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The teaching of Arabic as a community language in the UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of UK Arabic language teaching in supplementary and mainstream schools from available research papers and provides a synopsis of recent developments in supporting Arabic teaching at school level and pathways to Higher Education. The largest study cited is the 2016 research collaboration between the British Council, the Universities of Leeds, Edinburgh, Goldsmiths, and London, and Alcantara Communications [Snowden et al. (2016. *Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language in the UK – Strand 1 Research: How Arabic is Being Taught in Schools*. London: British Council)], exploring current teaching techniques, teachers' perceptions of diglossia and variation in Arabic, and these are incorporated when designing teaching activities and materials. With surveys, interviews and lesson observations, Snowden et al. show teachers believe in the importance of communication as a learning aim and are familiar with the communicative approach but many base learning activities on traditional writing tasks and less on listening and speaking. It shows that Arabic diglossia remains a challenge with teachers stating that learning dialects is important, yet they struggle to find appropriate approaches and materials for it. This paper presents challenges faced by Arabic teachers including foundational teacher training, continuous professional development and material design, concluding with recent developments in supporting teaching Arabic as a community language and recommendations for addressing current challenges.

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KEYWORDS
Arabic; teaching Arabic as a foreign language; community language learning

Introduction

In UK schools, learning a second language is generally limited to learning one of the three main European languages: French, Spanish or German. Additionally, foreign language learning is usually delayed until the secondary school level. Primary schools often provide some language lessons as extra-curricular activities which serve more as tasters than properly planned curricula (Long, Danechi, and Loft 2020). Language learning is also mostly governed and controlled by official examinations such as GCSEs and A-Levels. When students make the choice to study a second language, they think carefully about the implications on their overall results, which impact university entry. Therefore, the choice of learning a second language at school level usually stems from a pupil's deep interest in the language or the influence exerted by their heritage rather than being influenced by a national policy that encourages language learning.

Contrary to the decline seen in recent years in the demand for learning the traditional European languages, the demand for learning Arabic has been steadily increasing in the UK, Europe and the US

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at all learning stages, from pre-school to higher and further education levels (Dickins and Watson 2006; Tinsley 2019a). The UK exam system offers further insight into Arabic language teaching and learning in UK schools. The UK school system is well known for the strong presence and role of examinations that aim to provide a standardised way of assessing pupils' abilities and knowledge in various subjects including second languages. Despite a general decline in the number of students taking GCSE and A-Level exams in European languages, the number of these exams taken in the Arabic language has seen, in the last 10 years, an increase of 49–59% as stated in the last Language Trends report which regularly monitors the state of language learning in UK schools (Tinsley 2019a). Arabic GCSE entries went up from 2639 in 2011 to 4203 in 2019 and for A-Level Arabic, it went up from 561 in 2011–835 in 2019 (Tinsley 2019b).

Despite the increasing number of pupils from Muslim and Arab backgrounds attending UK schools and despite the existence of research-based evidence that emphasises the importance of Arabic language learning for the political and economic future of the UK (Board and Tinsley 2017), it is still not seen as a priority within the UK education system. Arabic is still considered a minority language with very few mainstream schools that actually include it in their curriculum – about 5% of state schools and 13% of independent schools (Tinsley and Han 2012). Most secondary schools in the UK have students taking Arabic exams and yet what many schools offer is simply the facilitation of exam setting with few schools providing tutoring support as an extra-curricular activity (Tinsley 2015).

Given the limited research and data available around Arabic language provision in UK schools, in 2016–2017 researchers from Alcantara Communications, the Universities of Leeds and Edinburgh, and Goldsmiths, University of London, worked together on a multiple-strands research project funded by the British Council which aimed to gather information on the number of UK schools teaching Arabic, the reasons for learning it, methods of teaching and issues surrounding examinations and accreditations . This paper reflects on the strand of the project[1] that focused on data collected from teachers regarding how Arabic is taught. This paper will also aim to link between challenges faced in teaching Arabic at school level and the roles that Higher Education (HE) institutions can play in order to support the teaching of Arabic as a community language in the UK. The research methodology of Snowden, et al.'s study relied on a range of quantitative and qualitative research tools, including an Arabic teacher survey, one-to-one interviews with teachers and classroom observations.

