

# Teaching Arabic as a Global Language in U.S. K-12 Settings: *How do Teacher Identity and Critical Language Awareness Matter?*

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# *Introduction to the Study*

The present study sought to garner new knowledge about the readiness of the Arabic language teacher workforce in the U.S., and in U.S. k-12 settings especially, to implement integrated pedagogies that incorporate Modern Standard Arabic (henceforth MSA, or Fushā) and Colloquial Arabic (henceforth Arabic dialects, or āmmiyya) together in the classroom with the goal to develop effective communicative and intercultural competence in Arabic, which includes by necessity heteroglossic and multidialectal competence. More broadly, we also wanted to illuminate the experiences and needs of k-12 teachers of Arabic in the country.

In the United States, Arabic is a so-called less commonly taught language. But in the world it ranks fourth most spoken language. It is spoken by well over 250 million speakers in the Arab world, and perhaps about 30 more million in the Arabic diaspora across the globe, including 3.7 million Arab Americans in the U.S. (Albirini, 2016; Arab American Institute). Additionally, many among the 1.6 billion of Muslims around the world (Pew Research Center) can read Arabic without necessarily understanding it, much less speaking it. Arabic teachers must be highly skillful in tailoring their pedagogies contextually and in helping their diverse students develop Arabic language proficiency to function across vibrant Arabic-speaking contexts. Following ACTFL, teachers need to help their students develop language that meets four kinds of goals: interpersonal, interpretive, presentational, and intercultural. For Arabic, this means combining appropriate cultural knowledge and critical thinking with teaching for heteroglossic and multidialectal competence. Dialect integration has thus become a central object of study, albeit also still subject to heated debate, in contemporary Arabic language pedagogy. Support for integrative pedagogy as an innovation is not new. It was brought up by Younes (1990), problematized by Ryding (2006), and consolidated in the telltale volume titled *Arabic as One Language: Integrating Dialect in the Arabic Language Curriculum* edited by Al-Batal (2018).

A few studies have begun to examine the experiential, professional, and attitudinal predispositions that language teachers teaching Arabic in U.S. k-12 contexts hold towards Arabic dialects and integrated teaching (e.g., Abourehab, 2024; Deiri, 2024). We tackled this question in the present study by connecting two theoretical lenses that have attracted keen attention in the study of language teacher education. One is language teacher identity (Kayi-Aydar, 2019), which refers to how teachers view themselves as professionals when they think of the work they do with their students, in their teaching context, and in the wider society. The other is critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1992), which is generally understood as teachers' knowledge of social and political hierarchies of language, as well as of varieties of language and ways of speaking, and their awareness that these hierarchies can be traced to histories and tensions that play only outside the classroom and also impact teaching and learning dynamics in the classroom.

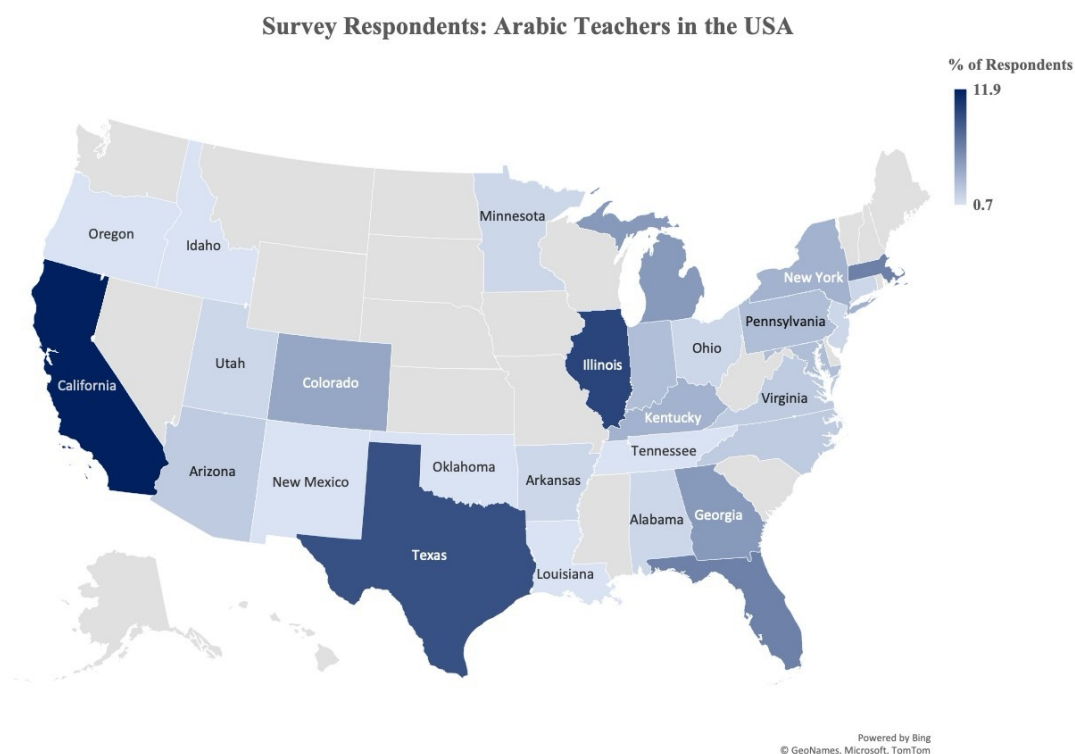
These two lenses of language teacher identity and critical language awareness offered a novel way to examine the readiness of the Arabic language teacher workforce in the U.S., and in U.S. k-12 contexts especially, to introduce and implement integrated pedagogies that incorporate Fushā and āmmiyya in the classroom with the goal to develop heteroglossic and multidialectal Arabic language competence. Thus, our overarching question is: Do different teacher identities and degrees of critical language awareness among Arabic language teachers in the U.S. help explain how they orient to MSA and dialects, how they endorse or doubt integration pedagogies, and how they negotiate the professional dynamics of implementing integration? We empirically addressed our goals in two parts, a survey of teachers of Arabic teaching across k-12 and higher education levels in the United States, and in-depth interviews with a subset of teachers working in U.S. k-12 contexts.

