

The Arabic Speaking Competition: *A Tool for Heritage Language Motivation and Identity Affirmation*

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Abstract

Qatar Foundation International's Arabic Speaking Competition (ASC) in the United Kingdom was established in 2021 to promote Arabic language proficiency by encouraging students across UK schools to improve their proficiency in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), otherwise known as fuSHa or فصحي. At the same time, the ASC provides an opportunity for classroom Arabic teachers to encourage students to practice and demonstrate growth in their speaking ability. The ASC was set up for all learners of Arabic, with no specific focus on a student's previous exposure to Arabic. However, the ASC has become particularly popular with heritage learners of Arabic over the last four years, supporting student motivation, providing positive reinforcement of heritage language identities, and celebrating students' multilingual skills as an asset. Rather than heritage learners shying away from using their Arabic, the ASC has given them a platform to proudly display their linguistic profile and showcase and celebrate their cultures on a stage that is not necessarily specific to heritage communities.

As such, the ASC has the potential to make a significant difference to people's lives. The parent of one participant, whose family had moved from an Arabic-speaking country to the UK, reported: "We have been going through a lot of challenges, including cultural differences, language, and even the weather was different. It was important for my daughter to stay connected to her roots and to maintain her connection to the Arabic language. Participating in the competition allowed her to show her language skills in an unfamiliar environment. It was also a way for her to build confidence in her identity while adapting to life in a different country." After taking part in the ASC, the student summed up the experience: "After the competition, my self-confidence increased, which helped me interact better at school and with friends. Overall, it was an inspiring experience that led to considerable personal growth."

In this chapter, we will first discuss the various terminologies being used to describe students who are learning Arabic in UK schools. We will also give an overview of how and where Arabic is being taught. Next, a conceptual model for language revitalization that examines the importance of opportunity creation and desire is presented, followed by a brief literature review on the use of competitions for motivation in language learning. The ASC and its history will be detailed before we dive into analyzing surveys conducted with student participants, teachers, and parents. We will conclude by demonstrating how the ASC acts as an additional motivational tool for heritage learners to develop their speaking skills alongside their previous exposure to the language through their respective communities, which likewise motivates them to take part in the competition in the first place.

Contents

Abstract	2
Terminologies	4
Arabic in UK Schools	8
A Model for Language Revitalization	10
Language Competitions and Motivation	11
The Arabic Speaking Competition (ASC)	12
Feedback from participants, parents, and teachers	17
Teachers	17
Parents	18
Students	18
Future Directions	20
Conclusion	21
Reference List	22
About the Authors	25

Terminologies

Ramezanzadeh raises the question of what is meant by “heritage learner” in the context of Arabic education in the UK.¹ Terms such as “heritage speaker,” “mother-tongue speaker,” “heritage learner,” and “native speaker” are all used. Furthermore, different terminologies are employed to describe the Arabic language itself-”community language,” “home language,” “heritage language,” “mother tongue,” and even “native language.” While each term has its own definition, some of these are used interchangeably in different contexts. To make the best curricular decisions, teachers need to understand a student’s linguistic profile fully, and these labels are one way they do that. However, the labels are used differently by different teachers, which could take away from the nuanced understanding of a student’s linguistic abilities that comes with assigning them a certain label. Heritage learner, for example, can mean so many different things.

Referencing Valdés’ commonly used description, a heritage language learner (HLL)², it is someone who: is raised in a home where Arabic is spoken but lives in a country where Arabic is not a majority language; may speak or merely understand Arabic; and is to some degree bilingual in the language of their country of residence and Arabic. Building on this, we also looked at Ibrahim & Allam’s definition, which broke this down further into four types of HLL:³

- a) Students whose parents are both of Arab origin and who hear or speak one of the Arabic dialects at home.
- b) Students who have only one parent of Arab origin and do not speak Arabic at home.
- c) Muslims who came from non-Arab countries and are exposed to only one variety of Arabic through their learning of the Qur’an or aspects of religion.
- d) An Arab who lived in Arab countries, attended international schools, and have never had any formal education in Modern Standard Arabic.

It is important to be aware of the complex and nuanced language profiles that heritage students bring to the classroom in UK schools. Not only are children growing up in homes where both or one parent speaks Arabic, but also where parents/caregivers speak other languages alongside Arabic. Some students are managing a linguistic repertoire that contains two or three languages alongside English, only one of which is Arabic, and are mixing with peer and friendship groups where an even wider range of languages are used. These students are truly plurilingual individuals in a multilingual environment.

¹ Ramezanzadeh, 2016

² Valdés, 2000

³ Ibrahim & Allam, 2006; this definition was also used by Allaf et al, n.d.

Sometimes it appears that the term “mother tongue” is being used interchangeably with “heritage” because both terms refer to the language one is exposed to from their family from when they were a baby. “Mother tongue,” some argue, is the language that remains with a child despite where they live, but heritage language can be crowded out by the dominant (or host) language. Some are keen to distinguish between “mother tongue” and “heritage learners” because they believe that students in these categories have different educational needs. To further complicate terminology usage, “native speaker” is also used and generally refers to a person who speaks and writes using a native language or mother tongue.

It is also important to note that certain negative connotations are often associated with “heritage language.” Kircher states that, “heritage languages, whether indigenous or from immigration, often face negative stereotypes and are undervalued, particularly within the educational system.”⁴ This discrimination originates from linguistic attitudes, which are the beliefs people develop about languages and their speakers. These attitudes are acquired early in life and associate certain languages with socially low-status groups. This leads to the stigmatization and marginalization of children using these heritage languages.” Heritage language speakers themselves may perceive that one’s heritage language links one to being an immigrant or minority, which can lead to feelings of marginalization, discrimination, and pressure to assimilate.