The teacher survey was made available both as an online and paper questionnaire. It was completed by 43 teachers of Arabic across 27 schools at primary, secondary and sixth-form level. Of these, 22 are state or independent schools and five are supplementary schools (also known as complementary or weekend schools). Detailed interviews were conducted with nine teachers discussing how Arabic is being taught, comparing it with the teaching of other foreign languages and the proficiency scale used. In addition, a total of 11 classroom observations took place at nine different primary, secondary and sixth-form schools in order for the researchers to observe Arabic language teaching in practice and to compare this to what teachers say about their practice.

Schools and the community learning needs

Due to the ever-changing nature of Arabic language provision in schools, it is difficult to get accurate data on the number of schools teaching Arabic. In Tinsley's (2015) study, there was an attempt to create a database of Arabic teaching schools. The database included 312 mainstream (state and independent) schools (105 primary and 207 secondary) and 87 supplementary schools (Tinsley 2015). However, the subsequent studies showed that the majority of the mainstream schools that teach Arabic as part of their curriculum are independent and faith-based schools. It also showed that the provision in these may not be the same every year and may vary depending on the number of students, availability of resources and the expertise of teaching staff (Snowden, Soliman, and Towler 2016; Tinsley 2016).

Beyond the mainstream schools that have some provision for Arabic language teaching, there are a large number of supplementary or complementary/weekend schools – that offer Arabic language teaching for different ages. Again, it is difficult to know the exact number of these; however, it is well-known that in almost every major city in the UK, there is a supplementary school for each Arab community such as an Iraqi, Libyan, Saudi, etc., with each following the curriculum of its respective country, albeit with some local variation in the curriculum and teaching approach to suit children growing up in the UK attending English schools during the week. Although each school adheres to a national curriculum, the student body is a diverse one with students from different backgrounds. There are also supplementary schools that intentionally divert from sticking to a certain Arab identity or curriculum (Reed et al. 2020). One can say that supplementary schools offer the biggest hub for Arabic teaching; yet, they are not as rigorously regulated as mainstream schools. Teachers in supplementary schools do not always have to have a teaching qualification as many of them are volunteers and teach to the best of their ability, sometimes with minimal support. Because of the nature of how these schools run, it is difficult to investigate how they maintain standards of teaching and how their pupils develop their Arabic language skills. They can be organic in their approach to teaching and lack consistency in their curricula due to the continuous change of teaching staff.

In terms of the Arabic learning needs, three studies attempted to gather these data. The first attempt was a brief one in (Tinsley 2015) looking at reasons for learning Arabic in supplementary schools and stated that the motivations for learning Arabic have been mostly related to religion and identity in addition to a recently growing interest in learning Arabic as evidenced by the increase in GCSE Arabic exam takers (Tinsley 2015). Tinsley's research deliberately did not provide quantitative data due to the complexity of exactly measuring qualitative answers provided by school pupils. The next study by Tinsley (2016) included 149 pupils (47 in primary schools and 102 in secondary schools), asked some questions around reasons for learning Arabic. Primary school children gave expected simple answers such as 'Because I love it', 'Because it is fun', or 'Because it is important', but many of them also mentioned the aim of speaking Arabic with family members. 55% (56 out of 102) of the secondary school pupils also mentioned speaking with relatives as a reason for learning Arabic, and a large number mentioned religious purposes. According to Tinsley (2016, 29) [2], reasons for studying Arabic in schools gathered from pupils show a strong link between heritage, faith and the motivation for studying Arabic. This is an expected observation considering the high number of faith-based schools that teach Arabic and which participated in the research. The study also found there are some non-faith-based schools that believe in the importance of teaching Arabic language to enable their pupils to grow as global citizens and to support community cohesion in the UK.

The third attempt to look at reasons for learning Arabic was in Snowden, Soliman, and Towler (2016), which did not ask the learners but instead asked the 43 participating teachers to comment on the reasons they believe their pupils are learning Arabic for. The data showed that 54% of the teachers believe that the main reason for learning Arabic is the ability to speak with Arabic speakers, including family members. This is followed by understanding the Quran (42% of the teachers). Lesser reasons included an interest in Arabic language and culture (16%), that it is requested by parents (16%), and for future career and university study (12%). The teachers' perceptions seem to parallel the reasons given by pupils. In Snowden, Soliman, and Towler (2016) the same two reasons of faith and speaking with Arabic speakers, including family members were given as the top two reasons for learning Arabic, but in the reverse order whereby speaking with Arabic speakers/family members came first before faith reasons (understanding the Quran). This finding resonates more with the findings of studies into the motivations for learning Arabic at the university level. The few studies that have looked at reasons for learning Arabic in UKHE (Heyworth 2015;Khalil 2011; Soliman 2015) showed a resemblance to the findings of similar research done in the USA (Belnap 2006; Husseinali 2006). In general, Arabic university students want to gain all the skills and linguistic knowledge that an average educated Arabic speaker has. Nevertheless, when looking at prioritised motivations, the main aim for doing an Arabic degree is to communicate with Arabic speakers whether these are relatives, friends or members of Arabic speaking

