

Teaching Arabic as a Global Language –  
QFI Funded Research 2022–2023

# Investigating and Responding to *Teachers’ Beliefs of the Integration of Variation in Arabic School Teaching*



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2022 – 2023

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This research aims to investigate the current beliefs that Arabic schoolteachers in the UK have in relation to the integration of different varieties of Arabic into their teaching.



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# *Abstract*

This research aims to investigate the current beliefs that Arabic schoolteachers in the UK have in relation to the integration of different varieties of Arabic into their teaching. The data analysis aims to produce a set of guidelines to clear misconceptions and guide schoolteachers in how to integrate more language variation into their teaching. The research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are schoolteachers' perceptions of Arabic dialectal variation and its use by L1 Arabic speakers?
2. What are their views about the need for and the importance of integrating dialectal knowledge in school teaching?
3. What are the barriers that deter them from integrating dialectal variation in teaching?
4. For the schoolteachers who do integrate variation, what perceptions can they share with other teachers and what are the challenges they might face with regard to developing their variationist approach further?

The data collected and analysed in this research aim to develop a set of principles and Guidelines that can help schoolteachers integrate and welcome dialectal variation into their classes.

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# Section 1: Introduction

This research report is the result of a research grant, awarded by Qatar Foundation International in February 2022 to the University of Leeds. To date, a very limited amount of research has been conducted into Arabic teaching in UK schools, which does not provide a deep understanding of teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and approaches. Previous research only scratched the surface about what teachers think, especially when it comes to regional varieties. The current study directly addresses this gap, and is therefore of vital importance to Arabic teachers, school leaders, educators, and policy makers, specifically in the United Kingdom (UK). This study has four key research questions:

1. What are schoolteachers' perceptions of Arabic dialectal variation and its use by L1 Arabic speakers?
2. What are their views about the need for and the importance of integrating dialectal knowledge in school teaching?
3. What are the barriers that deter them from integrating dialectal variation in teaching?
4. For the schoolteachers who do integrate variation, what perceptions can they share with other teachers and what are the challenges they might face with regard to developing their variationist approach further?

Based on the answers to these questions, this research project also aimed to produce a set of Guidelines that would provide practical and accessible solutions for teachers with regard to the integration of language variation into their classrooms which are directly informed by the experiences and feedback of the Arabic teaching community in the UK.

After this introductory section, the second section of this research report is a literature review of different views and perceptions of sociolinguistic variation in languages in general and in Arabic in particular. It will also discuss the impact of certain perceptions that teachers may have on their choice of approaches to language teaching.

The third section presents the four main research questions and the methodology used to seek answers for them. As this is a qualitative study, it relied firstly on one-to-one interviews as well as focus group discussions that aimed at refining the Guidelines that stemmed from the interview discussions.

The fourth section of this report discusses the findings of the interviews and the focus group discussions. This is followed by the last section with concluding answers to the research questions. The Guidelines are produced as a separate document that can accompany this report or can be used on its own.



## Section 2: Literature Review

The Arabic language, classically described as being diglossic (Ferguson, 1959), operates on a continuum, with L1 speakers opting for the most suitable language code for the situation and topic under discussion (Abu-Melhim, 2014; Eisele, 2013; Suleiman, 2013). The Arabic linguistic situation is unusual even in comparison to other diglossic languages because there is a large degree of difference between FuSHa<sup>1</sup> and regional varieties (RVs) (Versteegh, 2014); FuSHa does not represent the speech of an actual community (Gibson 2013) and no one acquires it as a first language (L1: Habash 2006).

When approaching the teaching of a second language (L2), one variety has been traditionally favoured in the wider L2 field. Educators have tended to focus on the standard variety when designing an L2 programme (Horner & Weber, 2018), for example, Standard British English (BrE), High German or FuSHa. This invariable approach to teaching does not take the flexible, variational and changeable nature of the language continuum into consideration. Despite how unnatural this view is, it is notoriously pervasive due to its clarity and measurability in terms of learning. The last two decades have seen a change in the field of L2 teaching regarding perceptions of what languages are and how they are naturally used outside the classroom (Dewey & Pineda, 2020; Monfared, 2019; Szymańska-Tworek, 2016). There has been an acknowledgment in the field of Applied Linguistics that language variation is an aspect of all languages that needs to be taken into consideration when learning and teaching an L2. Research on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has inspired academic work on the nature of variation and implications to English language teaching (Kiczkowski, M., & Lowe, R. J., 2019; Misir & Gürbüz, 2021; Mohr et al., 2019). Similar discussions have increasingly taken place in the last few years regarding linguistic variation in teaching a range of languages (Ruck & Shafer, 2020).

Despite the theory of communicative competence highlighting the importance of sociolinguistic competence when learning a language (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980), when Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was introduced in Higher Education (HE) for Arabic, diglossia was sidelined as unimportant for academic purposes (Ryding, 2018). Some challenged this approach due to learners acquiring a variety which is inauthentic in certain contexts. The Integrated Approach (IA) (Al-Batal, 2018; Younes, 2015; Wilmsen, 2006; Nielsen, 1996) was put forward as an alternative which teaches learners to speak and listen in an RV and to read and write in FuSHa. Such efforts aim to portray Arabic as one by teaching two varieties of the language side by side from the start of courses (Al-Batal, 2018). Further recent discussions have gone beyond a dichotomous view and are leaning toward an approach of integrating more than two varieties of Arabic (Trentman & Shiri, 2020; Zaki & Palmer, 2018). Most of these advancements in the wider field of HE are based on research on L2 learners' needs and objectives as well as classroom observations, however, this research has yet to be expanded into the school setting. As such, it is important to investigate schoolteachers' ideologies and whether such discussions on the IA have impacted their views.

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<sup>1</sup> FuSHa is used throughout this study to refer to both Standard Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic.

## 2.1. Language ideologies

Language ideologies need to be explored in depth when investigating an individual's beliefs. For teachers, the ideologies they hold have a significant impact on the way they teach (Young & Walsh, 2010). León (2018: 45) states that "language ideologies refer to what people believe about language, its use, and its users." Horner and Weber (2018) discuss a number of pervasive language ideologies that can be found in multilingual settings: the hierarchy of languages, the standard language ideology, the one nation-one language ideology, the mother tongue ideology and the ideology of purism. Four of these are discussed below due to their significance for Arabic, including the issue of confusion, identified from research into the Teaching of Arabic as a Second Language (TASL) research (Al-Mohsen, 2016; Towler, 2021). Horner and Weber (2018) emphasise that such ideologies are 'ill-informed assumptions' about language structure and use, which tend to simplify the complex linguistic reality. All persons, whether linguists or not, hold certain beliefs about language, and not everybody holds the same beliefs. When teaching the language, understanding such belief systems is particularly important as they influence the teachers' approach and risk being handed down to learners as a confirmation bias (Towler, 2021).

### 2.1.1. The hierarchy of languages

Horner and Weber (2018: 21) define the hierarchy of languages as:

the belief that linguistic practices can be labelled and divided into 'languages' or 'dialects', 'patois', etc., which are then subsumed into a hierarchy, with 'languages' being looked upon as superior to 'dialects' and, additionally, certain languages being given a higher status as the 'national' or 'official' language of the state or community.

In purely linguistic terms, it is not possible to distinguish between language and dialect. The most cited argument in support of such a distinction is "the criterion of mutual intelligibility: if two varieties are mutually intelligible, they are dialects, and if not, they are languages" (ibid). In opposition, Horner and Weber (2018) state that some 'languages', such as Danish, Swedish and Norwegian, are largely mutually intelligible. Some Arabic 'dialects' are not, as speakers code-mix and code-switch to more widely understood varieties for intranational communication as well as avoiding dialectal language that is perceived to be too localised (Soliman, 2012; 2014). FuSHa acts as the official Arabic language and the RVs are referred to as 'dialects.' Granting FuSHa the status of a 'language' and referring to the RVs as 'dialects' could be interpreted as a socio-political stance to emphasise pan-Arab ties, closely related to the one nation-one language ideology (see 2.1.3). Suleiman (2013) states that there have been attempts at establishing the RVs as 'national languages,' but, to date, none have succeeded in either establishing RVs as widely recognised in print, within education or even to dent the authority of FuSHa in these domains to any significant degree.<sup>2</sup>

There is evidence that a hierarchy exists among Arabic RVs themselves, with "North African varieties held in a subordinate position by Middle Eastern Arabic speakers in relation to their own" (Hachimi, 2015: 39).<sup>3</sup> Research into inter-Arab dialect perceptions (Chakrani, 2015; Hachimi, 2013; S'hiri, 2013) suggests that this is reflected in inter-Arabic speech, with the communicative burden being placed on speakers of North African dialects.

<sup>2</sup> On the internet, RVs, or code-switching, are used extensively in written form (Khalil, 2019). However, this has not yet impacted policy decisions in the educational domain.

<sup>3</sup> Hachimi (2015) cites research by Herbolich (1979), Ibrahim (2020), Abu-Melhim (1991), S'hiri (2002) and Hachimi (2013) in support of this claim.

Chakrani (2015) claims that speakers of varieties that he categorises as being more prestigious, such as Egyptian and Gulf dialects, do not attempt to understand those he regarded as less prestigious varieties and expect accommodation. S'hiri (2013: 168) described this as their resistance to observe "passive accommodation." Speakers of Eastern Arabic dialects were reported as viewing Maghrebi 'Western' varieties as not being 'Arabic' enough (Chakrani, 2015). Hachimi (2013) suggests that Mashreqi 'Eastern' Arabic, especially Lebanese, seems to be an object of stylised adulation and validation, whereas Maghrebi Arabic, Moroccan in particular, is viewed as being unintelligible and, consequently, non-Arab. An alternative explanation could be that Maghrebi Arabic has low levels of comprehension as a result of little exposure, leading to a lack of confidence in understanding it as opposed to prestige.<sup>4</sup> More recently, Arabic speakers have been staying in their RVs, including those who speak in more distant varieties which can be observed through YouTube and the media.

This view has been found in research into TASL. From his interviews with Arabic teachers in Higher Education, Al-Mohsen (2016) found evidence of the ideology between the RVs relating to which ones are the 'easiest' to understand. This theme was also raised in tutor and student interviews in Towler's (2021) study. The most comprehensible varieties were classed as being closer to the 'root' and, hence, more widely understood, which was being reinforced by some tutors as a confirmation bias. Wilmsen (2014) suggests that the RVs share origins with each other, as opposed to a particular variety being 'closer' to FuSHa. To sum up, one can state that the ideologies behind the perceived hierarchy of language varieties are instigated by the individuals' own L1, its distance from other varieties and the level of exposure they have to these varieties rather than by the linguistic structures of the varieties themselves.

### **2.1.2. The standard language ideology (SLI)**

Lippi-Green (1997: 64) defined the SLI as a "bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogeneous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions." Milroy (2001) refers to them as standard language cultures, stating that the people tend to believe that "a homogeneous, standardized, one-size-fits-all language" is an actual possibility and this idea is instilled in society and language education. Horner and Weber (2018) state that the variety which becomes the standard is primarily due to socio-political developments and, contrary to what many language guardians or purists think, not to any inherent superiority of a particular variety. The notion of standard varieties of language violates the core principle of language as a pluricentric living organism in constant evolution (Horner & Weber, 2018). However, once a language has been promoted as standardized, it is not only viewed as a functional tool but also as an icon of national identity, making it indexical of what a 'good' speaker of this language should look and sound like (Lippi-Green, 1997; Mackiney, 2016). León (2018) states that the SLI is one of the most pervasive ideologies affecting language teaching.

FuSHa is regarded very highly by Arabic speakers, as clarified by Abdel-Jawad (1987: 67), "[i]t is closer to the root, a symbol of nationalism and Arab unity, the language of religion, the carrier of culture and civilization, and more effective for communication since it is mutually intelligible over the entire Arab world." Although the last point can now be challenged as more recent research shows that speakers are predominantly remaining in their own RVs (Soliman, 2014), there is still evidence of code-switching to some aspects of FuSHa.