While we can operationalize the phrase “heritage language learner” using any one of the various definitions that exist, it is vital to recognize that heritage language learners, as we define them, may reject being categorized as such when

1. It does not align with their own definition,
2. They do not want to be assigned a unidimensional identity (just “Arab”), or
3. The stigmatization of their heritage language makes them feel powerless.⁵

Criteria that these learners may use to exclude themselves as heritage learners can include affiliation, cultural artifacts (e.g., stereotypes), self-positioning, and positioning by others.⁶

⁴ Kircher, 2024

⁵ Hornberger & Wang, 2008

⁶ Dressler, 2010

One common criterion that students use to reject their assigned heritage learner label is the level of language expertise, which can affect students at both ends of the proficiency spectrum.⁷ A study by Hillman found that students of MSA who were fluent in their regional dialect rejected the “heritage learner” label.⁸ Instead, they identified with “native speaker,” but only of their specific dialect (e.g., Syrian). In the same study, Hillman also observed two heritage language learners who minimized their in-class participation and experienced low self-esteem because they were labelled as “heritage learners.” Of these two students, one was the only non-Arab Muslim in the class, and being classified as a heritage learner led to her feeling “like an artificial Arab.” She received the same expectations for oral proficiency as the other heritage learners, even though most of her exposure to Arabic had occurred via perceptive skills (reading and listening). Both students felt afraid of making mistakes in front of their peers and embarrassed for not having a native-like level of proficiency. This fear of embarrassment actively prohibited the development of these students’ language skills and, in turn, led to their proficiency levels being lower than those of the two absolute beginner, non-heritage learners at the end of the class. These observations by Hillman underscore a powerful assertion by linguists Nancy Hornberger and Suhan Wang that “without the recognition that HLL identity is as much chosen as assigned, the efforts of language educators to instruct these learners may not be maximally effective.”⁹

This plays out with Arabic in the UK. Students tend to downplay their proficiency in their own heritage language, Arabic, and only focus on that of the dominant language, English. Teachers we have spoken to describe how their heritage students of Arabic feel awkward or uncomfortable speaking Arabic outside the home, and do not use it in the classroom or the playground with other Arabic-speaking students for fear of seeming “different.” Sometimes, Arabic-speaking parents may downgrade the use of the language at home as well, to encourage the use of English, in the belief that this will help children assimilate into the mainstream language and culture. Even mainstream schools can give heritage language speaking students the impression that English is more important than the language they speak at home. Alongside these factors are the feelings of shame or guilt which young speakers of the heritage language may experience if they are not fluent in their heritage language.

The 2021 England and Wales census reports that 204,000 people in those countries consider Arabic to be their “main language,” up from 159,000 in 2011.¹⁰ The UK’s Arabic-speaking communities include those who have lived in the UK for many generations, such as the Yemeni communities of Liverpool and Newcastle. There are also those who have arrived more recently and continue to arrive, often as refugees or asylum seekers, fleeing conflict in their home countries. The designation of “main language,” however, further highlights the difficulty with all these labels, as the term can easily be interpreted as referring to a heritage speaker, a mother tongue speaker, or a native speaker. If a child from one of these families enters an Arabic classroom, their linguistic profile is still quite nuanced, and a teacher must fully understand what they know to be able to teach them. This difficulty in labelling students who come from homes where Arabic is the main language has been strongly highlighted in the ASC. Additionally, there are many Muslim families in the UK. According to the 2021 UK Census, 6% of the population identified as Muslim, and most of those Muslims have a South Asian background, where Arabic is not used as a daily communicative language but rather is encountered and experienced as the language of the Quran.

⁷ Dressler, 2010

⁸ Hillman, 2019

⁹ Hornberger & Wang, 2008, p. 14

¹⁰ Office for National Statistics, 2022

Anna-Maria Ramezanzadeh reviews various definitions of heritage learners.¹¹ These include a proficiency-based definition, which refers to those who have learned the language in childhood but not necessarily attained native speaker ability, and an ancestral-based definition, which “centers around a personal, historical, ethnolinguistic connection to the language in learners who may have had no previous exposure to the language putting them, in terms of competence, on a par with L2 learners.”¹²

It is clear from the way in which teachers submit their student registration information for the ASC that there are vastly different ideas of what constitutes a heritage and native speaker, despite the efforts of the competition guidelines to define them. Additionally, the categorization of a particular individual can vary significantly depending on who is distinguishing between categories. There have been many cases where ASC judges have felt the need to recategorize a particular participant because they are clearly a native speaker, even though the teacher has entered them as an intermediate heritage speaker or vice versa.

Another crucial factor to bear in mind is that since Arabic is a diglossic language, with a standardized variety (MSA, used for specific formal spoken contexts but the most common medium of written communication) existing alongside the spoken colloquial forms used by native speakers in their daily lives, it is common that many of the heritage learners have minimal to no literacy skills. It is not uncommon to see learners who have grown up speaking their heritage language fluently but struggle to read or write in that same language. Indeed, as far as Arabic is concerned, one of the main motivations for families to enroll their children in Arabic supplementary schools is to enhance and develop their knowledge of MSA to access literature and religious texts.

¹¹ Ramezanzadeh, 2016

¹² Ramezanzadeh, 2016, p. 6

Arabic in UK Schoolss

The teaching and learning of Arabic in the UK has witnessed significant growth in recent years, as can be seen through national examination numbers. GCSE entries for Arabic rose from 2,707 in 2011 to 5,171 in 2023.¹³ By comparison, in 1995, there were just 1,000 entries.

