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# Attitude of medical students and postgraduate residents at King Faisal University towards teaching medicine in Arabic

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**Abstract Background:** There is urgent need for teaching medicine in Arabic, a process which requires careful planning based on scientific basis. Most literature advocating this come from personal feelings and impressions. There are no reports of medical students' opinions and attitude towards this issue.

**Setting:** The study was conducted in the College of Medicine and Medical Sciences, King Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia, which uses English as the medium of instruction.

**Method:** Medical students and post-graduate residents were selected to answer a self-administered questionnaire which explored their attitude towards the subject.

**Results:** The students showed a positive attitude towards teaching medicine in Arabic, with varying opinions regarding when and how it should be done.

**Conclusion and recommendations:** It was concluded that students and residents welcomed Arabization provided it was approached gradually and with adequate planning. A gradual plan to achieve is out-lined.

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Arabization of medical education is acquiring increasing importance in recent years as the 90's have been labeled "The decade of Arabizing medical education".<sup>1</sup>

Scientific knowledge becomes more effective to a student if taught in his native language.<sup>1,2</sup> A nation's lasting contribution depends on the identification of its distinct cultural and scientific personality. This cannot be achieved unless it has its own science language and scientists.<sup>3</sup>

A subject is easier and quicker to understand in one's own language than in another's language.<sup>1,4</sup> The adoption of Arabic as the language of instruction in medical education will lighten the study for Arab medical students and raise their general educational standard.<sup>5</sup> Then, they can write, read and communicate more effectively in their own language.<sup>6</sup> Currently, because they are taught in English, some Saudi undergraduate medical students shy away from discussion, and prefer to memorize notes instead of reading textbooks and journals. Their teaching in English is slow, and this

hinders their search.<sup>1,7</sup>

Teaching medicine in Arabic will bring Arabian physicians down from their 'ivory tower' and remove the science language barrier between them and their community. This will make them more effective health educators. It will also improve the quality of medical education and research.<sup>1,5</sup>

As far as the authors know, no study has been done to explore the opinion and attitudes of medical students towards this issue. The available literature is largely based on personal impressions and opinions. Sebai and Othman compared medical students' ability to understand and grasp subjects when taught in Arabic as against when taught in English. They found a statistically significant difference as students were more capable of understanding in Arabic.<sup>8</sup>

The general aim of the study was to explore medical students' attitudes towards Arabization of medical education. The objectives were to explore their views on: their capability to write, read, speak and argue in Arabic as compared to the English

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language, the potential negative effects regarding possible decline of their educational standard and isolation from current literature, the use of foreign language as a medium of thinking and its sequelae, and the feasibility of teaching medicine in Arabic.

**Methods** The study was conducted in the King Faisal University, Dammam, Eastern Saudi Arabia. A self-administered questionnaire in the Arabic language was designed. The subjects were male and female medical students randomly selected from four different grades as follows:

- i) First year: these students had completed the College English language course but had not yet begun studying pre-medical subjects.
- ii) Third year: These had not yet acquired enough knowledge and practice of the English language but were, at the same time, required to study major subjects.
- iii) & iv) Six year and Post-graduate students: These are mature students and more knowledgeable in the English language. It was believed that they would define their opinions more accurately.

From the College registers, we selected every second student to answer the questionnaire. The post-graduate residents were mostly from the Departments of Internal Medicine, Family & Community Medicine, and Pediatrics. The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions as follows: differences in the speed of reading and grasping scientific materials in English vs Arabic? When given the option does he/she answer essays in

English or Arabic? How long would it take him/her to write in Arabic or English, material which lasts 3 hours? In which of the two languages is he/she more capable of answering and discussing in orals? Does he/she think that teaching in a foreign language prevents him from or reduces his participation during lectures and/or rounds? Whether he/she believe that he/she understands and grasps faster in Arabic? While answering written or oral examinations does he/she think in Arabic then answers in English or think and answer in English? To him/her would teaching medicine in Arabic isolate the physician from scientific developments, and updates in the field, or weaken the students' standard? Does he/she prefer teaching medicine in Arabic and whether that is feasible? If so, does he/she see it as important to give a parallel course in the English language and for how long? And finally his/her views on whether implementing teaching medicine in Arabic should be immediate, after preparation of staff, or both together. The questionnaire envisaged two categories, viz. for or against Arabization (Table 1).

**Results** A total of 182 students were surveyed, 110 males and 72 females. Table 2 shows their distribution by grade.

Of all the respondents, 146 (80%) said that they saved one-third or more of their time when reading in Arabic compared with English. One hundred and thirty-one (72%) saved one third or more of their time when writing in Arabic. Forty-two (23%) preferred answering in English during written examination, while 136 (75%) believed that they could answer orals and discussions better in Arabic.

