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The British Council's role in nourishing the English language teaching industry in the Gulf Cooperation Council region: a visual social semiotic perspective

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ABSTRACT

Although the interlocking of the British Council with wider political and economic activities and interests is well documented in some parts of the world (Pennycook, A. 2017. *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*. New York: Pearson; Phillipson, R. 2017. "Myths and Realities of 'Global' English." *Language Policy* 16 (3): 313–331; Rapatahana, V., and P. Bunce. 2012. *English Language as Hydra: Its Impacts on Non-English Language Cultures*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters), precious little has been written on how the British Council is constructing the reality of the English language as an 'unstoppable juggernaut' (Demont-Heinrich, C. 2007. "The Ideological Construction of the Juggernaut of English: A Critical Analysis of American Prestige Press Coverage of the Globalisation of Language." *Studies in Language and Capitalism* 2: 107–144) in parts of the Arab world. This paper scrutinizes the ways through which the British Council is nourishing the highly acclaimed English Language Teaching industry in the six member Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. This issue will be explored through visual social semiotics analysis of nine videos that were published on the British Council's six websites of the Gulf Cooperation Council member states to promote various courses and programs in the region.

KEYWORDS

English language teaching; the British Council; Gulf Cooperation Council; visual social semiotics

Introduction

In 2018–2019, 791 million people took part in the British Council's various programs worldwide, exceeding a previous figure by 731 million (Annual Report and Accounts 2018–2019, 4). This has been considered as significant progress towards the Council's target of 100 million by 2020, and has led to seven per cent growth in total income to £ 1,250 million (Annual Report and Accounts 2018–2019, 80). For some, such intriguing figures are products of top-down Anglo-American institutionalized efforts of orchestrating the English language (Phillipson 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000; Rapatahana and Bunce 2012). While for others, such figures reflect a bottom-up acceptance of the English language as beneficiary by those at whom the language is promoted to (De

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Swaan 2001; Spolsky 2004; Ferguson 2006). Phillipson (2009), for instance, takes a top-down perspective in considering the spread of the English language. For him, the spread of English is driven mainly by the political and economic interests of English-speaking nations, and purposely provides an advantage to native English speakers while disadvantaging speakers of other languages. Spolsky (2004) and Ferguson (2006), on the other hand, take a bottom-up perspective, arguing that the advantages afforded to native English speakers are not part of an organized policy, but instead are a consequence of the spread of British and American power through colonization and globalization. Nonetheless, such a dichotomization of top-down and bottom-up forces, as Phillipson (2009) notes, is a simplification of the complex processes that shape attitudes to languages in a society. He argues that the global spread of the English language is subject to both the supply and demand and push and pull factors that are manifested in the structures and ideologies of a society.

To that end, this paper aims to examine how the “push and supply” factors influence the “pull and demand” factors. Concretely, it investigates how promoting the English language through institutionalized efforts increases the desire to learn the language. This study focuses on the British Council as one of the linchpins driving the promotion of the English language globally. While the British Council’s association with wider political and economic activities and interests in some parts of the world has been researched thoroughly (Phillipson 2017; Pennycook 2017; Rapatahana and Bunce 2012), there is scant research considering how the British Council underpins the process behind English becoming an “unstoppable juggernaut” (Demont-Heinrich 2007) in parts of the Arab world. Therefore, this study scrutinizes the ways in which the British Council supports the highly acclaimed English Language Teaching (ELT) industry in the six Arab member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia – and sponsors the creation of

moments of desire for the English language; for the identities represented by particular accents and varieties of English; for capital, power, and images that are associated with English; for what is believed to lie beyond the doors that English unlocks. (Motha and Lin 2014, 332)

These issues will be explored through a visual social semiotics analysis of nine videos published on the British Council’s websites for the six GCC member states. Before considering this in more details, this paper begins by giving a historical account of the British Council’s engagement in the GCC region drawing on the Council’s archive published on its Asset Bank.

The British Council’s engagement in the GCC region

The British Council for Relations with Other Countries, which was later abbreviated to the British Council, was founded by the British Foreign Office in 1943, to “conduct cultural propaganda overseas” countering “the detrimental effects of aggressive foreign propaganda upon British interests and prestige” (Taylor 1978, 244). At its inauguration, it was contended:

We are aiming at something more profound than just a smattering of our tongue. Our object is to assist the largest number possible to appreciate fully the glories of our literature, our

contribution to the arts and sciences, and our pre-eminent contribution to political practice. This can be best achieved by promoting the study of our language abroad. (cited in Pennycook 2017, 146)

Yet, the 1940s witnessed a global instability that made it strenuous to achieve the above stated goals. The Second World War mandated the withdrawal of the British Council from almost all European states. "Britain's influence was weakened because of a global financial depression, which reduced living standards, jobs, and trade" (The British Council website). At the same time, "extreme ideologies were gaining influence, with the rise of Communism in Russia, and Fascism in Germany, Italy and Spain" (The British Council website). To a certain extent, this defeated the Council's mission at that time, but not its motives.

An alteration to the plan was needed for the Council to continue functioning as an "army of linguistic missionaries" (Routh 1941, 11). The Council shifted its focus from cultural to educational affairs and from developed to developing countries (Pennycook 2017). The Council's initial focus at this stage was on the Middle East. In the 1950s,

following the discovery of oil, and concern over the dominant influence of the United Arab Republic in the region, this persuaded the Foreign Office to assign the first Persian Gulf Representative, John Muir, who was based in Kuwait and also oversaw Bahrain, Qatar, Muscat and the Trucial States. (British Council History in Kuwait, 4)

Yet, for the GCC region, "the British Council arranged for its educational services to be funded by the host governments, rather than by the Council itself" (British Council History in Kuwait, p. 2). This was facilitated by the "the material wealth of citizens, as such that bursaries and other financial inducements were not required" (British Council History in Kuwait, 4).