Recent research conducted by Shift Insight in 2022 sheds light on where students are learning Arabic in the UK. This research identifies 232 schools known to be teaching Arabic, of which 170 (75%) were Islamic faith schools and supplementary Arabic schools.¹⁴ 106 (almost half) were independent schools. Of the 61 non-Islamic faith schools offering Arabic, there were 23 academies, 12 independent schools, and 12 community schools. Looking at the geographical distribution of schools teaching Arabic, most (94) were within London, followed by the Northwest (41) and the West Midlands (24).

The Arabic provision in these schools follows a variety of models. Some have Arabic in the curriculum as a time-tabled subject, and all pupils take the language, while others provide Arabic as an enrichment subject or extra-curricular club, which students elect to take. In some cases, schools offer Arabic support to those pupils taking the GCSE, often pupils of Arab heritage, although other pupils in the school do not learn the language. Ramezanzadeh examined the demographics of learners of Arabic in 2015.¹⁵ She interviewed 102 pupils learning Arabic at Muslim faith schools, of whom 77% were of Asian origin (Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi), while 20% were of Arab heritage. Describing the diversity of learners that can be found in an Arabic language classroom, she says:

Not only do some classes contain students of Arab heritage, but also those of different ethnicities who have lived in an Arab country during childhood. These students are being taught alongside those who, whilst not exposed to Arabic for communicative purposes in their homes, may be familiar with the language through religious observance.¹⁶

It is important to include the role of supplementary schools (sometimes also called complementary or weekend schools) when it comes to the teaching of Arabic to school-aged children in the UK. Much has been written about the history and role of supplementary schools in the UK. Lamb describes them as spaces of hope and resistance, a way that language communities ensure that their languages are maintained and learned, “semi-formal communities that choose to meet in the evenings and at weekends to ensure autonomously and collectively that their languages and cultures are passed on to the younger generation ... creating spaces in which their linguistic and cultural identities can be safely nurtured and maintained.”¹⁷

¹³ Alcantara Communications, 2016

¹⁴ Wild & Graham, 2022

¹⁵ Ramezanzadeh, 2015

¹⁶ Ramezanzadeh 2015, p. 46

¹⁷ Lamb, 2020, p. 102

Soliman and Khalil state that “It is well known that in almost every major city in the UK, there is a supplementary school for each Arab community such as an Iraqi, Libyan, Saudi, etc., with each following the curriculum of its respective country, albeit with some local variation in the curriculum and teaching approach to suit children growing up in the UK attending English schools during the week.”¹⁸

While the methodology and approaches to teaching vary enormously from one supplementary school to another, these institutions are often well attended and seen by students as spaces where they can be themselves. Teachers who were interviewed for a research project on the teaching of Arabic as a mother tongue/heritage language in 2023 pointed to the social aspect of the mother tongue classes as a crucial factor in enhancing learning.¹⁹ They said their learners enjoyed the opportunity to get together and improve their Arabic. They reported that their students feel safe with each other and that they appreciate the opportunity to express themselves by socializing with peers in an environment where they can easily show their identity: “They feel very happy to be gathered as Arabic speakers, and they can express their social identity more freely when all the students in the class are Arabic speakers and have common points in their heritage and language.”

Our research and observation indicate that educators in the supplementary sector are evolving innovative teaching approaches that reflect and address the unique identities of their plurilingual learners. Some employ project-based learning and community action projects that allow their learners to develop their language skills in a way that is stimulating, exciting, and relevant to their lives. One teacher we spoke to, who works in a supplementary school in London, told us how her school has adapted its teaching approach to focus on more creative ways of teaching Arabic, an approach she calls اللغة العربية و الإبداع (The Arabic Language and Creativity). The school’s understanding of heritage learners has changed as they have done more work on the creative side, and lessons are much more connected to learners’ needs, interests, and lived experiences. As a result, interest levels have improved as students have become more involved in choosing the themes and stories that are taught.

¹⁸ Soliman & Khalil, 2022, p.3

¹⁹ Allaf et al, n.d.

A Model for Language Revitalization

To prevent host languages from completely dominating heritage languages, a strategic approach to language maintenance and revitalization of these heritage languages that can be applied at multiple levels of the social ecosystem is vital. One framework discussed by Bianco and Peyton specifies that capacity development, opportunity creation, and desire are three conditions that must be met to revitalize a minority language successfully. The authors discuss how, in practice, policy solutions which support heritage language maintenance overwhelmingly prioritize capacity development, or the teaching and learning of the heritage language.²⁰ They also emphasize that in English-dominant countries in particular, opportunity creation is especially important, as opportunities to authentically use heritage languages in third places (other than in school or at home) are limited. In the United States, it was discovered that the creation of additional academic and professional opportunities for heritage learners of Hindi, another less commonly taught language, fostered a sense of pride in Hindi-speaking communities.²¹ Seals and Peyton similarly found that creating opportunities for heritage learners to share their language and culture with their peers helped foster self-confidence and build leadership skills.²² As discussed later in this chapter, the Arabic Speaking Competition provides more opportunities for Arabic heritage learners to authentically engage with the language and culture in a way that affirms their identities.