*Table 1* - Criteria "For" or "Against" Arabization of Medical Education

Criteria	"For"	"Against"
1. Teaching	Prefers teaching medicine in Arabic, and believes that it is feasible.	Prefers teaching medicine in English and believes that medical education in Arabic is not feasible.
2. Answering	Prefers answering examination questions in Arabic.	Prefers answering examination questions in English.
3. Discussion	Believes that he can answer questions and discuss them better in Arabic.	Believes that he can answer questions and discuss them better in English.
4. Limitation	Believes that teaching in English language limits his contribution in discussions during lectures or clinical rounds.	Does not believe that teaching in English limits his contribution to discussions.
5. Understanding	Believes that he can understand scientific subjects more quickly and more steadily in Arabic.	Believes that he can understand scientific subjects more quickly and steadily in English.
6. Isolation	Does not believe that teaching medicine in Arabic will isolate or hinder him from scientific development and advancement or will weaken his professional standards.	Believes that teaching medicine in Arabic will isolate the physician from scientific development and can weaken students' educational/professional standards.

Only 15 (8%) of them preferred teaching in English language.

**Table 2** - The distribution of the study sample (n=182) according to sex and grade

Age (yrs)	Year in Medical School				Total
	First	Third	Sixth	Postgraduate	
Male (%)	33 (30%)	22 (20%)	36 (32.7%)	19 (17.3%)	110 (100%)
Female (%)	22 (30.5%)	20 (27.8%)	21 (29.2%)	09 (12.5%)	72 (100%)
Total	55 (30.2%)	42 (23.1%)	57 (31.3%)	28 (15.4%)	182 (100%)

**Students who preferred Arabic as a language of medical education:** Of the total students sampled, 128 (70.3%) preferred Arabic as a language of medical education. These constituted 87 (79.1%) of the males and 41 (56.9%) of the females with a statistically significant difference (P value = 0.0007). The numbers and percentages of those who preferred Arabic as a language of medical education in each category of the study sample were as follows: 40 (70.2%) of the sixth year students, 21 (75%) of postgraduates, 39 (74.4%) of first year students, and 25 (59.5%) of third year students. The difference between third year and first year students was statistically significant (P = 0.035).

Of this subset, 120 (94%) believed that they saved half or more of the time when they read, and understood the subject better if it was in Arabic as compared to English text. One hundred and thirteen (88.3%) of them believed that during oral examinations, they were better able to answer and discuss in Arabic as compared to 4 (3.1%) who felt more capable when using the English language; while 9 (7.1%) were indifferent. Ninety-nine (77.3%) said that they were hindered by the English language from active participation in discussions during lectures and ward rounds.

Statistically there was no significant difference between those who thought in Arabic and answered in English, and those who thought and answered in English. Eighty-one of those for Arabization (63.3%) did not think that this would isolate them from scientific developments while 18 (14.1%) feared isolation and 29 (22.6%) gave no opinion. One hundred and fourteen showed no anxiety that their education might be weakened due to teaching

in Arabic; and only 3 (2.3%) had some fears in this regard. The remaining 11 (8.6%) did not show their opinion. Most of the students (93%) believed that English as a regular language course should remain even though medicine is taught in Arabic.

Although more than two-thirds of the studied sample preferred Arabic as a language for medical education, nevertheless the supporters of the idea had their reservations about a hastened implementation. Nearly half of them (48.4%) supported the postponement of implementation until faculty staff had been adequately prepared for this purpose. Forty-two of them (32.8%) believed in simultaneous preparation and implementation, whereas only 24 (18.8%) of them supported immediate implementation without waiting for adequate preparation.

**Students who rejected the idea of Arabization of medical education:** While 26 (14.2%) students had no preference on teaching medicine in English or Arabic, 28 students (15.3%) rejected the idea. These were 11 (10%) of the males and 17 (23.6%) of the females (p = < 0.001). The highest proportion of opponents was among third year students where 9 (21.4%) rejected the idea. They were followed by sixth year students 12 (21.1%), 5 (9.1%) of first year students, and 2 (7.1%) of the postgraduates.

Of the opponents of Arabization, 13 (46.4%) believed that they needed more time for reading in Arabic compared with English. Ten (35.7%) believed that they needed more time to write in Arabic language. One-third said that they were better able to answer and argue in English during oral examinations. The second-third said that they were capable of answering and arguing in Arabic language. For the remaining third, both language were the same.

Twenty-three (82%) of the opponents said that they thought and answered better in English. Eighteen (64.3%) believe that Arabization would isolate physicians from the scientific developments and recent advances in medicine. Twelve (42.9%) believed that Arabization would lead to lowering of scientific standards.

Of opponents of Arabization, 9 (32.1%) maintained that the process was not feasible, 7 (25%) believed that it was. The remaining did not know.