According to the British Council History in Bahrain, the declared goals of the Council in the region were: (1) ensuring English remains a language of commercial and technical education, as a result of which, Great Britain remains a viable and popular tourist destination; (2) developing the Council's role as an educational advisory organization by strengthening the relationship with government ministries; and (3) encouraging governments in the region to finance the purchase of British educational expertise (7).

Yet, the Council quickly identified various problems achieving its agenda in the GCC region. In Bahrain, "the Suez crisis of 1956 resulted in tensions rising between the local population and the British residency" (British Council History in Bahrain, 5). This was fueled by "a rise in tension between reformists and traditionalists, further putting pressure on British work in the country" (British Council History in Bahrain, 5). At the same time "a process of Bahrainisation was taking place: foreign government workers were sacked and replaced by (often unqualified) locals" (British Council History in Bahrain, 6). In Kuwait, a major obstacle was that "the government relied on staff from Palestine and Egypt to staff its highly centralized education system" (British Council History in Kuwait, p. 4). Likewise, in Bahrain, "the British relations with the Kuwaiti Government soured after the Suez Crisis as Egypt was very popular in the state and provided technical and professional assistance on a vast scale" (British Council History in Kuwait, p. 4). The Kuwaiti government regarded the Council as "a private school, subject to regulation by the state, whilst the Council hoped for special status to allow it to operate in line with its international standards" (British Council History in Kuwait, p. 4). The tension in Oman was similar, and the "progress was slow, because of its ruler was unenthusiastic about British Council involvement"

(British Council History in Oman, 7). In Saudi Arabia, the Council was “overreached and felt a constraining lack of resources.” As such, “it was hard for Council staff to build up their presence and revenues” (British Council in Saudi Arabia, p. 6). In Qatar, the British Council was reluctant to build up any presence due to a variety of reasons. The first concerned the Emir of Qatar who was identified as “not being enthusiastic about education and the British Embassy in Doha” (British Council History in Qatar, 1). Another barrier was “the large and influential presence of Egyptian teachers who had a senior presence with filling the position of Inspector of English and were keen to hold on to this influence” (British Council History in Qatar, p. 1). During the 1970s, it has been argued, “the Egyptian presence was still suspicious of the Council’s motives and what they saw as an eroding away of control” (British Council History in Qatar, p. 2). Nonetheless, measures were taken by the British Council to make relations with the GCC region work. The focus was on “separating the Council from the British Government and building relationships with the Educational Departments” (British Council History in Bahrain, p. 6). In the 1980s, the Council managed to remain secured in the region through “avoiding drawing negative attention; the Council’s work was deliberately unostentatious and limited to useful activities – teaching, educational advice and supplies and developing an English syllabus” (British Council History in Kuwait, p. 4).

Yet, just as sands shift, many things have changed in the region. Confronted by globalizing flows of capital and labor, starting in the 1990s, the GCC region became integrated into the global economy more quickly than others. A new generation of the region’s rulers has pursued liberal globalization and pushed for the reconstruction of new global citizenship among their nations. Achieving this through adhering to neoliberal ideologies and outward-oriented policies (Kanna 2011). Endeavors to build knowledge-based economies have led to the outsourcing of educational reforms, embracing a secular understanding of the region’s societies, anchored in a positivist framework of global incorporation (Alkhateeb 2015). In tandem with these changes, the region’s citizens have been facing the need to acquire a new linguistic capital; a global English (Alkhateeb 2017). Change, linguistic and otherwise, is inevitable. Still, the specific form it assumes is not inevitable. Demont-Heinrich (2007) argues, “the global rise of English must be critically identified as a particular, socially produced, and not-at-all-natural change” (119).

Methodology

This paper examines the ways through which the British Council is nourishing the highly acclaimed ELT industry in the GCC region through visual social semiotics analysis of 9 videos that were published on the British Council’s websites of the GCC member states. It depends on Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) framework for reading visual images. For Kress and van Leeuwen, just as grammars of language combine in clauses, sentences and texts, “elements of people, place and things are combined in visual statements of greater or lesser complexity” (2006, 1). According to them, in visual statements, “neither power nor its uses has disappeared. It has only become more difficult to locate and trace” (2006, 14). They proposed three descriptive features that simultaneously exist in any visual statement and jointly construct the meaningful whole. These are: (1) representational features which refer to the relationship between visual and verbal modes depicted in a visual statement; (2) interactional features, which refer to the relationships

between the producer and the viewer; and (3) compositional features, which involves aspects related to the layout of the visual statement to determine the extent to which the visual and verbal elements achieve a sense of coherence (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). Following Kress's (2000) views that, "no sign is innocent" (174), Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) anticipated that their descriptive features for reading visual statements provide the basis from which researchers can begin to uncover what ideologies or interests lurk behind semiotic resources.

Data collection

The British Council's websites of the GCC six member states were frequently visited during the period 2018–2019, to identify the videos published, which included their number, durations and subjects. A list of the published videos was assembled (see Table 1). Some of these videos were repeated across the six websites, under similar or different titles (see Appendix 1). Videos were watched more than once with both sound and image, and sometimes without sound to focus on actions; body postures and gazes, in order to recognize customary acts and patterns. Videos were transcribed into written form so that they can be studied further. Transcriptions were detailed and captured the verbal and non-verbal interaction involved in each video. It should be noted here that the data in this study (i.e. the British Council's promotional videos) is limited to 2018–2019 uploaded videos.

Analytical procedure

For each video, the representational features were first examined. This involved identifying the represented participants (i.e. the people depicted in the videos), and identifying the relation between them, which could be realized conceptually through one of three sub-processes. These are: (1) Classificational Processes, which involve bringing different people together in one image, distributing them symmetrically across the space to show that they belong to the same place; (2) Analytical Processes, which involve relating participants in terms of a part-whole structure, in which a concept or entity is defined by showing how it is made up out of which parts; or (3) Symbolic Attributive Processes, which involve defining the meaning or identity of a participant (Carrier) through the participant that represents the meaning or identity itself (Symbolic Attribute) (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). Next, the interactive features were analyzed. This involved examining

Table 1. The British Council videos.

