local context. These approaches include selectively incorporating Arabic to support students' comprehension and creating more inclusive classroom environments rather than rigidly enforcing EO rules.

Abdel Latif and Alhamad (2023) called for more flexible, bilingual models that accounted for both global and local needs. Key recommendations included revising language admission requirements, strengthening English support services, enhancing content instructors' linguistic competence, and regulating top-down policies by explicitly documenting and publishing them. In the absence of these reforms, EMI may intensify educational disparities and further marginalize Arabic language in academic environments. To address these challenges, it is essential to involve practitioners in needs analyses to ensure that classroom reality, rather than top-down mandates, informs language rules.

2.3 Bilingual Teachers' Identities and Experiences in Higher Education

Teachers' identities are dynamic and multifaceted, shaped by continuous interactions among personal views, professional roles, institutional expectations, and sociocultural norms (Barkhuizen, 2016; Varghese et al., 2005). In EMI contexts, bilingual educators frequently struggle with conflicting demands. Although they acknowledge the pedagogical and relational significance of their students' L1, institutional ideologies generally prioritize English as the exclusive legitimate medium of instruction. This design sometimes creates a conflict between educators' pedagogical convictions and their classroom practice – a conflict that is influenced by policy, ideology, and professional standing (Almayez, 2022).

Hornberger and Johnson (2007) emphasized the importance of teachers' agency in policy implementation and highlighted that educators interpreted and modified policies through their contextual professional judgement. Strict EO policies may limit teachers' autonomy, leading to disempowerment and alienation from fundamental professional principles. Yang and Jang's (2022) ethnographic research on bilingual Korean educators demonstrated that EMI functioned not only as a policy but also as a tangible ideological experience that influenced everyday choices and professional credibility. Comparable trends were observed in Japan, where strict EMI rules have been associated with emotional distress and the undermining of bilingual educators' identities (Menard-Warwick, 2008).

Scholars have shown that, in the KSA, the exclusion of Arabic from classes, despite numerous teachers being Arabic–English bilinguals, limits culturally sensitive teaching and reduces teachers' agency (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Louber and Troudi (2019) found that, notwithstanding formal EMI rules at a Saudi institution, Arabic persisted as the predominant language in scientific and engineering courses due to students' inadequate English competence and their inclination towards Arabic to improve their understanding. Educators have condemned EMI as a mandated Western paradigm; they observed that English texts were often inappropriate for the local context and were often not completed in a single course.

Barnawi (2021) contended that EMI in Saudi universities embodied a neoliberal agenda that emphasized speed, competition, and efficiency. Students expressed feelings of being overwhelmed by the speed of EMI, while educators and administrators recognized that these circumstances may hinder in-depth learning and the provision of substantive feedback. Under these circumstances, education may become focused on efficiency rather than on intellectual substance. In response to these obstacles, scholars have suggested a steady transition. Almusharraf (2021) indicated that Saudi teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) were progressively developing bilingual professional identities that strategically integrated Arabic while adhering to the objectives of English immersion. Alsaawi and Almulhim (2024) reported an increasing trend in teachers' support for language policies that acknowledged translanguaging as a valid teaching approach instead of as a departure from EMI standards. These findings indicated a rethinking of professional identity and the positioning of bilingualism as a pedagogical and cultural asset.

Almoaily and Alnasser (2019) surveyed ELPs in English departments in higher education across all regions in the KSA and highlighted that the absence of a clear, nationwide ELP in Saudi EFL university departments had resulted in inconsistent, implicit EO practices that created confusion, inequality, and a disconnect between institutional expectations and actual teaching and learning needs. Alnasser and Almoaily (2022) further explored the self-regulated ELPs of instructors in Saudi English departments and found that they were adapting and were prepared to adopt any explicit top-down policies (Alnasser, 2022). Additionally, religion is a crucial aspect of professional identity in the KSA. Islam significantly influences Muslim English-language teachers' relationship with their pupils and reinforces their obligation to maintain religious principles (Almayez, 2022; Louber & Almayez, 2023). This aspect further complicates how bilingual educators navigate policy, pedagogy, and identity within EMI contexts.

2.4 Bilingual Students' Identities in Higher Education

Pavlenko (2003) argued that second-language (L2) contexts may pose emotional challenges that shape learners' self-positioning within academic contexts. Zembylas (2005) went further, positing that emotions were socially and politically produced, as classroom dynamics, language regulations, and power relations influenced them. Empirical research regarding Saudi students' perceptions of EMI policies in higher education (Alfehaid, 2018; Almatrafi, 2023; Alnasser & Almoaily, 2022; Alqahtani, 2022; Al Zumor & Abdesslem, 2022; Oraif & Alrashed, 2022) predominantly indicated favorable attitudes towards and the recognition of the advantages of English for proficiency advancement. Nonetheless, students with lower levels of English proficiency may feel alienated when they are prevented from using their L1, resulting in anxiety, diminished participation, and disengagement. These responses are closely linked to perceptions of linguistic validity and access to academic achievement.