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<sup>4</sup> More research is required into investigating Arabic L1 speakers' language attitudes.

However, speakers often switch to more widely used RVs (ibid). Despite these advancements in the use of RVs for communication, Al-Mohsen (2016) identified the existence of the deep-rooted ideology of FuSHa among Arab teachers, influencing the receptivity to change in the field of TASL. Tutors interviewed within Towler's (2021) research were split into two categories: those who supported the importance of the standard as the 'academic' variety and those who had a linguistic understanding of the language. Those with the latter had a background in Arabic linguistics and had taken it upon themselves to understand the varieties linguistically. This highlights the importance of raising awareness on language variation.

### 2.1.3. One nation-one language ideology

The one nation-one language ideology supports the notion that language is territorially bound and the link between national identity and language. Diversity is viewed as a threat to national unity and, as a result, a nation needs to be unified under one homogenous and common language. When specifically discussing the situation in Europe, Auer (2005: 406) states that it is based upon the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder's notion that "Each collectivity (particularly a nation) expresses its own character (Volkgeist) in and through its language." May (2001) states that the link between language and identity is very important to speakers. Therefore, they often develop negative attitudes toward hybrid linguistic varieties, including a fear of linguistic and cultural heterogeneity, perceived as a threat both to the national language and identity.

While this ideology draws on European theory, it is applicable to the Arabic language situation: FuSHa represents one of the deepest anchors of Arab unity throughout history (Suleiman, 2003). Historically, FuSHa has been linked to Arab and Muslim identities, evoking memories of Arab unity, power and prosperity, whereas RVs are associated with Arab division, disunity and weakness (Albrini, 2011). Albrini (2011) emphasizes the importance of FuSHa as "the language of Islamic theology and tradition" to its speakers. He adds that FuSHa is not viewed as a superposed language, but as a local language, representing the Arabic-speaking community. He claims that this differentiates the role of FuSHa vis-à-vis other standard varieties which have been imposed on a community due to asymmetric power relationships.

Pan-Arab nationalists support a united Arabic language as a unifying force among its speakers (Abuhamida, 1988; Suleiman, 2003; Haeri, 2003). Haeri (2003: 63) found when investigating three text correctors that "colonialism was also cited by all three as a reason for preserving and propagating Classical Arabic." In their study analysing teacher and learner perceptions of FuSHa in Morocco, Zakhir & O'Brien (2019: 60) state that the introduction of a dictionary in Moroccan Arabic was rejected by intellectuals who viewed it as "a linguistic conspiracy to pave the way for French to spread at the expense of FuSHa." Their research leads them to conclude (ibid: 74) that "despite its use in classrooms, TV, emails, and messages, MA [Moroccan Arabic] is perceived by students and teachers as an oral variety which does not deserve to be recognized as an official language." None of the attempts at establishing RVs as national languages made throughout the Arabic-speaking world have, to date, succeeded (Suleiman, 2013).

## 2.1.4. The ideology of purism

With regard to the ideology of purism, Horner and Weber (2018) note: “Closely intertwined with the standard language, one nation–one language and mother tongue ideologies, this ideology has a powerful evaluative component, which stipulates what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘proper’ language.” The ideology denies the linguistic reality that language is constantly in a state of flux and includes the view amongst its advocates that not all speakers of the language even have an accent (only, for example, those of the lower-class or learners of the language as an L2). Those who hold such views fear that a language will become endangered or die out.

While for Arabic, the situation differs because FuSHa is not acquired as an L1, every speaker has their own ‘dialect’ and the notion of preserving the language in its ‘pure’ form is widespread both throughout the Arab world and within the L2 classroom. Alhazmi (2021) investigates the sociolinguistic aspects of language ideologies embedded in Arabic speakers’ online interactions, focusing on the notion of Arabic purism. In that study, nationalism was found as being one of the most powerful factors affecting attitudes toward linguistic practices including Islamic and Arabic identities. Calls for Arabization are viewed as saving the Arabic and Islamic identity. Attitudes toward mixing were negative, but also viewed as fulfilling various communicative, integrative and affective functions in modern life. It is interesting to note that, despite this being a recent study and the increase in using RVs for intranational communication, the importance of preserving FuSHa still appears to be widespread

## 2.1.5. Confusion

Ruck & Shafer (2020) state that attempts to reduce complexity when teaching Arabic as L2<sup>5</sup> can “produce overly simplistic, homogenizing, and likely distorted representations of a language as well as of language users.” However, the pedagogic belief that language variation may confuse learners often guides L2 theory and practice (Durrell, 2007). The issue of confusion is a widely cited argument against integration (Parkinson, 1985: 27):

It is very difficult to incorporate Colloquial into a Standard Arabic Class without leaving the students hopelessly confused. Arabic is hard enough without having to remember from the first day you can say mish مش (not), but you can’t write it.

Featherstone stated (2018: 58), “I have asked UK colleagues why they refuse to teach a dialect alongside or even in addition to FuSHa, and many claim that it’s too complicated, too confusing.” In response, Featherstone (2018: 59) claims that this fear, widespread amongst Arabic teachers, stems from their own confusion due to lack of training. He adds, “they fear they do not have the expertise in teaching dialect because they were never taught it and they believe a dialect cannot be taught formally” (ibid; see section 7.2.4). When arguing in favour of the IA, Younes (2015) also discusses the confusion argument and views potential confusion as being a lesser evil than teaching students to communicate inauthentically. At HE institutions in the US where the IA has been introduced, academics state that the initial confusion soon diminishes and does not represent a long-term difficulty (Al-Batal, 1992; S’hiri, 2013a; Younes, 2015) or that for students, confusion does not deter them from wanting to learn RVs (Al-Batal & Glakas, 2018; Nassif & Basheer, Forthcoming; Zaki & Palmer, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting here that more research is needed to investigate the issue of confusion when teaching Arabic as L1.

There is evidence that a hierarchy exists among Arabic RVs themselves, with “North African varieties held in a subordinate position by Middle Eastern Arabic speakers in relation to their own” (Hachimi, 2015: 39).<sup>3</sup> Research into inter-Arab dialect perceptions (Chakrani, 2015; Hachimi, 2013; S’hiri, 2013) suggests that this is reflected in inter-Arabic speech, with the communicative burden being placed on speakers of North African dialects.

## 2.2. Effects of language ideologies on the classroom

When discussing ELT, Horner and Weber (2018) note that language ideologies have a negative effect on the language classroom through reinforcing the idea of ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ language as opposed to standard/non-standard language use. They add that “schools tend not to be concerned with linguistic variation and situational appropriateness, but only with an absolute notion of correctness (as defined by the prescriptive grammar or textbook).” Schoolteachers draw on this notion of correctness in their teaching and assessments.<sup>6</sup> Forms used by thousands or millions of native speakers in practice can be marked as ‘incorrect’ in language classrooms.

Some abovementioned studies into HE found that language ideologies that are not grounded in linguistic research are affecting the approach to TASL in the classroom (Towler, 2021; Al-Mohsen, 2016). Both Towler (2021) and Al-Mohsen (2016) found a clear split between teachers who are in favour of and against integrating language variation into the classroom. Further research into Arabic teacher perceptions is minimal. Azaz & Abourehab (2021) investigate Arabic teachers’ translanguaging ideologies focusing on three teacher interviews. While the main focus of that study was on translanguaging, all teachers were found to be integrating at least one Arabic RV into their teaching. This led them to conclude that “three teachers may be no longer certain about the rigid borderline between Standard Arabic and the dialects” (2021: 103).

When discussing the situation in US schools, Berbeco (2017) stated that many classroom teachers are native Arabic speakers who take a traditional approach to teaching Arabic like the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) which is not appropriate for elementary, middle, and high school learners in the United States. The situation in UK schools differs vastly to both the US and HE contexts, mainly because teachers need to prepare learners to pass external exams which are conducted entirely in FuSHa (see section below). The research into UK Arabic school teacher views is even more minimal than the former, with only one study found which merely scratched the surface on how teachers view the language (Soliman et al., 2016). In that research, most teachers (61%) oppose learning RVs and only 26% of teachers support them. This does not mean they are taught in the classroom even by those who are in favour of them. Some teachers who stated they support learning RVs said that they encourage students to learn them outside of class, which is mostly feasible only for heritage learners who have more access and exposure to the language outside of class.

It is crucial to investigate whether these views exist within the Arabic language classroom in UK schools to ensure that the Guidelines resulting from this research reconcile certain beliefs with the reality of the language situation. Raising awareness on the linguistic situation will help teachers in their approach to language variation within their classrooms.

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<sup>6</sup> This suggests that teacher training needs to be reconciled with the reality of the language situation.

## 2.3. Language policies in the UK

England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland have different language policies resulting in a range of approaches used to facilitate L2 acquisition. In England, it is compulsory for children at Key Stage 2 (KS2; age 7–11) and Key Stage 3 (KS3; age 11–14) to acquire an L2.<sup>7</sup> In Wales and Northern Ireland, L2 learning is only compulsory in KS3, but in Wales, English and Welsh are taught at KS2, and in Northern Ireland, English and Irish are taught. The policy for language learning in Scotland is based on the European Union 1 + 2 model.

In 2013, the national curriculum in England for languages programmes of study, which provides guidance on aims, attainment targets and subject content for L2s, was revised. The document clarifies that children at KS2 should learn any modern or ancient L2 and be enabled to make substantial progress in the L2 (DfE, 2013b). There needs to be an “appropriate balance of spoken and written language,” which lays the foundations for language acquisition at KS3 (ibid). This means that all primary schools need to integrate an L2 into their KS2 teaching provision with a focus on practical communication.

At KS3 (age 11–14), learners can either continue with the same language or learn a new one, but it is intended for KS3 to build upon the foundations laid in KS2 and to prepare learners for further study (see DfE, 2013c). Pupils at this level should focus on developing their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills alongside an understanding of core grammar and vocabulary. They should be able to understand and communicate personal and factual information, going beyond their immediate needs and interests in preparation for further study.

Language learning is not compulsory at KS4 (age 14–16), learners can, however, choose to pursue language study through their GCSE options. At this level, learners should “develop their ability and ambition to communicate with native speakers in speech and writing” (DfE, 2022). They should be encouraged “to step beyond familiar cultural boundaries and develop new ways of seeing the world” (ibid). The main three languages studied at GCSE and A-Level are French, German and Spanish. The numbers of learners opting for French were reported as experiencing a huge decline from 2003 to 2013.<sup>8</sup> The lesser taught languages (Urdu, Italian, Polish, Arabic and Chinese) have been steadily increasing over the same period (see Board and Tinsley, 2014). Other, less common languages (Portuguese, Turkish, Bengali, Japanese, Panjabi, Gujarati, Persian, Dutch, Modern Greek and Modern Hebrew) are also taught at GCSE level.

Learners in KS5 (AS/A-level) acquire a high level of practical language skills, including depth of knowledge, understanding and intercultural competence, while developing communication skills, critical thinking, autonomy, resourcefulness, creativity and linguistic, cultural and cognitive flexibility (see DfE, 2015). This should provide a robust foundation for further language studies, but also offer transferrable skills relevant to all subject disciplines. In the UK, degree-level Arabic is offered ab initio so there is no current pathway for A-level students into HE.

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<sup>7</sup> See DfE, 2013a

<sup>8</sup> For French, student numbers decreased from 304, 500 (2003) to 161, 800 (2013) and for German, from 120,700 in 2003 to 60,300 (2013; Board and Tinsley, 2014).