Video's title	Video duration
Video 1: English for Kids and Teens	1 minute and 25 seconds
Video 2: English for Teens (13–17 year olds)	1 minute and 45 seconds
Video 3: Learning Time with Shaun & Timmy	4 minutes and 49 seconds
Video 4: English for Adults – Beginners	0:59 seconds
Video 5: English for University Students	1 minute and 41 seconds
Video 6: English for Study	1 minute and 22 seconds
Video 7: English for the Workplace	1 minute and 31 seconds
Video 8: IELTS	1 minute and 10 seconds
Video 9: APTIS	3 minutes and 6 seconds

the verbal mode of the videos, through which the video makers address viewers by making statements and offers, asking questions, or requiring some kind of action from them. This was followed by examining the visual mode of the videos, through which the video makers employ visual techniques, often with verbal support, to clarify their message functions. Such techniques include: Distance (the distance between the viewer and the characters in the videos which can be identified through gaze); Contact (a particular relation created between viewers and the world inside the video through facial expressions and gestures); and Point of view (the angles the video makers deploy to enhance the viewers' identification and involvement with represented participants) (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). Finally, the compositional features of the videos were studied by looking at two aspects. This first is whether the elements in the videos are placed on the left or on the right, in the center or the margin, or in the upper or lower part of the visual space. The second aspect is modality, which in visual statements can be (a) high naturalistic (images are the same as what is seen in real life), and/or (b) low (images are fictional or cartoon-like). In language, modality appears through modal auxiliaries (e.g. may, will, must), and adjectives (e.g. possible, probable, certain) and adverbs (e.g. possibly, probably, certainly) (Martin and Ringham 2006, 125).

Data analysis

Video 1: English for kids and teens

This video starts with the logo of the British Council and the written message "learning English will give your child a head start," combined with a set of five building blocks on which the words school, career, and university are written, and blended with English alphabet letters. Represented participants in this video are: The British Council's teachers, ESL young learners, and local parents. The conceptual relation between these participants is realized through two different processes. The first is a number of Classificational Processes, through which the ESL young learners and local parents are brought together in one space, distributed symmetrically, to show that they belong to the same place (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). The second is a number of Symbolic Attributive Processes, in which the identity of the ESL learners (as Carriers) is defined through the identity of the British Council's teachers (as Symbolic Attributes). That is, the British Council's teachers are the focal point around which the ESL learners gather. At the very start of the video, a commentator maintains:

Learning English will give your child an early advantage in school and an amazing head start in life. Our courses are designed around the unique way children learn, emphasizing communication and social interaction by encouraging children to talk play and interact with each other in a natural and enjoyable way.

Then, a torrent of testimonies from ESL young learners starts to follow (in Arabic with a subtitle in English):

- Child-1: I enjoy coming here; *it is one of my favorite places.*
- Child-2: I used to have few friends before joining the British Council, but now I have made a lot of friends.
- Child-3: I love my teachers so much.
- Child-4: We have so much fun learning new things every day.

A commentator then addresses the local parents by saying:

Overall, we want to build confidence and work with you; the parents, to keep you up to date on your child's progress.

Next, a local parent joins in advertising the Council as a safe place for his child and maintains (in Arabic with a subtitle in English):

Parent: It is great to feel so involve and to be able to help him learn outside the classroom. And when my son is here, he is in good hands because the kids are always properly cared of.

Remarkably here is that the italicized sentence in the previous exchange is not part of the native Arabic speech; rather it is inserted in the English subtitle provided by the British Council. Such a thing is a repeated feature in other videos and will be examined in the discussion section.

In this video, the viewers cannot see neither the ESL young learners nor the parent as they speak, but only hear their voices. For Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) when represented participants do not make eye contact with viewers as they speak, then they are "offered" to the viewer "as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case" (119). The British Council's teachers and ESL young learners often appear in the same shot and filmed from a horizontal frontal angle, which according to Kress and van Leeuwen tells the following message: "what you see here is part of our world, something we are involved with" (2006, 136). As for the distance, most of the time, ESL young learners are either filmed in a long shot (whole figure with space around it) or very long shot (torso of at least 4–5 people). In these cases, framing implies either "far social distance" or "public distance." At this distance, ESL young learners are no longer portrayed as individuals; rather they are exhibited "impersonally, as strangers with whom we do not need to become acquaintances, as trees in a landscape" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006, 126). Still, at the very end of the video, young learners are filmed from a medium close shot (waist up), waving to viewers, loudly and enthusiastically articulating in one voice: "We love learning English with the British Council."

This video ends with the British Council's slogan: "Teaching English for 80 Years," which is placed at the top of the visual statement, while maps of Asia and Africa are placed at the bottom. This is also the ending scene of the coming video and will be discussed in the coming section.

Video 2: English for teens (13–17-year-old)

This video starts with the verbal message: "learning English will give your child a head start," combined with a set of five building blocks on which the words school, university and career are written and blended with English alphabet letters. Represented participants in this video are: The British Council's teachers, local parents and ESL teen learners. The conceptual relation between them is realized through two processes, which involve, as in the previous video, a number of Classificational Processes and a number of Symbolic Attributive Processes. The former involves distributing the ESL teen learners and local parents symmetrically across the space. While the later involves positing the British

Council's teachers as the focal point around which the ESL teen learners gather. Following the verbal message stated above, the ESL teen learners articulate (in Arabic with a subtitle in English):

- Teen-1: I have been studying with the British Council for 3 years, and I love coming here to see my friends and my *lovely* teachers. I have learned so much and they taught me to be *a lot more* confident.
- Teen-2: I came here because I have already dreamed of going to a university abroad. Now my English is strong enough that I am applying to universities in the USA and the UK.
- Teen-3: I joined the British Council because my school friends studied English here and they *really* enjoyed their time while studying. I wanted to do the same, learn English and have fun. Now I have made *a lot of* friends and we can always practice our English together!
- Teen-4: The British Council online tools and apps are available to everyone and they make learning outside the classroom really fun and easy.
- Teen-5: Now I can practice for my IELTS exam in my own time.

