

# The Arabic GCSE and Lack of Alignment with Arabic as a Global Language

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# Presentation Overview

- Introduction to the Arabic GCSE
  - What is the Arabic GCSE and why is it important?
  - The “new” GCSE
  - Specification
  - Comparison to other GCSEs and alternatives
- Concerns from the Arabic educator community
  - Specification structure
  - Day of the exam
- Impact
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  - Teachers
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- Recommended action

# What is the (Arabic) GCSE?

- General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)<sup>1</sup>
- Qualification taken by students in year 10/11 to mark graduation from Key Stage 4 (KS4) in **England**, Wales, and Northern Ireland<sup>2,3,4</sup>
- Often required for matriculation into sixth forms (college) and post-secondary education (university)<sup>1,4</sup>
- Students can take a minimum of 5, most recommended to take 8-12<sup>1,2</sup>
- Core subjects (Maths, English language and literature, and Science) are compulsory for **all** KS4 students<sup>2</sup>
  - Ebacc, which is a performance measure for schools, also includes geography/history and a foreign language<sup>5</sup>
- Many competitive sixth forms/universities also require at least one modern foreign language (MFL) GCSE<sup>6</sup>
  - Offerings: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, German, modern Greek, Gujarati, modern Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Panjabi, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Turkish, and Urdu<sup>7</sup>

# Why is the Arabic GCSE important?

- Incentive for students to learn Arabic before university
  - Offering opportunities for native/heritage speakers to utilize and be recognized for their strengths
  - Students with Arabic GCSE have more competitive qualifications for college/university admission
- (Dis)Incentive for schools
  - Scores are considered in the evaluation of schools' performance and school rankings, which influences offerings<sup>9</sup>



# Sweeping Reforms: The “New” GCSE



Bloomberg.com (2022)<sup>11</sup>

*“Our changes will make these qualifications more ambitious, with greater stretch for the most able; will prepare young people better for the demands of employment and further study; will address the pernicious damage caused by grade inflation and dumbing down, which have undermined students’ achievements for far too long; and will give pupils, parents, teachers, universities and employers greater confidence in the integrity and reliability of our qualifications system.”<sup>10</sup>*

- Introduced in 2014 by Former Education Secretary Michael Gove (pictured left)<sup>10,11</sup>
- Most significant change in scoring system (alphabetical to numeric) allowing greater differentiation<sup>12</sup>
  - Argued to more clearly recognize the achievements of high-attaining students
- Rollout started in Fall 2015 with core subjects<sup>7</sup>
- By Fall 2018, all new GCSEs rolled out<sup>7</sup>
- For all modern foreign languages:<sup>10</sup>
  - Greater emphasis on speaking and writing
  - Inclusion of translations from English
  - Most exam questions in target language
  - Focus on using the language appropriately in different contexts (travel, employment, study abroad)

# The New GCSE in Context

Before Fall 2017	Fall 2017 to Present
Alphabetical Scores (A to U) <sup>12</sup>	Numerical Scores (9 to 1); Foundation Tier max score of 5 <sup>12</sup>
Option to “mix tiers” <sup>7</sup>	All papers must be taken in one tier <sup>7</sup>
Courses are divided into modules with periodic exams <sup>7</sup>	Courses designed for 2 years of study with all exams at the end <sup>7</sup>
Coursework (assignments and projects) contributes to overall grade <sup>7</sup>	Overall grade based wholly on exam score <sup>7</sup>
MFLs: perception skills (listening and reading) 46% of score, production skills (speaking and writing) 54% of score <sup>13</sup>	MFLs: each of the four skills contribute equally to the score (25% each) <sup>14</sup>

## How numerical grades compare with old ones

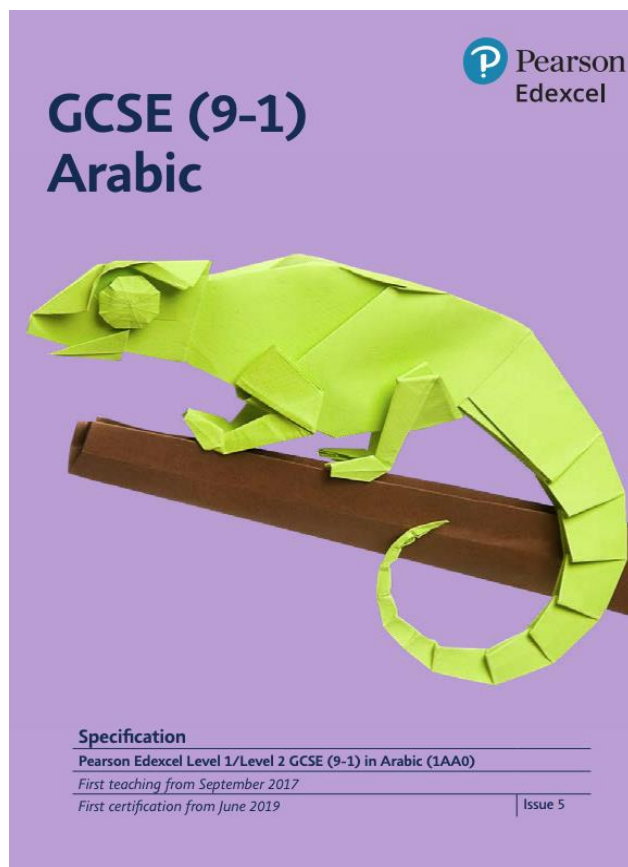
Old grades	Numerical grades
A*	9
A	8
B	7
C	6 5 Strong Pass 4 Standard Pass
D	3
E	2
F	1
G	1
U	U



Source: Ofqual

Ofqual (2025)<sup>3</sup>

# Arabic GCSE Specification - Assessment



- Tier Options: Foundation Tier (FT) and Higher Tier (HT)<sup>14</sup>
  - Higher Tier more advanced, offers more time for each section
- Four papers (each paper is 25% of final score)<sup>14</sup>
  - Paper 1: Listening Comprehension (out of 50 marks)
    - One section with instructions in Arabic
    - One section with instructions in English
  - Paper 2: Speaking (out of 70 marks)
    - Task 1: roleplay on one topic
    - Task 2: picture-based discussion
    - Task 3: conversation based on two themes (one is student's choice pre-exam)
  - Paper 3: Reading Comprehension (out of 50 marks)
    - Section A: instructions in English
    - Section B: instructions in Arabic
    - Section C: translation of passage from Arabic to English
  - Paper 4: Writing (out of 60 marks)
    - 2-3 open-response questions
    - Translation of one passage from English to Arabic

## Sample: Listening

### Ambitions

- 7 You are listening to a podcast interview with a 16-year-old student, Ahmed, from Bahrain.

Listen to the interview and answer the following questions in English.

- (a) What was his dream job when he was a little boy? (1)

- (b) How did he do in his final secondary school exams? (1)

- (c) Why does he want to study engineering at university? (1)

- (d) What, in Ahmed's point of view, are the **two** main conditions for success? (2)

(Total for Question 7 = 5 marks)

## Sample: Reading

### An internet forum

- 3 Read the following comments by young people discussing the ways they prefer to travel.

#### كيف تُسافر لزيارة الأهل والأقارب؟

ليلى: كنتُ نسافر في إجازة الصيف من كل عام إلى اليمن لزيارة جدتي وجدتي. نسافر بالطائرة والرحلة طويلة ومتعبة جداً. لا نستمتع بالقراءة في الطائرة أثناء السفر ونفضل أن نشاهد أفلاماً بوليسية.

نادر: يعيش بعض أفراد عائلتي في شرق فرنسا. نحن نذهب لزيارتهم كل عطلة. نذهب بالقطار لأنّ أتي لا يعجبها السفر بالطائرة. نقضي معظم الرحلة باللعب على الألعاب الإلكترونية وبالتحدّث مع بعضنا، حيث نخطط لإجازتنا في فرنسا.

سلوى: يبعد بيت عمّتي حوالي ثلاث ساعات فقط ولهذا نحن نسافر لزيارتهم كل شهر. عادةً نسافر بالقطار وأنا أفضّله لأنني أتعرف فيه على أصدقاء جدد، ولكننا سوف نسافر بالسيارة مع أبي في العطلة المُقبلة.

Answer the following questions in English. You do not need to write in full sentences.

- (a) Why doesn't Leyla like the trip to Yemen? (1)

- (b) Whose mother does not like travelling by plane? (1)

- (c) Mention **one** activity Nader does during his journey. (1)

- (d) Why, according to the text, does Salwa visit her auntie every month? (1)

- (e) Why, according to the text, does Salwa prefer to travel by train? (1)

(Total for Question 3 = 5 marks)

## Sample: Writing

Choose either Question 1(a) or Question 1(b).

### حدث رياضي عالمي

- 1 (a) وصلتك رسالة إلكترونية من صديقك العربي سليمان يسألك عن الحدث الرياضي العالمي الذي ذهبت إليه.

اكتب ردّاً غير رسمي إلى سليمان.

يجب أن يحتوي هذا الردّ على النقاط التالية:

• كيف عرفت عن الحدث

• الرياضة المفضّلة لدى الناس في بلدك

• أهمية الرياضة في حياة الشباب

• نشاط رياضي تريد أن تشارك فيه في المستقبل.

اكتب ما بين 80-90 كلمة باللغة العربية.

(20)

# Arabic GCSE Specification - Content

- All papers require the use of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA, FusHa)<sup>14</sup>
- Each tier has set lists of grammar and vocabulary to be expected on exam<sup>14</sup>
- Content organized into 5 themes and topics (in context of UK and the Arab World)<sup>14</sup>
  1. Identity and culture
    - Who am I?
    - Daily life
    - Cultural life
  2. Local area, holiday, and travel
    - Holidays
    - Travel and tourism
    - Town, region, and country
  3. School
    - What school is like
    - School activities
  4. Future aspirations, study, and work
    - Using languages beyond the classroom
    - Ambitions
    - Work
  5. International and global dimension
    - Bringing the world together
    - Environmental issues

## Section 2 – Topic-specific vocabulary

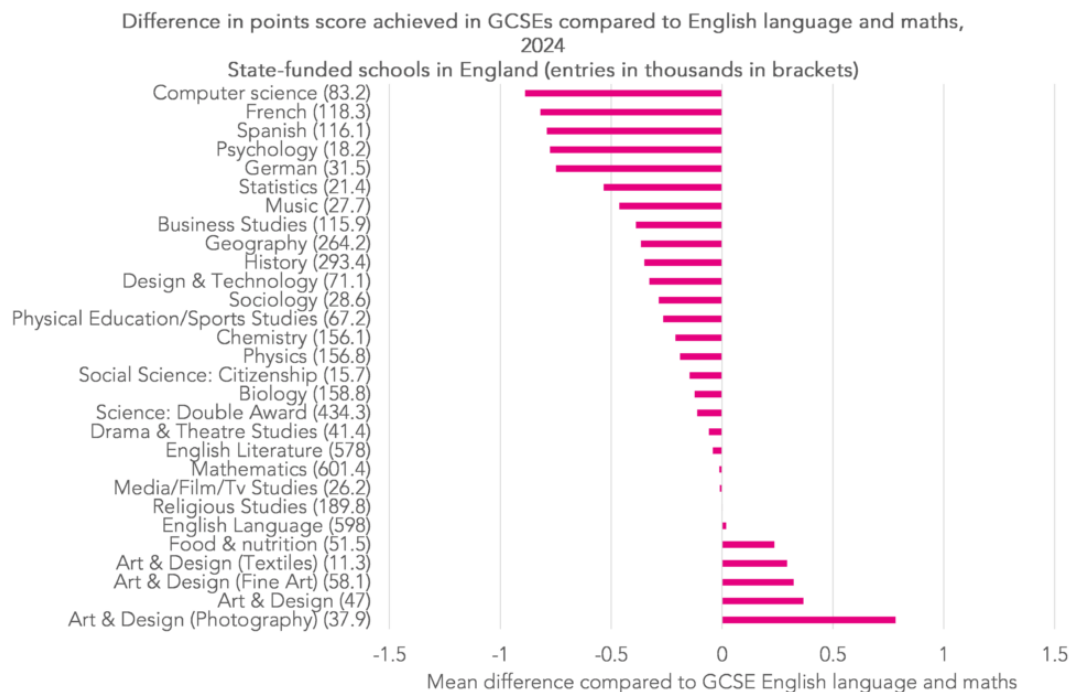
### Identity and culture: Daily life, food and drink, including eating out