**The feasibility of Arabization:** An overall assessment: Of all the students surveyed, 143 (78.6%) had no doubts about the applicability of Arabization in medical education compared to 13 (7.1%) who believed that it was inapplicable; and 26 (14.3%) who did not know.

The great majority of students 170 (93.4%) believed in the importance of carrying out a study course in the English language, even in the event of Arabization of medical education. This showed their desire and seriousness to have access to international literature. Three quarters of the students believed that the English language should be taught for at least four years of the undergraduate studies, the rest believed that it was adequate to do so during the first two years.

Most of the sampled students urged a cautious approach to the application of the idea. One hundred and ten (60.4%) believed that it should be postponed until faculty staff had been prepared adequately for this purpose, whereas 46 (25.3%) believed that both teaching and preparation should start at once. Only 24 (13.2%) preferred immediate application of the idea.

**Discussion** For the first time medical students expressed their views on the subject of teaching medicine in Arabic. The results clearly support the personal impressions and individual experience documented by others in terms of a quicker understanding of medical students in Arabic,<sup>3</sup> better ability to express themselves and expecting that the educational load on them will be reduced.<sup>5</sup>

No student absolutely supported or rejected the idea of teaching medicine in Arabic. Support was not free of reservations and restrictions, and even rejection was rational.

Over 70% of students preferred Arabic as a language of medical education, most of them being first, sixth year students and postgraduates. This may be attributed to the fact that first year students still had a choice before them and were still at the beginning of their university education; if given the choice they would have preferred the Arabic language. Sixth year students and postgraduates had finished their courses and were more able to choose. However third year students were still half-way through and therefore were incapable of giving specific opinions. Two-thirds of the opponents had no problem in reading, writing and discussing in Arabic and the remaining one-third thought that these difficulties could be

overcome by training.

Study results clearly showed the positive effects of teaching in Arabic, particularly regarding students' capability to read, write and discuss.

Regarding feasibility of Arabization, the results go with the finding of Sebai and Othman<sup>8</sup> and the recommendations of most callers for Arabization.<sup>7</sup> Students preferred a gradual and cautious adoption of Arabic as a medium of instruction. This would prevent isolation, but maintain scientific standards. To achieve this, respondents thought an English language course would enable students to keep up with recent scientific developments.

The seriousness of students regarding Arabization is consistent with that of education experts, therefore, the climate is suitable for planning implementation through:

1. A preparatory phase. This could include study courses curriculum, standardizing terminology, and the establishment of intensive training programs for teachers on scientific technology and teaching in the Arabic language.
2. Due to the importance of enriching the Arabic medical library and training physicians to write in Arabic, we propose the following:
  - a. Written brief scientific dissertation in Arabic should be made pre-requisite for graduation in all Medical Colleges in Arabic countries.
  - b. Universities should encourage writing of scientific theses for postgraduate programs in Arabic, or request students to translate them.
  - c. For promotion of faculty staff of medical colleges, at least one of the papers presented for promotion should be written in Arabic, or translated into Arabic.
3. Utilization of the new computer translation technology in Arabization of medical books and literature.
4. To ensure the implementation of these recommendations, there should be a scientific body for planning and follow-up. This should include experts in the fields of education, linguistics and medical specialities.

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## ملخص

الخلفية:

هنالك حاجة ماسة لتعليم الطب باللغة العربية، ويحتاج ذلك إلى تخطيط دقيق مبني على أسس علمية، ويلحظ أن معظم ما نشر من الدعوة لذلك قائم على أساس الآراء والانطباعات الشخصية، كما لا توجد أية دراسات سابقة استطلعت آراء واتجاهات طلاب الطب حيال ذلك.

المكان:

أجريت هذه الدراسة بكلية الطب والعلوم الطبية بجامعة الملك فيصل بالدمام بالمملكة العربية السعودية، واللغة الإنجليزية هي لغة التدريس بهذه الكلية. خطة الدراسة:

تم اختيار عينة عشوائية من طلبة كلية الطب وأطباء الدراسات العليا بالكلية قاموا بتعبئة استبانة ذاتية تستطلع آراءهم واتجاهاتهم حيال تعليم الطب باللغة العربية.

النتائج:

أظهرت النتائج اتجاهها إيجابيا لدى عموم عينة الدراسة حيال تدريس الطب باللغة العربية على تفاوت بينهم حيال توقيت وطريقة تنفيذ ذلك. الاستنتاجات والتوصيات:

خلصت الدراسة إلى ترحيب معظم العينة بفكرة التعريب مع التأكيد على أهمية التخطيط الكافي ومرحلية التنفيذ، ووضعت ملامح خطة تدريجية لتحقيق ذلك. مفتاح الكلمات:

التعريب، التعليم الطبي: