

# Sociolinguistics and Promotion of English Language Education in the Middle East

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**Abstract:** On a daily basis, individuals tend to make inferences about how language is used and how the users of these languages are able to communicate their norms, values, geographical regions, belief systems etc. These attitudes towards specific languages and the people who speak them can be positive or negative. Keeping in view the negative attitudes in the Middle Eastern countries towards English language, there is a need for assessing this area. The present study used a survey research design with a sample size of 50 sociolinguists. Data collection was done using a survey questionnaire. Bar charts and graphs were used for data analysis. The results showed that English language should be promoted for fostering cultural awareness, for promotion socioeconomic development, promoting peace with the western world and for initiating technological advancements and advanced levels of knowledge sharing with the western worlds.

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistics, Middle East, English Language Education.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language education has been an integral and significant phenomenon in the modern times. Responding to the evolving and changing personal and professional education needs of individuals has forced countries to promote education. Also, people have been themselves driven by the desire to pursue learning of foreign languages. There are a number of reasons for which foreign language education is pursued including the need to qualify for studying abroad, to communicate with people from other countries, to increase one's prospects for good jobs etc. In order to gain an understanding of the phenomenon, a higher level of knowledge of the process of language acquisition, the importance of foreign language, analysis and assessment of the methods and techniques and other related measures have been important in the domain of sociolinguistics. In the present research article, the current standing, positioning and significance of foreign language education will be assessed and determined in relevance to the promotion of English education in the Middle East.

Broadly speaking, there are two core goals behind the need of teaching and using foreign language education. The first is the need to help students in gaining and understanding of the formal components and properties of foreign languages. Secondly, to help them in using the language in communicative situations. It is critical to note that verbal communications fall within the realm of sociolinguistics. For this reason, understanding the relationship and association between the two domains is of extreme importance (McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008; Phillipson & SKUTNABB-KANGAS, 1996).

The current approaches being used in foreign language education encompass a thorough and detailed understanding of sociocultural theory as well as sociolinguistics. The research on English language teaching is increasing rapidly. One integral segment of this research is understanding the relationship between ELT and the manner in which English language is being used around the world. A number of schools of thought exist in using English language. Research has shown that the emergence of these multiple schools of thought can be explained via the wide range of communication measures and strategies that have emerged as a result of the interaction among individuals who believe in different genres and perspectives of English language (Bolton, 2000; Pennycook, 2014).

### ***Significance of the Research***

Considering the global status of English language, providing training to teachers and promoting its usage in academic and business circles is quite obvious. The core viewpoint adopted for the present investigation is that English is a global and

worldwide language and that there is a need for developing educational and political policies in the Middle East keeping in view the international status of English. Furthermore, there is a need for conducting observational as well as experimental investigations in this area. In addition, the role of sociolinguistics in promoting the adoption and understanding of English language needs to be explored in the context of the Middle East.

### ***Problem Statement***

As it is evident that understanding and being able to use English language is important, there is a need for analyzing and understanding the importance of English language education in the Middle East. Research has shown that English language education in the Middle East has not been well-received among the extremist and hard minded segments. In the gulf region, it is quite common to find themes running in the headlines of newspapers in relevance to English language. The slogan is “Cultural Identity is in Danger” is quite common among newspapers and media outlets that are against the promotion of English language (Khamis, 2013). There are also those who believe that English should be eliminated completely as it is bringing modern western values into the Middle East which is a threat to the Arab world. It is evident that these ideas and perspectives have been a challenge in the promotion of English language. Also, the field of sociolinguistics has not advanced in a rapid manner in the Middle East. The lack of commitment and support from academic circles is another reason behind the poor adoption of English language education. It is also important to understand that the Middle Eastern countries are not well-known for providing quality education. The lack of educational promotion, inability to integrate English language effectively and other related reasons are pivotal to the significance of the present research. Keeping these problems into focus, the importance of sociolinguistics in promotion of English language education needs to be assessed.

## **2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

- To explore the importance of sociolinguistics and the role of experts in this field for the promotion of English language education in the Middle East
- To identify the barriers that lie in the way of promotion of English language in the Middle East
- To contribute to the research gap in this area in the Middle East

### ***Hypotheses***

- Sociolinguistic experts would identify English language education as being important for academic and research purposes in the Middle East
- Experts would identify extremism and lack of education as being the main barriers to the large scale adoption and integration of English language
- Formal English language education would be identified as being important for socioeconomic development in the Middle East

## **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Defining Sociolinguistics***

Sociolinguistics can be defined as the descriptive study of the effects of the society including the norms, customs and values on the manner in which language is used. Also, it is based on exploring the effects of language use on the entire society (Bygate, Swain & Skehan, 2013; Coleman, 2006). It is critical to note that sociolinguistics tends to explore the effect of society on language and not vice versa. Another definition views sociolinguistics as a field in which experts tend to study language and how the norms and customs in a society tend to impact on the use of language (Norton & Syed, 2003; Khuwaileh & Shourmali, 2000). There are also studies in which sociolinguistics have been focused upon for determining the specific attitudes and cultural norms that impact the adoption of a particular language (Bygate, Swain & Skehan, 2013; Coleman, 2006).