The third condition in the framework, desire, is immeasurable yet perhaps the most crucial: learners must choose to study and use the language they are learning, which involves both sustained motivation and behavior change (Bianco & Peyton, 2013). The authors suggest that this condition of desire requires the presence of an internalized motivational system, in which a learner incorporates images of their future self as a proficient speaker of the target language into their present sense of self. In other words, the desire to identify as proficient in the target language is essential to increase a learner's actual proficiency and usage. A common source of intrinsic motivation for Arabic heritage language learners is the desire to strengthen relationships with their family members overseas and to connect with Arabic speakers from other backgrounds (locations, religions, etc.).²³ Additionally, results from a study by Wang suggest that heritage learners who maintain or improve their proficiency can significantly benefit the well-being of their family, promote deeper connections with their parents, and evoke positive parental emotions like pride, fulfillment, and accomplishment.²⁴ Thus, even without the provision of material prizes, in theory, the Arabic Speaking Competition has the potential to provide both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for heritage learners.

²⁰ Bianco & Peyton, 2013

²¹ Gambhir & Gambhir, 2014

²² Seals & Peyton, 2016

²³ Cruickshank, 2019

²⁴ Wang, 2022

Language Competitions and Motivation

Student competitions can serve as powerful motivators for learning a new language in school settings. Research suggests that engaging students in competitive activities, such as language contests, speech competitions, or debate tournaments, can enhance their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn a language. These events encourage students to set clear goals, practice regularly, and apply their linguistic knowledge in authentic, high-stakes scenarios, fostering deeper engagement with language material.²⁵ One study by Marashi and Dibah even found that the use of a competitive learning approach generally led to better oral proficiency outcomes for second language learners, as compared to a cooperative learning approach.²⁶ Competitions can be part of a useful teaching strategy to inspire children and young people, and they can be a fun way to bring excitement to the language curriculum, sparking conversations about the importance of language learning.

Collaborative contests, like team-based quizzes or role-playing activities, can also build confidence and promote peer learning.²⁷ For instance, students who see their peers excel in language competitions are often inspired to improve their own skills, leveraging the social aspect of competition to create a positive learning environment.²⁸ Research has also shown that such activities can support building a healthy self-concept, coping with subjectivity, dealing with competition, and interacting with role models.²⁹

Additionally, the recognition and rewards associated with competitions, such as ceremonies, certificates, medals, or scholarships, can reinforce the value of language learning. These tangible outcomes not only boost students' self-esteem but also highlight the importance of bilingualism or multilingualism in globalized education and careers. By integrating well-designed language competitions into school curricula, educators can nurture long-term motivation and interest in language acquisition.³⁰

There is limited research specifically examining the impact of student competitions on the motivation of heritage learners in school settings. While competitions have been shown to enhance motivation among language learners generally, further studies are needed to understand their effects on heritage learners specifically, who may be affected by different motivational factors compared to non-heritage learners. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective educational strategies that support heritage language maintenance and development.

²⁵ Usher & Kober, 2012; Fowler, 2022

²⁶ Marashi & Dibah, 2013

²⁷ Madrid et al, 2007

²⁸ Deci & Ryan, 2000

²⁹ Ozturk & Debelak, 2008

³⁰ Dörnyei, 2001; Papi & Hiver, 2020

The Arabic Speaking Competition (ASC)

The ASC, supported by QFI since 2021, was initially modelled after the Mandarin Speaking Competition in the UK and was developed in partnership with the British Council. From its initiation, the goal of the ASC has been to nurture the learning of the Arabic language among primary and secondary school students while also celebrating their linguistic achievements and creativity. Open to all students in UK schools learning the Arabic language, the competition has been extremely popular, with the number of competitors rising from 50 in 2021 to 463 in 2023. The competition involves a short (no more than two minutes) presentation on a topic previously selected by the student from a list of issues, including home, family, local area, interests, travel, celebrations, and festivities, followed by a live (not pre-prepared) question-and-answer session with a panel of two or three judges. This two-part format allows students to prepare in advance some of their contribution, to check the vocabulary and structures they need, and to practice before the event. It also provides for spontaneous interaction with the judges and a chance for the participant to display their extemporization skills. The participant's performance is judged using a rubric against a series of criteria that include communication, language use, fluency, and pronunciation. Both parts are considered together with a mark out of five for each of the four criteria, equaling a total of 20 points.

While the overall goal of the competition has remained the same over several years, the competition has evolved into an inspiring and inclusive event that encourages young learners, particularly from heritage learner communities, to become confident speakers and advocates for the Arabic language.

In the first iteration of the ASC in 2021, the goals of the event were to:

- Raise the profile of Arabic as a language
- Increase students' motivation for learning Arabic
- Develop students' vocabulary and improve pronunciation and speaking skills
- Raise confidence for oral examinations
- Inspire students to discover more about Arabic cultures
- Celebrate the skills of those who have Arabic as a home or heritage language

Quickly, QFI saw that many students taking part in the ASC had some identity link to the Arabic language. While students learning Arabic as a world language also took part in the competition, the ASC has proven to resonate especially with students from a heritage background, whether through exposure to Arabic as a home language or connection to it via religion. Still, for both, the ASC provides an avenue for expressing pride in aspects of their identity in a UK-specific context. For those who use Arabic at home, it allows students to present their home language as an asset and a strength on a stage that is not necessarily specific to those heritage communities.

There are several areas where the ASC appears to prove meaningful and important to the Arabic-learning community. The ASC provides motivation and a platform for students to practice speaking in preparation for the compulsory speaking component of the GCSE. Teachers have responded positively to the need for more enhancement opportunities to encourage students to practice their speaking skills for these assessment purposes. Moreover, another advantage of the ASC is that it capitalizes on the strength of heritage learners' speaking skills, when assessments in the field of pre-college language learning typically tend to privilege non-heritage learners and focus on reading and writing, which are usually heritage learners' areas of weakness (Malone, Peyton, and Kim, 2014). Indeed, both teachers and parents have actively supported the participation of their children and students in the competition. The ASC also appears to contribute to the creation of a sense of community among Arabic learners and educators in the UK, fostering collaboration and shared enthusiasm for the language.