### **2.3.1. Schools offering Arabic**

In the UK, Arabic is currently taught at faith schools and some mainstream, independent and supplementary schools (discussed below). There are, in total, 172 Muslim faith schools throughout England and in Cardiff (none reported in previous studies in Northern Ireland or Scotland) teaching Arabic and Quranic Studies (Tinsley, 2015). Arabic is learnt most intensively in independent Muslim primary schools, primarily as a timetabled subject. Approximately 4% of secondary schools taught Arabic in 2012 (ibid). In both independent and state sectors, Arabic is often an enrichment or extra option as opposed to a main, timetabled subject. Some schools with relatively high Arabic GCSE numbers offer Arabic as a modern language.

### **2.3.2. Supplementary schools**

In the UK, Arabic is currently taught at faith schools and some mainstream, independent and supplementary schools (discussed below). There are, in total, 172 Muslim faith schools throughout England and in Cardiff (none reported in previous studies in Northern Ireland or Scotland) teaching Arabic and Quranic Studies (Tinsley, 2015). Arabic is learnt most intensively in independent Muslim primary schools, primarily as a timetabled subject. Approximately 4% of secondary schools taught Arabic in 2012 (ibid). In both independent and state sectors, Arabic is often an enrichment or extra option as opposed to a main, timetabled subject. Some schools with relatively high Arabic GCSE numbers offer Arabic as a modern language.

### **2.3.3. FuSHa focus**

UK schools offering GCSEs and A-levels in Arabic focus on FuSHa because it is the variety students are examined in. This is despite a large percentage of teachers stating that learning RVs is important (Soliman et al, 2016). An Arabic A-level qualification includes no oral examination at all, which is inconsistent with examinations in other A-level languages. There is no pathway for students to progress from GCSE and A-level to an undergraduate degree (British Academy, 2018). Some schools have created their own communicative courses which are not part of the GCSE or A-level programmes but aim to help students speak Arabic and focus on diversity within the language (Soliman et al, 2016). Teachers state that this provides a useful introduction to the language for learners who want to learn Arabic in institutions, but it is only available at a limited number of schools. Research to date has not explored, in any depth, teachers' perceptions of integrating language variation, which is crucial to understanding how it is approached within the classroom, as directly addressed by the current study.



# Section 3: Methodology

## 3.1. Research questions

1. What are schoolteachers' perceptions of Arabic dialectal variation and its use by L1 Arabic speakers?
2. What are their views about the need for and the importance of integrating dialectal knowledge in school teaching?
3. What are the barriers that deter them from integrating dialectal variation in teaching?
4. For the schoolteachers who do integrate variation, what perceptions can they share with other teachers and what are the challenges they might face with regard to developing their variationist approach further?

## 3.2. Methodology

UK schools offering GCSEs and A-levels in Arabic focus on FuSHa because it is the variety students are examined in. This is despite a large percentage of teachers stating that learning RVs is important (Soliman et al, 2016). An Arabic A-level qualification includes no oral examination at all, which is inconsistent with examinations in other A-level languages. There is no pathway for students to progress from GCSE and A-level to an undergraduate degree (British Academy, 2018). Some schools have created their own communicative courses which are not part of the GCSE or A-level programmes but aim to help students speak Arabic and focus on diversity within the language (Soliman et al, 2016). Teachers state that this provides a useful introduction to the language for learners who want to learn Arabic in institutions, but it is only available at a limited number of schools. Research to date has not explored, in any depth, teachers' perceptions of integrating language variation, which is crucial to understanding how it is approached within the classroom, as directly addressed by the current study.

### 3.2.1. Sample and recruitment

Participant	Years of Experience	Qualification	Levels taught	School setting	Learner background	In favour of having a set of guidelines	Focus group attended
1	Over 25	None	KS4 (GCSE); A-level	Supplementary	Primarily of Arab/Muslim background	Split	Online discussion
2	6	PGCE in teaching MFL	KS4 (GCSE)	Mainstream secondary school	Primarily of Muslim background	For	None
3	Over 20	Not from the UK	KS4 (GCSE); A-level	Supplementary	Primarily of Arab/Muslim background	Against	None

Participant	Years of Experience	Qualification	Levels taught	School setting	Learner background	In favour of having a set of guidelines	Focus group attended
4	Over 20	PGCE	KS4 (GCSE); A-level	Supplementary	Primarily of Arab background	For	None
5	3	Diploma in teaching methodologies	KS4 (GCSE)	Supplementary	Primarily of Arab/Muslim background	For	None
6	Over 10	Undergraduate degree in Arabic and CPD	KS1; KS2	Mainstream primary school	Mixed backgrounds but mostly non-Arab	For	In-person discussion
7	3	Undergraduate degree in Arabic and currently training for a QTLS	KS4 (GCSE)	Two mainstream secondary schools	Mixed backgrounds	Not asked	None
8	8	PhD in the Libyan variety; Egyptian certificates in TASL	KS4 (GCSE)	Mainstream and supplementary schools	Primarily of Arab background	Against	In-person discussion
9	15	Degree in Arabic; no teaching qualification	KS4 (GCSE)	Supplementary	Primarily of Arab background	For	None
10	22	Fully QTS qualified	KS4 (GCSE)	Faith school	Primarily of Muslim background	Split	None
11	Over 16	MA in education	KS3; KS4 (GCSE)	Mainstream secondary school	Primarily non-Arab & non-Muslim background	Split	Online discussion
12	Over 22	Currently doing QTS	KS1; KS2; KS3; KS4 (GCSE); A-level	Mainstream secondary and a supplementary school	Mixed background	Against	In-person discussion
13	8	TA qualification	KS1; KS2; KS3; KS4 (GCSE)	Supplementary	Primarily of Arab/Muslim background	For	In-person discussion

Participant	Years of Experience	Qualification	Levels taught	School setting	Learner background	In favour of having a set of guidelines	Focus group attended
14	3	TASL (generic qualification); MA in linguistics	KS4 (GCSE)	Supplementary	Primarily of Arab/Muslim background	Split	In-person discussion
15	5	BA in education; MA in education & sociology	KS1; KS2; KS3	Supplementary	Primarily of Arab/Muslim background	For	None
16	5	None	KS1; KS2	Supplementary	Mixed background	Split	None
17	10 years	TASL diploma from SOAS	KS1; KS2; KS3; KS4	Supplementary	Primarily of Arab background	For	Online discussion

*Table 1: Participants*

Table 1 details the teachers included in the research as interview participants, including their qualifications, experience and whether they attended the focus group discussions. To recruit teachers for interviews, the three leads of the Arabic Teachers Councils in the UK were sent an email to distribute to schoolteachers. This did not yield enough respondents, so schoolteachers known personally to the researchers were contacted and a call for research participants was put on social media. This yielded a total of 17 respondents who committed to being interviewed. The majority of them (13; 70%) were from supplementary and/or faith schools and six (30%) were from mainstream schools, with two of them teaching at both mainstream and supplementary schools. Two focus groups were held, one was in-person and the second online to include a wider geographical reach of participants. Six teachers attended the in-person discussion and three the online. All respondents from the first phase of the research were contacted personally and a £50 voucher was offered to schoolteachers participating in both phases of the research. It was difficult to schedule a discussion with all participants because mainstream teachers work during the week and supplementary schoolteachers over the weekend. Despite these challenges, teachers from a range of backgrounds, opinions and schools were included in the focus group discussions (see table 1).

### 3.2.2. Limitations

There are limitations to interviews, such as epistemological implications as they are dependent on the respondent's ability to verbalise, interact, conceptualise and remember (Mason, 2002). However, this is the most effective way to understand belief systems in greater depth and consequently answer the RQs. Data could be compromised by subjectivity and bias on the part of the interviewer (Cohen et al., 2011; Litosseliti, 2011). The effects of this will be mitigated through member checking. Focus groups in particular may be subject to bandwagonism and certain individuals dominating discussion, but it is hoped these limitations will be reduced through the first phase of the research. This research investigates teachers' perceptions by directly asking questions. Therefore, the analysis details what they think they do in the classroom, which may not be reflective of the reality.

### 3.2.3 Procedures

#### *Interviews*

The first phase of the research included semi-structured interviews which were used due to their relatively informal style, fluid and flexible structure and as knowledge is reconstructed as opposed to being straightforwardly excavated (Mason, 2002). Because knowledge is required on participants' individual experiences in learning Arabic, this was deemed suitable for the research. Semi-structured interviews come across as a conversation with purpose to the interviewee but were prepared for by establishing the key themes for discussion, so that useful data could be generated (ibid; see appendix). Semi-structured interviews require the researcher to think on their feet due to the absence of a predesigned set of questions. Participants were given the option of having the interviews conducted in English or Arabic. Written notes were kept during the interviews.

#### *Focus group discussions*

To prepare for the focus group discussions, data from the interviews was analysed. The key themes were identified and common misconceptions were used to directly inform the first draft of the Guidelines. To refine the Guidelines and verify their acceptability and suitability to support teachers in integrating RVs in teaching, focus group discussions were arranged to seek participants' feedback on the Guidelines. Focus groups provide an environment for reflections and deeper thinking, where individuals do not only voice their own opinions but merge them with the opinions of other participants in the group (Phakiti et al., 2018). Therefore, it was decided that focus group discussions would be an appropriate method for collecting feedback on the Guidelines that stems from a conversation with a group of teachers rather than relying on separate feedback from each participant. It was also important that those who participated in the interviews were the same participants invited for the focus group discussions as they were already aware of the aims of the research and would be the ones to link the perceptions they shared in their interviews and how they see the Guidelines addressing the issues they raised in the interviews. Two focus group discussions were arranged: one in-person and one online to accommodate participants' preferences. Both discussions were recorded for data analysis.

### 3.2.4. Data Analysis

The data from the interviews were transferred into word processing files for analysis. Answers that were given in Arabic were translated into English for the sake of consistency. The data were then analysed through a hand-coding process, divided into small units and assigned labels. The codes were also grouped into themes, which were in turn grouped into larger dimensions and related or compared. After analysing the data from the interviews, the Guidelines were written in preparation for the focus group discussions. The data resulting from the focus group discussions were also hand coded and analysed as in the first phase.

## Section 4: Research Findings

In this section, the main findings from the interviews which directly informed the writing of the Guidelines are presented. In section 4.6, participants' responses to the Guidelines are discussed, including the findings from the focus group discussions.

### 4.1. Participants' use of Arabic varieties

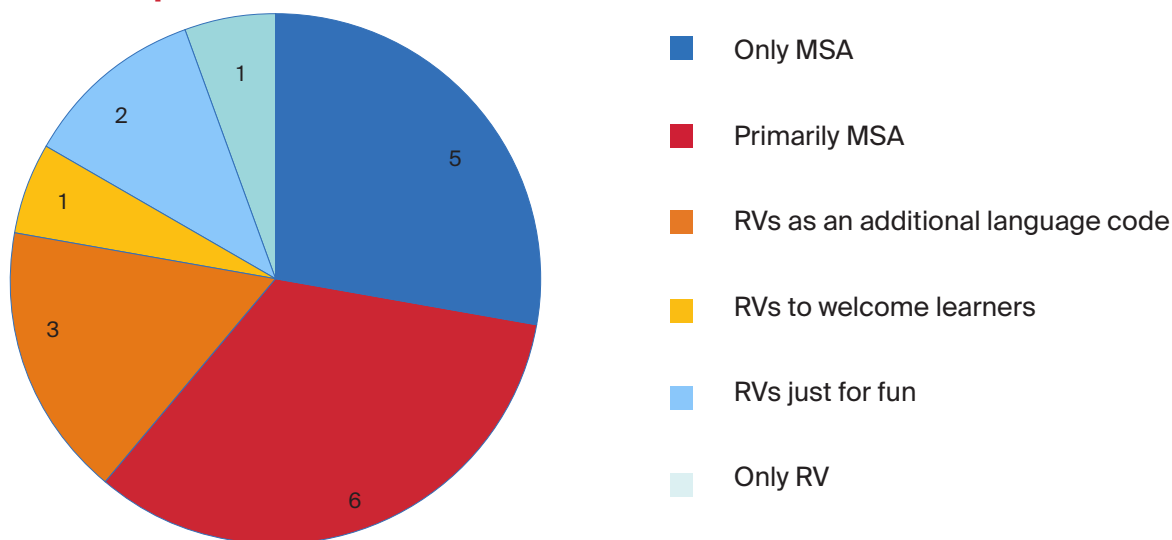


Figure 1: Variety primarily used by participants for classroom instruction

Variety used by participants	
Only FuSHa	5
Primarily FuSHa	6
RVs as an additional language code	3
RVs to welcome learners	1
RVs just for fun	2
Only RV	1

Table 2: Key to Figure 1

During the interviews, participants were asked about the approach taken to language variation within the classroom, including the language code used during lessons. Table 2 and Figure 1 above illustrate the varieties that the participants stated to be utilising for classroom instruction. Eleven participants stated that they teach in FuSHa, two of these 11 mentioned that there are times when they slip into their RVs:

Teachers of Arabic need to be realistic, we can't expect pupils to speak purely in FuSHa when it is something we do not do ourselves. (Participant 9)

Participant 11, who has a long experience teaching and training Arabic teachers in the UK, reinforced the idea that teachers can find it difficult to speak in FuSHa all the time. A majority of participants (11) stated that they either inclusively or primarily stick to FuSHa, so it could be that this issue has not been recognised by the participants themselves or they feel that they 'should' be speaking in FuSHa in the classroom, pointing to the existence of the SLI (see section 2.1.2). Three participants, who primarily teach learners of Arab background, stated they refer to an RV as an additional language code within the classroom, using it to explain the message to heritage learners when FuSHa has not been understood, before resorting to English. Only one teacher (participant 17) stated that she teaches in an RV (see 4.5.3). Although the majority believe that the language code for the classroom should be FuSHa, RVs are being utilised for instruction, warranting deeper investigation (see 4.5.3). It is worth noting here that these statements are the teachers' self-reporting. Further research into the reality of language use and code-switching through classroom observations may confirm or negate the teachers' perceptions of the varieties they use in their classes.

## 4.2. Arabic vis-a-vis other L2s

Six participants stated they have taught additional languages to Arabic: French, German, Latin, Urdu and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It was mentioned by participants of other European languages that acquiring the script and complicated grammar is time consuming, putting learners at a disadvantage in comparison to other L2s. Due to these two issues, the fun and engaging aspects of Arabic have "already been squeezed out" (participant 7). Participant 2 stated that she feels like a different teacher for Arabic as she can make her French lessons much more fun and engaging. Whereas participant 11 stated that language diversity is not included for other L2 languages, which are taken "more seriously," so the situation for Arabic should not be treated differently. It has been argued that Arabic diglossia is what makes the language unique, making it require a different approach to European languages (Towler, 2021).<sup>9</sup> This highlights the need for raising awareness on the language situation for Arabic for teachers and students.

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<sup>5</sup> This is because MSA is not acquired by anyone as an L1, it is not spoken on a day-to-day basis in any part of the Arabic-speaking world and, while there are similarities, there are vast differences between MSA and the RVs.

### 4.3. Learners' RV usage in the classroom

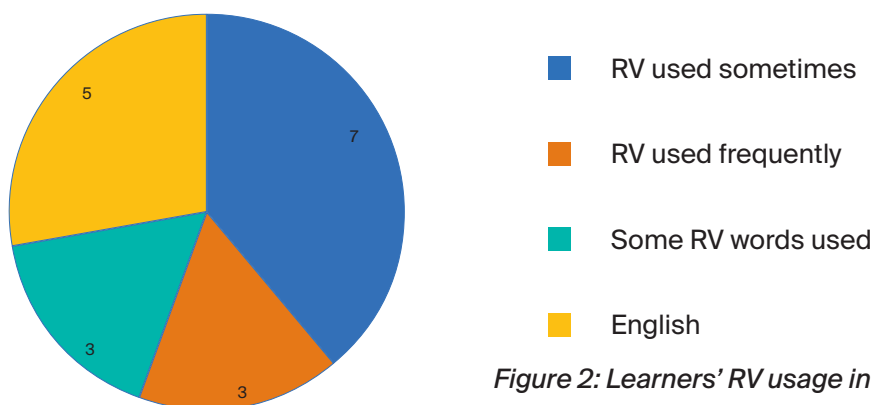


Figure 2: Learners' RV usage in the classroom

Learners' RV usage in the classroom	
RV used sometimes	7
RV used frequently	3
Some RV words used	3
Some RV words used	5

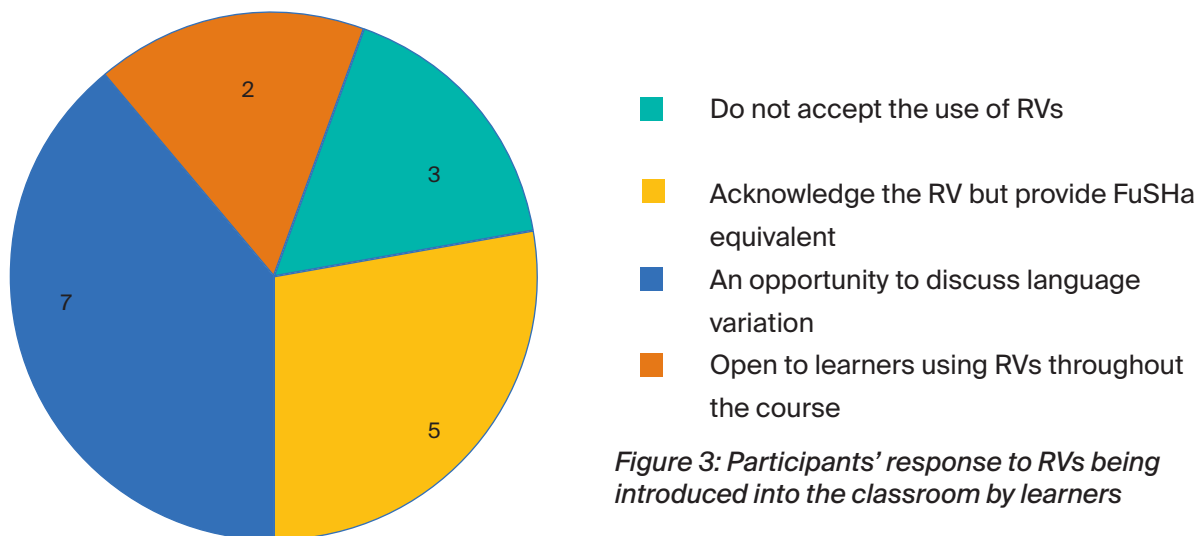
Table 3: Key to Figure 2

When asked about the variety used by learners, 10 participants stated pupils (who come from Arab backgrounds) use their RVs within the classroom. An additional three said their usage is more minimal, with only a few lexical items being introduced into lessons. Five participants mentioned that they have more of a 'problem' with learners speaking in English. Participant 14 went further than this, emphasising that it is challenging for her to help her students to view Arabic as an actual language, as opposed to an academic subject needed to pass an exam.<sup>10</sup> Table 3 and Figure 3 above present the data regarding learners' use of RVs in class.

Participants who stated that there are learners who speak among themselves in the RV were asked during the interviews how they deal with such occurrences. From these responses, the participant approach can roughly be split into four groups as presented below in Figure 3 and Table 4. The four opinions are: those who do not accept the use of RVs (three); those who acknowledge learners' varieties but provide the FuSHa equivalent (five); those who take these instances as an opportunity to discuss and raise awareness around language variation (seven); and those who let learners openly use their own varieties throughout the course (two). This means, the majority does recognise that discussions on language variation need to be present in the classroom, but a unified solution is required to ensure it is approached both effectively and linguistically. Even among participants who were more open to discussing language variation, there is evidence that certain ideologies need to be reconciled with the reality of Arabic language variation. For example, some of the participants who did not mind students using their RVs said that they still try to provide them with the 'correct' forms, meaning the FuSHa equivalents. This indicated a misconception regarding what is considered 'correct' versus the simple reality of 'variation'.

<sup>10</sup> Student motivation is an issue facing all subject disciplines and is out of the scope of this research. However, research into learner motivations specifically for Arabic suggests that this is a misconception (see Ramezanzadeh, 2021).

**PARTICIPANTS RESPONSE TO RVS BEING INTRODUCED INTO THE CLASSROOM BY LEARNERS**



Participants' response to RVs being introduced into the classroom by learners	
Do not accept the use of RVs	3
Acknowledge the RV but provide FuSHa equivalent	5
An opportunity to discuss language variation	7
Open to learners using RVs throughout the course	2

*Table 4: Key to Figure 3*

The participants who are against the integration of RVs into the classroom insisted that the RVs cannot be referred to within an educational setting. For example:

We can't teach our children slang (participant 3).

Despite the traditional focus on solely teaching FuSHa, only three participants interviewed were completely against integration. They emphasised that when RVs are used by learners within their classrooms, they continue to insist on using FuSHa regardless of how frequently they are referred to. Most participants (nine) noted that using the RV is not incorrect language use: they acknowledge that it is an RV which has been used by the learner before providing the FuSHa equivalent. For example:

This is dialect, we use FuSHa (participant 7).

Seven stated they expand on this, viewing the introduction of the RV into the classroom as an opportunity to raise awareness on language variation. In those classrooms, differing levels of integration have been identified. Some participants briefly discuss the region and its variation, providing a comparison of lexis and phrases. Participant 5 stated that she puts a table on the board so learners can identify the similarities and differences themselves.



Participant 14 deeply engages learners in the activity, asking them how they say a certain phrase in their own RVs.<sup>11</sup> This opens a discussion on the similarities and differences between the varieties. Participant 8 noted that this means, despite not teaching the RVs, learners themselves are introducing them into the classroom and raising awareness on language diversity (see section 4.5.3). Such instances are not as frequent in classrooms without heritage learners. Learners in those lessons cannot benefit from a background understanding of the language situation and are more likely to be confused and frustrated when encountering Arabic used in practice (Towler, 2021).

#### 4.4. Barriers

Barriers to integration	
Exam orientation	12
Which variety and FuSHa as the most widely understood	11
Stigma against RVs	8
Confusion between the different varieties	6
English	4
Teacher education	4
Parental opposition	3
Resources	2

*Table 5: Barriers to integration*

During the interviews, participants were asked what they perceive the barriers are to integrating RVs into the classroom. Table 5 lists the points raised and the number of participants mentioning them. This was an open-ended question so they could discuss numerous barriers depending on their own experiences, detailed in the proceeding sections.

##### 4.4.1. The examinations as a barrier

The examination was referred to as representing the biggest barrier to integrating variation into the classroom, raised in twelve teacher interviews.<sup>12</sup> They stated that as the exam is in FuSHa, it needs to be the variety prioritised within the classroom. Four of the six mainstream secondary school teachers interviewed recognized not only the importance of including RVs but that learners thoroughly enjoy discussing and learning about them.

<sup>11</sup> In the past decade, a plethora of research, theories and debates have been published supporting the critical role of student engagement in learning. For further discussion, see Kuh et al., 2008; Thomas, 2011; Zepke, 2015, and Leach, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> The RVs not being in the examination could be seen as forming a base for the solution (see 4.5.5).

However, those participants feel they cannot spend too much time on language variation due to the focus on the exam and time constraints specifically within mainstream schools to prepare learners to pass it, especially for non-heritage learners:<sup>13</sup>

‘Every second’ of contact hours needs to be spent on FuSHa so children have enough input to understand the exam (participant 11).

In mainstream secondary schools, learners only receive an average of two hours of instruction per week, which means that “every minute needs to be spent preparing learners for the exam” (participant 9). These participants mentioned that they feel the aspects of learning Arabic which are fun and engaging for learners have been squeezed out to focus on passing the exam. Integrating more culture, which includes the RVs and provides more authentic material was suggested as a solution to making Arabic more interesting for both teachers and learners (see 4.5.1). This highlights the importance of making the Guidelines flexible so teachers can integrate as much or as little as they have the time for (see 4.6.3).