### ***Role of Sociolinguists***

The professionals in this area apply a wide range of approaches and numerous lines of research for understanding how society effects foreign language education and adoption. The issues addressed by these experts include: language variety

and change, variation and style, language and interaction, bilingualism and multiculturalism, language and gender, language and religion etc. The core theoretical features of the field of sociolinguistics and the context in which it is subject to practicing have an impact on the rich social content embedded in foreign language education. Apart from the role of experts in promoting research, an important role played by them is influencing the attitudes towards the use of a foreign language (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008).

### ***Language Attitude***

On a daily basis, individuals tend to make inferences about how language is used and how the users of these languages are able to communicate their norms, values, geographical regions, belief systems etc. (Norton & Syed, 2003; Khuwaileh & Shourmali, 2000). These attitudes towards specific languages and the people who speak them can be positive or negative. One relevant example in this regard is the positive attitude of English language learners in Turkey to have an attractive British accent. In this example, it can be said that the attitude of Turks towards learning British English is positive (Dudley-Evans & St John, 2008; Ricento, 2000). An example showing negative attitudes towards English language is that of countries like Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Bahrain and to some extent Kuwait. Research has provided mixed findings in this area. There are some studies that suggest that the attitudes towards English language education are changing in the Middle East. However, there is also evidence to show that the usage of English language in day to day contexts is not well-received in these countries, especially among the conservative sections of the society. In order to understand the positive and negative attitudes towards foreign languages, it is critical to analyze them in relevance to their cultural contexts (Bygate, Swain & Skehan, 2013; Coleman, 2006).

### ***Language and Culture***

Language is used for the purpose of sharing ideas, needs, experiences and for understanding the world and the people around us. In situations when interactions occur among individuals speaking different languages, a cultural exchange is witnessed. The concept of culture is marked by a wide range of definitions and varieties. Generally speaking, culture encompasses daily lifestyles, religions, values and traditions. Also, the concept of culture varies in accordance with the communication styles, norms, values and attitudes. When considered from anthropological perspective, culture can be viewed as a system of shared beliefs, traditions, values and behaviors. Sociolinguists, however, tend to offer a more dynamic interpretations of culture and language in relevance to one another. Culture is a concept that is reconstructed in relevance and accordance with knowledge and experiences of individuals.

### ***The Significance of Culture in Acquisition of Foreign Language Education***

The concept of culture in relevance to the acquisition of foreign languages reveals that the perspectives, knowledge and experiences of individuals in terms of their native languages are reconstructed due to the process of exchange of ideas, experiences and knowledge while undergoing the process of learning a new language. Also, students activate their prior knowledge and learning experiences when starting to learn a foreign language and consciously and unconsciously try to make sense of new cultural concepts, perspectives and ideas (Norton & Syed, 2003; Khuwaileh & Shourmali, 2000). This process is helpful in increasing the awareness and understanding of individuals in terms of understanding the foreign languages and cultures. So it can be said that the purpose of learning a foreign language is a means for promoting cultural exchange and tolerance. Another benefit of learning and acquiring new languages is to foster learning processes and paradigms. Studies have shown that acquiring a foreign language, especially English language, is helpful for individuals from a specific country or region to utilize global learning opportunities. There are able to receive and experience numerous benefits in terms of learning and growth (Dudley-Evans & St John, 2008; Ricento, 2000).

### ***Benefits of Promotion of English Language***

English language is classified as a universal language. Almost all cultures of the world have been touched by the language. It has been reported that the developed regions of the world are primarily those who have integrated English language usage in their academic and official systems in one form or the other (Norton & Syed, 2003; Khuwaileh & Shourmali, 2000). There are also a number of research findings that have shown that sociolinguists should promote the adoption of English languages in developing regions for increasing the socioeconomic prospects for these countries. There is also a large amount of evidence in the economic and financial sectors that have shown that adoption of English language results in economic benefits for developing regions primarily due to the increasing levels of business

interactions among foreign investors and local bodies and systems (Norton & Syed, 2003; Khuwaileh & Shourmali, 2000).

It is pivotal to understand that English language is international and it does not necessarily represent a particular culture or system of values. Firstly, the cultural content of English language is not limited to specific cultures. Secondly, the knowledge produced in English language is universal and is an embodiment of universal values and systems. Thirdly, sociolinguists often possess dualistic qualities and knowledge which is helpful for them in terms of their mastery of the local as well as international cultural dynamics and systems (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008). The overarching qualities of sociolinguists as well as teachers serve as a means for motivating students, teachers and other professionals in government and non-government organizations to adopt English language. For countries that have adopted English as their official language, the professionals involved in teaching and researching about the language should have an adequate understanding of the cultural dimensions of the language (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008). It is clear that when using English language, the local and international cultures are often presented when teaching it. This does not mean that one should give up one's own cultural values and adopt the values and norms of western cultures and systems. There are numerous examples of countries which adopted English language but did not holistically adopt the western values and systems. Countries like Germany, China, Japan and others have been learning how to use English language but still they use their own language at a more massive level. Also, they are still true to their norms, customs and ideologies. In addition, these countries have been able to engage in extensive levels of cultural and economic exchange primarily due to the learning of English language (Dudley-Evans & St John, 2008; Ricento, 2000).

The review of literature in terms of sociolinguistics and the need for promoting English language has provided numerous findings. It has been assessed that the benefits of learning this universal language are numerous. Also, the real life examples cited have shown that almost all of the developed regions have adopted this language in one form or the other. The review has also shown that the promotion of a foreign language in a region depends upon the amount of research done in the field by sociolinguists and other language experts including the teachers involved in teaching the language to students.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

##### ***Research Design***

The present study used a survey research design. This design used a questionnaire with specific items and questions aimed at extracting data about a phenomenon. Also, this design helps in the collection of specific and descriptive information. It is often used for assessing thoughts, opinions and feelings.

##### ***Sample***

For the present study, the sample included 50 sociolinguists who had an experience of working in the profession either as a student or teacher. The sample included 39 males and 11 females. Purposive sampling technique was used for sample recruitment and selection.

##### ***Instrument***

Survey instrument was used for data collection. The items were aimed at data collection in relevance to the area being explored. The items focused on assessing the importance of English language promotion in the Middle East, the barriers to the promotion of English language and the importance of promoting large scale adoption of the language.

##### ***Data Analysis***

Bar charts and graphs were used for the purpose of analyzing the data. This form of data analysis allowed for a descriptive analysis of the participant responses.

##### ***Procedure***

The participants were contacted online and the surveys were emailed to them. They were informed about the purpose of the study, the usage of the study and the right of the participants to participate or to refuse participation. They were ensured that their data will remain confidential. Also, the participants were allowed to respond to the survey based on

their convenience. The participants sent the completed surveys back to the researcher. Data analysis was initiated once the surveys had been returned.

## 5. RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

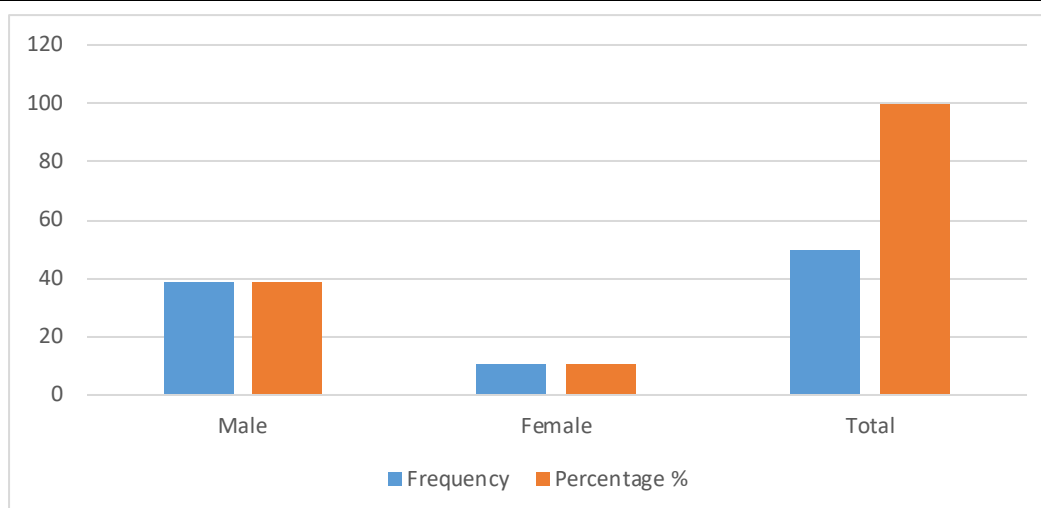
The results and data analysis was performed keeping in view the aims and objectives and the problem in focus. The researcher had conducted the data collection and analysis without exhibiting any form of biases. Below is the data analysis of the present investigation.

1. What is your gender?

a) Male

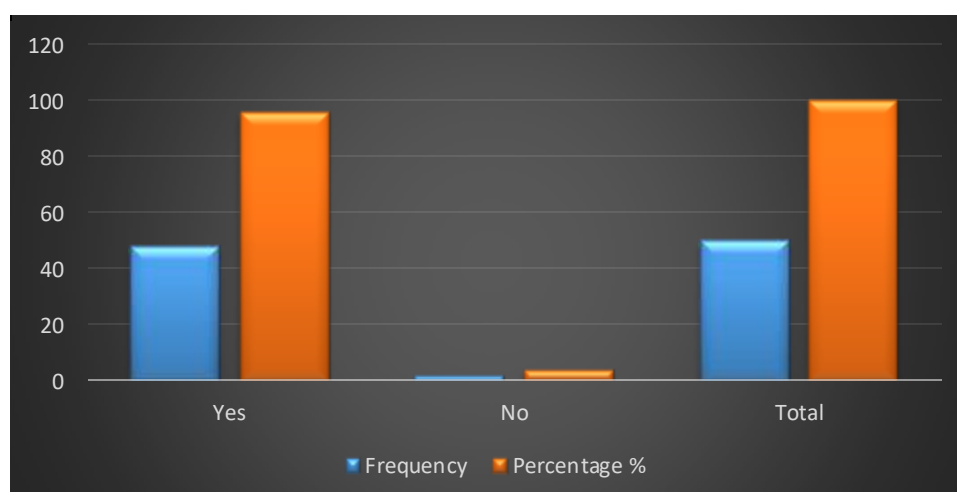
b) Female

Gender	Frequency	Percentage %
Male	39	39
Female	11	11
Total	50	100



2. Do you think that promotion of English language education is needed in the Middle East?

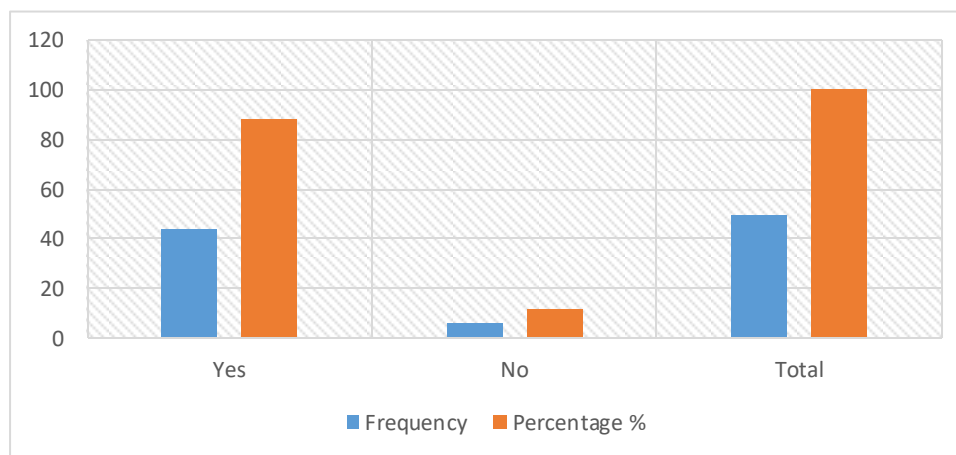
Particular	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	48	96
No	2	4
Total	50	100



A majority of the participants stated that English language needs to be promoted in the Middle East. The responses show that a majority of the sociolinguists understand the importance and criticality in promoting this foreign language. It can also be stated that these professionals have an understanding behind the reasons for promoting the language and the losses that the countries are facing due to the lack of proper English language understanding.

### 3. Are sociolinguists responsible for promotion of a foreign language?

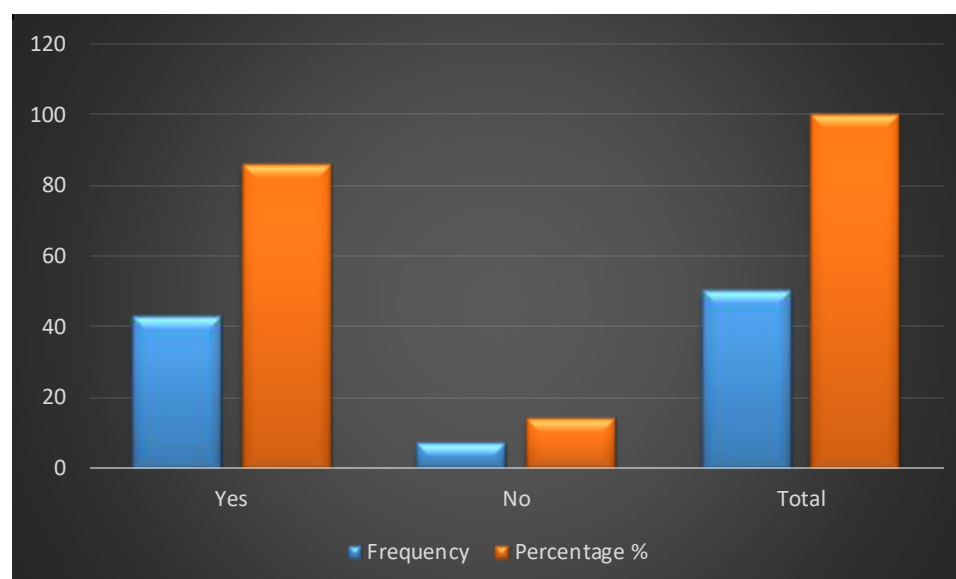
Particular	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	44	88
No	6	12
Total	50	100



A majority of the participants agreed that it is the role of sociolinguists to promote English language education. They need to promote the language at all levels and should encourage students, professionals and others to develop an understanding about it.

### 4. Can promotion of English language education in the Middle East improve the communication skills of students, teachers and other professionals?

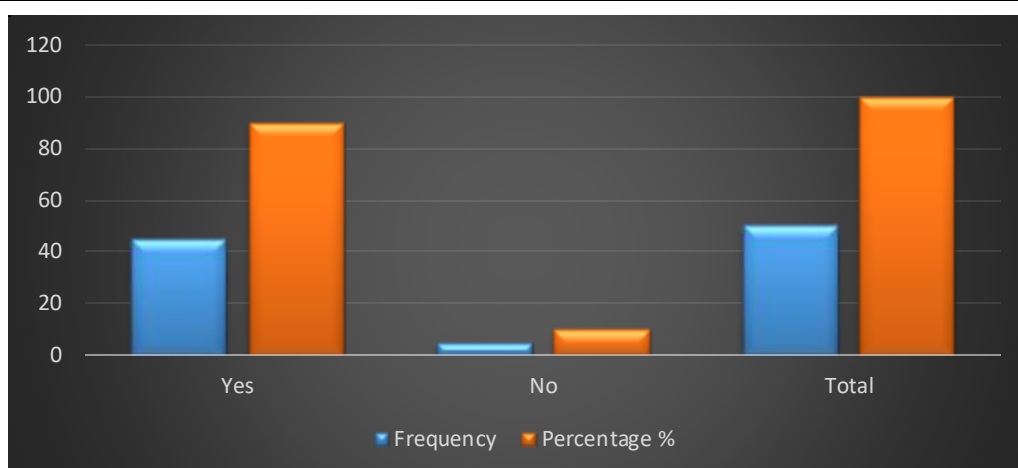
Particular	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	43	86
No	7	14
Total	50	100



86 % of the participants agreed that English language education can help in improving the communication skills of students, teachers and others. It has assessed that these countries have been missing out on a number of opportunities for development in educational and business spheres primarily due to the lack of proper communication. This can be quite devastating and problem keeping in view the rising economic and educational challenges.

5. Is promoting the linguistic and cultural awareness among the Middle Eastern people required for creating harmony and peace with the western world?

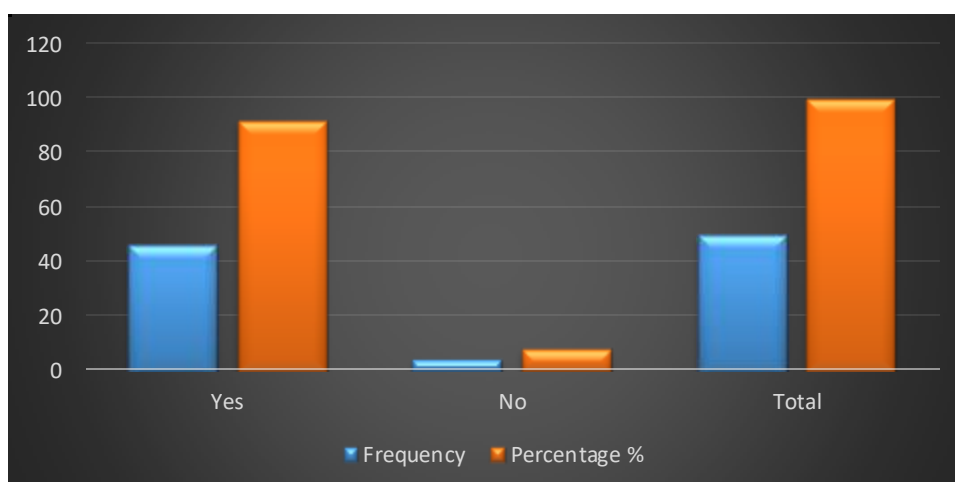
Particular	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	45	90
No	5	10
Total	50	100



90 % of the participants agreed that promotion of English language will help in removing the misconceptions between the gulf and the west and is also going to lead to harmony and peace. The main reason is that English language education and its understanding will allow them to cooperative with one another and to understand each other's opinions, religious beliefs and perspectives. This is going to at least reduce the level of disintegration and intolerance that exists among the societies.

6. Will the Middle East be able to benefit from more knowledge about the modern advancements through learning English language?

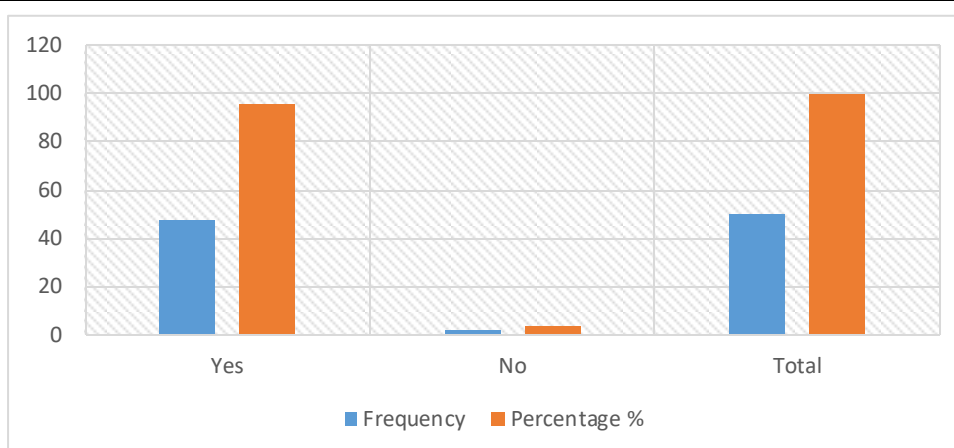
Particular	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	46	92
No	4	8
Total	50	100