communities in the UK and abroad. Other motivations that come as second priorities in the UKHE context include the ability to understand the news and media, the skills of translation and interpreting, religious purposes and general interest in Arab civilisations and culture. The similarities in learning motivations at both levels (schools and HE) suggest that approaches to teaching and materials design should not differ in terms of their objectives.[3]

The current provision

The learning motivations mentioned in the section above as stated by both pupils and teachers highlight the need for communication skills with Arabic speakers in addition to the ability to read and understand religious texts. This new communicative dimension has led to a variation in teaching approaches and ideologies which in turn can lead to a clash between them at times. In fact, there are many Arabic teachers who still prefer a completely traditional grammar-based approach to teaching and learning, while there are others who are motivated by the communicative approach. Of those teachers who prefer the communicative approach, we find they have differing views on how to apply it to a diglossic language like Arabic (Wilmsen 2006), leading to a complex and varied picture of current Arabic language teaching practice.

In the study by Snowden, Soliman, and Towler (2016) on Arabic teaching methodology, a large number (74%) of the participating teachers stated that they are most familiar with the communicative approach of language teaching. This is based on their answers to the survey questions as illustrated in Figure 1. Despite the majority of these teachers stating their belief in the importance of communication as a goal of learning Arabic and their familiarity with the communicative approach in language teaching, many of them (67%) base most of their classroom and homework activities on traditional writing tasks with listening and speaking skills being given less attention (Snowden, Soliman, and Towler 2016). A further 44% of the teachers claim dialects are important for communication yet struggle to find an appropriate approach and materials to introduce linguistic variation to their students. And while there are many Arabic teachers who still prefer a completely traditional grammar-based approach to teaching and learning, there are others who are motivated by the communicative approach but differ in their views on how to apply it to a diglossic language like Arabic (Wilmsen 2006). This is reinforced by data gathered from classroom observations where teachers who were mostly familiar with the communicative approach did not employ it as frequently in their classrooms and rather more traditional approaches such as the audiolingual method were

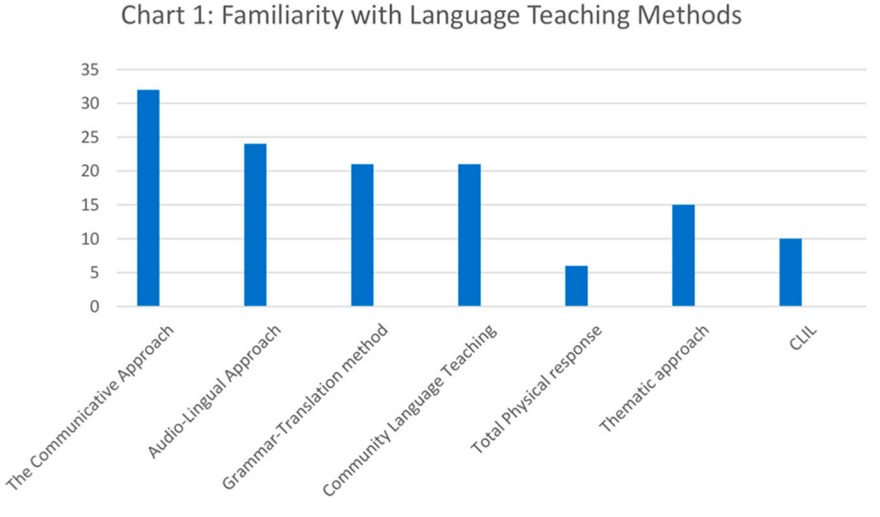

Figure 1. From Snowden, Soliman, and Towler (2016).

more frequently employed (Snowden, Soliman, and Towler 2016). This seems to suggest a gap between theoretical knowledge and actual practice. The study points out the need for further teacher professional development training 'to deepen understanding of the various pedagogic approaches to language learning' (Snowden, Soliman, and Towler 2016, 11) and more importantly, how to apply these approaches to a diglossic language situation like Arabic.

As for the balance between the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, most teachers manage to strike a balance in the classroom between using the four skills (Snowden, Soliman, and Towler 2016). Regarding assessment, since there is no standardised proficiency scale for Arabic in the UK, teachers tend to rely on either their own interpretations of the CEFR, the GCSE/A-level curriculum, or their experience and intuition (Snowden, Soliman, and Towler 2016). In fact, teachers have expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that the GCSE speaking exam is conducted entirely in Standard Arabic as it does not reflect the real use of Arabic, and that the oral/aural component has been cancelled from the A-level exam altogether (Snowden, Soliman, and Towler 2016). While the majority of teachers rely on textbooks supplemented by their own materials, they also use technology, mainly in the form of PowerPoint presentations, in the classroom (Snowden, Soliman, and Towler 2016). Figures 2 and 3 give indications of the most commonly used resources and technological tools that the schoolteachers rely on in their curriculums and teaching techniques.

Challenges

Arabic schoolteachers have highlighted three main challenges that they face. The first is a lack of teacher training provision, particularly in teaching and assessment methods (Tinsley 2019a), which means that Arabic teachers do not have many opportunities for professional development. Second is the lack of teaching materials and resources, which seems to be consistently highlighted as a challenge by teachers and which might stem in part from limited teacher training; and finally, they highlighted Arabic variation and dialects as a major challenge (Snowden, Soliman, and Towler 2016). Others identified challenges such as the limited number of teaching hours, the lack of governmental support and the lack of standardisation of curricula and progression (Snowden, Soliman, and Towler 2016). Finally, the challenge that is ought to be mentioned here is the lack of clear pathways to HE for Arabic learning. The following sections briefly discuss some of these challenges.

Lack of institutional support

The review presented in this paper of the current situation of Arabic teaching in UK schools shows a stable and a promising picture of growth in interest in learning Arabic, but it also shows that Arabic

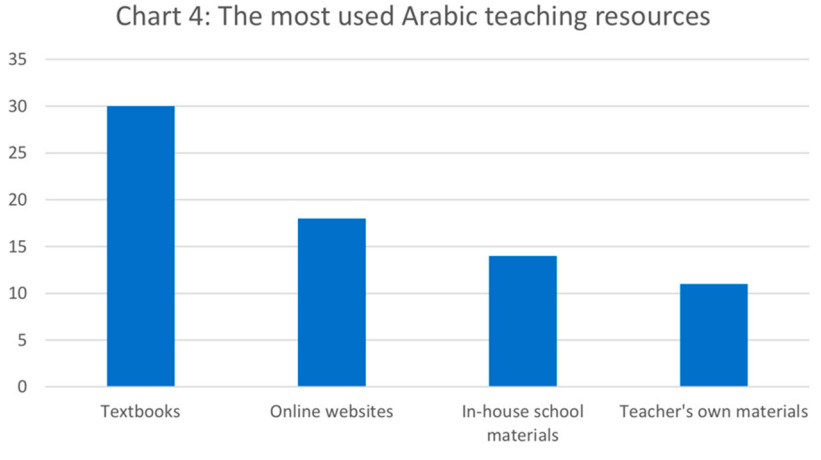

Figure 2. From Snowden, Soliman, and Towler (2016).

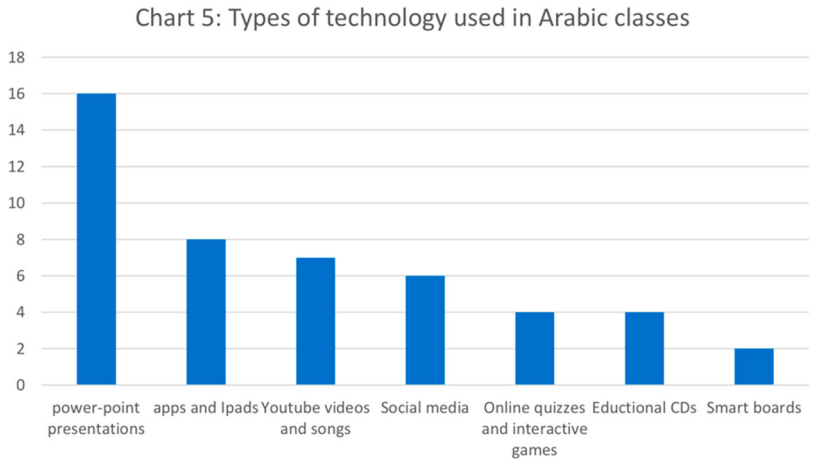

Figure 3. From Snowden, Soliman, and Towler (2016).