#### Foundation tier

appetite	شَهِيَّة
apple	تُفَاحَة
apricot	مُشْمُوش
banana	مُؤُز
bean	فَاصُولِيَا
beer	بيرة
beef	لَحْم بَقَرِي
bill	فَاتُورَة جِسَاب
biscuit	بَسْكَوِيَت
boiled	مَسْلُوق
bottle	قَبِينَة / رُجَاجَة
bread	خُبْز
breakfast	إِفْطَار / فِطُور
butter	زُبْدَة
cabbage	مَلْفُوف / كُرْنَب
café	مَقْهَى
cake	كَعْكَ
carrot	جَزَر
cauliflower	قَرْنَبِيَط
cereals	حَبُوب (كُورن فليكس)
cheese	جُبْن
cherry	كِرَاز

Pearson Edexcel (2022)<sup>15</sup>

# Comparison to Other GCSEs



FFT Education Datalab (2024)<sup>16</sup>

- Analysis of 2024 GCSE scores by FFT Education Datalab, modern foreign languages are graded more harshly than core subjects (English, maths)<sup>16, 17</sup>
- French, German, and Spanish (FGS) and “other” MFLs<sup>14</sup>
  - For FGS, the themes are similar but different
    - My personal world
    - Lifestyle and wellbeing
    - My neighborhood
    - Media and technology
    - Studying and my future
    - Travel and tourism
  - Interactive vocab lists provided for FGS but not other languages
- Foundation Tier vocab lists not standardized across languages<sup>14</sup>
  - Mandarin includes the most words related to culture (food, holidays, activities)
  - Spanish includes words about sexual identity
  - Both Italian and Arabic have words that could be relevant to British culture but seem random in the target language (canoeing, clarinet, saxophone) – these words are not in lists for FGS or Chinese
  - Arabic, Persian, and Urdu especially lacking when it comes to words related to culture, specifically Muslim holidays (Christian holidays are included)

# Alternatives to the Arabic GCSE?

- International GCSE Arabic available only for native speakers<sup>18</sup>
- Cambridge IGCSE also offers Arabic for L2 learners, but syllabus not in list approved by Ofqual<sup>19</sup>
- Can take BTEC qualifications available/taught in Arabic, but not specifically for Arabic language<sup>20</sup>
- **For the average secondary level Arabic learner in England there is only the GCSE**

# Concerns and Observations from the Arabic Educator Community



# Concerns and Observations – Specification Structure and Content

- Culture not systematically included in specification
  - Students only learn about culture if their teachers choose to teach it
  - Identity and culture is one of the five themes, but the vocabulary lists for both tiers missing many words relevant to Arab culture
    - Examples of missing words: nomad, prayer, poetry, folktale, oud, dabke, calligraphy, falafel, hummus, olive
- Lack of authenticity and relevance of content for students
  - Exclusion of dialect, which is used in daily life more so than MSA
  - MSA-only policy presents the language as unidimensional, which could potentially invalidate heritage learners' experiences and knowledge and further marginalize underrepresented dialects
  - Some common student interests (e.g. cricket, coding, hiking, theater, video gaming) are not represented in vocabulary list

# Concerns – GCSE Structure (cont.)

- Students must choose to test in the Foundation or Higher Tier before the exam
  - Choosing the “wrong” tier can lead to missed opportunities for students<sup>4</sup>
    - A high-achieving student taking the Foundation Tier may not be eligible for sixth forms/A-levels with a max score of 5
    - An underprepared student taking the Higher Tier may not be able to answer questions and receive an unusable score of U
  - An issue for all GCSEs, not just Arabic

# Concerns and Observations – Day of Exam

- Examiner conduct
  - Could not read or speak Arabic to provide accurate instructions for speaking paper
  - Poor enforcement of testing rules (students cheating, leaving the room) during the exam
  - Asking the wrong questions and forgetting to record responses
  - Examiners' behavior was distracting to students

**STIMULUS FR10**  
**Topic: Using the language beyond the classroom**  
**Instructions to teacher**

- Use appropriate language for a formal conversation.
- The target language phrases below must be asked verbatim. There must be no supplementary questions and no rephrasing of questions but questions may be repeated.

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**Begin the role play with the following introduction.**

أنت في محلّ عربي لبيع المواد الغذائية. أنت تطلب عملاً لُعُطلة الصيف في المحلّ. أنت الآن تتحدّث مع صاحب المحلّ.

1	كيف يُمكنني مساعدتك؟ Allow the candidate to say what kind of work they are looking for.
2	لماذا تريد العمل هنا؟ Allow the candidate to say why they want to work there.
3	! كم من الوقت بإمكانك أن تعمل؟ Allow the candidate to say how much time they can work.
4	ما هي صفاتك الشخصية المناسبة لهذا العمل؟ Allow the candidate to say what suitable personal qualities they have for the work. هذا جيّد.
5	? Allow the candidate to ask you when they can start work. Give an appropriate brief response.

**STIMULUS FP3**  
**Topic: What school is like**



(Source: © Paul Baldesano/Alamy Stock Photo)

يُصِف لي هذه الصورة.  
 [أنتي شيء آخر؟]  
 في رأيي أنّ ارتداء الزيّ المدرسي في المدرسة هو فكرة جيّدة. وأنت ما رأيك؟  
 [لماذا؟ لِمَ لا؟/أنتي شيء آخر؟]  
 ماذا فعلت في المدرسة يوم أمس؟  
 [أنتي شيء آخر؟]  
 ماذا ستفعل لتحتفل بنهاية الإمتحانات؟  
 [أنتي شيء آخر؟]  
 ماذا تحب أن تعمل في المدرسة؟  
 [لماذا؟ لِمَ لا؟/أنتي شيء آخر؟]

# Concerns and Observations – Day of Exam (cont.)



*Manchester Evening News (2018)<sup>22</sup>*

- Unintelligible audio for listening paper
  - Many reports of unclear, interrupted, and echoing audio
  - Speakers talking more rapidly than in recordings for practice papers

# Concerns and Observations – Day of Exam (cont.)

- Timing issues
  - Many students could not complete sets of questions in the allotted time
  - Mismanagement by examiners
    - Pausing exam for all so that one student could use the WC
    - Providing instructions to students after exam time had officially started
    - No set time for listening paper after recording played/repeated



# Concerns and Observations – Day of Exam (cont.)

مكان سياحي غريب

اقرأ هذا النص عن السياحة في مصر، ثم أجب عن الأسئلة التي تليه:

لنحضر مصر إحدى أرخص الدول السياحية في العالم، وتضفي أمثالكاً سياحية متنوعة وهو ما يجعل الأماكن السياحية المختلفة التي أيقظت كافة السياح على اختلافها. ولكن "رأس شيطان" مكانٌ غير عادي، يفصله نوح ثمين من السياح. هذه المنطقة هي الأكثر مبيعاً والمعروفة بأهلها ووجهة كثر من يَشُدُّ الهبوط دون إرتاج. على الرغم من أن اسم المنطقة غريب، إلا أنه في الحقيقة لم يكن الاسم الأصلي بل كان "رأس الشيطان" نسبةً إلى شواطئها الجميلة. ولكن لصعوبة طقفه على السائحين الأجانب، تمَّ تغيير اسم المنطقة إلى "رأس شيطان". المسكن هي عبارة عن منحنيات ولا وجود للنادق فيها، ويجعل هذا الإقامة فيها تجربة جديدة وممتعة أيضاً. هناك نوعان من المنحنيات: النوع الأول هو منحنيٌّ فيه أكوامٌ من القشِّ وتزيد المغل. أما النوع الثاني فالأكواخ فيه منية من الطوب ويعطها عربد النخل أيضاً، ولكنها تحوي على مكيف هواء.