Comments from the interviews suggest that the exam is being used as an excuse to reject the RVs and prioritize FuSHa. For the purposes of the exam, it is understandable that there is a need for a standard language code to facilitate the assessment process. When discussing potentially making changes to the exam with participants, only one suggested amending the speaking to provide learners with a ‘flavour’ of each variety (participant 2).<sup>14</sup> Other participants, even those open to language variation, stated it was easier to focus on FuSHa for the purposes of the exam. Three raised the issue that the listening exam can be too confusing for learners due to inconsistencies in the accent used. This supports the need for raising awareness on language variation within the classroom, so learners know to expect a certain degree of variation and can be equipped with appropriate strategies to deal with such instances (see 4.5.3). It can be argued here that a review of the exam’s content and approach needs to be conducted in consultation with both learners and teachers in order to reconcile the discrepancy between the exam’s objectives and the learners’ needs.

### *Learners’ backgrounds*

As abovementioned, heritage learners introduce RVs into the classroom, which is the only way learners are currently exposed to variation in a classroom setting. Participant 11 expanded on this, emphasising that when learners come with a former understanding of Arabic, it frees up more time for a discussion on variation. She clarified that heritage learners acquire FuSHa more quickly so less of the lesson is needed to cover the basics. Teachers of non-heritage learners need to invest more time in acquiring the script and pronunciation, meaning those skills are prioritized over language variation.

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<sup>13</sup> This point was emphasised by three of the four teachers interviewed from state secondary schools.

<sup>14</sup> The specifics of the examination requires further research and investigation.

## 4.4.2. Which variety?

Seven participants stated that it would be too difficult to incorporate RVs due to the question of which variety to teach. This issue has been raised extensively in the literature, which suggests that learning any variety is beneficial for learners and facilitates acquiring other varieties (Trentman, 2011; S'hiri, 2013; Al-Batal & Glakas, 2018). Participant 8 elaborated on her reasoning:

It wouldn't be fair on the other dialects to select one but learning some of them would be a waste of time.

Indirectly stigmatizing certain dialects through selecting one to teach needs to be considered when exploring their incorporation into a language curriculum (Towler, 2021). This comment suggests a stigma against certain varieties over others, as highlighted in the 'hierarchy of languages' (see 2.1.1), evidenced in six interviews. Participant 8 also stated that she would not feel comfortable teaching a more widely understood variety (in her opinion), such as Egyptian, because it is not her L1. Teachers need to be made aware that they do not need to know everything: integrating the RVs can be an enjoyable learning journey for both teachers and learners.

The question of which variety to teach feeds into the argument that FuSHa is 'the standard', the variety understood by everyone, hence, it 'should' be the variety used in schools. This was raised in four interviews, pointing to the existence of the SLI among Arabic school teachers. However, it provides evidence that RVs are becoming more accepted with seven including them in the classroom. From four interviews, a hidden stigma can be identified through their contradictory beliefs. For example, participants have been identified who are more outwardly accepting of the RVs, but at the same time, they also question whether their origins are Arabic and confine their usage to culture or 'just for fun' (see 4.4.3). This suggests more needs to be done to raise awareness on the reality of Arabic language variation (see 4.4.6).

The argument of 'which variety' to teach is continuously present when discussing variation (see 4.4.2). Teachers need to be made aware that integrating does not mean selecting one variety but raising awareness on the existence of variation and familiarising learners with examples including the similarities and differences between the RVs in general.

## 4.4.3. Stigma

The abovementioned stigma against certain Arabic varieties or RVs in general represents a barrier to integration. This barrier is fuelled by language ideologies, including the idea that exposing learners to variation would confuse them (see 4.4.4). Participant 9 stated that "people always look down on the dialects," which puts learners off learning the language. Seven participants voiced a stigma against RVs in general. Although seven participants clarified that Arabic speakers should be proud of their mother tongue varieties, contradictory beliefs can be identified from their comments:

- Some origins [of RVs] are not Arabic. (Participant 1).
- FuSHa is needed for work and is the most widely understood variety. (Participant 3).
- Is it [the RV] Arabic? (Participant 6).
- There are too many differences among the dialects to include a snapshot of each country. (Participant 8).

- Dialects are only needed to talk to relatives. (Participant 14).

These comments suggest certain beliefs need to be reconciled with the reality of the language situation (see 4.4.6). Participant 9 highlighted that the North African varieties are “looked down on,” claiming there is “no respect” for them.<sup>15</sup> She clarified:

This is due to a lack of exposure and knowledge, and, when people experience and learn about them, they will find that they have their ‘own beauty.’

Until such views are addressed, they will continue to be passed down to learners as a confirmation bias. The comments discussed here regarding the stigma of using/introducing RVs support the need for the Guidelines resulting from this research to address some of the misconceptions that Arabic teachers may have about RVs.

#### 4.4.4. Confusion

The issue of confusion was raised by six participants:

- Integrating more varieties would cause learners “too much unnecessary confusion.” (Participant 16).
- Dialects would make too much “background noise” and create more confusion. (Participant 8).

The argument that learning more than one variety of Arabic is confusing is widely addressed in the literature. Academics argue that it can be managed and eventually diminishes (Featherstone, 2018; Younes, 2015). It has also been argued that it is more frustrating for learners to encounter varieties they are unaware of (Towler, 2021). Heritage learners, in particular, could lose confidence in speaking the language when the variety they have acquired at home is continuously corrected in the classroom. Participant 15 stated that at her school, they encourage learners to speak in any variety they can. She discussed one student who was of Egyptian heritage and, although his teacher did not speak Egyptian, his fluency improved because of being allowed to speak in the variety he was most comfortable with. Participant 17 went further than this by developing her own curriculum and pedagogy for supplementary schools which teaches heritage learners to speak in RVs from day one (see 4.5.3). When asked whether learners are confused, she responded, “what’s the confusion?” She added that she can understand how pupils who have learnt through the textbook approach to FuSHa may get confused, but their ‘home grown’ learners, who have been with them since day one, are not confused. This presents a strong counterargument to those who omit variation out of fear of confusion.

#### 4.4.5. English

Four participants stated that their pupils prefer to use English over any of the RVs. Participant 14 emphasised that she is already struggling to motivate learners to acquire the language. Her own view is that learners only need their RVs to talk to family members. With their peers and when using the internet, they prefer English as it is their L1<sup>16</sup> and, hence, it is the most comfortable language code.

<sup>15</sup> Participant 2 and 8 both speak North African varieties and stated that, as a result, they would not be able to teach their L1 varieties.

<sup>16</sup> Even for Arabic heritage learners who speak at least one Arabic RV of at home, English is one of their L1s. They can be considered bilinguals speaking English and an Arabic RV as their L1.

She believes that if RVs are to be integrated into the classroom, they would need to be included within the exam to motivate learners to acquire them. This can be viewed as a contradictory statement as she stated elsewhere that her learners viewing Arabic as a subject to pass as an exam has a negative impact on their motivation.

#### 4.4.6. Teacher education

It has been identified from some of the preceding comments that teacher development is needed to reconcile certain beliefs about the reality of the language situation. It was additionally highlighted in four interviews that Arabic teachers require further training to give them the confidence to consider the integration of RVs in their classes.

- Participant 7 stated that as a non-native speaker of Arabic, she feels she would not be qualified to teach the dialect. She also raised ‘the issue’ that the RV she learnt at university was Moroccan.
- New teachers have many difficulties; they are not qualified like teachers of European languages (Participant 11).

Despite nine participants discussing how they raise awareness around the use of RVs and seven advocating for Arabic speakers to be proud of the RVs, most of their comments support the existence of language ideologies, which they may not be aware of. For example:

- In commenting on the possibility of integrating aspects of the RVs in teaching, participant 1 said “Maybe. However, would not go too deep, but open to discussing the origins and differences but would not teach the vocabulary, as some of the origins are not Arabic.”
- [Despite believing that Arabic speakers should be proud of their own varieties], participant 4 teaches learners the “more correct” and “better” way; “it is taken more seriously.”
- Is it [the RV] Arabic? (Participant 6).

Five participants overtly supported prioritising FuSHa stating that it is the variety understood by everyone and reinforcing the idea that FuSHa is used as a lingua franca. Research (Soliman, 2014) now suggests that speakers are predominantly remaining in their own RVs, with instances of code-switching to more widely recognised RVs, in addition to FuSHa. Despite these advancements in identifying the use of RVs for communication, and in support of previous research (Al-Mohsen, 2016) the deep-rooted ideology of FuSHa still exists among Arabic teachers, influencing the receptivity to change in the field of TASL.

Although, there are participants who said they avoid using the word ‘correct’ when providing the FuSHa alternative for RVs used in the classroom, the idea of FuSHa being ‘proper,’ ‘formal’ or ‘better’ crept into many of their comments. As abovementioned, the idea that FuSHa is the more ‘serious’ variety was identified from the interviews, with the usage of the RVs being limited to “making fun” (participant 14), making learners “laugh” (participant 5) or confining their usage to culture:

- [Participant 1] is “happy for students to use their mother’s variety when discussing food,” but other (less cultural) references would be “corrected into the standard.”

Participant 16 stated that she would like to teach Arabic more communicatively, but this would be purely in FuSHa. This indicates an incomplete understanding of the theory of communicative competence as sociolinguistics needs a place for the approach to result in the desired outcomes of truly communicative Arabic (see Olshtain & Celce-Murcia, 2005; Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972). All these comments further highlight a major shift needed in teacher education programmes and professional development for Arabic teachers.

#### **4.4.7. Parental opposition**

Within the interviews, there was minimal reference to parental opposition, with only three participants voicing it as a potential barrier against integration. Participant 11 discussed a parent who was frustrated about the use of Egyptian in the classroom to clarify that using the RV can cause unnecessary hassle for the teacher. She also stated that, similarly to comments made by some Arabic teachers themselves, parents may question whether the RVs are Arabic and stress the importance of FuSHa for the Quran. Participant 4 mentioned that some parents ask about the nationality of the teacher as they do not want their children to acquire a different variety from the one spoken at home. She added that teachers need to be careful when 'correcting' the child's home variety because it may cause issues with parents, if they are told not to use it.

Participant 13 said she did not include language variation in her teaching, but after discussing it in the interview, noted it was something she would like to try. She added that if there was any parental opposition, she does not believe it would pose a problem because she could clarify her reasoning to parents if the approach was questioned.

#### **4.4.8. Resources**

While it is interesting to note that only two participants cited resources as a barrier against integrating RVs in teaching, it could be because a limited number of participants have actually integrated RVs. Other participants, even the ones who in the interviews have shown interest in integrating RVs in their classes, would not be aware that there is a growing number of resources for RVs. Some of these include ready-made classroom activities. Participant 8 gave this generic comment on the limited resources implying that it would be difficult to locate resources for RVs:

The Arabic field in general already has limited resources, everything has to be created from scratch, so it is too complicated to teach [RVs]. The barriers discussed above mean that the Guidelines must include practical solutions and examples of how to integrate variation and a list of appropriate resources, which educators can refer to. Because the examination has been cited as representing the biggest barrier to integration due to the FuSHa focus and time restrictions in classrooms to prepare learners for passing the exam, it is crucial that the Guidelines make time-efficient and practical solutions so that integration is accessible to teachers and does not take too much focus away from exam preparation. The next barrier is a stigma against the RVs, which is fuelled by language ideologies, including the idea that exposing learners to variation would confuse them. This highlights the importance of raising awareness within the Guidelines so that such beliefs can be reconciled with reality.

The argument of ‘which variety’ to teach is continuously present when discussing variation. Teachers need to be made aware that integrating does not mean selecting one variety but simply raising awareness of the existence of variation and familiarising them with examples including the similarities and differences between the RVs in general.

#### 4.5. Participants’ suggestions regarding the place of RVs in class.

Solutions	
Raising awareness strategies & techniques	13
Culture	9
Learner enjoyment	6
Shifting opinions	3

*Table 6: Suggested solutions*

Table 6 details the ideas suggested by participants for how and why to incorporate RVs within the classroom. Ten of them elaborated on their own strategies of dealing with Arabic variation within their classrooms, as discussed below.

##### 4.5.1. Raising awareness strategies and techniques

From the interviews, and despite what appeared as an opposition to the integration of RVs in teaching, it was clear that a considerable number of participants (7) are already using the incorporation of RVs into the classroom by learners as an opportunity to discuss language variation, but mostly by chance rather than through pre-planned activities.

Participant 6 stated that there are rare occasions when the dialects are used. He uses these instances as opportunities to integrate language variation, for example by introducing greetings in different varieties. He clarified that this means that children know there are different RVs and how they are used, providing the comparison to how other languages have different ‘accents,’ such as English, Welsh and Scottish.

Participant 7 stated that she tries to approach the usage of the varieties within the classroom ‘positively,’ by not classifying them as ‘wrong’ but ‘different’. She added that they do some listening work on the variation between certain lexical items and that learners give presentations on Arabic-speaking countries which may include discussing RVs. However, she clarifies that the learners need FuSHa for exams, so they cannot spend too much time on this; she said “RVs are acknowledged then they need to quickly move on.” Participant 5 stated that she puts a table on the board, with a column for each country, and asks learners from those countries how they, for example, say “how are you,” opening a discussion on the similarities and differences.

By asking learners how they themselves say things in their own dialect, they are directly engaged in the learning process.

Participant 10 stated that she discusses variation “as and when” it surfaces in the classroom. She shows a map of the Arabic-speaking countries to learners, clarifying that each country has its own dialect, which has its own variations. She provided examples of words that learners introduce into the classroom: ‘رحت’ ruHt (went), ‘شفت’ shuft (saw), and ‘موية’ moyah (water), adding that they are received favourably by other learners. These words are categorised by the teacher as “dialectal, they [learners] can like the word and use it of course if they wish, but for the sake of exam, they need to use the FuSHa.” Learners are equipped with appropriate strategies for when they meet unfamiliar RVs. Participant 10 stated that when learners ask about the different RVs they hear, she says to them:

Listen carefully, identify keywords, try to catch the words you recognise.

Investing a few minutes of class time to help learners identify strategies to deal with language variation helps them to make authentic texts, including the listening sections of the exam, more accessible. Participants who criticised the listening section of the exam stated that if learners do not know the variety used, they would fail that section of the exam. This supports the importance of including language variation within the classroom as opposed to prioritising one variety over others, even for the benefit of the current examination as it teaches students to identify key patterns in the language rather than memorizing one specific dialect.

Regional variation is being discussed in some classrooms but the extent of it varies. As it is introduced by the learners themselves, lessons without heritage learners cannot benefit from such discussions. Participant 2 suggested that a ‘flavour’ of each dialect could be included in lessons. This would enable all learners to benefit from an authentic understanding of Arabic. However, it is important to provide suitable ways of doing so. While some other participants had not considered integrating RVs, some of them decided that it would be something they are open to during the interviews (see 4.5.4). This highlights the importance of the Guidelines, which will result from this study.

### *Example of ‘good practice’*

The interview with participant 17 presented an example of a successful attempt of awareness-raising and integration of RVs in teaching, which was in strong support of the resulting Guidelines. After researching a supplementary school for herself and her then two-and-a-half-year-old daughter to attend, participant 17 decided to set up her own supplementary school. The school now has three UK branches and additionally provides international online classes. It accommodates children from birth to 16 years old, with younger children attending with their parents, as early as when they are still in the womb. Initially, participant 17 set up the school after identifying a gap for pre-literacy provision for learning and using Arabic. She developed her own curriculum, which runs across multiple stages. The first is their ‘parent and child’ stage, which is for preliteracy and purely focuses on oral skills, through telling stories, singing songs and building up learners’ oral repertoire. As many RVs as possible are integrated and classes are tailored to the RVs spoken by learners. She added that there are instances when different words are introduced. For example, she would use بني bonni for ‘brown’, and the Moroccan attendees would say قهوي qahwi, to which she responds:



That's fine, you can use 'qahwi' or 'bonni'. Learners do not have to know both, but they can use them, and the ones that do can make the association between the words.

When the children are of school age, they commence the second stage, which consists of learning the alphabet. Only shared vocabulary between FuSHa and RVs is introduced, which means the children are primarily using the vocabulary they are familiar with. There may be new vocabulary but only words existing in both FuSHa and RVs. In the third stage, their phonics programme is introduced. This is the school's formal literacy programme. The children initially learn to read the shared sounds that are common between FuSHa and RVs because most sounds do exist in both. They also use shared vocabulary, for example 'باب' baab (door), 'نور' noor (light) and 'شباك' shibbak (window). This provides learners with a measure of success as they read a word and recognize it. After this, they move to sounds that are different, for example 'قلب' qalb or 'لب' lb (heart). In the final stage, learners are introduced to words between that are completely different in FuSHa and the RVs. Participant 17 stated that by the time learners reach this final stage they are developmentally ready to be exposed to completely different words, so there is no confusion. This approach is research-focused, drawing on the patterns and consistencies across all RVs under three main categories: phonological, lexical and grammatical (Figure 4; see Khalil, 2018 for an in-depth discussion). However, as it is not common knowledge, many teachers may not be aware of the existence of such patterns between the RVs. It is important to note here that participant 17 draws on the linguistic knowledge of learners with diverse RVs as her classes consist primarily of learners from Arab backgrounds. The approach to raising awareness of and integrating RVs would be different for learners with no previous knowledge of any Arabic variety. This will need to be systematically planned by the teachers. The Guidelines aim to support both settings: classes for learners of Arab and non-Arab backgrounds.

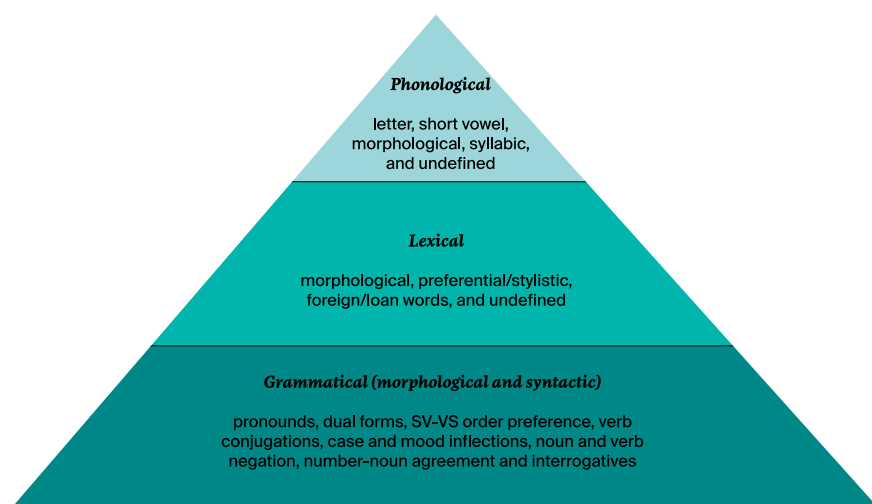


Figure 4: 'Summary variations between fuSHa and 'āmmīyah' (Khalil, 2018: 77)

While the majority of schools may not be ready to fully implement this particular approach, it highlights the importance of including examples of reference to the similarities and differences between RVs in the Guidelines. Teachers can see the patterns for themselves and refer to them easily within their lessons, making language variation less daunting and confusing.

## 4.5.2. Culture

Nine participants linked using RVs to culture:

- Participant 1 stated she is happy for students to use their RV for cultural references such as food, but other more formal speech would be corrected into the standard.
- Dialects could be introduced as part of the culture, this opens the door for them to decide whether and which dialect they would like to learn, but solely for language classes (not the exam; participant 8).
- It is very enjoyable for students to learn about the dialects of the countries through culture. Dialects and culture “come hand-in-hand” (participant 9).

This suggests that teachers are more open to integrating RVs into the classroom through cultural activities. It could imply that the RV is included “just for fun” (participant 14) and, hence, does not need to be taken seriously. RVs are a crucial language code required for using the language authentically. Even though they are not included in the curriculum, learners need some exposure to language diversity to be able to adopt the strategies needed to understand the listening exam and to make the language more accessible. This is not to say that integrating RVs with culture is not a beneficial solution, but their importance and status needs to be recognised in an academic environment.

## 4.5.3. Learner enjoyment

As mentioned above, the cultural references within the classroom are enjoyable for the learner, which tends to be when RVs are introduced into the classroom. Participants highlighted that discussions about RVs which surface within lessons are received favourably by learners:

- All of my pupils are very open to the dialects and enjoy learning about their origins and the similarities and differences between them (Participant 1).
- Participant 2 added that other learners in the class [who do not speak RVs themselves] really enjoy listening to the Arabic varieties. They think it sounds ‘funny’ but are interested in learning more. They often acquire words from the dialects with ease and continue to use them.

These comments suggest that learning about RVs is enjoyable for learners. For learners of Arab origin, the link between their usage in the classroom and their own heritage can be a useful motivating factor, engaging them deeply in the learning process.<sup>17</sup> For learners in general, it can both be empowering to be able to access authentic material and ease their frustrations when encountering unfamiliar RVs. Being open to variation means that teachers can equip learners with strategies for dealing with unfamiliar dialects and facilitate the learning process.

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<sup>17</sup> See Ramezanzadeh (2021) for further discussion on learner motivations in Arabic.

#### 4.5.4. Shifting opinions

Despite what may appear like strong opinions by some of the participants against the integration of RVs in Arabic classrooms, the possibility of changing opinion was apparent either over the course of the teaching career journey or even through intellectual discussions such as the ones that took place within the scope of the interviews for this research. Three participants said that they were initially completely against integration but gradually shifted their opinions over the course of their careers. Participant 12 stated that she now welcomes students in their own varieties to make them feel welcome, happy and integrated, which is something she would not have done previously. However, it was also clear that more can be done to incorporate the reality of language variation as, when the lesson starts, she emphasized that she only uses and accepts ‘the formal language,’ stressing the division of formal and informal Arabic. While she agrees that learning the RV is important for their origin and families, she insists that FuSHa is the variety required for education. She argues that ‘the formal’ is needed for writing and to prepare learners for employment and believes that RVs do not require any formal instruction and can be acquired through practice. She was, however, open to having a speaking activity to speak informally, but, for writing, reading and formal academic topics, she said they need to strictly implement FuSHa.

A more propitious shift of opinions was observed during the interviews themselves. Three participants stated in the interviews that the idea of integrating RVs in the classroom had not occurred to them until they discussed it in the interview. For example, participant 13 stated that it would be interesting and engaging for herself and learners to ask them about words and phrases from their home varieties and this is something she would now like to try. The shifting of opinions and the openness to consider integrating RVs in teaching was also observed in the focus group discussions which are covered in the following section.

#### 4.6. The focus group discussions and the Guidelines

The findings of the interviews presented above highlighted the pressing need for a set of guidelines to both raise awareness of language variation and provide practical examples for integrating RVs. This research has found that participants are becoming more open to language variation, further supporting the need for a tangible and easy-to-use guide which lays out a unified approach specific to the Arabic language. In the interviews, participants were asked for their opinions on a set of Guidelines clarifying how to integrate RVs into the classroom: eight were in favour, three against and five undecided.<sup>18</sup> No links were observed between their opinions and other factors such as the participants’ teaching settings, qualifications or years of experience. While the majority were in favour, believing the Guidelines would be highly beneficial for Arabic teachers, those who had split opinions clarified these with the following reasoning that appears not to relate to the interviewees themselves but rather to how they think other teachers will receive the Guidelines:

- How these are received would differ from teacher to teacher, some are more open to variation within the classroom whereas others believe this is not Standard Arabic and the classroom needs to focus on keeping the Arabic pure. (Participant 1).
- Participant 9 believes the set of Guidelines will be received differently by two groups of teachers. She said “there are still those who are strict on maintaining FuSHa who will reject them. The other group, of younger teachers, who take a more realistic approach, will welcome them.”