# Phase 1: Survey

We developed a survey on Qualtrics and distributed to 83 administrative (school) emails and 290 individual emails. We received 143 complete responses.

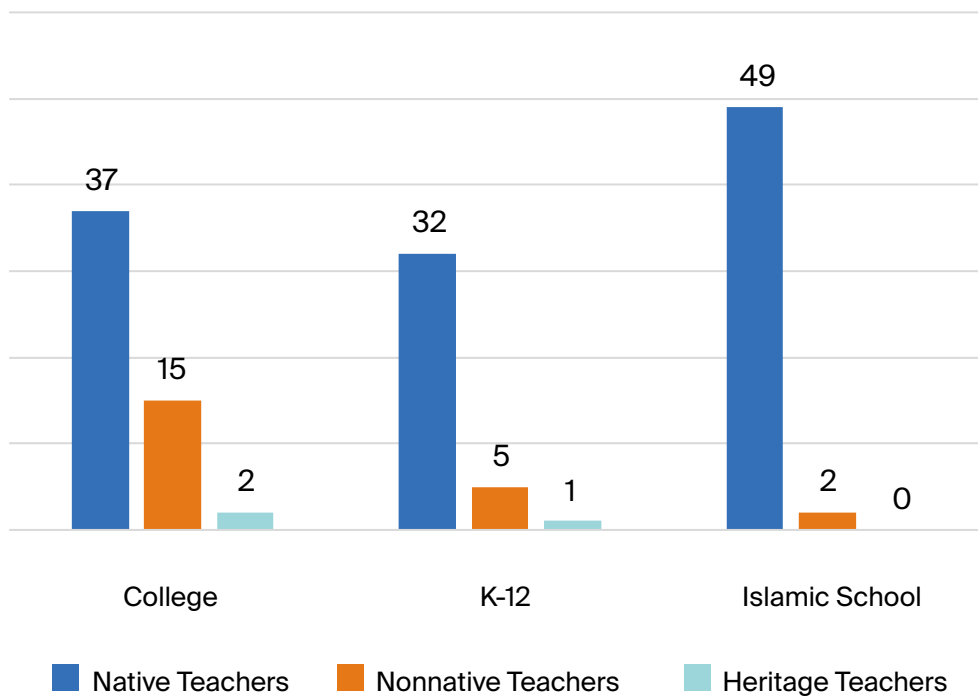
## Who Were the Teachers who Responded to the Survey?

Figure 1 shows where the respondents were teaching Arabic at the time of completing the survey. Answers came from 29 states plus the District of Columbia. Nine locations contributed most respondents: California (17), Illinois (14), and Texas (13), shown in dark blue in the Figure; and DC (10), Florida (9), Massachusetts (9), Georgia (7), Michigan (7), and Colorado (6), shown in lighter blue. The rest of 20 states shown in even lighter blue in the figure contributed between 5 and 1 respondents each.



**Figure 1.** Workplace location for 143 respondents.

Our final teacher sample was overwhelmingly native (82.5%) and female (69.2%). Many of the teachers (41%) were in their 40s, and a very large majority of them were highly educated (27% holding a BA and 63% holding a master's or doctoral degree). In terms of institutional setting, the teacher backgrounds were evenly distributed between college (54, or 37.8%) and k-12 Islamic schools (51, or 35.7%), with teachers working in secular (public or private) K-12 settings formed a smaller group (38, or 26.6%). Figure 2 summarizes the linguistic identity of the teachers in terms of nativeness when distributed by instructional setting.