Between the articulations of Teen-1 and Teen-2, a parent appears while walking with his daughter and maintains (in Arabic with a subtitle in English):

- Parent-1: My daughter Houda *has enjoyed it and is* so much better now in speaking and writing. *But it's not just that. She got more confident and seems happier. She made friends. It is amazing.* And now she is preparing for IELTS.

Here also the italicized words/phrases are not part of the native Arabic speech; rather it is inserted in the English subtitle provided by the video makers. Most of the time, represented participants are filmed from a frontal horizontal angle, which leads to a maximum involvement (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). The ESL teen learners are filmed through a very close shot (face or head only), while teachers are filmed through a medium long shot (whole figure). This puts the ESL teen learners in "intimate distance" with the viewers while place the teacher in a "close social distance" with them. Still, similar to Video 1 discussed earlier, in this video, we hear from the ESL teen learners, but we do not see them as they speak. Yet, in 1:18, viewers see a teacher speaking with a direct gaze towards them. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) refer to images in which the represented participants make eye contact with the viewer as "demand" images through which, they symbolically demand something from the viewers. In this case, the teacher's welcoming gestures fill in what exactly she demands: join the Council and learn English. This video ends with the British Council's slogan: "Teaching English for 80 Years," placed at the top of the visual statement, with maps of Asia and Africa placed at the bottom. Let us examine this based on the below diagrammatic representation of the visual space suggested by Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2003).

Top
Ideal
Highly valued
Bottom
The real
Less valued

x The British Council's slogan: "Teaching English for 80 Years"

x Maps of Asia and Africa

Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2003) posit that, to the top section of a visual statement, viewers assign the value “ideal”; while to the bottom section, they assign the value “real.” In this sense, the British Council, represented through its slogan, is portrayed as an ideal and highly valued, while Asia and Africa, represented through their maps, are portrayed as the real and less valued. “Ideal” may mean distant in time, whether “of the past” or “in the future”; an ideal form, “a wish.” “Real” may have the specific meanings “here and now” “empirically so”, and so on. In more concrete terms, the top–bottom distinction relates to ontological judgments. For Kress (2000), the kinds of semiotic materials placed in such distinctions between top–bottom are both culturally shaped and determined by the interest of the maker (179). Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) point out that the top–bottom visual structure creates two realms that exist concurrently, with the top section showing the viewer what “might be” and the bottom section showing the viewer “what is.” In effect, this means the “might be” realm is superior to the “what is” realm, which may serve the video makers’ agenda of promoting and sustaining a culture of dependency.

Video 3: learning time with Shaun & Timmy

In this video, the conceptual relation between represented participants – the British Council’s teachers and administrators, ESL young learners, and parents – is realized through a number of Classification Processes; allocating participants symmetrically across the space to show that they belong to the same place. This video addresses viewers by giving them information about the Council’s activities. Yet, much of the space here is given to the British Council’s teachers and administrators, all white British, to advertise such activities. One can argue that this is an indication of native speakerism, which is “a pervasive ideology within ELT, characterized by the belief that native-speaker teachers represent a Western culture from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology” (Holliday 2006, 385). Many experts on teaching English as a second or foreign language have shown that native speakerism ideology is pedagogically invalid (Kubota 2002; Holliday 2005; Carder 2018). The problem with the native speakerism logic is not only that it places the onus of learning on teachers rather than students but also fosters inequalities. Holliday (2006) maintains that the underlying theme of the native speakerism ideology is the “othering” of students and teachers outside the English-speaking West based on essentialist regional or religious cultural stereotypes, especially when they have difficulty with the specific types of active, collaborative, and self-directed learner-centered teaching and learning techniques that are frequently viewed as superior in the English-speaking West. This, as Holliday (2006) notes, labels non-native speakers of English as “dependent, hierarchical, collectivist, reticent, indirect, passive, docile, lacking in self-esteem, reluctant to challenge authority, easily dominated, undemocratic, or traditional and, in effect, uncritical and unthinking” (386). In effect, the native speakerism logic fosters inequalities between native English-speaking teachers and teachers/students of other languages and different backgrounds, irrespective of their qualifications and abilities. Consequently, non-native English-speaking teachers/students may suffer from impostor syndrome, while native English-speaking teachers may conceal their shortcomings with their professed superiority. In short,

native speakerism contributes to “an Anglo-American monopoly of expertise” (Phillipson 2016, 87).

Whereas, the ESL young learners are filmed standing, setting and playing behind the front scene and are seen from a distance, encouraging viewers to see them in outline – as a type, rather than as individuals (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2003, 146), teachers and administrators are filmed looking directly at the viewers with deliberate gazes, establishing a “demand” imaginary relation with them. In this case, teachers’ and administrators’ enthusiastic facial expressions and gestures fill in what exactly they demand; learn English at young age. Such demand, is strengthened by (1) filming teachers and administrators through a close shot (head and shoulders), which implies a close personal distance; and (2) filming teachers and administrators through a horizontal frontal angle, which suggests: “we are maximally involved with the participants” (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2003, 140). Teachers and administrators argue:

- Director-1: From one of the things that make it really special is that it is a quite unique in the market here. When people come in for the first time, with their kids or parents, they are amazed by the installation we got, the space we have, it kind of purpose built, and the material that we use to teach English, in the way we teach English, really, really, bring into life in a creative way.
- Director-2: At the heart of learning time with Shaun & Timmy, is the philosophy that children learn best when they are playing. Here we create a world of opportunities, for children to play, to develop and without really realizing that they learn a second language ...
- Teacher-1: ... so they learn in a very fun and natural way, because they just listen a lot to English, watch their episodes in English. So they get this very natural, just the way you learn your mother tongue. Children react to Shaun & Timmy in a very impulsive way because I think that they feel the connection between me and then, because sometimes they can see themselves in Timmy.
- Commentator: ... Our lessons are informed by the UK’s early years foundation stage, a world leading methodology based on exploratory play. This unique learning experience exposes children to new words in English, helping them to correct pronunciation early. It is through storytelling that Shaun & Timmy worked their magic. Through each of their exciting stories, the child will encounter the repetition of new language, their brains connecting new knowledge to old through a cumulative process. Our brains are hard wired to store information in a narrative form, which is why the stories of Shaun & Timmy work so well to strengthen neural pathways and to enforce the learning of English in young children. It is ultimately a natural technique that aids memory.

This video ends with a verbal invitation to sign up for free first class.

Video 4: English for adults

This video starts with the written message: “Learning English will help change your life,” combined with two animations for a university and a career suitcase. The represented participants here are: the ESL adult learners and the British Council’s teachers. Both are conceptually related to each other through a number of Symbolic Attributive Processes, in which the identities of the ESL learners (as Carriers) is defined through the professional identity of the British Council’s teachers (as Symbolic Attribute). In other words, teachers

here are the focal point around which adult ESL learners are gathered. This video gives viewers information about the Council's activities by adhering to testimonies from ESL learners (in Arabic with a subtitle in English):

- ESL learner-1: I Just left university, so I came to the British Council to improve my job prospects.
- ESL learner-2: I had to improve my English in order to take the next step in my career, as I *always* wanted to join a multinational company.
- ESL learner-3: The confidence boost has been *incredible* and there are so many career pathways I can choose from.
- ESL learner-4: English create worldwide opportunities. It has given me so many opportunities.

In between students' testimonies, the British Council's teachers stress:

- Teacher-1: Speaking English will help change your life and it's our job to make you realize your dreams. We want to help you learn as much English as you can as fast as you can.
- Teacher-2: ... to build a strong foundation that will help you speak, listen, read and write with confidence.
- Teacher-1: ... Speaking English will help change your life and it's our job to make sure you realize your dreams.

Once again, the italicized words are not part of the native Arabic speech; rather they are inserted in the English subtitle provided by the British Council. Here also, most of the time, the represented participants are filmed from a frontal horizontal angle, which implies a maximum involvement. Yet, on one hand, the social distance between the British Council's teachers and the viewers is captured through a close shot (head and shoulders), which implies a close personal distance, and which is enforced by direct and deliberate gaze. On the other hand, the ESL adult learners are captured from long shots (whole figure with space around them) implying a far social distance and with gazes that seem more accidental than intentional. Similar to the previous videos, this video ends with the British Council's slogan: "Teaching English for 80 Years," placed at the top of the visual statement, while maps of Asia and Africa are placed at the bottom.

Video 5: English for university students

This video starts with the message: "English for students: make the most of your academic studies." The represented participants here are: the ESL adult learners and the British Council's teachers. Both groups are conceptually related to each other through a number of Symbolic Attributive Processes. That is, often here, teachers are the focal point around which learners are bounded. Most of the time, the ESL learners are filmed interacting with each other from a horizontal front angle, either through a very long shot (public distance) or through a long shot (far social distance). In other occasions, the interaction between the British Council's teachers and the ESL learners is filmed through a medium close shot (waist up), which implies a far personal distance. In all cases, no direct contact through gaze is made between the represented participants and viewers. As such, the represented participants, both the ESL learners and the British Council teachers, are "offered" to the viewer impersonally as items of information.

This video gives viewers information about the Council's activities through a commentator who maintains:

If you want to make the most out of life, make sure your English skills are world class with a course from the British Council. As the world's English experts, we can get you closer to the language that will support your studies, online or in one of our many language schools ... And since English is the global language of business, the Internet and culture, your confidence in English is essential to helping you get where you want to be ... Our expert teachers know how to build your confidence in speaking, listening, reading and writing ... wherever you are, we got a solution for you ... we can help get you in the right university, on the path you need for a successful future.

In many occasions in this video, the reading path, which is determined by the movement of the viewer's gaze around a visual statement, focuses on the British Council's teachers, who appear busy encouraging students and instilling their "confidence." In minute 1:12, viewers see an ESL learner in a library, reading a book, without a direct gaze at viewers. While on the bottom left side of the screen the following message is written:

ESL learner-1: English connects me with the things I love, which are music, movies and everything that is entertaining. I need English to enjoy them.

It is worthwhile to examine the above quote through Positioning Theory, which explains, "how people use words (and discourse of all types) to locate themselves and others" (Moghaddam and Harre 2010, 2). Positioning is "a discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines" (Gray and Block 2012, 134). As named by the British Council, the "proficiency student" here, took a certain positional role as a "helpee" who needs the British Council as a "helper" to connect him with English as a lingua emotive; that involves the imaginary of Hollywood, popular music, consumerism and hedonism (Phillipson 2009). Yet, promoting and endorsing such positionality from the side of the British Council, contributes to creating a series of stereotypes within the ELT discourse, that constitutes everything entertaining as Western; a view which carries with it a belief in the superiority of Western cultural practices and the inferiority of local cultural practices. This denies the Council's own definition of itself as "an organization dedicated to cultural exchange [that] looks for areas of common interest, not points of departure" (The British Council Website). This video ends with the Council's logo; four blue dots on a white background symbolize the four countries of the UK; England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Video 6: English for study

This video starts with the question: "what is your dreams?" combined with the two animations of a graduation hat and the planet earth. The represented participants in this video are: the ESL adult learners and the British Council's teachers, both are conceptually related to each other through a number of Classificational Processes. Here, we see the ESL learners and British Council's teachers in movement, walking towards the viewers, making direct eye contacts with them, standing at a public distance, with their full bodies in shot. This implies that viewers would feel engagement. The ESL learner then speak

about their dreams in three languages (Arabic, English and French), while English subtitle is provided as follows:

ESL learner-1:	I have always dreamt of studying in the USA.
ESL learner-2:	Moving to Canada for new start.
ESL learner-3:	and getting the dream job I have always wanted.
ESL learner-4:	playing football for a club in England.
ESL learner-1:	every year million of people take an English test to fulfill their ambitions.
ESL learner-2:	but which test? IELTS helped our dreams come true!
ESL learner-5:	It only took me a few minutes to register online for IELTS.
ESL learner-4:	... and I got 30 hours of free online practice and loads of mock tests.
ESL learner-2:	... books and study guide
ESL learner-5:	... help from IELTS experts in Facebook
ESL learner-2:	... and more apps made it so simple to prepare.
ESL learner-1:	... and the British Council IELTS workshops and video tips cleared my doubts.
ESL learner-4:	the British Council courses have helped me gain the confidence I needed.
ESL learner-1:	... means you can apply to more than 3000 universities and colleges in the USA.
ESL learner-2:	... but also Europe, Canada and New Zealand.
All learners in one voice:	Choose IELTS because your future starts now!

Here, we not only see how the “West is the best” discourse is being constructed, but we also identify the manifestations of the discourse mentality in the minds of GCC locals. Learners’ dreams veer towards the land of the Statue of Liberty, towards the land of the Maple Leaf and towards the land of the English Football League, as verbally articulated by them and visually insinuated by the video makers. IELTS is constructed as the ticket to these “foreign” dreams. One can argue that the video makers attempted to promote ELT in the GCC region using a domino effect, which occurs when a first event is intended to lead to a more significant event, which in turn leads to a more significant event, and so on until the ultimate significant event is attained. Analogously, this video tells its viewers that learning English will lead to passing IELTS, which will lead to going to the West, which will eventually lead to fulfilling dreams and being successful in life. At the conclusion of this video, the sentence “choose IELTS because your future starts now” is displayed at the top of the visual statement, combined with two animations of planet Earth and a graduation hat at the bottom.

Video 7: English for the workplace

This video starts with the British council’s logo combines with the message: “English for business, reach your full potential in your career.” Represented participants here are the local businesswomen/men and the British Council’s teachers. Both are conceptually related to each other through a number of Symbolic Attributive Processes in which the British Council’s teachers are the focal point around which the ESL learners are gathered. Most of the time, the represented participants are filmed from a slightly oblique angle: viewers are not maximally involved with the participant however they are not fully detached. The represented participants are filmed from either medium close shot

(waist up) or very long shot (torso of at least 4–5 people), implying “public distance” and “far personal distance.” Yet, a lot of British-style nodding is deployed here; nodding head back and forth and up and down around three times, at medium speed, as a sign of mutual understanding and agreement. This video tells viewers that learning English in the GCC region is not so much a compelling matter, but mostly an economically advantageous as indicated in one of the on-screen messages: “If your English is good, it is easier to be promoted. So, you communicate with your manager, director and your colleagues” (minute 1:08). English is constructed here as a “hypercollective good” (De Swaan 2001), definable in term of its prevalence and centrality. English’s prevalence is established through referring to the proportion of its speakers, which, according to another on-screen message displayed in minute 0:11 will enable GCC locals to join a single global market: “Thousands of professionals learn business English with us in our global network.” As for English’s centrality, it is established through another on-screen message appeared in minute 0:42, through which the proportion of English’s plurilingual speakers is stated: “We help some of the world’s most prestigious companies improve the English skills of the workforce.”

Video 8: IELTS

This video starts with the question: “where does your future begin?” The represented participants in this video are the ESL adult learners only, who appear individually at the very start of the video. Yet in minute 0:47, they gather to enter the British Council building. In this case, they relate to each other through a Symbolic Attributive Process through which their identities are defined by the British Council’s identity. Most of the time, we see almost the whole figures of the ESL adult learners with space around them, from a slightly oblique angle. From this angle, viewers are not maximally involved with the represented participant, yet not fully detached. The represented participants (i.e. the ESL learners) are shown as like “us,” the learners for whom the video is intended (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). Yet, most of the time, they do not make eye contacts with the viewers and as such become objectified. This video starts by asking viewers a question about their future, and then it moves to answering the question on behalf of the viewers through a commentator who argues in a command voice tone, while an enthusiastic music plays:

It starts with passion, then the ambition (visual affect: the British flag appears), and the instinct to make it happen. It is looking for signs (visual affect: the Canadian flag appears), and getting the support you need (visual affect: the White House appears). The British council will help you realize your potential and let you step into your future. IELTS is more than English language test, it is the first step towards the future you dream of, opening the door for higher education, immigration and job opportunities across the globe. Are you ready to start yours? Choose IELTS with the British Council today.

ELT is constructed here in relation to “opportunities” of higher education, immigration and employment, and for the British Council, IELTS acts as a mediator between these opportunities and GCC locals. Yet, this obscures the reality that English opens doors for the few and closes them for the many (Phillipson 2016). According to the English Proficiency Index (EPI); a global survey that measures English levels in markets around the world, the Middle East is by far the world’s weakest region in English proficiency (see: <https://www.ef.com/wwar/epi/compare/>). In IELTS test results for several past years,

Arabic speakers have placed in the bottom tier of world rankings. This perhaps should have drawn attention to the testing agenda in the region and/or its “native- like” criteria. Instead, it pushed for trainability and yielded a number of laissez-faire projects between the League of Arab States and the British Council, aimed at improving English education and English language skills. This has even opened the door to introducing more English proficiency testing at the organizational levels, which will be discussed in the following section. This video ends with the sentence of “choose IELTS because your future starts now,” at the top of the visual statement, combined with two animations of the planet earth and a graduation hat at the bottom.