<sup>18</sup> Please refer to Table 1

Language variation is not openly taught in the Arabic-speaking world or in teacher training programs, so it is understandable that teachers will hold contradictory beliefs stemming from gaps in that knowledge. This highlights the pressing need to reconcile such ideologies with the reality of the situation of the Arabic language. It is important to note, however, that the implicit biases toward FuSHa and against RVs may be difficult to fully eradicate. Furthermore, the three participants who, in their interviews, were against the idea of the Guidelines had different reasons that mostly stemmed out of some of the ideologies discussed earlier in section 2 of this report. Participant 12 who supported the strict implementation of FuSHa in classrooms voiced her disagreement with the idea of the Guidelines saying:

It will be sending the 'wrong message', as in the classroom, they need to concentrate on and learn 'the formal'

Participant 8 was asked about differing levels of variation, from teaching an RV to including a snapshot of varieties, none of which she agreed with:

Even including a snapshot from a variety of dialects would not work, there are too many differences, this would cause too much confusion

Therefore, the Guidelines needed to be written in a sensitive and sympathetic way that reassures teachers that integrating variation does not jeopardise learning FuSHa but rather complements and supports it. The Guidelines also need to have a section that clarifies misconceptions about the reality of the language use in different contexts and explicitly addresses the concerns about confusions, exams and time limitations.

#### **4.6.1. The content of the Guidelines**

Based on the findings presented above, a set of Guidelines was written in a way that addresses both the knowledge gaps and some of the misconceptions that were observed during the interviews. The Guidelines were also written while realistically considering some of the barriers that, at the time of conducting this research, cannot be fully overcome, such as the formal exams that penalise learners for using RVs and the classroom time limitation that many of the participants highlighted. Therefore, it was vital for the Guidelines to offer clarifications as well as aspects of flexibility that encourage and support teachers to integrate as much as they can of linguistic variation into their teaching, which could vary from basic continuous awareness-raising to more adequate integration of linguistic knowledge across RVs.

The Guidelines have three main sections: (1) How to systematically raise learners' awareness of Arabic linguistic variation; (2) How to actively integrate learning about the RVs in teaching; and (3) How to deal with certain tricky situations in class when you try to integrate variation. These three parts are aimed at informing and guiding the users by giving them the background information that is needed as well as clarifying misconceptions that either the teachers, the learners or parents may have. Some of these misconceptions were listed in the third part of the Guidelines and were prompted by some of the comments made by participants of this research. The first draft was written in a descriptive style while the main ideas are listed as bullet points with a few examples embedded in the narrative for further clarification.

## 4.6.2. The focus group discussions

It was important to consult with some of the participants to ensure that the Guidelines document does indeed address teachers' questions and concerns and would help them to implement the documents' suggestions in their classes. Hence, focus group discussions were scheduled, in which the initial draft of the Guidelines was shared and feedback was sought.

A call for all the participating teachers was sent inviting them to attend a focus group discussion either in Leeds or near London (the two regions in which most of the participants are based). They were given the option of a face-to-face or an online discussion to accommodate preferences and to provide as much convenience as possible. Eight out of the 17 participants agreed and committed to attend the focus group discussions. Two discussions took place: (1) An in-person discussion in Leeds, which was attended by five participants; and (2) an online discussion with three other participants. Each discussion took about two hours. Table 7 details which participants attended the focus group discussions, including the opinions that they had voiced on the Guidelines during the earlier interviews.

Participant	Years of Experience	Qualification	School setting & learner background	Discussion attended	In favour of guidelines
1	Over 25	None	Supplementary—Primarily of Arab/Muslim background	Online	Split
6	Over 10	Undergraduate degree in Arabic and CPD	Mainstream primary school—Mixed backgrounds but mostly non-Arab	In-person	For
8	8	PhD in the Libyan variety; Egyptian certificates in TASL	Mainstream & supplementary schools—Primarily of Arab background	In-person	Against
11	Over 16	MA in education	Mainstream secondary school—Primarily non-Arab & non-Muslim background	Online	Split
12	Over 22	Currently doing QTS	Mainstream secondary & a supplementary school—Mixed background	In-person	Against
13	8	TA qualification	Supplementary—Primarily of Arab/Muslim background	In-person	For
14	3	TASL (generic qualification); MA in linguistics	Supplementary—Primarily of Arab/Muslim background	In-person	Split
17	10 years	TASL Diploma from SOAS	Supplementary—Primarily of Arab background	Online	For

Table 7: Focus groups participants

During the focus group discussions, participants reviewed the Guidelines, provided feedback and raised questions. Participants with differing opinions attended the discussions. For the in-person discussion, the participants included two who had openly stated in the interviews that they were against the Guidelines,<sup>19</sup> two who were in favour and two who were undecided. At the online discussion, there was one participant in favour of the Guidelines and two with split views. Despite the wide array of views, the in-person discussion was received favourably, with participants discussing how they could use the Guidelines in their teaching. However, most of the in-person discussion was spent introducing participants to the Guidelines. This led to a tweak for the second focus group discussion as the draft Guidelines were made available to participants in advance.<sup>20</sup> Although participants stated they had only briefly looked at them, it meant the Guidelines could be introduced more concisely allowing more time for participants to voice their feedback. Table 8 provides the main themes of feedback highlighted from both focus group discussions in relation to the usefulness, informativity, clarity and applicability of the Guidelines. These are also discussed in the following sections.

In-Person Focus Group Discussion	Online Focus Group Discussion
The importance of practical examples	Making the Guidelines more visually appealing
Examinations and time limitations	Examinations and time limitations
The need for flexibility in the Guidelines	The Guidelines will help in bridging a gap between GCSEs and A-levels

*Table 8: Main themes raised in the focus group discussions*

### *Practical examples*

The positive response of participants specifically toward the tables of examples from FuSHa and the RVs included within the Guidelines highlights the importance of presenting them to teachers so they can see the similarities, differences and patterns for themselves. Participant 8, who had previously commented in the interview that even including a snapshot of the RVs in the classroom would not work, was particularly interested in these tables, specifically requesting a copy before she left. The more examples that can be included within the Guidelines, the better they will be received and understood. In the second focus group discussion, participant 17 recommended that the table of Arabic sounds and their variations be broken down and made clearer by presenting only the sounds that are variable across the RVs, which was then incorporated into the final version of the Guidelines.

### *Examinations and time limitations*

The main barrier identified previously, the examination, was raised within both discussions. During the in-person discussion, one participant questioned learners using the RV during the exam:

If they remember and use them [the RVs in the examination], that is not encouraged. (Participant 6)

<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting here that in the focus group discussions and following the introduction to the set of Guidelines, both respondents did become more open to the Guidelines.

<sup>20</sup> It is to be noted that the draft of the Guidelines was sent to all 17 participants encouraging them to share feedback either by email or a phone conversation if they were not able to join the focus group discussions.

This led to a discussion among participants about how the exam is marked, especially by those who have been directly involved in assessments. Another respondent noted that learners are marked for content, so they would receive a mark for being understood using the RV but they would not gain a mark for accuracy. Another participant added that the deduction for using an RV is minimal. This suggests that integrating RVs into the examination, especially when it comes to the speaking component, is not as negative as it may be perceived. However, this may require some further investigation.

Another issue raised by participants about the examination is the time limitations a teacher is under to cover exam content during lessons. During the online discussion, participant 11 stated:

For heritage learners it is part of their identity. However, for non-native speakers it [learning Arabic] is a marathon. We don't even have a full hour to teach them, we have 50 minutes, and approximately 25 students. The first 10 to 15 minutes is spent on attendance registration, so we have 35 to 40 minutes. This time has to be spent on FuSHa, especially as there is a lot of additional background pressure from the school for learners to pass exams.

Participant 11 continued to discuss how she acquired the Egyptian variety, which is different from her own mother tongue Arabic variety, by immersing herself in watching television, adding that she has also acquired an understanding of Moroccan through 'TikTok'.<sup>21</sup> She added that due to the amount of technology which currently provides a wide reach of even the lesser-known Arabic varieties, learners can access them at home. She therefore believes that homework time could be utilized for this. Every learner would, at the very least, benefit from time being invested in raising awareness of the language situation. Utilising homework time would provide a time-efficient solution for teachers under time restraints. However, it is firstly crucial to raise awareness and equip learners with the tools to access the RVs in the classroom setting, so the experience is beneficial and does not lead to learner frustrations and confusion. Teachers are under pressure to prepare learners to pass exams. However, the amount of time teachers dedicate to raising awareness on language variation is up to them, highlighting the flexibility element that should be in the Guidelines.

### *Flexibility*

The focus group discussions stressed the importance of flexibility for the teachers to choose how much knowledge of RVs to integrate into their classes. As a result, the Guidelines include two separate aspects of integrating language variation: 1) raising awareness on the linguistic situation and 2) teaching learners to comprehend and use RVs. The latter can include the variations in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. The differences of opinions as well as the teaching settings that were clearly observed during the interviews and the focus group discussions meant that the Guidelines need to stress flexibility and encourage teachers to choose the parts that they feel would be most beneficial and suitable for their specific group of pupils. How much teachers incorporate is at their discretion; the Guidelines can be adapted for the level and time restraints of the class. A key message from the focus group discussions is that raising awareness of language variation cannot be left 'to chance' through solely being integrated at the hands of learners. Teachers themselves need to explicitly raise awareness on language variation so every learner is, at the very least, actually aware.

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<sup>21</sup> 'TikTok' is an application which allows users to create, share and view short videos on any topic.

This led to a discussion during the in-person discussion on how language variation could be integrated into existing classroom sessions. Participant 6 stated that it could be included after the initial introduction to a topic has been provided in FuSHa and presented to learners as an additional element through which they can gain extra points. Teachers themselves can experiment with how and how much variation to incorporate into their individual sessions.

### *Bridging the gap between GCSE and A-level Arabic*

Even though in the interview, participant 1 had a split opinion regarding the need for Guidelines to help teachers integrate RVs in teaching, in the focus group discussion she raised the issue of the gap between GCSE and A-level, whereby the GCSE's focus on FuSHa does not prepare learners for the authentic language of Arabic films used at A-level. Participant 1 was another teacher who started to have her opinion shifted toward the need for raising learners' awareness of RVs when she reflected on the difficulty that learners have when they encounter RVs for the first time at A-level. This highlights the importance of raising awareness on language variation from the beginning of the Arabic learning journey so learners understand how the L2 is used and what to expect and, hence, are prepared for the higher levels of their education if they decide to take Arabic at A-level.

### *Further discussions*

During the focus group discussion, a few interesting conversations took place. They did not necessarily entail amendments to the Guidelines, but were of direct relevance to some of the initial findings of this research discussed earlier and are worth mentioning in the following sections:

### **Culture**

The cultural importance of language variation was additionally raised in the focus group discussions. Participant 11 stated that this is something she would incorporate into the 'pre-Christmas' sessions, when a more relaxed approach is taken within the classroom and learners may, for example, watch a film. She stated that while she believes that incorporating the research findings within her classroom would act to enrich the learners' experience, she does not have the time to do this in every lesson. However, at the end of term, she tries to include what she termed 'project-based learning,' whereby students are exposed to an RV as part of a wider cultural project on a certain Arabic-speaking region. She added that, as previously mentioned, time restraints and expectations from the school do not always make this possible. However, during this final session, raising awareness on language variation is something that she could feasibly do. The problem is that delaying it to the end of the semester means that learners will not reap the full benefits during their course.