92 % of the participants acknowledged the importance of English language education in promoting knowledge sharing and for technological advancements. It shows that by promoting a large scale understanding of English language is going to result in an inflow of western scientific knowledge into the Middle East at a larger level and is also going to lead to a higher level of information exchange. This is going to be quite beneficial for the gulf countries.

7. Is English language learning in the Middle East going to help remove the communication barriers between students and foreign teachers?

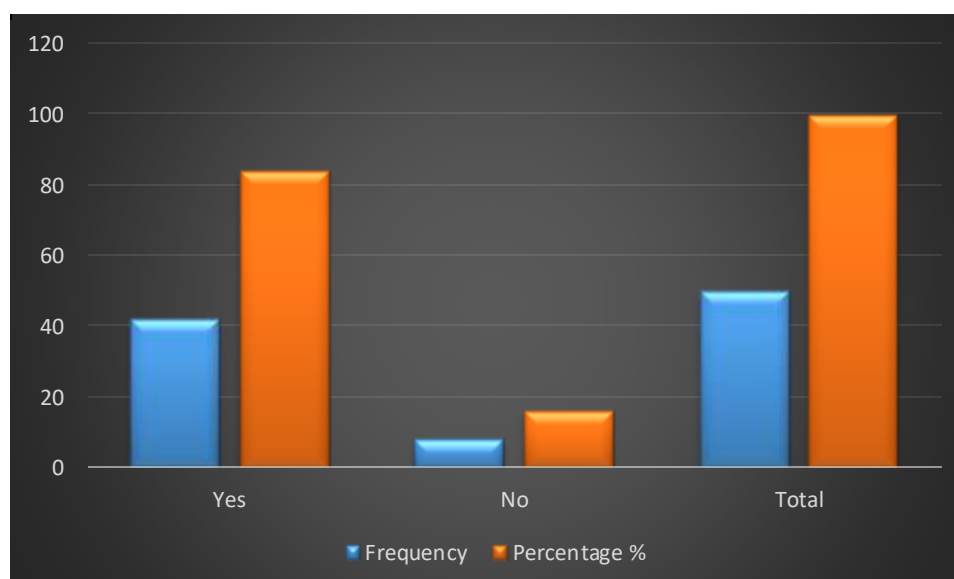
Particular	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	48	96
No	2	4
Total	50	100



96 % of the participants stated that promotion of English language education at a larger level is going to help in removing the barriers to communication that exist among students and teachers. The responses also show that currently there is a problem of lack of communication and understanding between students in the gulf and their foreign teachers who use English language.

8. Do you think that there is going to be a positive cultural impact of promotion of English language in the Middle East?

Particular	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	42	84
No	8	16
Total	50	100

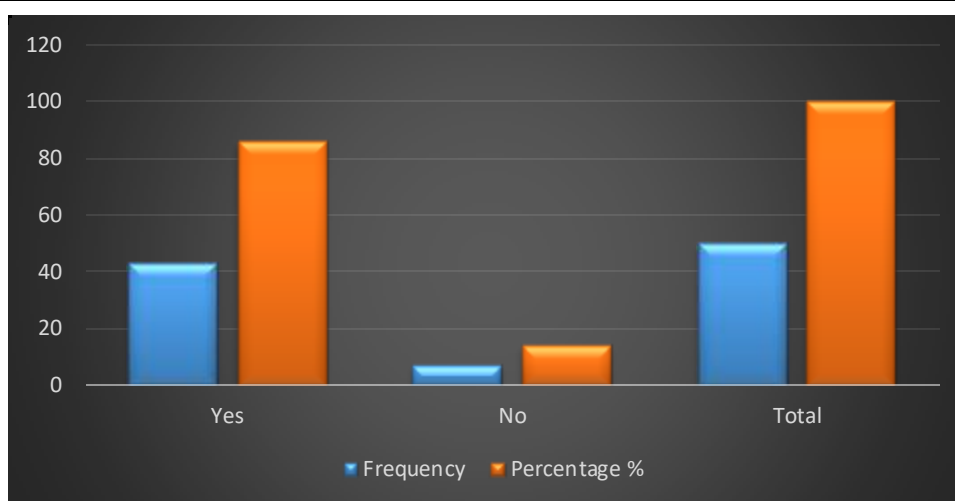




84 % of the respondents stated that promotion of English language is also important for promotion of cultural integration and harmony. This does not necessarily mean that the masses will be corrupted through integration and promotion of English language. The impact is going to be positive shows that it is going to benefit the society as reported by a majority of the sociolinguists who were surveyed in the present study.