وتُعتبر "رأس شيطان" وجهةً رائعةً لمجموعة من الأصدقاء أو زوجين في شهر العسل، فيمكنهم في الصباح الاسترخاء على الأرائك الخشبية والاستمتاع بالشمس والبحر، أو تجربة تسلُّق الجبال حيث يوجد في "رأس شيطان" تسعة جبالٍ صالحةٍ للتسلُّق. كما يمكن زيارة الأماكن الشجرية بالمنطقة، مثل "جبل موسى" و"ساعات كاترين"، وهي رحلات منخفضة التكلفة.

**Glossary**

يُشَدُّ: meets  
ألوان: tastes  
بسطان: satan  
تذهب: go to  
يَشُدُّ: seek  
بسطان: shores  
بسطان: huts  
القش: straw  
بسطان: palm branches (fronds)  
الطوب: clay bricks  
الاسترخاء: relaxation  
الأرائك: settees

Pearson Edexcel (2023)<sup>24</sup>

Support for Arab films

6 Read the following announcement about a competition to support Arab films and television.

أعلنت الهيئة الملكية الأردنية للأفلام عن تقديم دعم ماليٍّ لثلاث وعشرين مشروعاً سينمائياً وتلفزيونياً من "صندوق الأردن لدعم الأفلام". وقدَّم الصندوق في دورته السادسة لسنة 2021 مبلغ مئتين وخمسين ألف دينار أردني.

وتدعم هذه الهيئة الأنشطة والبرامج التي تُعزز صناعة السينما المحلية المستقلة. ويتحقق هذه الغاية من إنشاء "صندوق الأردن" بهدف تشجيع صنَّاع الأفلام من سنز قصصهم، خصوصاً في الأردن.

وتشكَّلت لجنة تحكيم مستقلة للمسابقة، والتي اجتمعت عبر الإنترنت على مدى ثلاثة أيام، من أجل دراسة المشاريع المُقدَّمة في الفئات الثلاثة التالية: إحداهما تطوير وإنتاج المشاريع الروائية الوثائقية الطويلة والأخرى تطوير المسلسلات التلفزيونية، وأخرها إنتاج الأفلام القصيرة الروائية والوثائقية.

و تُعطي اللجنة ستة أعضاء من المخرجين والممثلين والكتاب والممثلين جادوا من الأردن وفلسطين ولبنان والسودان. ومن الجدير بالذكر أن أحد أعضاء اللجنة هو مدير مهرجان "مادبو" للسينما العربية "محمد قلاوي" والذي حضر من أوروبا للمشاركة في هذا النشاط. وبحسب البيان، تقدم للحصول على دعم الصندوق في هذه المنافسة مائة مشروع سينمائي وتلفزيوني وبنواً تلحوظة عن الدورة السابقة. ومن الملاحظ أن عدد المشاريع التي وُقِّعت اتفاقيات إنتاج مُشترك مع دول عربية وأجنبية قد ازداد أيضاً، ووصلت تلك الزيادة إلى خمسة وعشرين بالمائة عن الأعوام السابقة.

