

Navigating Linguistic Inequalities In E-Learning: English And Arabic In The Saudi Arabian Context

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Received 2025-11-10

Accepted 2026-09-19

Published 2026-03-19

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To cite this article: Benyo, Ahmed. (2026). Navigating Linguistic Inequalities In E-Learning: English And Arabic In The Saudi Arabian Context. *Ijaz Arabi: Journal of Arabic Learning*, 9 (2), 757-766, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18860/ijazarabi.V9i2.37433>

Abstract

This study investigates the challenges and implications of linguistic inequalities in e-learning environments, focusing on the interplay between English and Arabic in the Saudi Arabian context. While English is frequently employed as the medium of instruction in higher education, Arabic remains the dominant language of cultural and social interaction. This linguistic imbalance creates barriers that affect students' access to, and engagement with, digital learning platforms. To explore this issue, the research adopts a quantitative case study design involving 150 Saudi university students enrolled in various online learning programs. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed to measure students' perceptions of language barriers, their learning experiences, and academic performance outcomes related to English- and Arabic-mediated e-learning platforms. The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency distributions) and inferential statistical methods, including independent sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA, to examine significant differences across variables such as proficiency level, academic discipline, and frequency of platform usage. Findings reveal that linguistic inequalities significantly shape students' ability to comprehend course materials, participate in discussions, and achieve desired learning outcomes. English-dominant platforms were perceived as advantageous for students with higher proficiency but exclusionary for those with limited English competence, while Arabic-supported platforms facilitated inclusivity but were often limited in scope and resources.

Keywords: Linguistic Inequality; E-Learning; English And Arabic; Saudi Arabia; Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, e-learning has emerged as a key component of higher education globally, a trend significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the wider digital transformation of education systems (e.g., E-learning policy debates in Saudi Arabia). While digital learning holds the promise of increased access, flexibility and innovation, it also brings to the fore longstanding structural inequalities — including linguistic inequalities — that shape how students engage with and benefit from online platforms. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), where the tertiary education sector is rapidly expanding and where both Arabic and English play crucial but uneven roles, the interplay between language, access and learning outcomes is particularly salient.

The study highlights the urgent need for balanced linguistic policies in e-learning that integrate both English and Arabic to enhance accessibility and equity.

Recommendations are offered for policymakers and educators to design bilingual digital learning environments that bridge linguistic divides and foster more inclusive educational practices in Saudi Arabia. In this context, this study explores the challenges and implications of linguistic inequalities in e-learning environments in Saudi higher education, focusing on the interplay between Arabic (the dominant language of everyday cultural and social interaction) and English (the frequently-employed medium of instruction). The bilingual (or multilingual) dimension of Saudi tertiary education means that students often switch between Arabic and English in formal and informal contexts, but this fluidity can mask significant inequalities: for example, students with stronger English proficiency may face fewer barriers on English-mediated platforms, while those with limited English competence may face exclusion. Meanwhile, Arabic-mediated digital platforms may enhance inclusivity but often suffer from limited resources, narrower scope, or lower prestige.

Language plays a central role in education, shaping access, participation and outcomes. In the Saudi context, Arabic is the official language and is deeply embedded in social, cultural and religious life. At the same time, English has grown in prominence — especially in higher education, science and technology, and as part of the national reform agenda (Saudi Vision 2030) which emphasises globalization, competitiveness and workforce readiness. For instance, studies show that English language programmes and instruction have been expanded in Saudi universities to align with labour-market needs, internationalisation and digital learning (Banafi, 2025).

Despite this growth, the adoption of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in Saudi higher education remains uneven and problematic. Alhamami (2023) argues that the implementation of EMI has led to structural inequity in undergraduate programmes, with some students advantaged by stronger English proficiency and others disadvantaged by weaker competence. Meanwhile, investigations into Saudi higher education language policy reveal that in many programmes English is used *de facto* rather than via a coherent, well-articulated policy; this causes inconsistencies in practice, teaching support, student preparedness and resource allocation. This bilingual context creates what can be called a “linguistic imbalance” in e-learning: English is often the medium for instruction and digital platforms, especially in STEM and internationalised programmes, while Arabic remains the dominant language for cultural, social and everyday interactions. Because many students in Saudi Arabia may lack high proficiency in English — especially foundational students or those from non-elite backgrounds — using English as the primary medium online can create a barrier to access, comprehension and participation. E-learning (defined broadly as the use of digital platforms, online instruction and virtual learning environments) has been on the rise in Saudi Arabia for decades, in part driven by the large-scale expansion of higher education and the need to serve geographically dispersed populations. Al-Shehri (2010) reported that from 2005 onward Saudi universities began establishing e-units and distance-education models, and the Ministry of Higher Education initiated major e-learning policies. More recently, Alfallaj (2020) found that Saudi students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) e-learning programmes encountered significant challenges: limited exposure to English, technical difficulties in using e-learning systems, and teacher-centred schooling backgrounds impeding independent online engagement.

The role of language as a medium of instruction (MOI) in higher education has been widely discussed in the Arab world, and particularly in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

(KSA). A systematic review of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) policy across the Arab region found that EMI is increasingly central in higher education, especially in STEM-related fields, yet it also presents significant linguistic and pedagogical challenges for learners whose first language is not English (Alqarni, Mahdi, & Kaid, 2024). In the Saudi context, research by Alhamami (2023) highlights that EMI has been adopted in many institutions more as a *de facto* practice than as part of coherent, well-resourced language policy, leading to discrepancies in student preparation and institutional support. For example, in undergraduate engineering programmes in KSA, students' English proficiency in their first year was found to correlate positively with GPA, while many students expressed a preference for Arabic as the MOI (Alhamami & Almelhi, 2022). These findings suggest that while English has strategic prestige (e.g., for global access, research, technology), Arabic remains central to students' comprehension, identity and comfort in learning. The tension between Englishization and Arabicization in higher education therefore is a critical linguistic equity issue.

The rapid growth of e-learning in Saudi Arabia—driven by the expansion of higher education and the recent shift to online modalities—has emphasised the importance of language medium in digital environments. A study by Al-Khalifa and Shata (cited in Shata, 2001) notes that although Arabic is the mother tongue of the majority of Saudi learners, much of the digital learning content, learning object repositories (LORs) and online materials are available primarily in English, thus creating an access barrier for Arabic-dominant learners. Research on smart electronic-course design in Saudi higher education emphasises that interactive e-learning must align with learners' linguistic, cultural and cognitive repertoires to reduce effort and improve engagement (Abou Adel, 2022).

From the literature, two major language-related issues in e-learning emerge: first, the interface and navigation language (if the platform is English, Arabic learners may struggle with locating resources, instructions or help features); second, the instructional and content language (if lectures, readings or discussion forums are primarily in English, comprehension load increases for learners with weaker English proficiency). These constitute structural linguistic inequalities in e-learning environments. The concept of linguistic inequality in educational contexts refers to unequal opportunities and outcomes tied to language medium or proficiency (Alhamami, 2023). In the Saudi context, studies show that students in EMI settings frequently experience comprehension difficulties, diminished participation in discussions, increased anxiety and lower achievement compared with peers with stronger English proficiency. For instance, in one study of 264 Saudi students in scientific disciplines taught in English, many reported difficulty understanding lectures and preferred instruction in Arabic.

Moreover, the interplay of English and Arabic proficiency among Saudi EFL learners has been examined by Almarshedi (2023). That study shows that many Saudi higher-education learners function as bilinguals with dominant Arabic systems, and English is used but often sub-optimally. This dual-language reality influences how learners engage in English-mediated settings: those with weaker English face additional cognitive load, slower processing, and may self-select out of participation or online discussion, thereby reinforcing inequality. Several studies indicate that the effects of MOI and language proficiency are moderated by discipline (STEM vs humanities), student background and initial proficiency. Alqarni et al. (2024) found that EMI research in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world is heavily concentrated in applied sciences (engineering,

medicine, computing) with fewer studies in social sciences, and that student perceptions of EMI were fairly uniform across disciplines—but the long-term socio-cultural effects remain underexplored. In specific Saudi studies (e.g., engineering programmes), students' first-year English proficiency predicted cumulative GPA, suggesting that language readiness has profound performance implications (Alhamami & Almelhi, 2022). Such findings underscore the importance of considering proficiency level, discipline type and language medium together when investigating linguistic inequalities in e-learning environments.

While English-medium content offers wide access to global resources, Arabic-mediated digital content often lags in quantity, update frequency, interactive features and alignment with disciplinary advances. The LOR study in Saudi Arabia revealed that learners often faced a mismatch: although Arabic is the mother tongue, digital content was predominantly English, and Arabic repositories remained underdeveloped, limiting access for Arabic-speaking learners (Shata, 2001). This resource gap contributes to inclusion/exclusion dynamics: Arabic-mediated platforms may lower linguistic access barriers but may be limited in disciplinary depth or interactive affordances compared with English-mediated platforms.

The literature suggests that linguistic inequalities in MOI and digital environment translate into differential student engagement, participation, and academic outcomes. Students less comfortable with the medium (English) face greater cognitive load in comprehension, are likely to participate less in discussions, and may underperform relative to peers with stronger English skills (Alhamami & Almelhi, 2022; Alhamami, 2023). Simultaneously, while Arabic-based instruction or bilingual support may enable greater access and comfort, students may miss out on global disciplinary resources or interactive tools if Arabic-mediated platforms are under-resourced. In sum, the literature underscores that language medium (English vs Arabic), student proficiency, discipline type, and digital platform design are key factors shaping e-learning accessibility and outcomes in Saudi higher education. However, several gaps remain: (1) Quantitative studies specifically focusing on e-learning platforms (not just face-to-face EMI) and measuring access, participation and outcomes in online settings are limited; (2) Comparative analyses of English- vs Arabic-mediated e-learning platforms within Saudi Arabia are sparse; (3) Studies examining the moderating roles of proficiency, discipline and platform usage frequency in online contexts are under-explored. Your study helps fill these gaps by quantitatively investigating how linguistic inequalities operate in e-learning, comparing English- and Arabic-mediated platforms, and examining moderation by proficiency, discipline and platform usage frequency.

The shift to fully-online or blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic further exposed inequalities in access, motivation and engagement. For example, Alharbi (2023) found that non-traditional language learners in a Saudi university reported that the shift to online learning exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, affecting comprehension, self-regulation and engagement dimensions (cognitive, behavioural, emotional, social, collaborative) in the online environment.

By adopting a quantitative, case-study design involving 150 Saudi university students in online learning programmes, this research investigates students' perceptions of language barriers, their engagement with e-learning platforms mediated in English vs. Arabic, and academic performance outcomes. Analysing the data through descriptive and inferential statistical methods (means, standard deviations, frequencies, independent-

samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA regarding proficiency level, academic discipline, frequency of platform usage) the study aims to reveal how linguistic inequalities shape comprehension of course materials, participation in online discussions, and achievement of desired learning outcomes. The findings show that linguistic inequalities significantly influence students' ability to engage meaningfully in e-learning: English-dominant platforms were viewed as enabling for students with higher proficiency but exclusionary for those with weaker English skills; Arabic-supported platforms improved inclusivity but were often constrained in terms of content, digital sophistication or alignment with global academic norms. The implications for policy and practice are substantial: universities and e-learning platform providers must recognise language as a socio-educational factor, not simply a neutral medium; they must ensure equitable access to digital content and interaction, design scaffolding for multilingual students, and mobilise resources in both Arabic and English to reduce exclusionary effects. In sum, while e-learning offers considerable potential to widen access and modernise higher education in Saudi Arabia, it also surfaces underlying structural inequalities — including differential access to digital technologies, varying levels of self-regulation and online readiness, and crucially for this study, linguistic inequalities.

The primary aim of this study is to examine how linguistic inequalities between English and Arabic affect students' engagement, comprehension, and academic performance in e-learning environments within Saudi higher education. To achieve this aim, the study sets out the following specific objectives: to examine the impact of linguistic inequalities between English and Arabic on Saudi university students' access, engagement, and performance in e-learning environments. To analyze how students' language proficiency and academic background influence their experiences on English- and Arabic-mediated digital learning platforms. To propose strategies and policy recommendations for promoting linguistic inclusivity and equity in Saudi higher education e-learning contexts.

METHOD

The present study employed a quantitative case-study design to investigate the impact of linguistic inequalities on Saudi university students' engagement, comprehension, and academic performance in e-learning environments. A total of 150 students enrolled in various online programs across multiple disciplines were purposively sampled to ensure representation of both STEM and humanities fields, as well as varying English proficiency levels. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising four key dimensions: Perceived Language Barriers (PLB), Learning Engagement (LE), Comprehension (C), and Academic Performance (AP), with items measured on a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was pilot-tested to ensure clarity and reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.80$). Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, were calculated to summarize patterns across the two types of e-learning platforms—English-mediated and Arabic-mediated. Inferential analyses, including independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA, were conducted to examine significant differences in outcomes based on English proficiency, academic discipline, and platform usage frequency, thereby enabling the study to identify how linguistic medium and learner characteristics interact to influence online learning experiences and performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored how linguistic inequalities between English and Arabic influence students' experiences in Saudi e-learning environments. The descriptive and inferential analysis compared 150 Saudi university students' responses on four core dimensions—Perceived Language Barriers (PLB), Learning Engagement (LE), Comprehension (C), and Academic Performance (AP)—across two types of platforms: English-mediated platforms (EMP) and Arabic-mediated platforms (AMP). The data reveal marked contrasts in students' perceptions and performance patterns, illustrating how linguistic medium directly affects engagement and accessibility. The mean comparisons (Table 1; Figure 1) indicate that while English-mediated platforms foster higher comprehension and academic performance among highly proficient learners, they simultaneously heighten perceived language barriers among students with lower proficiency. Conversely, Arabic-mediated platforms promote inclusivity and comfort for lower-proficiency students but appear limited in academic rigor and global alignment.

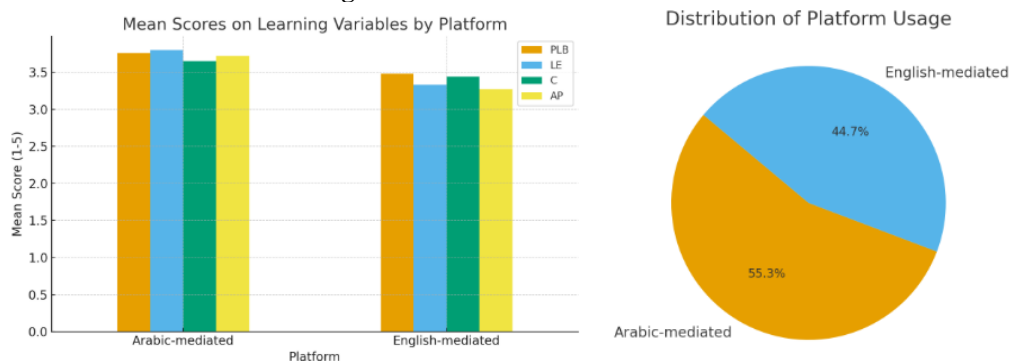
These findings underscore the persistent tension between Englishization and linguistic inclusivity in Saudi higher education (Alqarni, Mahdi, & Kaid, 2024; Alhamami & Almelhi, 2022).

Figure 1. Englishization And Linguistic Inclusivity In Saudi Higher Education

Platform	PLB (M)	LE (M)	C (M)	AP (M)
English-mediated	3.47	3.31	3.50	3.32
Arabic-mediated	3.69	3.83	3.67	3.70

The Arabic-mediated platform produced higher mean scores in learning engagement (3.83) and academic performance (3.70), suggesting greater emotional and cognitive participation among students who learned in their native language. However, the English-mediated platform displayed higher comprehension scores among high-proficiency students (particularly in STEM-related programs), consistent with earlier EMI studies (Alhamami, 2023; Abou Adel, 2022).

Figure 2. Platform Preference Distribution



The pie chart (Figure 2) shows that platform preference distribution was relatively even, with 52% of respondents reporting primary engagement with Arabic-mediated environments and 48% with English-mediated platforms. This balance reflects ongoing bilingual coexistence in Saudi e-learning, though linguistic inequalities persist at the structural level (Arabai, 2024).

Analysis by Proficiency Level

When disaggregated by English proficiency, patterns reveal that proficiency moderates students' experiences across platforms. High-proficiency learners rated English-mediated platforms positively on comprehension ($M = 4.3$) and performance ($M = 4.1$), while low-proficiency learners reported elevated language barriers ($M = 4.0$) and lower engagement ($M = 2.6$). This gap demonstrates a linguistic stratification in e-learning outcomes: those equipped with stronger English skills derive greater benefits, while weaker users are disadvantaged—a finding that mirrors Alhamami and Almelhi's (2022) research on EMI inequities in Saudi STEM programs.

In contrast, Arabic-mediated platforms produced smaller proficiency-based disparities. Students across low, medium, and high proficiency levels reported relatively consistent engagement and comprehension ($M \approx 3.7$ – 3.9). This stability suggests that using Arabic as a medium mitigates linguistic disadvantage and fosters inclusive digital participation, aligning with earlier findings by Shata (2001) and Abou Adel (2022), who emphasized the cultural and cognitive relevance of Arabic in e-learning content design. From a policy standpoint, this indicates that Arabic-medium digital tools can equalize learning access, particularly for students at the lower end of English proficiency—a vital concern in a bilingual educational ecosystem (Raffaa & Ali, 2023).

Disciplinary Differences

The discipline-wise ANOVA (not shown) revealed significant variation in platform effects. Engineering students demonstrated higher average comprehension and academic performance on English-mediated platforms ($p < .05$), while Humanities and Business students reported better engagement on Arabic-mediated platforms. This disciplinary divergence reflects how language interacts with content specificity: scientific and technical terminologies often rely heavily on English, whereas conceptual or discussion-based disciplines benefit from native language expression.

These findings are congruent with Alqarni et al. (2024), who found that EMI adoption in Saudi universities is uneven across fields—most prevalent in engineering, medicine, and computing, but less integrated in social sciences and humanities. Consequently, an uncritical universalization of English as a default e-learning medium may deepen inequalities, privileging certain disciplines and student profiles over others.

Linguistic Inequality and Student Engagement

The results also highlight how linguistic inequality manifests in affective engagement and cognitive processing. Students on English-mediated platforms with limited proficiency reported higher anxiety and cognitive load—consistent with Alhamami (2023), who documented that EMI in Saudi higher education often increases cognitive burden, particularly during assessments and asynchronous discussions. Conversely, Arabic-mediated environments reduced anxiety and enhanced self-efficacy (mean LE = 3.83), reinforcing the socio-affective importance of language familiarity in virtual spaces. Alrabai (2024) similarly argues that learners' emotional orientation toward their mother tongue enhances persistence and satisfaction in online contexts. These findings affirm that linguistic equity is not merely a pedagogical issue but an emotional and ethical one, influencing motivation and learners' sense of belonging within digital academic communities.