9. Is promotion of English language going to increase globalization, economic integration and political engagement with the western world?

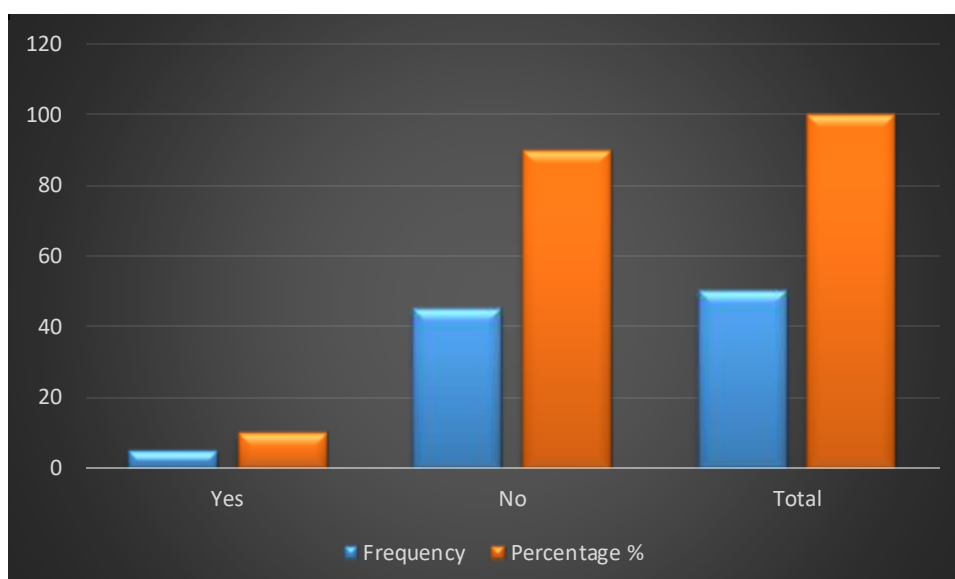
Particular	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	43	86
No	7	14
Total	50	100



86 % of the participants reported in the affirmative. This shows that the majority of the participants agree to the economic, political and social benefits of promotion of English language.

10. Do you think that English language is oppressive and it is going to corrupt the youth through increasing cross-cultural contact?

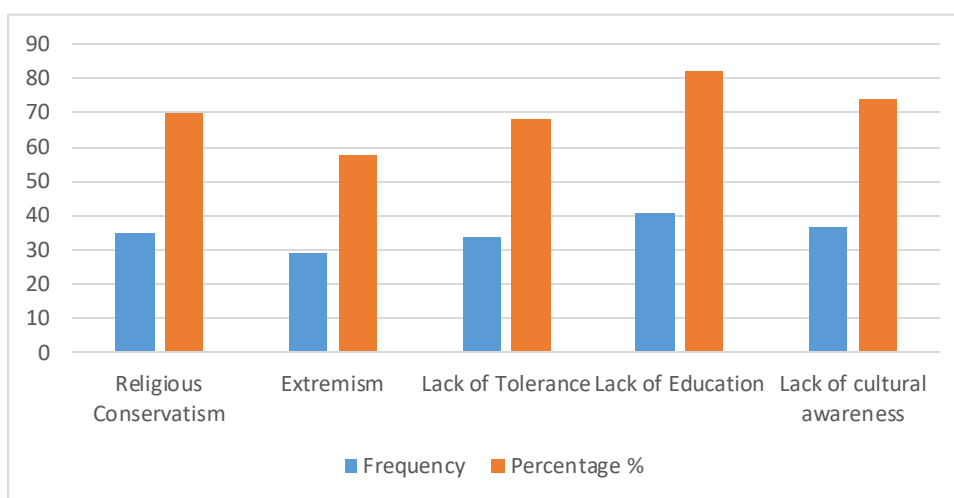
Particular	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	5	10
No	45	90
Total	50	100



90 % of the participants disagreed that English language is oppressive and that it is going to corrupt the youth. This shows that the problem is not so easy and that the blame for the problems being faced by the youth cannot be pinned onto a single cause.

11. Which from below are the barriers towards the promotion and large scale adoption of English Language in the Middle East?