Video 9: APTIS – assess English skills

This video is different from all previous examined videos, mainly because of its low modality. The British Council deploys here animations only, to provide information about APTIS; an English language proficiency test. This video starts with the British Council’s logo, APTIS logo and the verbal message: “Welcome to APTIS, a new service from the British Council, designed to help organization, measure how well people understand and use the English language.” This is followed by a relatively detailed presentation that explains what is APTIS, to whom it is intended, what are its benefits and how it works. In this video, contrast is deployed as a powerful visual tool to draw viewer’s attention to APTIS; “the most complete English assessment you can wish for.” Most of the time, the visual elements in this video are placed side by side to create contrast effect. Information is presented through utilizing colorful symbols (red and green) that have high contrast with the background color (white) which makes the subject stand out. Rhetorically, contrast is also deployed to highlight the differences between APTIS and other English language proficiency tests. The video explains that “... . With poor quality test, you can end up putting the wrong people in the course, employing people who are not on the scratch, and risk benchmarking, too low or too high. Poor decisions waste time and money.” In contrast, APTIS “has helped many organizations to make better decisions about recruitment and staff developments ... APTIS is flexible, accessible and accurate.” As it started, this video ends with the British Council’s logo and APTIS logo.

Discussion

The main running themes in all of the examined videos are: (1) learning English is a good thing; (2) The GCC locals need the English language; and (3) the British Council can help the GCC locals learning the English language. The coming lines discuss how each of these themes was visually represented, taking into consideration that the second and third themes are discussed jointly.

Learning English is a good thing

In all the examined videos, the British Council blends between high naturalistic modality (i.e. images are the same of what an eye would see in normal life) and low modality (i.e. images that include fictional or animated items). Modality is “the truth value or credibility of statements about the world” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006, 160). For the British

Council, the credibility of learning English as a good thing is visually constructed through: (1) naturalistic modality that involves real images of a highly dynamic and supportive educational environment; and through (2) low modality that involves a list of animations such as: career suitcase, university logo, horn, bulb light, airplane, an open door, hiring now sign and ribbons. Each one of these animations resembles one of the various discourses that have been constructing the reality of English as the language of opportunities (i.e. English for employment, English as a basic skill, English for mobility, among others). In a Foucauldian sense, the list of animations deployed in the examined videos functions as a “commentary” of the ELT discourse, as such, it gives the British Council “the opportunity to say something other than the text itself, but on condition that it is the text itself which is uttered [re-iterated] and, in some ways, finalized” (Foucault 1969, 221). For Foucault,

the open multiplicity, the fortuitousness, is transferred, by the principle of commentary, from what is liable to be said to the number, the form, the masks and the circumstances of repetition. The novelty lies no longer in what is said, but in its reappearance. (1969, p. 221)

The examined videos then play a role in constructing the reality of the English language as “self-fulfilling prophecy” (De Swaan 2001, 167). That is, the more the story of the benefits of learning the English language is told, the more it appears to viewers to be exactly so.

Rhetorically, the British Council constructs learning English as a good thing through modified subtitles. The italicized words/phrases in the videos’ transcripts, provided in the analysis section, are not part of the native Arabic speech produced by the local ESL learners and parents; rather, they are inserted in the English subtitle provided by the British Council. Mainly, the inserted parts are either adjectives or adverbs. These adjectives and adverbs function as modality markers, which serve to create an imaginary “we” (Martin and Ringham 2006). As if they say, “these are the things we consider true” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006, 155).

The GCC locals need the English language/ the British Council can help the GCC locals

In all of the examined videos, most of the time, the represented participants (i.e. the ESL learners, local parents, the British Council’s teachers and administrators) relate to each other conceptually through two different processes. The first is a number of Classificational Processes in which the ESL learners are distributed symmetrically across the visual space, at equal distance from each other, equal in size, and oriented towards the horizontal and vertical axes in the same way, as if they are species of the same genus (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). The second is a number of Symbolic Attributive Processes, through which the ESL learners (as Carriers) are the participants whose identities are established through the British Council’s teachers’ professional identities (as Symbolic Attribute). That is, the British Council’s teachers are made salient in the visual representations in a way or another. For instance, by being placed as the focal point around which the ESL learners gather. From this multiple analysis we can see that the videos (even when we disregard the interactive and compositional structures which will be discussed in the coming lines) assign power to the British Council’s teachers and

administrators. The videos form and re-legitimized a power structure that places the ESL learners as *helpees*, and accords the British Council's teachers the role of *helpers*. The interactional features of the videos deliver similar forms of representations. Mostly, the ESL learners are represented in offer images, without a direct gaze with viewers, casting their eyes aside. While, at many times, the British Council's teachers and administrators are presented in demand images, having direct gaze with viewers; establishing an imaginary relationship with them. This accords them with direct address and opportunities to express their pedagogical beliefs. They stress on informal interaction, enjoyment and functional communicative approaches for teaching English in the GCC region. "In several ways, not asking why- questions is part of ESL tradition" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, xxii). Pennycook (2017) questioned the communicative orientation towards language teaching in a global context. Contemplating its appropriacy in non-Western communities, he argues, "language is a cultural practice," and for him, in some cultures, silence is a salient feature of conversation; a feature that has been noted in Asian cultures for instance (169). Similarly, for McKay (2003), communicative approaches are culturally influenced methodologies that cannot be assumed to be the best applicable method globally. One can argue here that, when the British Council's teachers and administrators promote their set of language teaching practices as the finest, then such practices lucidly present a particular cultural politics. This makes the English language classroom a battleground over different ways of thinking about and dealing with language (Pennycook 2017, 170).