The ASC also raises the profile of the Arabic language itself. It acts to showcase Arabic as a versatile and adaptable world language that can be used creatively for various forms of expression, including poetry, storytelling, and music. It also aims to highlight its importance as a global language in areas of diplomacy, trade, media, and international relations. The competition reinforces the idea that Arabic is an important and useful language for a young person to learn.

From a more specific language learning perspective, the ASC seeks to develop vocabulary and improve pronunciation and speaking skills. By providing new avenues for speaking Arabic, it contributes to building confidence for language learners in demonstrating their speaking skills. The ASC requires that participants use MSA, or fuSHa (فصحى). There are several reasons for this: MSA is the language that students of Arabic learn at school in the UK; it is the language of the GCSE examination and the variety of Arabic that is expected to be used in the speaking component of that examination. It is also the language that heritage learners, who may well speak a colloquial variety of Arabic at home and with their peers, most commonly learn in their supplementary schools. Furthermore, MSA is the language of public speaking used by many speakers in the Arab world in formal and professional situations such as presentations, speeches, and interviews. We believe that the fact that the ASC is conducted in MSA has been one of the reasons heritage communities have so positively received it, as we will discuss in more detail below.

Contestants in the ASC have hailed from a wide range of backgrounds and have learned Arabic in a variety of ways, very much reflective of the varieties in labels and the nuances that they bring. Some are native speakers of Arabic who have learned MSA in schools in their home countries, others are born and raised in the UK and use Arabic at home, often speaking a colloquial dialect of the language fluently but with limited formal learning of MSA. Some have learned Arabic (MSA) from an early age for religious reasons, although they do not speak it as a home language. Yet, others have come to the language with no prior knowledge or connection to the Arab world and are at the very beginning of their Arabic journey (those who are studying Arabic as a world language in school). The ASC reflects this variety with categories for heritage and non-heritage as well as beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners.

As seen in Figures 1 and 2, nearly all ASC participants in both 2023 (97%) and 2024 (97%) were heritage learners, and participation at the secondary level was greater than participation at the primary level for both years. Between 2023 and 2024, only one non-heritage student participated at the primary level.

2023 ASC Participation

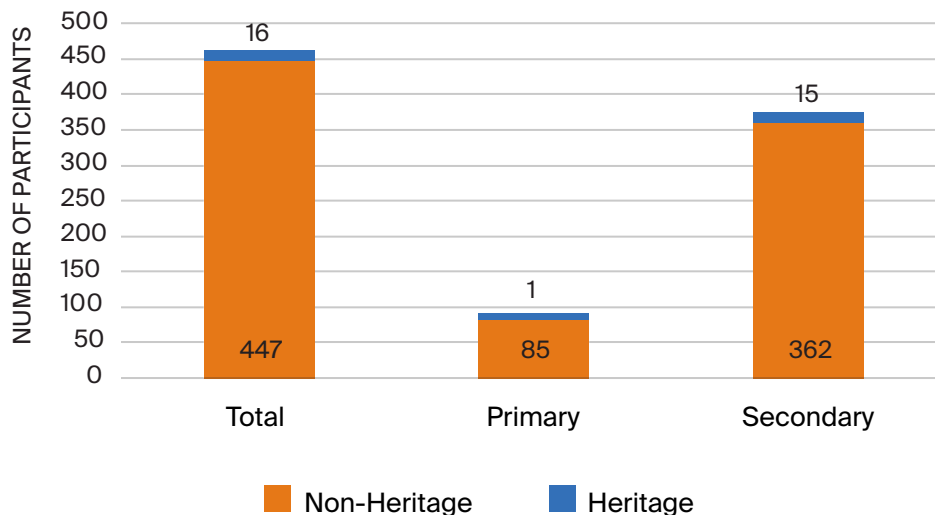


Figure 1. Of the 463 students who participated in the 2023 ASC, 447 (97%) were heritage learners. Heritage learners accounted for nearly all participants at both the primary (99%) and secondary (96%) levels.

2024 ASC Participation

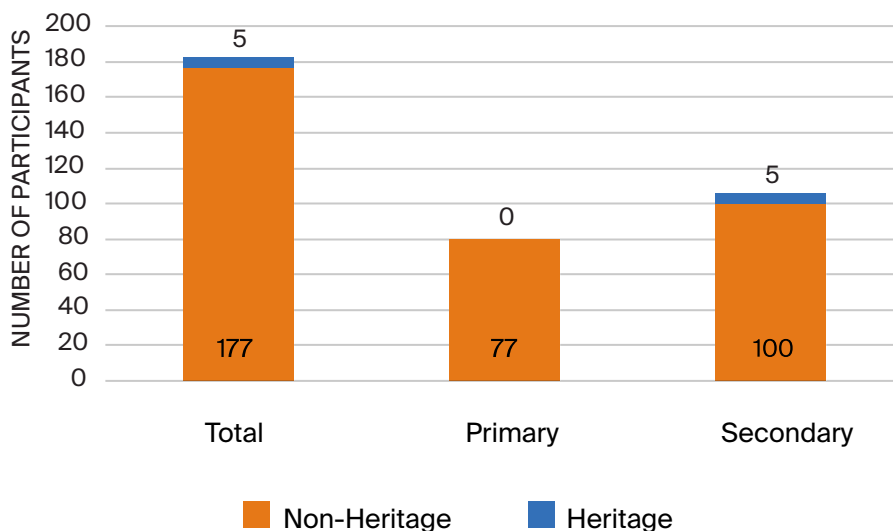


Figure 2. Of the 182 students who participated in the 2024 ASC, 177 (97%) of students were heritage learners. There were no non-heritage learners at the primary level, and most participants at the secondary level were heritage learners (95%).