Alomaim (2019) and Alomaim and Altameemi (2022) reported Saudi students' robust support for translanguaging and the utilization of their L1 in English classes, despite the students' recognizing that these methods may not directly improve their ability to use English. A thorough review indicated minimal variance amongst major subjects; for example, engineering students emphasized intelligibility, whereas medical students preferred to have native-like English proficiency. However, the existing research has predominantly focused on

the practical sciences, with scant consideration given to the business and social sciences and none to the field of education (Alqarni et al., 2024).

In contemporary research, scholars have increasingly advocated for reconceptualizing L2 learners as bilinguals instead of promoting the exclusion of their L1 in the educational process. Norton's (2013) investment theory elucidated how learners' perceived possibilities for meaningful language use influenced their motivation and identities. When students see English as a means of social advancement, they may commit to acquiring English despite the conflicts associated with the marginalisation of their L1. Canagarajah (2013) emphasized that practices such as code-switching and translanguaging served not only as teaching instruments but also as mechanisms for negotiating identity. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital demonstrated that English acquired symbolic significance in EMI situations, whereas Arabic may be regarded as less legitimate, potentially leading to identity conflict and diminishing students' sense of belonging. Wenger's (1998) notion of communities of practice emphasized that identity evolved via engagement in significant interactions. Students with inadequate English proficiency may experience exclusion from academic communities, thereby exacerbating identity insecurity. In this regard, the legitimization of multilingual practices enhances engagement and reinforces identity affirmation.

Bilingualism influences teachers' identities in both EFL and EMI situations. Bilingual educators frequently manage conflicting expectations that are influenced by native-speaker ideologies that associate legitimacy with adherence to standardised English norms (Rudolph et al., 2015). Canagarajah (2005) contended that these ideologies neglected the sociolinguistic reality of global English and perpetuated unequal power dynamics. Garc ía and Wei (2014) defined translanguaging as the utilisation of a speaker's complete linguistic repertoire to create meaning that transcended strict language limitations. In EMI classrooms, translanguaging enables both educators and learners to assert agency and contest strict EO policies (Li, 2018). Collectively, these approaches emphasise the need to reconceptualize bilingualism in EMI not as a deficiency but as a vital resource that is integral to identity development and educational justice.

In this study, we posit that English departments in Saudi institutions may function under an implicit EO mindset despite the lack of formally established language policies, as the studied literature indicates. Although explicit institutional mandates may not always be stated, the expectations of English predominance often serve as de facto standards that influence classroom engagement, professional conduct, and identity negotiation. This conceptual framework guided the current study on the impact of implicit language ideologies on the emotional, linguistic, and professional positioning of teachers and students within English departments. Our aim in this study was to investigate how bilingual English instructors and their students in university English departments in Saudi Arabia managed the EO policy based on the examined literature. We specifically explored teachers' negotiations of their emotional, professional, and linguistic identities; analysed students' experiences and perceptions of related policies; and assessed the broader implications for pedagogical practices and classroom dynamics.

Although previous research has extensively examined EMI, EO practices, and language policies in Saudi higher education, much of the existing literature has focused on policy implementation, students' attitudes, or language-learning outcomes. Less attention has been given to how implicit EO expectations shape the emotional, professional, and linguistic identities of bilingual instructors and students, particularly within English departments. Furthermore, limited research has examined how these individuals negotiate institutional language ideologies through their everyday classroom experiences and bilingual practices. Accordingly, this study addresses this gap by drawing on language policy, identity, and translanguaging perspectives to examine how institutional expectations shape bilingual practices and identity negotiation.

Building on this gap, we argue that English departments in Saudi universities may operate under an implicit EO mindset despite the absence of formally established language policies, as suggested by previous research. Although explicit institutional mandates are not always articulated, expectations of English predominance often function as de facto norms that shape classroom engagement, professional conduct, and identity negotiation. This perspective informed our examination of how implicit language ideologies influence the emotional, linguistic, and professional experiences of teachers and students within English departments. Subsequently, this study investigated how bilingual English instructors and their students in Saudi university English departments negotiate implicit EO expectations. Specifically, we explored teachers' emotional, professional, and linguistic identity negotiations, examined students' experiences and perceptions of classroom language practices, and considered the broader implications for pedagogy and classroom interaction.

3. Method

In our study, we employed convergent parallel mixed-methods research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We gathered qualitative data (interviews, focus groups, and open-ended responses) and quantitative data (questionnaire items) concurrently, analyzed them independently, and subsequently synthesized them during the interpretation phase. We emphasized the qualitative component, while the quantitative results provided descriptive reinforcement and triangulation.

