Script: “Stuck Between Two Worlds”

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SoundCloud Rough Cut link: https://soundcloud.com/merna-abdelaziz-sakr/rough-cut-stuck-between-two-worlds/s-0BaNg

This audio documentary aims to shed light on the language issue that Egyptian international school graduates face. Students in International schools enroll to receive high quality education comparable to schools in the West, but these students graduated stuck between two worlds. Living in a bubble with an inability to relate fully to their own people, or speak their native language fluently, this is about the struggle of Egyptian youth.

*Rana Sakr (RS):* “It’s like the school system is working against us... It’s like we’re paying for so-called international education that doesn’t even exist.” (:07)

That was my sister, Rana and you know, maybe we were all scammed, maybe we did waste our money... after all, in 2012 the international school consultancy group, which is the biggest research firm for international schools, found out that only 20 percent of so-called international schools in Egypt are qualified to be categorized as such.

*RS:* “Less privileged people go to public schools and get horrible education... wealthy people pay so much money and they still don’t get proper education!” (:08)

What does ‘proper education’ really mean anyway? My friend Farida seems to agree that language is a big part of it.

*Farida El-Ghor (FG):* “Generally, I should of course learn English or French or whatever language it is I expect in my school, but my own language shouldn’t be neglected. When it comes to Arabic, I’m ignorant and you know what, my English isn’t that great either!” (:14)

Okay wait; let’s get to the bottom of this.

*SFX: Flashback sound effect*

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, in the 1800’s Mohamed Ali created Western-style schools to train doctors, engineers, veterinarians, and other specialists. He also began sending educational missions to European countries for training in modern techniques. Okay, so what went wrong?

*SFX: The Egyptian revolution - Global entertainment*
That revolution was led by the free officers and one of them became the leader of the nation. President Gamal AbdelNasser believed that the way to implement social justice was to establish free education for boys and girls… and then: (pause)

**ONLINE NAT SOUND: Anwar El-Sadat 1973 speech**

That was the late president Anwar El Sadat giving his presidency speech in 1973. Under his rule, international education started to rise as part of his plans to implement an outward looking economic policy to attract foreign investors and encourage privatization of business and education.

I still don’t see where the problem in international education in Egypt started, so I decided to head to the office of the director of the Arabic Language Institute in The American University in Cairo, professor Mona Hassan’s to understand the root of this.

**NAT SOUND: Footsteps**

**Mona Hassan (MH):** “The stereotype of Arabic teaching makes the students hate learning any further studies of the arabic language. A great focus is given to grammatical rules, which shouldn’t be because Arabic is not mainly grammatical rules” (:12)

Students who graduated from international schools are definitely privileged, but if there’s one thing we’re lacking, it’s the ability to relate to our own heritage, culture, and language.

**FG:** “We live in a bubble. If any of us is put in a western environment, we’ll start to realize the truth that we can’t deal with Arabs and we can’t deal with English speaking natives either. (:10)

So our only hope then was to find a university that will help us be well rounded Egyptians capable of integrating within our own community.

**FG:** “In university I take American politics and history in my core requirement... Where does Egypt come in? (:06)

Well, I guess not.

Perhaps a new culture has emerged. Maybe sticking to old Arab beliefs and in this case, proper Arabic language, isn’t the trend anymore…

**MH:** “parents started to feel that they rely on their children mastering their colloquial which is the dialect used for spoken tasks and so on and they take it as a prestige that their children do not know any arabic.”

It’s quite understandable that having a bilingual child is something to be proud of or even brag about, but my father thinks there’s much more to it than that.

**Abdelaziz Sakr (AS):** “I choose, me and your mother for sure, to give you education level and a better category of life that’s why we have chosen that you study in the British school in Jeddah or Saudi Arabia at that time. British
school is offering a high level of education, high level of community and culture which improves and reshapes the personality however you missed a lot of things, particularly learning arabic in that school. ” (:20)

Maybe the problem is that parents shifted too far away from their old way of life and accidentally caused a major problem concerning the Arabic language.

That may explain why there’s a problem learning Arabic, but that still doesn’t explain the idea that the vast majority of students who graduate from English speaking international schools still have a problem with the English language.

RS: “The only language Egyptians have mastered is colloquial Arabic and slang.” (:04)

Egyptian Slang, that is.

It is quite natural that parents speak to their children at home in colloquial Arabic, but the real question is whether international schools in Egypt do enough to reverse these negative effects.

FG: “I just think that in school the curriculum on paper was great, but the teachers themselves weren’t fluent in English and when they wanted to make a point or further explain something, they did it in colloquial Arabic.” (:13)

When it comes to education, The American University in Cairo is the highest ranking university in the country, according to the 2017 Egyptian university ranking service, but does it contribute to the lack of language fluency?

MH: “The American University is an English speaking community, all the classes are in English, all the projects of the students are in English so they feel why should they learn the Arabic language.” (:11)

Maybe AUC shouldn’t be expected to help students enhance their Arabic skills, but Rana seems to think that it’s not always doing a great job in helping students have stronger English language skills either.

RS: “Okay AUC is great. Most of the professors spoke in English indeed and were very fluent but I have noticed that in some departments, the majority of the professors are not foreigners, they’re Egyptian and that’s not a problem but they explain most of the course content in Arabic.” (:13)

Rana based that on complaints she got from her friends in different departments. We don’t know if it really is the majority, but it is problematic nevertheless.

So now, when it comes to Arabic fluency, Mona Hassan thinks the best way to deal with that is by changing the culture through experience. Students will either recognize the problem on their own when they struggle to find jobs, or will listen to friends who are already facing the consequences of that problem. Rana believes that the one way to fix the problem with English fluency is:

RS: “Students have to read a lot. A lot!” (:03)
Well there we have it, let’s hope those solutions are as easy to implement as they are to be said.

This audio documentary was produced by Merna Sakr for the Audio Production course at the American University in Cairo taught by professor Kim Fox. I would like to thank my interviewees, Professor Mona Hassan, My sister and father, Rana Sakr and Abdelaziz Sakr, and my colleague, Farida El Ghor. The music used in this documentary is Respiro by MATTIAVLAD MORLEO and Ambient Piano by THEJRSOUNDDESIGN. Natural sound was collected by myself and sound effects were collected from www.youtube.com.