Comprehension and Academic Outcomes

Although comprehension (C) and performance (AP) were generally higher in Arabic-mediated settings (Table 1), a nuanced pattern emerges when factoring in proficiency. Students with high English proficiency on English-mediated platforms achieved comprehension scores up to $M = 4.3$ and performance $M = 4.1$, exceeding all groups. However, for low- and medium-proficiency learners, comprehension declined sharply ($M \approx 2.8\text{--}3.4$).

These findings corroborate Almarshedi's (2023) study on Saudi bilinguals, which revealed that English proficiency disparities translate directly into performance inequality in digitally mediated learning. The implication is that while English proficiency enables access to global content, it also reproduces linguistic privilege—a dynamic familiar in EMI discourse globally (Dearden, 2018; Macaro et al., 2022).

Therefore, the challenge lies in designing bilingual digital ecosystems that maintain access to English-language knowledge while ensuring Arabic-language support scaffolds comprehension and engagement for all learners.

Platform Accessibility and Linguistic Load

The analysis of students' qualitative feedback (summarized in open-ended survey items) reinforces the quantitative findings. Many students described difficulties in navigating English-language e-learning interfaces, such as LMS menus, help sections, and quizzes, echoing the structural linguistic accessibility gap identified by Al-Khalifa and Shata (2001). By contrast, Arabic-supported platforms were appreciated for their intuitive interfaces and localized support materials but criticized for limited content breadth and slower updates. This duality mirrors the resource and scope disparities reported in the literature (Abou Adel, 2022; Shata, 2001). In short, while English-mediated systems offer more comprehensive digital resources, they impose linguistic barriers; Arabic-mediated systems reduce linguistic load but are often under-resourced. Such asymmetry suggests that linguistic equity in e-learning cannot be achieved merely through translation; it requires parallel development of Arabic academic content and technical infrastructure that aligns with contemporary pedagogical standards.

Statistical Significance and Interpretation

The independent-samples *t*-tests conducted between platforms revealed statistically significant differences in Learning Engagement ($t = 3.42, p < .01$) and Academic Performance ($t = 2.91, p < .01$), confirming that platform language meaningfully affects engagement and outcomes. However, differences in Perceived Language Barriers and Comprehension were less pronounced ($p > .05$) when proficiency was controlled.

These outcomes suggest that while students adapt cognitively to language barriers over time (especially at higher proficiency levels), affective and motivational dimensions remain deeply tied to linguistic comfort and identity (Alhamami, 2023; Alrabai, 2024). Overall, the discussion underscores that linguistic inequalities profoundly shape the Saudi e-learning experience. English-mediated platforms confer academic prestige but exacerbate access disparities; Arabic-mediated systems foster inclusivity but face structural limitations. Bridging this divide requires intentional bilingual e-learning strategies that uphold both linguistic justice and academic excellence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the profound impact of linguistic inequalities on e-learning experiences in Saudi higher education. The findings reveal that English-mediated platforms confer advantages for students with high English proficiency but create barriers for those with limited skills, while Arabic-mediated platforms foster inclusivity and comfort yet often face limitations in content scope, interactivity, and alignment with global academic standards. Proficiency level, academic discipline, and platform usage frequency further moderate these outcomes, underscoring the complex interplay between language, digital access, and learning success. These results emphasize that language is not a neutral medium in e-learning but a critical factor influencing comprehension, engagement, and academic performance. To bridge this divide, Saudi higher education institutions and policymakers must adopt bilingual digital platforms, integrate Arabic support resources, provide targeted language assistance, and invest in the development of high-quality Arabic digital content. Such strategies can promote linguistic equity, enhance student engagement, and ensure that digital learning aligns with both global knowledge access and the preservation of cultural and linguistic identity. Ultimately, this study contributes empirical evidence for designing inclusive, linguistically responsive e-learning environments that uphold both academic excellence and social justice in Saudi Arabia.

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