teaching is often driven by examinations rather than by learning needs and wider objectives. One of the available informal networks for Arabic school teachers in the UK is the Facebook group Arabic Sawa[4] which provides a very good and efficient platform for teachers to ask questions and exchange materials and ideas. It is quite obvious from navigating the group page that most of the posts are related to questions and discussions around examinations. In order for Arabic to flourish in schools, there is a need for much wider support from the Department of Education or a similar institution that can act as an umbrella to objectively monitor Arabic learning and teaching, and devise plans for its development in a way that sees Arabic more as a skill that required continuation rather than being limited to a ticked box examination. There is a need for more primary and secondary schools to promote and support the learning of Arabic as a skill throughout the curriculum. This would only be feasible if the Department of Education takes this as an important step in supporting a growing community of Arabic pupils.

Teacher training and networking opportunities

There is a constant need for different levels of Arabic teacher training despite good initiatives that have taken place in the last 10 years Currently, the main provider of Arabic teacher training is Goldsmiths, University of London supported by Qatar Foundation International (QFI), which offers a six-month Certificate in Arabic teaching that covers the basics of language teaching. Other prominent efforts, which focus on Arabic at school level, are the professional development initiatives by the British Council and (QFI) offering teacher training events, annual conferences and resources for teaching the language and its culture.[5] They have also recently supported the creation of local Arabic Teachers Councils to address the need for networking and training opportunities. Supplementary schools, including those that teach Arabic, are also supported by the National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education (NRCSE)[6], which offers schools guidance on regulating their work and on safeguarding young people. So whilst these forms a welcome addition to the Arabic teacher training provision on offer in the UK, much more training opportunities are required in order to educate teachers to better understand the sociolinguistic nature of Arabic and how to dynamically teach it in order to fulfil learning needs rather than exam results. Lack of teachers' sociolinguistic awareness was one of the highlights mentioned in the 2019 symposium[7] when discussing challenges faced in teaching non-standard and minority languages in the UK. The discussion in the symposium suggests that sociolinguistic awareness must be a fundamental component of teacher training programmes.

In addition to the content-based training that would encompass linguistic/sociolinguistic competence and teaching methodology, Arabic teachers often face an extra challenge of isolation when in each school there is only one Arabic teacher. Although they would be working under the guidance of a Head of Modern Languages, and often with colleagues who teach other languages, there is often a sense of solitude and unshared language-specific challenges that they need to face on their own.

> Teacher of Arabic may experience a unique set of challenges driven by changing circumstances in their schools or school districts. For example, a teacher may face a sense of distance or even outright hostility from colleagues, especially if she is the only Arabic teacher in a particular school setting
>
> (Berbeco, 2019)

It is worth noting here that the lack of solid training for Arabic teachers, especially in supplementary schools is not limited to UK setting, but in fact a wider challenge that exists in North America and in other European countries (Sai 2017, 451)

Diglossia and variation

A discussion of Arabic teaching cannot be comprehensive without reference to Arabic diglossia. Diglossia is a term used to describe a fairly stable language situation in which there exists a 'High' and 'Low' form, each with its distinct uses (Ferguson 1959). This phenomenon is engrained in Arabic language use and has resulted in deep sociolinguistic attitudes that Arabic speakers may have towards the existence of local, spoken dialects or the 'Low' forms as described by Charles Ferguson (Ferguson 1959). There are studies that have looked at attitudes towards diglossia (Chelghoum 2017; Freeman 1996; Hudson 1994; Schiffman 1999) as well as studies that relate diglossia to Arabic teaching (Ferguson 1963; Giolfo and Sinatora 2011; Palmer 2007; Soliman 2014). All these studies suggest that despite the complex attitudes that many Arabic speakers have regarding the sociolinguistic situation of Arabic, the teaching of Arabic dialects and raising awareness of their existence is fundamental if we are to equip learners with a language that they can fully and naturally use.