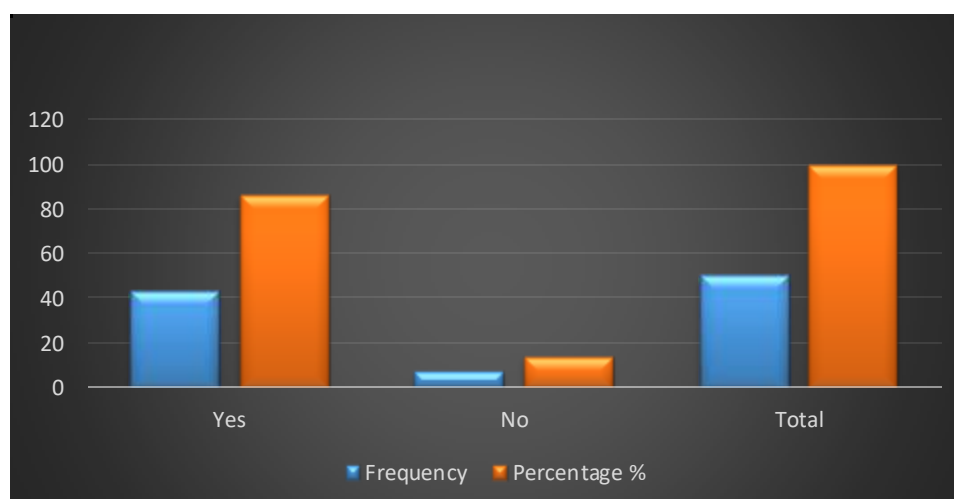
Particular	Frequency	Percentage %
Religious Conservatism	35	70
Extremis m	29	58
Lack of Tolerance	34	68
Lack of Education	41	82
Lack of cultural awareness	37	74



Lack of education, lack of cultural awareness, lack of tolerance, religious conservatism and extremism were identified as major barriers towards the promotion of English language. These barriers need to be removed for promotion of the language and for increasing cross cultural impact. Keeping in view the responses to other questions, it can also be said that these barriers have also limited socioeconomic development and technological advancements in the Middle East.

12. Do the governments in the gulf countries need to pass new legislation and policies for promoting English language?

Particular	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	43	86
No	7	14
Total	50	100



86 % of the participants agreed that there is a need for passing laws and legislation for promotion of the English language and for removing the barriers.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the importance of promotion of English language in the Middle East and the role of sociolinguistics in this regard. Also, the research was aimed to exploring the barriers that have prevented the large scale adoption of the language. The results and analysis of data have provided new insights about the phenomenon being explored. The results of the study have also offered a confirmation of the three hypotheses of the study which are:

- Sociolinguistic experts would identify English language education as being important for academic and research purposes in the Middle East
- Experts would identify extremism and lack of education as being the main barriers to the large scale adoption and integration of English language
- Formal English language education would be identified as being important for socioeconomic development in the Middle East

It has been determined that sociolinguists can play an important and decisive role in promoting the language. There are a number of benefits that can be achieved through this promotion including improved communication skills, globalized knowledge sharing, diffusion of knowledge in educational and business contexts, cross cultural contact, promotion of peace and harmony, more economic integration with the western world, more social and cultural benefits etc. The results are in accordance with a number of previous studies and investigations. The concept of culture in relevance to the acquisition of foreign languages reveals that the perspectives, knowledge and experiences of individuals in terms of their native languages are reconstructed due to the process of exchange of ideas, experiences and knowledge while undergoing the process of learning a new language. Also, students activate their prior knowledge and learning experiences when starting to learn a foreign language and consciously and unconsciously try to make sense of new cultural concepts, perspectives and ideas. This process is helpful in increasing the awareness and understanding of individuals in terms of understanding the foreign languages and cultures.

The responses show that English language is a universal language and that it needs to be adopted to survive in the modern and highly competitive business environment of the world. English language is classified as a universal language. Almost all cultures of the world have been touched by the language. It has been reported that the developed regions of the world are primarily those who have integrated English language usage in their academic and official systems in one form or the other. There are also a number of research findings that have shown that sociolinguists should promote the adoption of English languages in developing regions for increasing the socioeconomic prospects for these countries.

Another important finding is that the adoption of English language is not going to lead to a negative impact. It is also not going to lead to a corruption of the youth and others. Also, adoption of a foreign language does not mean that one should give up one's own culture. These findings have been supported in the previous literature on this area. Studies that have shown that there numerous examples of countries which adopted English language but did not holistically adopt the western values and systems. Countries like Germany, China, Japan and others have been learning how to use English language but still they use their own language at a more massive level.

## 7. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that English language education is a need that has been denied in the Middle East for a long time. Though it is being taught in universities and business spheres, the sociolinguists in the region are of the view that there is not a large scale understanding of the language. It has been determined that promotion of English is needed for fostering socioeconomic development, economic integration, removing the communication gap in terms of knowledge sharing with the west, for promoting of cultural awareness and integration and for other related benefits. The lack of understanding of the language and the resulting lack of diverse economic development also shows that the region is being left behind. The oil boom alone is not going to be enough for future economic success. The promotion of English language is going to be a major determinant of the knowledge, development and advancements in the region. It is recommended that that the

government needs to pass laws and legislation for promoting the language, the media should play its roles, teachers should promote this language, the barriers to adoption should be removed and the gulf countries need to collaborate with the west for promotion of knowledge sharing. Also, sociolinguists need to play a leading role in this regard.

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