Figures 3 and 4 display the representation of three types of schools in the UK - state-funded, independent, and supplementary - in the 2023 and 2024 ASCs. In 2023, most participants (70%) were students enrolled in state-funded schools, and supplementary schools accounted for 28% of all participants. This changed significantly in 2024, when state-funded schools and supplementary schools each accounted for nearly 50% of participants. In both years, independent schools accounted for less than 10% of all participants. Figure 5 displays the representation of the three school types specifically for heritage learners' participation, which is virtually the same as the representation when including all participants.

2023 Submissions by School Type

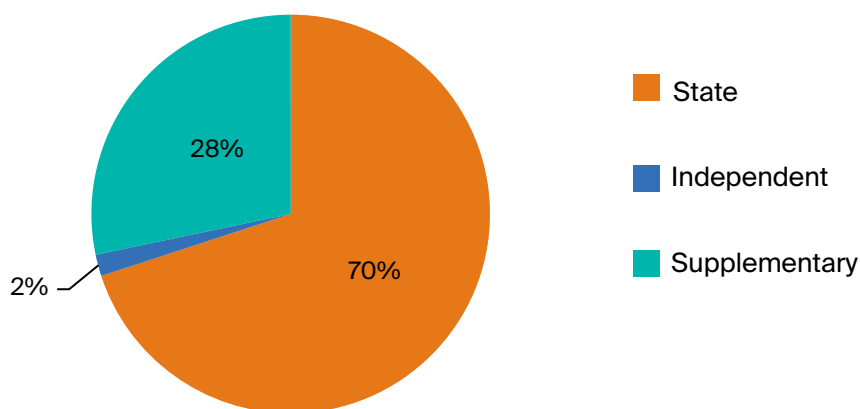


Figure 3. In 2023, most participants in the ASC were students at state-funded schools (70%), while nearly all other participants were students at supplementary schools (28%). Students at independent schools accounted for only 2% of all ASC participants.

2024 Participation by School Type

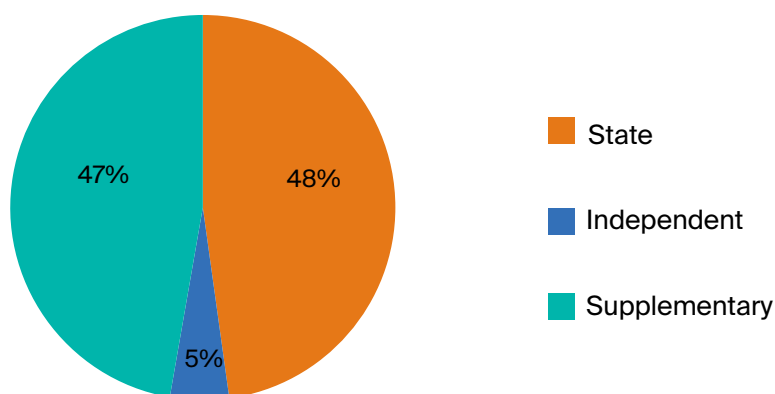


Figure 4. In 2024, nearly all ASC participants were students at state-funded schools (48%) or supplementary schools (47%). Students at independent schools accounted for only 5% of all ASC participants.

Heritage Learner Participation

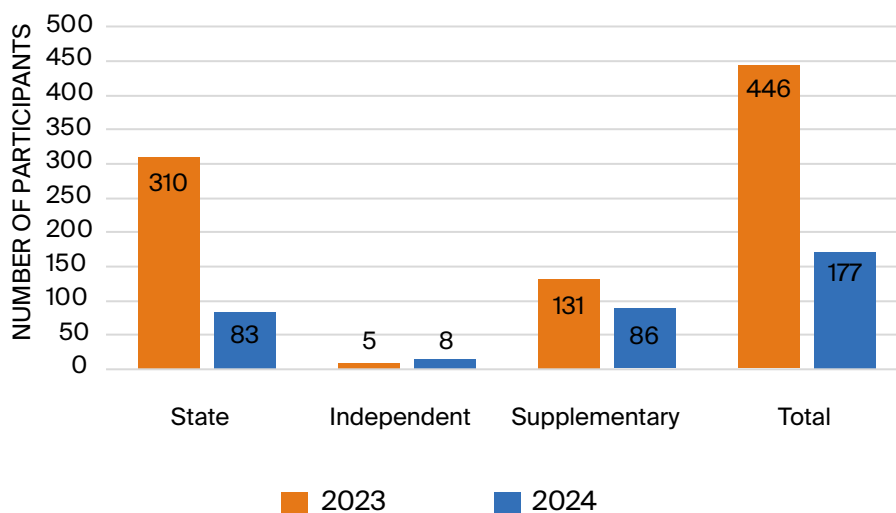


Figure 5. Nearly all ASC participants in 2023 (97%) and 2024 (97%) were heritage learners. State-funded schools accounted for the majority of heritage learner participation in 2023 (70%), in contrast to 2024, when supplementary schools accounted for most heritage learner participation (49%). In both years, students enrolled in independent schools accounted for less than 10% of all heritage learner participation, with independent schools accounting for 5% of all heritage learner participation in 2024 and 2% of all heritage learner participation in 2023.