**Glossary**

الهيئة: commission/authority  
دوره: session  
الغاية: aim/goal  
يُمكِّن: enabling  
صنَّاع: maker  
نُزوة: narration  
يُحكِّم: judging/arbitration  
المُقدَّمة: qualified to  
الفئات: categories  
البرامية: features (films)  
الجدير بالذكر: worth mentioning  
بحسب البيان: according to the statement

Pearson Edexcel (2023)<sup>24</sup>

- Content does not match specification
- Reading paper included outdated, niche vocabulary
- Passages too long or proverbial, don't align with themes like other languages
- Translation of some words different on exam than in specification vocabulary list
- Inclusion of a large glossary (>10 words) but no extra time added to account for this
  - Glossaries either not included or are small (<5 words) in 2024 and 2025

# Concerns and Observations – Day of Exam (cont.)

- Difficulty
  - Arabic GCSE is more difficult than GCSE for FGS
    - In same timetable as FGS students learning vocabulary and grammar, Arabic students also learn a new alphabet and language structure
    - Some schools push their students to sit for the exam in year 10, losing an additional year of study
  - Exam is inaccessible to non-heritage learners and can still be very difficult for native speakers
    - For a similar language, Mandarin, the GCSE is accessible to all learners
  - Questions for reading paper could not be solved using context clues
  - Only anecdotal evidence readily available, limited comparisons of score distribution for languages other than FGS

## German paper translated into English

### The weather

1 Read this weather report from a German website.

Yesterday it was dry and beautiful in the south, but today there are unfortunately thunderstorms. Temperatures will fall at night.  
The weather on Friday is mostly sunny and warm. Only in Berlin it is foggy and rainy. The wind is not so strong.  
It will be cold in the Alps on Saturday morning. There will be frost in the mountains. Later on Saturday the temperature could rise to 18 degrees. That is much warmer than normal.

Answer the following questions in English. You do not need to write in full sentences.

- (a) What will the weather be like in the south today? (1)
- (b) Where will it be foggy? (1)
- (c) Why is the rise in temperature on Saturday unusual? (1)

## SECTION A

### An ambitious grandmother

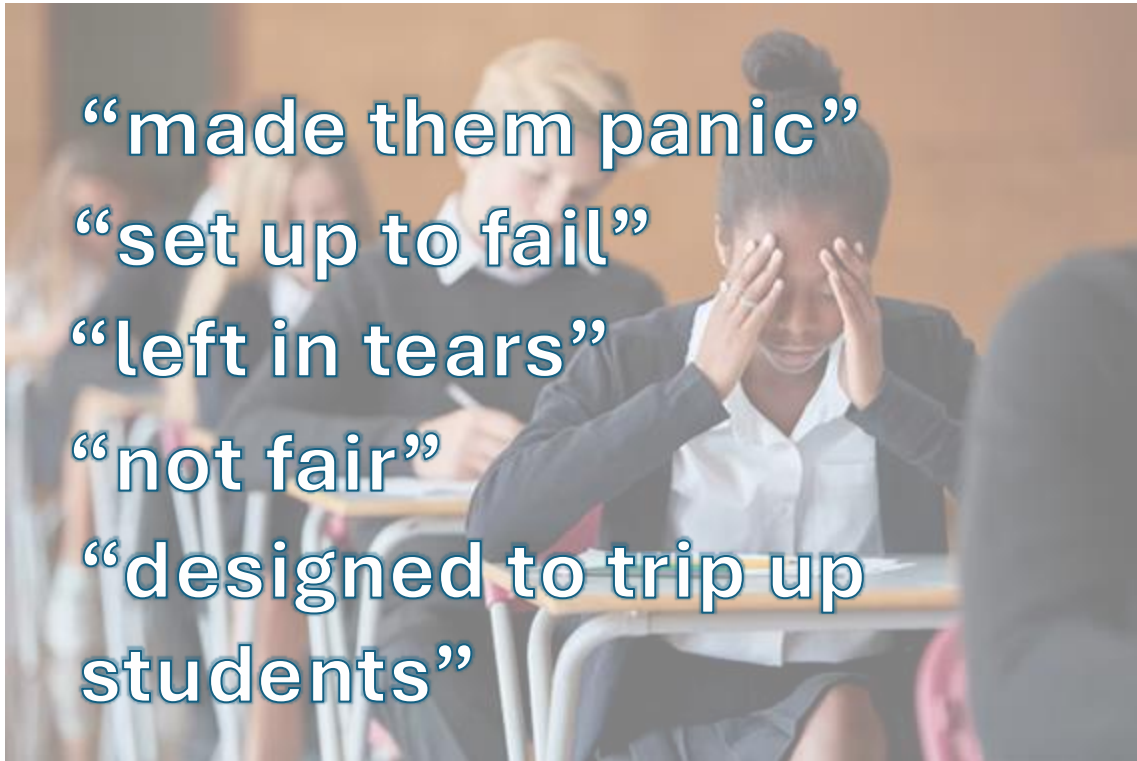
1 Read this text about the love of a grandmother for education.