3.1 Participants

We divided the participants in this study into two groups: bilingual Saudi instructors and undergraduate students in English departments. We recruited 21 instructors from six universities, representing diverse teaching backgrounds, years of experience, and academic qualifications (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of Instructors' Profiles

Gender (F/M)	Age Group	Highest Qualification	Country of Highest Degree	Teaching Experience	Courses Taught	Student Group	Class Size
F (n = 15)	< 30 (n = 3)	BA (n = 4)	SA (n = 10)	0–5 (n = 6)	Language skills (n = 11)	Undergraduate (n = 18)	< 20 (n = 1)
M (n = 6)	30–39 (n = 15)	MA (n = 6)	English-speaking countries* (n = 10)	6–10 (n = 6)	Linguistics (n = 3)	Mixed levels (n = 3)	21–40 (n = 12)
	40–49 (n = 3)	PhD (n = 11)	Other ME (n = 1)	11–15 (n = 6)	Mixed (n = 7)		41–60 (n = 5)
				16–20 (n = 2)			> 60 (n = 3)
				> 20 (n = 1)			

The student group consisted of 174 undergraduate students enrolled in English language and literature programs at the same six universities where the instructors taught; see Table 2 for student participant profiles. We employed purposeful and convenience sampling of people who were accessible to the researchers. However, this approach resulted in the gender distribution being highly skewed. We did not aim for the sampling approach to establish statistical generalization but at capturing a wide range of perspectives that would shed light on ELPs' complexities in Saudi higher education; upon closer examination, we observed no differences between female and male participants.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of the Student Participants

Variable	Category	N	%
Age	Under 20 years	100	57.5
	20–22 years	65	37.4
	23–25 years	8	4.6
	26 years and above	1	0.6
Year of Study	First year	43	24.7
	Second year	111	63.8
	Third year	8	4.6
	Fourth year or above	12	6.9
Gender	Female	165	94.8
	Male	9	5.2

Table 2 presents student participants' demographic characteristics ($N = 174$). The majority of students were enrolled in their second year of study (63.8%), while approximately one quarter were first-year students (24.7%). Representation of the later years of study was limited, with third-year students accounting for 4.6% and those in the fourth year or higher representing 6.9% of the sample. The gender distribution was highly skewed, with female students comprising 94.8% of participants.

Table 3. Educational and Linguistic Backgrounds of the Student Participants

Variable	Category	N	%
University	Taif University, Taif	101	58.0
	Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, Riyadh	36	20.7
	King Saud University, Riyadh	30	17.2
	Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh	3	1.7
	King Faisal University, Al-Hofuf	3	1.7
	Saudi Electronic University, Tabuk	1	0.6
Self-Rated English Proficiency	Beginner	20	11.5
	Intermediate	96	55.2
	Above average	39	22.4
	Advanced	17	9.8
Language of Instruction (General Education)	Near-native / Native-like	2	1.1
	Arabic	23	13.2
	English	74	42.5
	Mixed (Arabic & English)	77	44.3

This distribution suggests considerable variation in participants' prior language exposure, which was likely to have influenced their classroom experiences and their perceptions of EO instruction in higher education.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

We collected data in three stages. The first stage involved distributing the questionnaires. We distributed the students' questionnaire electronically via Telegram and university platforms to ensure accessibility and anonymity, and we sent the teachers' questionnaire directly to instructors to whom the researchers had access. The students' questionnaire was in Arabic, participants' common L1, to guarantee the clarity and precision of the responses. The teachers' questionnaire was in English and available for 2 weeks to increase participation. We implemented this bilingual and adaptable strategy to improve the depth of responses and to increase accessibility and authenticity between the participant groups. The second stage involved the structured interviews with the instructors. We conducted the instructors' interviews asynchronously via WhatsApp to provide flexibility and accommodate participants' schedules. The format resembled a protracted written dialogue rather than a singular synchronous interaction. We permitted the participants to respond in either Arabic or English, with the majority of the responses incorporating both languages. The discussion generally lasted for about one week to give participants sufficient time to consider their responses before replying. In the third stage, we organized focus group discussions with the students through

Telegram.

We obtained ethical approval prior to the data collection. All the participants received clear information about the study's purpose and procedures, as well as their right to withdraw at any time. We obtained informed consent independently for the questionnaires and for the interviews/focus groups. We maintained confidentiality and anonymity using pseudonyms and storing the data on password-protected devices. Students' participation was entirely voluntary and independent of their academic performance.

3.3 Data Analysis

We analyzed Likert-scale items from the questionnaires descriptively (e.g. frequencies, percentages, and mean scores) to provide an overview of students' attitudes. We analyzed the qualitative data from the interviews, discussion groups, and open-ended responses to the questionnaires using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify recurring patterns related to identity, policy, and classroom practices. We coded the transcripts of the interviews and the focus group discussions inductively and organized them according to themes. This strategy ensured credibility, triangulation, and depth by combining individual narratives with institutional perspectives.