Most recently, although limited, there has been an emergence of integrated teaching approaches that combine learning dialectal and Standard Arabic at university teaching level, but this has not necessarily translated to school-level teaching, with a majority of teachers making no provision for teaching dialects despite their perception that teaching dialects are important (Snowden, Soliman, and Towler 2016). Clearly, there are many divergences in Arabic teaching methodology, from the communicative aims of learners in terms of speaking and listening, and the more traditional reading and writing-centred teaching they receive; between students' mainstream English education and the teaching approaches they are exposed to, versus the more traditional instruction they receive at their weekend school; and between learners' and teachers' desire for more dialect-sensitive Arabic language instruction, and the exclusively Standard Arabic instruction learners are more likely to receive. One recent attempt to minimise some of these divergences is found in the Cambridge-based community school called 'Kalamna', meaning 'our words' in Arabic, which has started to offer some basic Arabic language teacher training specifically for community language teachers and has developed a novel approach to teaching Arabic that relies heavily on the shared vocabulary and structures of both spoken and Standard Arabic (Khalil 2016). Furthermore, it has developed an Arabic phonics programme for teaching early Arabic literacy skills that resembles the phonics approach used for teaching English in mainstream schools. Most recently, it has attempted to bridge the gap between academic research and community language school teaching by initiating a research impact project funded by Cambridge University to develop a research and evidence-based toolkit for teachers of Arabic (Khalil, forthcoming).

As mentioned above, Snowden, Soliman, and Towler (2016) found that teachers themselves stated diglossia as one of the main challenges they face in their teaching. There is a considerable number of teachers (44% of the participants in Snowden, Soliman, and Towler (2016)) who

believe that it is important to teach the dialects if we are truly to fulfil the essential learning objective of communication with Arabic speakers, but the study also revealed a lack of awareness of the sociolinguistic situation of Arabic and concerns over methods of integrating dialectal variation into teaching. These impede teachers from including any dialectal variation in their curriculums. There are two observations here that support the notion mentioned in the previous section regarding sociolinguistic awareness training. The first observation is that more than half of the research participating teachers do not believe in the importance of teaching Arabic dialects which means they are not sociolinguistically aware of the roles the dialects play in fulfilling natural communication. The second observation is regarding the 44% of teachers who do believe in the importance of dialect teaching, but who lack the teaching skills of how to integrate the different varieties in the class.

Lack of formal progression pathways to HE and lack of school-HE collaborations

Arabic language has been taught at university level in the UK since 1632 when it was first established at the University of Cambridge. A few more universities followed in providing Arabic programmes with a focus on translation and understanding of classical grammar. Since the mid to late twentieth century, the teaching of Arabic has witnessed a shift towards more communicative approaches, including teaching the four main skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening (Dickins and Watson 2006). Much of the focus is, however, still centred around teaching Modern Standard Arabic, with few institutions offering instruction in a spoken dialect of Arabic.

There are 13 universities that currently offer Arabic language for undergraduate degrees (UCAS 2020). These usually combine an intensive study of Arabic from an *ab initio* level for four years with another subject. The combined subjects vary from one university to the other. Many universities offer Arabic combined with other languages or combined with non-language subjects such as Business, Politics, Middle Eastern Studies and Islamic Studies. In most of these degrees, students must spend a year in an Arabic speaking country in order to be immersed in the language and culture. Graduates are expected, according to the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), to reach a proficiency level of B2/C1 based on the Common European Framework for Reference for Languages (CEFR).

At postgraduate level, a similar number of universities offer MA and PhD programmes that combine advanced Arabic language with other subject areas, mostly translation, Middle Eastern and Arab World studies. These expect students to be either native or advanced speakers of Arabic who are expected to reach a CEFR C2 level by the end of their studies. In addition to Arabic being taught at degree level, and according to the Association of University Language Communities (AULC), there are over 50 university language centres that offer optional Arabic language modules to a wide range of students and at different proficiency levels that usually do not exceed CEFR B2 level.

Interest in learning Arabic at HE level seems to have been stable over the last 10 years despite a notable decrease in the number of students doing language degrees in general. According to data provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), there is an average drop of 3% annually in the number of all language degree students. It is not possible to obtain exact data for Arabic; however, HESA publishes numbers of students doing a degree in Modern Middle Eastern Studies, which include a high number of Arabic language students. In the last five academic years, the number of these students fluctuated between 1100 and 1300 (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2020). The observable interest in studying Arabic in HE started after the September 11th attack in 2001 (Dickins and Watson 2006) and it continues to be linked to political and social changes and events in the Arabic speaking world; therefore, it is unlikely that it would decrease at any time in the near future considering the continual variant levels of relations between the UK and the Arab countries (Board and Tinsley 2017).