### **Cross-dialectal communication**

The focus group discussions highlighted the importance of being able to discuss integrating language variation with teachers and experts who have dedicated their career to researching such topics. For example, the idea that FuSHa is drawn on as a lingua franca to aid cross dialectal communication was raised during the in-person focus group discussion. This is an area which has been researched to conclude that more widely understood RVs are used in such situations, with the root system referred to as a frame of reference (Soliman, 2014), and not FuSHa per se.



Such discussions help to diffuse misconceptions and open the door to naturally integrating language variation with Arabic language teaching.

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### **Languages are constantly in flux**

During the in-person focus group discussion, a question was raised on how the different varieties can be taught when they are constantly changing and in flux, which is the case for all languages. This led to a conversation on how Arabic has always had variation, even at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an. It was interesting when participant 12, who was initially against the idea of the Guidelines and the integration of RVs, added that the Qur'an can be recited in seven different ways, supporting how variation is part of the language. Such realisations can be seen to make teachers more open to integrating language variation into their teaching, through raising awareness of the reality of the language situation, which they had simply not considered previously in any depth and in the context of being teachers of Arabic

### **'Informal' Arabic**

During the in-person focus group discussion, participant 6 further emphasized that pupils are not learning 'informal' Arabic within the school setting, drawing parallels with how they are also not learning informal English. It was important for such views to be covered in the discussions to highlight the differences in these two linguistic situations and, hence, the importance of understanding the unique aspects specifically of Arabic. While it is not expected that the Guidelines would fully change this view regarding the formality of each variety of Arabic, it is important for the Guidelines not to include terms such as 'formal' and 'informal' that would emphasise stereotypes linked to FuSHa versus RVs.

### **4.6.3. Refining the Guidelines**

The focus group discussions gave participants the opportunity to provide feedback on the accessibility of the Guidelines to the target audience (schoolteachers across the UK. This includes making minor tweaks to the Guidelines, including defining certain linguistic terminology such as the glottal stop. In the online discussion, suggestions were made to include more visual aids within the Guidelines, including, if possible, diagrams or pictures and breaking down the tables. Participant 17, who approaches TASL through first introducing learners to the RVs then slowly integrating FuSHa, stated that because the Guidelines are written from a 'FuSHa-first' perspective, they would not be directly applicable for her setting. The Guidelines were tweaked to this end to make them more neutral.

Based on the feedback received during the focus group discussions, more examples were added to the Guidelines to clarify the recommendations listed for how to integrate RVs in teaching and systematically raise learners' awareness of them.

#### **4.6.4. Going forward**

Running focus group discussions to discuss the Guidelines was a crucial step in the right direction to both reconcile language ideologies with the reality of the linguistic situation and to pave the way to incorporating language variation into the classroom. The feedback from the discussions was positive with many participants stating that it is something they would like to experiment with in their classrooms, even those who had openly been against language variation in the interviews. It would be useful for further research to investigate how teachers find putting the Guidelines into practice in addition to offering continued support with any obstacles they may encounter on the way.

## ***Section 5: Answering the research questions***

The following section directly addresses the research questions outlined in section 4 drawing on the research findings.

### **What are schoolteachers' perceptions of Arabic dialectal variation and its use by L1 Arabic speakers?**

This research has identified teachers of differing views. Although most of the participants stressed that the dialectal varieties are integral aspects of the Arabic cultures and identities, many of them expressed a strict division of 'formal' and 'informal' Arabic. A hidden stigma was identified from some comments: many participants who have become more outwardly accepting and open to RVs still question whether RVs are Arabic and confine their usage to being 'less serious.' Participants refer to FuSHa as the 'good' and 'proper' variety and some refer to FuSHa as their mother tongue. This highlights that certain ideologies, such as the SLI, the hierarchy of languages, the one nation-one language ideology and the ideology of purism are in the minds of many. Because language variation is not openly taught in the Arabic-speaking world, it is understandable that teachers will hold misconceptions and contradictory beliefs stemming from gaps in that knowledge. Although the implicit biases toward FuSHa and against RVs may be difficult to fully eradicate, there is a pressing need to raise awareness on the linguistic situation. A unified solution is required to ensure this gap is approached both effectively and linguistically. Therefore, the Guidelines resulting from this research had to be written in a sensitive and sympathetic way to reassure teachers that integrating variation does not jeopardise learning FuSHa but complements and supports it while also enhancing learner motivation. The first section of the Guidelines directly addresses this gap, acting to reconcile ideologies with the reality of the linguistic situation.

## What are their views about the need for and the importance of integrating dialectal knowledge in school teaching?

The research has found that participants hold different views on the importance of integration. While a few were fully supportive of the idea even though it was not something they considered before, some participants believe that FuSHa is the variety needed for education, ruling out any level of integration. Participants who have already shifted their opinions because of the reality of the Arabic language classroom and the authentic usage of RVs by L1 and heritage speakers view integrating RVs as important. For those teachers, the reality of the Arabic classroom with multiple RVs meant imposing a rigid distinction of FuSHa for school was unrealistic. This latter camp acknowledges that they cannot ignore the reality of the language situation despite still holding contradictory beliefs. Participants who had pupils of mixed backgrounds or who are mostly of non-Arabic heritage had mixed views with some of them agreeing that the integration of RVs in teaching is of importance but concerned that with the limited teaching time and the limited access to Arabic that these pupils have outside class, the integration of RVs would be unfeasible. The Guidelines addressed this concern by emphasising that the integration of RVs does not have to take a bulk of class time. This integration can be as minimal as time allows; yet it should be consistent in order to achieve the awareness that these pupils should have.

The focus group discussions gave participants the opportunity to provide feedback on the Guidelines and voice their questions and any concerns. At the outset, some participants in this study were in favour of the Guidelines and some against. It was clear throughout the discussions that even teachers who were initially against integrating language variation became more open to it following the opportunity to openly discuss the Guidelines and access practical examples. It is clear from the teachers' experiences that many of them view RVs as an integral part of the Arabic language. However, they are unaware of how important this knowledge is to convey to learners and how it can be approached in a way that complements the current instruction. The feedback from the discussions was positive with many participants stating that it is something they would like to experiment with in their classrooms, even those who had openly been against language variation in the interviews.

## What are the barriers that deter them from integrating dialectal variation in teaching?

Several barriers were identified by participants which needed to be addressed/considered in the Guidelines. The most widely stated was the examination, and particularly the time constraints teachers are under, especially for those at mainstream schools. Many participants stated that examination time restraints have already meant that the fun and engaging aspects of the language have been squeezed out. One claimed that "discussing language variation is a privilege that she simply does not have time for; there are more pressing matters they need to focus on before considering language variation, such as making the exam accessible for non-heritage learners."

The other barriers standing in the way of integration include which variety, stigma, confusion and teacher education, and are all fuelled by a lack of linguistic understanding of the language situation of Arabic. For example, the identified stigma (see 4.3.3) against certain varieties over others points to the existence of the SLI and a hierarchy of some varieties over others. It is crucial for teachers and learners alike to appreciate the RVs as varieties, which are an integral part of the Arabic language with their own pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Raising awareness on language variation will act to diffuse such views.

This was evidenced during the focus group discussions. Two participants openly stated that they were against the Guidelines during the interview, but discussions, particularly on how there has always been variation in Arabic and being able to see the patterns for themselves in the practical examples, made them more open to integration. For some teachers, these views will be more challenging to reconcile with the reality of the language situation, pointing to a need for deeper investigations.

While parental opposition was minimal, some participants believe the integration of RVs could cause unnecessary hassle for the teacher from parental pushback. Therefore, it was suggested by some of the participants that a presentation at parents' evening or providing handouts to parents would act to raise awareness on the approach taken also for parents and protect teachers from this potential barrier. It is because of some of these misconceptions that the Guidelines needed a section addressing specific situations when teachers may face opposition from parents, learners or fellow teachers. The final section of the Guidelines lists suggestions for teachers on how to deal with these situations.

**For the schoolteachers who do integrate variation, what perceptions can they share with other teachers and what are the challenges they might face with regard to developing their variationist approach further?**

This study shows that differing levels of integration have been identified. Some participants briefly discuss certain regions and their dialectal variation, providing a comparison of lexis and phrases. Some draw attention to variation by putting a table on the board so learners can identify the similarities and differences themselves. In other instances, learners have been deeply engaged in the process by being asked how they say a certain phrase in their own RVs.<sup>22</sup> This then opens a discussion on the similarities and differences between the varieties. In most classrooms when discussions on language variation are present, it is the learners themselves who are introducing them into the classroom and raising awareness of language diversity (see section 4.5.3). However, such instances are not as frequent in classrooms without heritage learners. Learners in those lessons cannot benefit from a background that would help them understand the language situation and are more likely to be confused and frustrated when encountering Arabic used in practice (Towler, 2021)

Participant 17, who integrates variation from day one (see 4.5.3), clearly stated that because an open environment to variation is fostered in her teaching, there is no confusion among learners. While such a radical change to starting with RVs would not be feasible in most school environments who may, for example, be introducing Arabic from GCSE level, the importance of mitigating frustration through raising awareness is applicable for all settings.

Whilst regional variation is being discussed in some classrooms, the extent of this varies. Participant 2 suggested that a 'flavour' of each dialect could be included in lessons. This would enable all learners to benefit from an authentic understanding of Arabic. However, it is important to provide suitable and systematic ways of doing so.

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<sup>22</sup> In the past decade, a plethora of research, theories and debates have been published supporting the critical role of student engagement in learning. For further discussion, see (Kuh et al., 2008; Thomas, 2011; Zepke, 2015 and Leach, 2014).

The findings of this research along with the produced Guidelines document are one step toward a more inclusive approach to Arabic teaching in schools in the UK and beyond. Although this research had a focus on the teaching of Arabic as L2 in the UK, the perceptions discussed here are likely to be widespread among teachers of Arabic as L1 too, in other parts of the world.

Therefore, the Guidelines resulting from this research can support teachers of Arabic as L1 in integrating RVs in their teaching, which would be an action that can break the cycle of passing uninformed perceptions from one generation to another due to the lack of sufficient understanding of the Arabic variation realities.

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# Appendix: Interview themes and questions

## Teacher background

- For how long have you taught Arabic in school settings? Have you taught Arabic in any other settings?
- What is/are your mother tongue Arabic dialect/s?
- Do you have a qualification specific to teaching Arabic as a second language to school children?
- Have you taught any other languages? How does that differ from teaching Arabic?

## School setting

- What is the teaching setting? I.e., primary versus high school, etc.
- Which level is taught (KS3/KS4)? How many hours per week?

## Learner backgrounds

- What is the background of the learners taught (heritage/non-heritage/Muslim/non-Muslim)?
- Do teachers/you consider the backgrounds of learners in their/your approach to teaching?
- How do teachers approach teaching learners of different backgrounds?
- What would you do if you taught a class with solely one group of those learners?

## Variation in the classroom

- In which variety of Arabic do you speak when teaching?
- What do you think about the different Arabic dialects that the children know of or speak being utilised in the classroom? (Is there a stigma against any varieties/a preferred variety?).
- Do you think they should be referred to in class/teaching materials?
  - If yes, then why and how?
  - If no, why do you think so?
- When variation is discussed, what is included? Similarities/differences in varieties? Cultural references? Diglossia?

## Barriers to integration

- Have you tried to integrate dialectal variation into your teaching?
- How did it go?
- Have you faced any barriers? E.g. rejection from the children/parents. (Need to prioritise MSA for academic purposes/the exam?).

## The exam/curriculum

- If you could make any changes to the exam/ curriculum, what would you do?
- If there was no exam, how would you approach TASL?
- Shifts in opinions (Arabic 'then' vs 'now')
- What has changed within your opinions/ approach since you started teaching Arabic?
- What would help you to start integrating dialectal variation into your teaching? Would a set of principles or detailed guidelines help? Or would this not change the current practice?