We conducted the instructors' interviews asynchronously in written format using WhatsApp and regarded the responses as naturally occurring textual data; we evaluated them immediately without transcriptions. Because the participants utilized both Arabic and English in their responses, we meticulously examined all the data in participants' original language to maintain meaning. We translated passages into English for reporting purposes, focusing on semantic and contextual precision.

The thematic analysis adhered to the six-phase framework that Braun and Clarke (2006) established: (1) familiarization with the data via iterative readings of the responses, (2) generation of the initial codes, (3) pattern identification to formulate preliminary themes, (4) reviewing and refining the themes in relation to the comprehensive dataset, (5) defining and labelling the themes, and (6) producing the final analytical narrative. We performed inductive coding to facilitate the emergence of themes from participants' narratives. We iteratively reassessed coding decisions to improve analytical precision, and we verified trends across interviews, focus groups, and survey results to ensure consistency and enable triangulation.

4. Results

4.1 Students' Experiences: Benefits and Emotional Challenges of EO Instruction

Generally, students in English departments in Saudi Arabia generally had positive attitudes towards EO instruction, despite some reporting feelings of anxiety and reduced confidence in certain learning situations. The survey results showed that most students perceived EO instruction as beneficial for their language development (82.7%) and for future academic or professional opportunities (72.4%). Taken together, these findings suggest that students' responses to EO instruction were characterized by a tension between recognizing English as a valuable academic resource and experiencing emotional constraints when access to their full linguistic repertoire was limited. Thus, students' acceptance of EO should not be interpreted as unconditional support for monolingual practices; rather, it reflected an ongoing negotiation between linguistic development, academic participation, and emotional comfort.

Students across all participating universities described EO instruction as effective for improving their listening (71.3%) and speaking skills (66.1%), as well as for developing their vocabulary and fluency. Conversely, students generally (50.6%) perceived that developing their writing skills required more explicit instruction and structured support that extended beyond EO exposure. The results indicate that students experienced emotional and cognitive challenges associated with EO policy because nearly half of the participants reported neutral levels of comfort (48.5%) and confidence (46.1%) in EO classrooms, and 61 of the 174 (37%) students acknowledged having experienced anxiety when Arabic use was not permitted; see Table 4 for the students' responses to the survey.

Table 4. Students' Perceptions of EO Instruction

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel comfortable participating in EO classrooms	19 (11.5%)	47 (28.5%)	80 (48.5%)	12 (7.3%)	7 (4.2%)
Teaching in English improves my English-language skills	58 (35.2%)	79 (47.9%)	21 (12.7%)	6 (3.6%)	1 (0.6%)
I sometimes feel anxious when I am not allowed to use Arabic	22 (13.3%)	58 (35.2%)	61 (37.0%)	21 (12.7%)	3 (1.8%)
Occasional use of Arabic (code-switching) helps to clarify difficult concepts	46 (27.9%)	74 (44.8%)	41 (24.8%)	3 (1.8%)	1 (0.6%)
My instructors consistently adhere to the EO teaching policy	46 (27.9%)	68 (41.2%)	45 (27.3%)	4 (2.4%)	2 (1.2%)
I view bilingual instructors as effective role models for learning English	61 (37.0%)	75 (45.5%)	26 (15.8%)	2 (1.2%)	1 (0.6%)
EO instruction prepares me better for future academic or professional opportunities	43 (26.1%)	77 (46.7%)	35 (21.2%)	6 (3.6%)	4 (2.4%)
I feel confident expressing my ideas in EO classrooms	17 (10.3%)	45 (27.3%)	76 (46.1%)	20 (12.1%)	7 (4.2%)

The focus group data provided deeper insights into these tensions. Many of the students explained that, even though the mandated use of

English in lectures, presentations, and classroom interactions initially posed difficulties, it gradually became a valuable facilitator of language development as they adapted to academic discourse and became familiar with subject-specific terminology. Several participants noted the need for occasional Arabic support to ensure comprehension; as one student noted, “EO helps me improve my language, but sometimes I feel lost and need Arabic to understand.” Others expressed a fear of misunderstanding key information, particularly in content-heavy courses or during assessments. As one student noted, “EO makes me nervous because I’m afraid of misunderstanding important information,” while another student said “Arabic explanation reduces stress and helps me participate again.”