قررت الجدة "أمال بطو" العودة إلى الدراسة بعد أن توقفت عن ذلك لعدة سنوات. وهذه السيدة هي أم لِسبعة أبناء وهدتُ إعدو كثير من الأحفاد.  
في البداية، بدأت الجدة "أمال" لتُرس مع أبنائها حتى حصلت على عدة شهادات بالغات والمدن والباحثيات.  
وبعد مرور عشرات السنين منذ أن توقفت عن التعليم في المدرسة، عادت هذه الجدة إلى التعليم من جديد وعمرها 81 عاماً يُؤكّد إلمام أنّ الفسر يجب أن لا يُؤرّ على طموحات الناس.  
وفي النهاية، حققت الجدة خلفها بأن تليّن قبة وأوب التخرج بعد حصولها على الدرجة الجامعية.

Answer the following questions in English. You do not need to write in full sentences.

- (a) How did Mrs Amal work on improving her education after leaving school? (1)
- (b) Which message did Mrs Amal want to send to the world? (1)
- (c) What was her final achievement? (1)

# Impact on Stakeholders



*University College London (2022)<sup>25</sup>*

- Non-heritage learners
  - Feel that the test is impossible
  - Many choose not to sit for it at all
  - May drop Arabic to choose an “easier” language to get better grades
  - May be prohibited from taking Arabic by school if unsure about ability to get strong pass
- Heritage learners/native speakers
  - Still find the test very difficult
  - Identity may be invalidated by exclusion of dialect and culture
- Prospective learners
  - Discouraged by negative experiences of current GCSE students

# Impact on Stakeholders – (cont.)

- Teachers
  - Feel discouraged by low student scores
  - Struggle to cover all content in specification
  - Feel limited in what else they can teach
  - Teaching not as enjoyable
- Schools
  - Less inclined to offer Arabic to avoid having low average scores
  - May only allow heritage learners to take the course and sit for the exam

# Advocacy and Response

- **Priority:** making the test accessible to non-heritage learners
- The Arabic educator community in the UK has
  - Collected anecdotal data from stakeholders
  - Wrote briefs and spread awareness
  - Created a registry of qualified Arabic GCSE examiners across England
- If we look at the Arabic GCSE score distribution, there is little quantitative evidence of inaccessibility for non-heritage learners
- But when the only students who take the test are those who are sure they can pass, **the numbers do not tell the whole story!**
- QFI continues to support the Arabic educator community in its advocacy efforts

# Recommended Action

- At Testing Sites
  - Resolve any outstanding technical issues
  - Ensure the exam matches the specification and allows fair amounts of time for the use of glossary or other variations.
  - Provide additional training for examiners to ensure consistency in exam administration
  - Provide additional opportunities for students to engage with Arab culture outside of the course timetable
- Policy level
  - Integrate culture into Arabic GCSE specification
  - Shift from “teaching to the test” to proficiency-based and student-centered learning
  - Acknowledge diglossia in exam specification
  - Adjust the difficulty of the Arabic GCSE to be similar to those of other MFLs and ensure accessibility to non-native learners
  - Address the disincentive for schools to offer Arabic (and other languages) from the linking of school performance with by exam grades

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Thank you!

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