The choice of distance in the examined videos also suggests a *helpees-helper* relationship between the GCC locals and the British Council. At many times, the ESL learners are captured from long distance. At such distance there is an invisible barrier between the viewer and the object; the object [in this case the ESL learner] is there for viewers contemplation, out of reach, as if on display in a shop window or museum exhibit, as objects of contemplation, not as subjects for the viewers to enter into an imaginary social relation with (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). The British Council's teachers, by contrast, are portrayed as people with whom the viewers should engage more directly, and in a friendly way. The videos represent verbally what has already been represented visually. The ESL learners are positioned as *helpees* who need the British Council to connect them with the English language for gaining different personal, social, and professional benefits (e.g. extracts A, B, C & D).

A. Video 4/ ESL learner-4: the British Council courses have *helped* me gain the confidence I needed.

B. Video 5/ ESL learner-1: English connects me with the things I love, which are music, movies and everything that is entertaining. I *need* English to enjoy them.

C. Video 1/ Child-2: I used to have few friends before joining the British Council, but now I have made a lot of friends.

D. Video 4/ ESL learner-4: English create worldwide opportunities. It has given me so many opportunities.

In turn, the British Council's teachers and administrators are verbally constructed as the *helpers* who can change the lives of the GCC locals (e.g. extracts E, F, G, H & I).

E. Video 4: Speaking English will *help* change your life and it's our job to make sure you realize your dreams.

F. Video 4: We want to *help* you learn as much English as you can as fast as you can.

G. Video 5: We can *help* get you in the right university, on the path you need for a successful future.

H. Video 8: The British council will *help* you realize your potential and let you step into your future.

I. Video 7: We *help* some of the world's most prestigious companies improve the English skills of the workforce.

Gronemeyer (1992) theorized the ideology of helping in relation to the cultural and economic superiority of the West. For her, the helping ideology centers on the rational that the "West as a helper" assist the "Rest as helpees" to find the way towards cultural and economic developments and eventually to modernization, not virtuously, but to achieve economic, political and cultural agendas. This helping ideology has inherited universalism from the idea of the Christian missions (Gronemeyer 1992). And in order to produce a worldwide homogeneity, the West has to undertake the eradication of all that is foreign, to secure the standards of normality. This includes language(s). Help in this sense is no longer about assisting someone in need; rather it is for the sake of overcoming a presumed "deficit" (Gronemeyer 1992). It took many centuries of colonization and hegemonic practices till the "West" managed to convert the "Rest" to the ideology of helping. Apparently, this ideology of helping is not only evident in the British Council's examined videos but is also endorsed and promoted.

Study limitation

By taking a visual social semiotic approach, this study examined the ways in which the British Council is promoting the ELT industry in the GCC region. In this way, the study was intended to be "descriptive," as it explains the *hows* more than it analyzes the *whys*. This is because, to my knowledge, there are no studies that explore the ways in which the British Council is constructing the reality of the English language in the Arab world in general, and in the GCC region in particular. The aim was to initiate a research endeavor to empirically investigate the British Council's motives and agenda in the region. However, this study's descriptive nature leads to two main limitations. The first is that less emphasis is given to the effects of the British Council's promotional videos on viewers. The second is that, depending on Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) descriptive framework, this study did not tackle a number of questions. Chief among them are: how much credence should the reader give to either the claims made by social semiotic scholars about the meanings of particular visual statements, or even to the interpretations given in this study? Can we really claim that viewers of the British Council's videos interpret them in the way in which it was argued in this study? Finding answers to these questions requires further investigation. Hence, with these two limitations in mind, this study should be seen as exploratory, in that it was conducted to form a better understanding of the issue under investigation and not to provide conclusive results. It is anticipated that this study will inspire scholars working in the sociolinguist field to undertake similar

studies so that a more comprehensive picture of the role of the British Council in the region can emerge.

Final remarks

This study concludes that whether the forms of representations uncovered in the British Council's videos are judged to be credible or not is not necessarily a matter of absolute truth. What one social group considers credible may not be considered so by another group. The examined videos both realize and produce social affinity by aligning viewers with certain forms of representations, namely those with which the British Council aligns itself. That is, the examined videos realize what "we" (i.e. The British Council) consider true or untrue. The extent to which the viewers are drawn into this "we" determines whether new values and modes of thinking are established. When enough viewers are drawn in, the popularizing cultural organs will move in to amplify the new forms and transfer them into mainstream culture. This is simply because people do not buy products, but instead buy meanings.

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Notes on contributor

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Appendix 1. List of analyzed videos

The British Council – Qatar

<https://www.britishcouncil.qa/en>

English for Kids and Teens. Last accessed: November 1st 2019

<https://www.britishcouncil.qa/en/english/courses-children>

English for teens (13–17 year olds). Last accessed: February 2nd 2018

<https://www.britishcouncil.qa/en/english/courses-children/teens>

English for study. Last accessed: February 2nd 2018.

<https://www.britishcouncil.qa/en/english/courses-academics>

The British Council – Kuwait

<https://www.britishcouncil.com.kw/en>

English for adults – beginners. Last accessed: February 8th 2018

<https://www.britishcouncil.com.kw/en/english/beginners>

English for university students. Last accessed: February 13th 2018

<https://www.britishcouncil.com.kw/en/english/students>

The British Council – Oman

<https://www.britishcouncil.om/en>

English for university students. Last accessed: February 21st 2018

<https://www.britishcouncil.om/en/english/students>

The British Council – Bahrain

<https://www.britishcouncil.bh/en>

Learning Time with Shaun & Timmy. Last accessed: March 1st 2018

<https://www.britishcouncil.bh/en/english/shaun-timmy>

The British Council UAE

<https://www.britishcouncil.ae/en>

English for workplace. Last accessed: March 4th 2018

<https://www.britishcouncil.ae/en/english/business>

IELTS. Last accessed: March 4th 2018

<https://www.britishcouncil.ae/en/exam/ielts>

British Council Saudi Arabia

<https://www.britishcouncil.sa/en>

Aptis – Assess English Skills. Last accessed: March 4th 2018

<https://www.britishcouncil.sa/en/exam/aptis>