4.2 Arabic in English Departments: A Resource or a Rival

The analyses of the open-ended survey responses and the focus group discussions showed broad agreement that students viewed Arabic as a pedagogical resource that facilitated learning. The most frequently reported function of Arabic was to clarify difficult or abstract concepts, new vocabulary, and technical or academic terminology. Students considered this function particularly important in grammar, linguistics, translation, and content-heavy courses, in which accurate understanding was essential. They also described Arabic as a form of cognitive and pedagogical scaffolding, particularly for less proficient students and those who were in the early stages of majoring in English. They considered the selective use of Arabic to reduce confusion, support comprehension, and enhance their confidence without undermining their exposure to English. In addition, many responses framed Arabic as essential for contrast analysis because it enabled students to compare grammatical structures, meanings, and cultural nuances between Arabic and English. The students also viewed Arabic as indispensable in translation-focused courses, in which they considered a high level of proficiency in Arabic a prerequisite for accurate, meaningful translations.

At the same time, the students consistently stressed that Arabic should be used in a controlled and purposeful manner. Most of them advocated for a balanced approach in which English remained the dominant medium of instruction, with Arabic being employed strategically when they needed clarifications or comparisons. Only a minority of respondents thought that Arabic had little or no role to play in English departments, or that it should be restricted to exceptional cases. Responses emphasized that Arabic’s pedagogical and psychological value clearly outweighed these views. Overall, the findings suggested that the students did not view Arabic as in competition with English, but rather as an enabling linguistic resource that supported comprehension and learning and boosted their confidence when used selectively.

Taken together, these findings suggest that students’ perspectives on Arabic use within EO contexts were not indicative of resistance to EMI; rather, they reflected a pragmatic approach to bilingual learning. Students appeared to position English as the primary language for academic development while recognizing Arabic as a supportive resource that facilitated comprehension, participation, and confidence. This pattern highlights an ongoing negotiation between institutional expectations of English dominance and students’ need for accessible learning strategies within bilingual classrooms.

4.3 Qualitative Analysis of the Instructors’ Interviews

Of the 21 instructors initially recruited for the study, 10 participated in the semi-structured interviews. The remaining instructors were unable to participate due to time constraints, and their non-participation may represent a potential source of participation bias. However, the participating instructors were drawn from the same six universities included in the student sample, allowing the findings to provide contextually relevant insights into instructors’ experiences and perspectives regarding EO practices in Saudi university English departments. While the possibility that non-participating instructors may have held different perspectives cannot be completely excluded, the interview data offer valuable accounts of how bilingual educators negotiate EO expectations within their academic contexts.

The thematic analysis focused on three main themes:

1. Language-use policy as a negotiated pedagogical practice
2. Bilingual identity and strategic language use
3. Affective and pedagogical consequences of the EO policy

4.3.1. Language-Use Policy as a Negotiated Pedagogical Practice

Many of the instructors highlighted the tension between institutional expectations for EO use and their pedagogical responsibility for ensuring learning. Teacher 3 described this conflict clearly: “When I use English only for the whole term, students’ understanding drops because they don’t understand, and then I’m blamed because everything was in English.” Teacher 9 similarly reflected, “I don’t prefer using Arabic, but because most students are weak, I’m forced to use it.”

Across the 10 interviews, participants described the language-use policy as being non-uniform and context-dependent, rather than as being a strictly enforced policy. Several instructors (Teachers 1, 6, 9, and 10) explicitly reported the absence of a written or clearly articulated institutional language policy. In these contexts, decisions regarding the use of Arabic and English were largely left to the instructor’s discretion. Teacher 10 explicitly stated, “There is no official written language policy in the department. Language use is left to the instructor’s judgment.” Teacher 6 echoed this ambiguity: “There is flexibility, but it is undefined, which creates uncertainty and inconsistency.” Even at institutions that promoted EO use (Teachers 2, 4, and 8), instructors often described enforcement as being “flexible” rather than mandatory. As a result, EO use functioned more as a pedagogical expectation rather than as a binding rule. This ambiguity placed the responsibility for interpreting and operationalizing language use on the instructors. This ambiguity led to confusion among students’ perceptions and expectations. One student commented, “Some teachers use only English and do not allow Arabic, others explain in Arabic

sometimes. We don't know what is allowed."

Another manifestation of policy negotiation can be observed in the evolving patterns of pedagogical practices and teachers' beliefs over time. Many of the instructors reported adopting a strict EO approach early in their careers (Teachers 1, 7, and 9), often based on prior training or a belief in immersion. However, as their teaching experience increased, they became more flexible and responsive to the students' proficiency levels (Teachers 3, 6, and 10). The increased use of simplified English, paraphrasing, visual aids, and structured scaffolding characterized this shift.

4.3.2 Bilingual Identity and the Strategic Use of Arabic

Bilingual identity emerged as a central factor that influenced instructors' language practices. Most of the teachers viewed their bilingualism as a pedagogical asset that enabled them to assist their students more effectively when comprehension barriers occurred (Teachers 4, 7, 8, and 10). All teachers emphasized that their use of Arabic was deliberate and controlled, rather than random. Teacher 4 stated, "Using Arabic is a planned strategy to support learning, not a distraction."

Generally speaking, the instructors reported mainly using Arabic to

1. Clarify complex concepts or terminology, particularly in linguistics or grammar-focused courses (Teachers 4, 7, and 10);
2. Communicate high-stakes information, such as exam instructions or assessment requirements (Teachers 1, 7, and 9); and
3. Support lower-proficiency students, particularly in preparatory or mixed-level classes (Teachers 3, 6, and 9).

Several instructors (Teachers 6, 7, and 10) highlighted the importance of regulating code-switching and emphasized the importance of separating the languages clearly rather than engaging in uncontrolled code-switching. For example, Teacher 10 noted that early and "excessive code-switching can confuse students, so Arabic should be used strategically and clearly separate." While some instructors expressed internal tension when using Arabic, such as viewing it as necessary but ideologically conflicting with the principles of ELT (Teachers 3 and 9), others reported minimal emotional strain and saw Arabic as a legitimate instructional scaffold (Teachers 4 and 8).

4.3.3 Affective and Pedagogical Consequences of an EO Policy

All the instructors acknowledged that EMI significantly impacted classroom interactions and relational dynamics. They widely perceived EO instruction as beneficial for increasing exposure and promoting academic language use (Teachers 2, 6, and 8); however, they also associated it with initial anxiety, silence, or reduced participation, particularly among lower-proficiency students (Teachers 1, 3, and 9). Several instructors reported that strict EO practices initially created emotional or social distance between the teachers and students. For example, Teacher 6 noted that some students became silent rather than risk making mistakes, while Teacher 9 observed that some students hesitated to approach her during office hours when EO communication was enforced.

Over time, when the instructors provided linguistic and emotional support, such as simplifying input, encouraging participation, and occasionally using Arabic, this distance tended to decrease (Teachers 1, 7, and 9). The instructors emphasized that students' confidence and participation improved when the language-use policy was implemented with affective sensitivity. Notably, the instructors cautioned against equating silence with low proficiency. Teachers 2 and 6 highlighted that factors such as shyness, fear of making mistakes, and classroom dynamics also influenced participation. As a result, many instructors adopted low-anxiety strategies, including group work, positive reinforcement, and a tolerance of language errors (Teachers 3, 4, and 7).

Instructors consistently associated limited Arabic use with reduced anxiety and increased engagement, particularly when it related to assessment instructions (Teachers 1, 7, and 9). At the same time, a minority of students preferred strict EO environments and viewed the use of Arabic as decreasing opportunities for practice (Teachers 6 and 10). This pattern illustrated an ongoing tension between immersion and inclusivity. The clarity of the policies and the institutional culture heavily influenced the instructors' emotional and professional experiences of EMI. When instructors perceived policies as clear and supportive, they reported greater confidence in and greater alignment with their teaching philosophy (Teachers 4 and 8). By contrast, policy ambiguity increased instructors' cognitive and pedagogical burdens because they had to justify and regulate their own practices (Teachers 1, 9, and 10).

Despite these challenges, most of the instructors emphasized professional agency. They experienced EMI not as a purely top-down enforcement but as a space that required continuous pedagogical judgment (Teachers 6, 7, and 10). When present, emotional strain was more often linked to students' comprehension and fairness rather than to the instructors' own language competence (Teachers 3 and 9).

Across the 10 interviews, EMI emerged as a dynamic, negotiated practice rather than a uniform instructional model. Evidence from multiple instructors indicated that the following:

1. EMI practices evolved with teaching experience (Teachers 1, 7, and 9),
2. Bilingualism functioned as a pedagogical resource when it was regulated (Teachers 4, 8, and 10),
3. Strict EO instruction may hinder interaction without scaffolding (Teachers 3, 6, and 9),
4. Strategic Arabic use reduced anxiety and supported participation (Teachers 1, 7, and 9), and
5. Policy clarity enhanced teachers' confidence and consistency (Teachers 4 and 8).

Overall, the findings supported a regulated flexibility model of EMI in which English remained the primary medium of instruction while

Arabic was permitted for clearly defined pedagogical purposes. Such an approach appeared to balance language development, equity, and learners' well-being in EFL university contexts.

5. Discussion

The results of this study revealed three interconnected facets of language policy and practice: (1) the implicit characteristics of EO policies in university English departments in the KSA, (2) the impact of these policies on bilingual instructors and students' emotional, professional, and linguistic identities, and (3) the manner in which language-use practices affected classroom interactions and language-learning outcomes. Rather than viewing EO as a fixed institutional policy, this study conceptualizes the policy as a negotiated social practice shaped by institutional expectations, instructors' professional agency, and students' linguistic and affective needs.