Despite this established and growing interest in studying Arabic at HE level, there are two challenges that need to be tackled in order to support the teaching and learning of Arabic as a community language. The first challenge is a gap in the provision of continuous Arabic language education in HE. UK universities that teach Arabic at degree level offer *ab initio* programmes only.[8] This means

that school study and GCSE/A-Level exams do not count for much when students want to continue their Arabic language study at university level. Students with some Arabic language background or qualification must normally start their university degree at a beginner's level. Some universities may offer programmes ad personam giving some credits to the previous study, but at the time of writing this paper, no known university programme officially starts at post-GCSE or A-Level as in the case for the main European languages studied at school, namely French, German and Spanish. However, there could be a model for offering provision to both *ab initio* and post-GCSE/A-Level students at university level. One Arabic undergraduate course in Canada proved successful after it splits students into two groups: heritage and non-heritage learners, in order to facilitate more tailored instruction to each group. Although the same material was covered with both groups, it was covered in half the class time for the former group (ElHawari 2021). This could serve as a useful model for UK universities to adopt in order to encourage more heritage and/or school learners to take up Arabic at HE level.

The second challenge is related to HE-Schools collaborations. HE institutions are the places of educational research that supports language learning at all levels including schools. Without sufficient interest and engagement from HE academics and departments, the impact of that research and HE evidence-based work would not reach school teaching level. At the time of writing this paper, limited work is taking place in terms of cooperation between HE academics and Arabic schoolteachers. As mentioned earlier in this paper, there are two institutions that have been offering Arabic teacher trainings (Goldsmiths and SOAS). More recently also the University of Leeds has been engaging in research and schoolteachers networking efforts, but definitely, more work is needed. There could be two main reasons for such limited cooperation: funding and time. Financial support for academics to conduct educational research has received support from universities only recently and since the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)[9] was officially announced in 2017. Although it encourages pedagogical research, most of it focuses on how subjects are taught in HE itself and not on school levels. Yet, it is possible that such pedagogical research can also have an impact on the development of language teaching in schools.

The other reason behind the limited collaborations between HE institutions and schools is the fact that most academics involved in Arabic teaching are heavily occupied with a high teaching workload of up to 18 teaching hours a week. These academics are mostly on 'teaching only' contracts with limited time for research and scholarship. This is true in the teaching of other languages and can only change when there is a change in perception at the leadership level, with more appreciation of the field of second language teaching and its classification as a 'full' academic field. If more time allowance and funding are provided for academics to conduct scholarship and research into Arabic pedagogy, this could tackle many other challenges such as the development of more European-centred textbooks and materials rather than relying on US-based textbooks, conducting experimental research on integrating dialectal variation into teaching, establishing pedagogical research centres/groups and creating more opportunities for learners to engage with Arab culture.

Developments and ways forward

Despite the continuing challenges listed above which have impacted the provision of Arabic teaching in UK schools, the last decade has witnessed some excellent efforts in supporting the provision of teaching Arabic as a community language. Most of these efforts have been supported by the British Council and QFI.[10] Annual conferences for Arabic schoolteachers have been organised by the British Council and aimed to create a sense of belonging and network for Arabic schoolteachers around the country. It also acted as an excellent opportunity for showcasing good practice and exchanging ideas. QFI has also supported the recent creation of Arabic Teacher Councils around the UK with each receiving funding to support teacher training and promotion of Arabic learning.

Universities have also been playing a role, although still limited, in supporting Arabic schoolteacher training. The Arabic department at the University of Edinburgh used to offer a two-week teacher training intensive course which is currently limited to a module at the postgraduate study level.[11] In

2019, the University of Leeds offered a 3-day Teaching Arabic Grammar workshop, which was open to both university and schoolteachers. Bringing together these two groups seemed to be a first in the UK and the opportunity to come together was received positively by the participants. Kalamna Arabic school in Cambridge is similarly offering teacher training aimed at community language schoolteachers, and more initiatives like these are needed with more institutional support to ensure their consistency and longevity.

In the last few years, there have also been some efforts to promote cooperation between universities in order to advance the learning and teaching of Arabic. Although these were focused on the Arabic teaching at HE level, they have been attended by Arabic schoolteachers too. In 2008, the Centre for Advanced Study of the Arab World initiated a preliminary discussion on Arabic pedagogy in the UK hosted by the University of Edinburgh. This was then followed in 2012 by a symposium entitled 'Arabic in UK universities' and organised by the Council for British Research in the Levant. More recently, efforts supported by AULC have witnessed the start of more systematically organised events that focus on the teaching and learning of Arabic in academia. This started with the 2017 Arabic conference hosted by the University of Leeds, then the 2019 conference hosted by King's College London and the most recent conference hosted by Exeter University in April 2021, with further plans to have future biennial conferences hosted by different UK universities with a focus on collaborative pedagogical research that advance the teaching of Arabic in UKHE. The continuation of such events requires a lot of support from heads of departments in (1) acknowledging the amount of organisational effort required to hold such events and its impact on staff workload, and (2) providing financial support, otherwise they will be relying solely on the goodwill of keen academics. These conferences have always been open to schoolteachers to present at and to attend.

Other supportive initiatives include work on integrating more technology and use of social media into teaching (Bouabdallah 2017; Diouri 2014), the British Academy project documenting where Arabic is taught across the UK (Towler 2018), the biennial Arabic learning and teaching conferences mentioned above, the newly launched British Association of Teachers of Arabic, and the UK-based Language Scholar edited special issue with a focus on Arabic teaching (Soliman 2020).

In order to support efforts in researching and advancing Arabic teaching in HE, more cooperation is needed between UK universities and their neighbouring European universities. Collaborating in the organisation of conferences, symposia and scholarship activities will help in sharing the workload required for conducting these activities considering the heavy teaching workload of most Arabic teaching academics. Internal and external funding can also help in buying out teaching time and giving these academics the opportunity to dedicate more time to research and scholarship, especially with a learner-centred approach in mind. The teaching of Arabic in UK would certainly benefit from academic exchange initiatives that allow teaching staff to share ideas around best-practice and foster enthusiasm in experimenting with newer and more creative teaching techniques.

Finally, an important step towards supporting the teaching and learning of Arabic as a community language at all levels in the UK is cooperation between HE institutions and schools. Although the type of learners in schools (children) are diverse and have different learning needs from those in HE, the collaboration between schools and universities would help in creating a more homogenous Arabic teaching community in which universities can benefit from the hands-on experience of school teachers while schools can benefit from university research findings. Cooperation between schools and universities may also create a clear pathway for learners who start at a young age, pass school exams, and then feel ready to develop their Arabic skills at university (Kendall forthcoming). This would lead to having more graduates at a more advanced level who would have the confidence to use Arabic in its different varieties to fulfil a range of communicative tasks more proficiently. Such competent Arabic graduates would also make the next generation of Arabic school teachers who would have full understanding of the education system in the UK and who can be professionally and academically trained to have awareness of the need for progressive teaching methods of Arabic as a community language.

Notes

1. Full report of this research strand written by (Snowden, Soliman, and Towler 2016) is available at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/teaching-arabic-foreign-language-uk
2. Full report of Tinsley (2016)'s research is available at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research_into_arabic_language_and_teaching_in_uk_schools_conducted_by_alcantara_communications_2016.pdf
3. Another overview of reasons for learning Arabic in UK schools is found in Gough and Calderbank (2019) referring also to specific learning motivations by heritage pupils. The authors are also aware of a current PhD study by Anna-Maria Ramezanzadeh thoroughly investigating UK pupils' Arabic learning motivations. Once published, the thesis will add in-depth insights to the current available literature, especially in regards to certain ideologies that the learners have which impact their motivations. The authors are not aware of other studies that looked at learners' Arabic learning ideologies. This is certainly an area for future research.
4. https://www.facebook.com/groups/150475432410943/
5. See: https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/schools/support-for-languages/arabic-language-culture-programme
6. https://www.supplementaryeducation.org.uk/
7. The University of Westminster symposium entitled 'Non-Standard and Minority Varieties as Community Languages in the UK Towards a New Strategy for Language Maintenance' presented common challenges faced by a number of minority languages taught in UK schools including Arabic. Position paper on the symposium can be found at: https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/3fa4be6ef42c8897c1313da52024ca921b795d3453b99449306ba3ff983182f5/1137378/Non-Standard-and-Minority-Varieties-as-Community-Languages-in-the-UK-Position-Paper.pdf
8. See descriptions of UK Arabic degrees on UCAS at: https://www.ucas.com/
9. See: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/blogs/what-tef-results-teaching-excellence-framework-2019
10. For a list of activities and opportunities provided, please see: https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/schools/support-for-languages/arabic-language-culture-programme
11. http://www.drps.ed.ac.uk/16-17/dpt/cximes11056.htm

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