While targeting students of all backgrounds, the competition has proven especially popular with heritage learners of the language. It has emerged as a significant factor in raising the profile of Arabic as a heritage language and a Modern Foreign Language in the UK. The ASC has also resonated strongly with parents of participants in the competition, many of whom are actively involved in their child’s preparation for the event and who attend with immense pride and joy the award ceremony if their child is one of the winners. In the 2024 ASC, 19 of the 20 winners were of Muslim or Arab background, who we are referring to in this chapter as heritage learners.

That a considerable proportion of the entrants for the ASC are heritage learners of Arabic is no surprise and may be seen to reflect the interest of those learners and their families in strengthening their knowledge of MSA. If the heritage language is not supported either at home or at school, it will soon weaken as the dominant language, in this case English, takes over with the child’s journey through formal education. As language is affected, so too is the sense of identity associated with that language. As we shall see below, maintaining identity is one of the main factors that lead parents to enroll their children in mother tongue language classes.

Feedback from participants, parents, and teachers

As part of the preparation for this chapter, QFI included the results of surveys of three teachers whose students had participated in the Arabic Speaking Competition (12 entrants to the 2024 competition and 12 entrants to the 2023 competition). The teachers surveyed by QFI then interviewed those students and their parents. Ten parents and 16 students responded.

Survey questions asked about why the teachers signed up their students to participate, the backgrounds of their students who participated, how their students felt about participating, and the impact of the competition on students' language abilities, heritage learners' attitudes towards their mother tongue, and the cultural identity of the greater Arabic-speaking community. Parents were asked related questions, including whether the ASC was viewed positively by the Arabic-speaking community and whether the ASC improved students' self-confidence. Students were asked about why they participated, what participating was like, and whether they would participate again.

Teachers

All three teachers saw the ASC as an opportunity for their students to develop their language skills, and in particular speaking and presenting, as well as building confidence and improving fluency. "I think the ASC is a powerful tool for enhancing students' language skills and related abilities," said Teacher AB. Teachers also reported that their students felt a deep sense of pride in participating and found it a meaningful opportunity to connect with their mother tongue and heritage language: "It was a chance for them to celebrate their roots, express themselves confidently, and feel empowered by representing their language and heritage on a broader stage," said Teacher NS, while Teacher OM noted: "A number of them joined to celebrate their language, others aimed to strengthen their academic pursuits and others felt an increase in confidence by speaking Arabic in front of unfamiliar audiences."

The teachers acknowledged the motivational aspect of the ASC: "It gives participants a clear purpose and an exciting challenge," commented NS, while AB observed: "Even if they don't win, the act of participating can foster a sense of achievement, enhance their confidence, and encourage continued learning. Teachers agreed that preparing for the competition encourages students to focus on their speaking and listening skills, which helps them engage more deeply with the language.

The teachers also reported how the ASC impacts students' attitudes towards their heritage language. NS observed how Arabic heritage speakers often have "complex feelings about their mother tongue, which are shaped by community attitudes, educational experiences, and social interactions." She pointed out how positive reinforcement from families and communities that value the Arabic language can instill pride and a keen sense of identity in heritage learners. All three teachers agreed that creating a positive atmosphere is essential for encouraging young heritage speakers to embrace and maintain their Arabic heritage, and that the ASC contributes to this.

Parents

When asked why they wanted their children to participate in the ASC, parents' responses focused almost exclusively on identity and linguistic ability. "As a proud Arab parent, I wanted my child to participate in the Arabic Speaking Competition because I wanted them to feel proud of their heritage and connect with their roots," explained Parent One. Parents clearly recognize the importance of Arabic in maintaining a sense of identity: "I believe that speaking Arabic can enhance his culture and identity," said Parent Two, while Parent Nine told of her child: "I wanted her to express herself in her native language, especially after facing difficult challenges when moving to the UK."

Other parents said that the ASC was an opportunity to enhance their children's Arabic skills and express themselves in their mother tongue, to express themselves clearly and eloquently, and to have a chance to explore the cultural and historical connections that Arabic, as their mother tongue, offers. Parent Two also commented on the social aspect of the ASC, "I wanted him to enjoy sharing and learn something new, connecting with other children, and sharing their experiences to help him build new friendships and increase his self-confidence."

When asked if the Arabic-speaking community views the ASC positively, all parents we surveyed agreed that it was. "It fosters a sense of pride in our language and culture, bringing people together and encouraging young generations to embrace their heritage. This support helps strengthen our identity and inspires a love for Arabic among children," said Parent One. "This competition is a positive and very important event for the Arab community in the diaspora," said Parent Three, "because it creates the spirit of competition between the children of the Arab community."

Parents recognize that the ASC provides positive reinforcement of heritage language identity. "It really helps kids feel proud of their Arabic language and culture," said Parent One. Parent Two remarked that the ASC "greatly enhances the heritage identity of the language. When they learn and compete in the use of language, they understand the stories of their heritage, their songs, and proverbs. This helps them better connect with their family and grandparents and increases their connection to their history." The parents were also in general agreement that the ASC promotes student well-being and is an opportunity to develop character and build self-confidence, and had encouraged their children to continue their Arabic studies and to read Arabic.

Students

Sixteen students who participated in the ASC gave feedback for this chapter. When asked why they had taken part, participants reported several reasons. "I wanted to challenge myself and connect more with my language and culture," said Student One. Student Nine had similar motives: "I wanted to test my limits and expose myself to a challenge." Student Five shared, "I participated because I wanted to test my Arabic skills." Student Two agreed: "Participating in the Arabic speaking competition was a great opportunity to express oneself and improve language skills."

In responding to how the ASC had impacted them, a considerable number of respondents mentioned increased confidence. "Winning the competition made me believe in myself more," said Student One, "I started to feel proud of my language and who I am. It helped me open up, and now I'm more confident when I speak, not just in competitions but in everyday life, too." Student Two said: "The experience was positively impactful, as I felt proud when speaking in front of the audience and realized the importance of my voice and my ability to influence. Overall, it was an inspiring experience that led to considerable personal growth." Student Ten echoed these sentiments, sharing, "It built my ability to convey and articulate myself in Arabic, which has built my confidence and belief that I can network using the Arabic language."

Respondents also commented on more personal aspects of their relationship with Arabic: "The Arabic language is a significant part of my identity," said Student 14, "This Arabic speaking competition was an exceptional opportunity for me to demonstrate my skills and get to know other young people who are passionate about the Arabic language." Student Seven commented on the sense of pride they felt when participating. "I felt proud when speaking about myself and my personality."

Respondents were generally positive about the experience of participating in the ASC. "Participating in the Arabic speaking competition was a positive and beneficial experience," said Student Two, "despite the stress at first, self-confidence increased over time," while Student One exclaimed: "Overall, being part of something like this made me feel really proud. It made me realize I can accomplish things I never thought I could."

All the students surveyed said that they would participate in the ASC again. They gave many reasons: wanting to win, improving their Arabic, increasing academic opportunities, and because it was "fun," "enriching," "beneficial," and "motivating." And of course, there is the sense of achievement, as Student One confirms, "Yes, I would totally participate again! Winning the competition was such an awesome feeling."

Future Directions

Building on the success of the last few years and considering the lessons learned from the different iterations of the competition, QFI plans to make the ASC an opportunity in other geographies. In the 2025/2026 academic year, QFI will hold the competition in the different geographies where we work (the US, Canada, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Spain, and Sweden) as well as continuing it in the UK. Heritage learners of Arabic make up a large part of the student population of Arabic classrooms all over the world. And while the contexts of Arabic learning may be different, the lessons learned from the ASC in the UK, and the nuances of the profile of a heritage language learner, indicate that ASCs would be welcomed and impactful in other contexts. The unique aspect of the ASC is that it is a motivational tool of learning not just for heritage language learners - as demonstrated in this chapter - but also for students learning Arabic as a second or foreign language. Holding ASCs in other geographies will provide an opportunity to build connections between learners of the language in different countries and contribute to raising awareness of Arabic as a major world language worthy of study and deserving of celebration.

Additionally, the profile of a heritage language learner deserves even more research and attention. Heritage Language Learners is an umbrella term that does not fully convey the nuance of what a learner with that label can do with the language in their everyday lives and across the four modalities of speaking, reading, writing, and listening. Teachers need to understand a student's full linguistic profile - no matter what they are labelled as - to be able to teach them so that they reach their full Arabic language potential. Specific teacher training for Arabic teachers on this is necessary, and is currently not widely available or offered. While there is professional development on differentiation, or perhaps how to accommodate having heritage language learners in class with other types of language learners, a full understanding of heritage language learners and the possibilities for advancing their Arabic language skills is not widely known by Arabic teachers.

Conclusion

The ASC has achieved a particular resonance with heritage learners, and those that we surveyed shared how the ASC is now perceived. Both parents and student participants spoke about how the competition engenders confidence and pride in their identity. One parent commented how they see it as “a valuable initiative that unites us and keeps our traditions alive” (Parent One). At the same time, another believes that such competitions “promote belonging and help prevent our culture from becoming extinct” (Parent Two). The ASC is seen as something that motivates the younger generation to preserve and master the Arabic language and enhances their ability to speak it. One parent even commented on how the ASC has impacted family ties, sharing, “the bonds between students and their families have become stronger because students rely on their parents as a reference for the Arabic language and culture. Families themselves have also become proud of their children” (Parent Three). Overall, we can see positive impacts of the ASC for teachers, parents, and students in confronting the marginalization of Arabic; challenging the negative connotations of the term “Home, Heritage, and Community Language;” reinforcing heritage language identity; and celebrating the benefits of multilingualism.

While targeting students of all backgrounds, the ASC has proven especially popular with heritage learners of Arabic, which was not necessarily the original intention of the ASC. Without explicitly setting out to do so, the ASC has helped heritage learners be proud of having prior exposure to Arabic or having heritage linked to an Arabic-speaking country. Rather than shying away from the spotlight, the ASC has motivated students with Arabic as a heritage language to want to showcase their linguistic profile to a wider audience. The ASC has shown that despite Arabic not being readily offered as a language in mainstream schools, families and students still value their heritage language and are ready to invest critical time and effort in preparation to allow them to use it with sophistication and proficiency to win.

Lastly, this chapter has also shown the challenges with using terminologies and how they do not support teachers in their planning because they could mean so many different things. Rather, teachers should think of all learners as individuals, coming to the classroom with their own linguistic profile and varied purposes for taking Arabic in school. While heritage learners - those with some background linked to Arabic, the Arab world, and/or Islam - have an additional asset when they come to the Arabic language classroom, it does not set them up immediately for success. Because students come with various feelings associated with their heritage language, in addition to students who come to Arabic as a brand-new language, differentiation is essential to meet all their needs as learners. Competitions like the ASC with varied categories allow students to partake in a way that makes sense for their own learning.

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