We based this study on the premise, supported by the current EMI literature, that English departments in Saudi institutions adhere to an implicit EO ideology in the absence of explicitly documented language policies. The findings confirm this observation. The interview data revealed that instructors perceived the use of English as an institutional expectation despite the absence of an explicit written language use policy in most of the examined institutions, an observation Almoaily and Alnasser (2019) reported and which resulted in self-regulated and uneven practices within English departments. The questionnaire data indicated that most students believed their lecturers consistently adhered to EO protocols. This finding corroborates Louber and Troudi's (2019) assertions that EMI functioned as a *de facto* policy in Saudi higher education.

Beyond confirming the presence of implicit EO practices, the present study extends existing EMI research by conceptualizing EO not merely as a medium-of-instruction preference but as a socially negotiated practice that influences identity construction, emotional experiences, and classroom participation. Previous studies in the Saudi context have largely focused on institutional policy discourse, ideological orientations, or measurable learning outcomes. In contrast, this study adopts a bottom-up perspective by examining how instructors and students experience, interpret, and negotiate EO practices in everyday classroom contexts.

The quantitative results indicated that the student participants predominantly linked EO to enhanced language proficiency and increased academic or career prospects. More than 80% of participants agreed that EO improved their English competence, particularly in listening and speaking. This result corresponds to previous findings in research on EMI and indicates that prolonged exposure to English enhanced receptive and oral language development (Galloway & Rose, 2021; Macaro, 2018). Nonetheless, the relatively diminished motivation shown for writing and translation skills implied that immersion alone may be inadequate for fostering more complex productive competences, thereby substantiating criticisms that EMI frequently emphasized exposure rather than systematic language development (Airey, 2016).

Notwithstanding the advantages of the EO policy, the results indicated considerable emotional and relational difficulties. Almost 50% of the student participants experienced anxiety when the use of Arabic was limited, while a comparably significant number conveyed neutral levels of comfort and confidence in EO classrooms. This finding may reflect a conditional acceptance of EMI rather than apathy. Students recognized the value of EO for language development and future opportunities, yet they also reported linguistic and affective challenges. This result suggests that EO was not rejected but internally negotiated. Such responses may indicate a transitional or hybrid identity because students strategically engaged with English (Norton, 2013), while maintaining a connection to Arabic as a cognitive and emotional resource.

The findings align with Pavlenko (2003) and Zembylas' (2005) assertions that institutional ideologies and power dynamics rather than solely linguistic proficiency influenced emotions in L2 learning contexts. In this context, EO instruction served as both a resource for linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) and a source of emotional restraint, particularly for students with weaker skills or limited prior exposure to EMI.

A primary conclusion of this study pertained to the perceived educational significance of Arabic. Both the quantitative and qualitative data demonstrated robust support for the purposeful use of Arabic as a mechanism for elucidation, scaffolding, and inclusion. More than 70% of the students agreed that intermittent code-switching enhanced their understanding, while qualitative responses highlighted the importance of Arabic for elucidating abstract concepts, assisting with translation tasks, and easing cognitive burden. Notably, student participants did not view Arabic as in competition with English but rather as a supplementary resource when used intentionally and judiciously. This finding corresponded with research on translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014; Li, 2018), in which multilingual behaviors are interpreted as techniques for meaning making rather than as pedagogical deficiencies.

The instructors' interviews elucidated the connection between these behaviors and their bilingual professional identities. The educators consistently described EMI as a negotiated, context-dependent approach that was influenced by students' proficiency, the course content, and their teaching experience. Numerous instructor participants initially implemented strict EO policies, only to subsequently modify these practices in response to classroom dynamics. This developmental trajectory reflected Barkhuizen's (2016) perspective on teachers' identities as dynamically and collaboratively produced, and corroborated Hornberger and Johnson's (2007) assertion that teachers functioned as active agents in the implementation of language policy rather than as passive implementers.

Instructors deliberate and restricted use of Arabic, particularly for critical communication, complex explanations, and emotional support, was evidence of a controlled variant of bilingualism rather than unrestrained code-switching. Some instructors encountered ideological difficulties when using Arabic, while others faced minor controversies and regarded bilingualism as a professional advantage. This

finding corroborated prior studies in the Saudi context (Almusharraf, 2021; Alsaawi & Almulhim, 2024) by illustrating that the bilingual identity was progressively being reconceptualized from being a disadvantage to becoming an educational asset, particularly within English departments historically linked to monolingual English standards. In fact, Alanazi and Curle (2025) reported that some non-native English-speaking instructors resorted to Arabic or relied on bilingual students to explain complex medical terminology. This research may indicate limited adherence to the EO policy. However, the accuracy and effectiveness of such practices warrant further consideration, particularly when instructors themselves may not have sufficient proficiency in Arabic.

Classroom interactions and participation were other noteworthy patterns that emerged from the data. Instructors reported that the students' lack of engagement, silence, and hesitation were frequently the result of strict EO policies, particularly during the early stages of their studies. These findings were consistent with Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice, which emphasized the importance of participation in the development of identity. Regardless of their motivations or aspirations, students' academic identities may be compromised when linguistic constraints restrict their participation. By contrast, students participants' confidence and their interactions increased when the instructors implemented affectively sensitive strategies, such as simplified input, selective Arabic use, and tolerance of errors.

Collectively, the findings suggest that EO instruction is neither inherently restrictive nor inherently beneficial. Rather, its effectiveness depends on how it is implemented, the characteristics of learners, and the surrounding instructional context. The findings support Abdel Latif and Alhamad's (2023) call for more flexible bilingual approaches that balance international academic expectations with local linguistic realities. Accordingly, this study proposes a conceptual understanding of EO implementation as a negotiated bilingual ecology, in which English remains the primary medium of instruction while Arabic is recognized as a legitimate pedagogical and affective resource for clearly defined purposes.

Within this conceptual framework, language policy, teacher agency, learner identity, and classroom interaction are viewed as interconnected processes rather than separate dimensions. Institutional expectations shape instructors' language choices; instructors' professional judgments influence classroom practices; and these practices subsequently affect students' emotional experiences, participation, and linguistic development. Thus, EO policies should be understood not simply as institutional regulations but as dynamic practices continuously negotiated among multiple stakeholders within specific educational contexts.

The conceptual contribution of this study lies in reframing EO practices in Saudi English departments as negotiated bilingual practices rather than fixed monolingual policies. While previous EMI research in Saudi Arabia has primarily examined policy discourse, ideological perspectives, or general educational outcomes, the present study offers a bottom-up account of how EO practices are experienced and negotiated by instructors and students within English departments. In contrast to studies such as Barnawi (2018), which primarily examined EMI through a neoliberal and policy-oriented lens, this study foregrounds the affective, professional, and linguistic dimensions of participants' lived experiences. By integrating perspectives from language policy, translanguaging, identity theory, and communities of practice, the study demonstrates how language choices are intertwined with broader processes of identity formation, emotional engagement, and classroom participation. The findings extend existing EMI scholarship by showing that the effectiveness of EO practices depends not solely on maximizing English exposure but on fostering a balanced linguistic environment that acknowledges the realities of bilingual education. Such an approach enables English to serve as a vehicle for academic and professional development while recognizing students' and instructors' multilingual resources as valuable assets that enhance teaching, learning, and meaningful classroom participation.

6. Conclusion

Our overarching aim in this study was to examine the influence of implicit EO policies on identity, interaction, and learning in university English departments in Saudi Arabia. The results indicated that, although the EO policy was broadly embraced and was linked to linguistic progress, it led to emotional conflicts and limited student involvement in classrooms. These findings illustrate that bilingual educators and learners are not simply passive beneficiaries of a policy; they are proactive negotiators who adjust language use to harmonize learning, identity, and wellbeing.

6.1 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study relied primarily on self-reported data, which may not fully represent actual classroom language practices. Future research could incorporate classroom observations, recorded interactions, or longitudinal approaches to examine how EO and bilingual practices are enacted in real-time classroom contexts. Second, the participant sample included a higher proportion of female participants due to access constraints, reflecting the characteristics of the Saudi higher education context but potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could examine mixed-gender contexts or male-dominated programs to provide comparative perspectives. Finally, this study focused on English departments in six public universities. Further research could extend the investigation to other EMI contexts, including social sciences and professional disciplines, to explore whether similar relationships among language policy, identity, and classroom participation emerge across different academic fields.

6.2 Implications

The findings highlight the need for a pedagogical approach that is responsive to diverse course objectives in English departments and

students' varying proficiency levels. We recommend that teachers adopt flexible strategies that extend beyond strictly monolingual practices, including the judicious use of Arabic, strategic language simplification, and the integration of instructional materials tailored to diverse proficiency levels. Such an approach requires a clearly articulated policy that acknowledges bilingualism as an educational asset and encourages reflective and context-sensitive pedagogical practices. Furthermore, this study highlighted the need for professional development programs to equip instructors with the necessary skills to implement a multilingual policy effectively and adaptively.

Declaration of the Use of AI

The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5.5) solely for language polishing, improving the clarity and readability of selected sections of the manuscript, and translating excerpts from Arabic to English. All translations were carefully reviewed and verified by the authors. The AI tool was not used to generate, interpret, or analyze research data, write the Methods, Results, Discussion, or Conclusion, or generate references. All AI-assisted text was thoroughly reviewed, edited, and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

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Author contributions

Dr. Sarah Nasser Alzeer was responsible for study design. Both authors, Dr. Sarah Nasser Alzeer and Wedad Mohammed Albeyali was responsible for data collection and analysis. Both authors drafted the manuscript and revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. Authors contributed equally to the study.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

This study was reviewed and approved by The Standing Committee for Research Ethics at King Saud University, and was granted approval under the reference number [KSU-HE-25-1105]

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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