**Figure 2.** Teachers’ linguistic identity by institutional setting. “k-12” stands for secular (public or private) k-12 schools. “Islamic Schools” stands for Arabic language programs in k-12 Islamic schools.

Out of 143 respondents, we only had 3 who self-identified as heritage speakers of Arabic (defined as “I learned Arabic from my family growing up in the U.S.”). There were also very few nonnative speaking teachers (only 22 in total), and the majority of them (15) were teaching in college. Conversely, teachers teaching in Arabic language programs housed in k-12 Islamic schools were overwhelmingly native speaking, as only 2 respondents self-identified as nonnative Arabic speaking teachers, out of 51 respondents working in k-12 Islamic schools. Contingency tables and Chi-square tests showed that this association was not random but statistically significant and thus trustworthy. This suggests that (a) nonnative Arabic speaking teachers are likely to end up teaching in college, and (b) Islamic schools decidedly prefer to hire native Arabic speaking teachers. The three top countries of origin identified by native speakers were Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. These were followed by Palestine, Kuwait, Morocco, and Lebanon. Between 1 and 6 native respondents only listed Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, UAE, and Yemen as the country where they grew up.

We also inspected gender by instructional setting in our sample and found a good gender balance for college (21 male and 29 female self-identifications, 4 undisclosed) but very few self-identified males in secular k-12 schools (6 of 38 respondents) and in k-12 Islamic schools (4 of 51). The descriptive statistics here are so stark that no statistical test was necessary. Clearly, our sample of the Arabic language teaching workforce in k-12 schools, both secular and Islamic, was female-dominated.

## ***What Teacher Attitudes Towards Dialects and Dialect Integration Did We Uncover in the Survey?***

We included several key questions in the survey intended to get at teachers' attitudes regarding dialects. One of the questions in the survey asked: Do you integrate dialects with MSA? We used a forced binary Yes or No response format. Another question we asked was: How important is teacher familiarity with dialects? Here the response format was on a continuum using a slight sliding scale from 1 to 100.

We found broad support for integrating dialects: 63% of the teachers reported integrating dialects, and only 37% said they did not. Moreover, very few teachers working in college (only 7 of 54) and even fewer nonnative speakers (only 2 of 25) answered No to dialect integration. The results of multiple logistic regressions confirmed that, based on this sample of 143 teachers of Arabic working in the United States, three factors predict who will more likely say Yes to the question of integration of dialects and MSA: (a) those teaching in college, (b) those who are nonnative Arabic speakers, and (c) those who think that teacher familiarity with dialects is very important. All three factors are conducive to saying Yes to integrating dialects and MSA in the classroom. In addition, there was a trend, but not statistically significant, for age, gender, and education. Namely, but tentatively since the multiple regressions only approached statistical significance, younger teachers (in their twenties or thirties), male teachers, and teachers who hold a master's or doctoral degree, were also more likely to say that they integrate dialects and MSA in their teaching.

## ***To What Extent Do Teachers Say They Include Dialect in their Assessments?***

We also asked the 143 teacher respondents whether they used MSA, dialect, or both when assessing their students' learning, and we asked them to answer this question by skill or area tested. Table 1 shows the raw tallies below. The same information is shown in percentages in Figure 3 below.

As expected, the majority of teachers said they assess reading-and-writing skills (81%) and grammar (73%) in MSA. Conversely, the assessment with highest responses under the integrative "both" category were, from most to least frequent: culture (49%), listening and speaking (46%), vocabulary (37%), and pronunciation (34%).

In our question, we intentionally included a response option "I do not assess this." We expected many teachers would say they do not assess their students on two skills: culture and pronunciation. Yet, only 11.2% and 6.3% of teachers chose this answer, respectively. In retrospect, we think when answering the question about assessment, different teachers may have had in mind different interpretations of the verb "assess," from formal tests, to quizzes, or even informal evaluations of their students' performances and gains. We thus interpret the results reported in Table 1 and Figure 3 with caution, less descriptive of actual assessment practices and more indicative perhaps of what areas of learning that teachers might see more appropriate for establishing measurable learning goals for dialects versus MSA.

In sum, we interpret the response results summarized in Table 1 and Figure 3 as suggesting that from a teacher’s perspective culture, listening and speaking, vocabulary, and even pronunciation are favorable curricular pathways for dialect integration.

Table 1. What type of Arabic do you focus on when assessing the following student learning areas? (in raw frequencies for 143 respondents)

|                      | R&W | L&S | Vocabulary | Grammar | Pronunciation | Culture |
|----------------------|-----|-----|------------|---------|---------------|---------|
| MSA                  | 116 | 65  | 86         | 105     | 77            | 36      |
| dialect(s)           | 2   | 11  | 3          | 3       | 6             | 12      |
| both                 | 24  | 66  | 53         | 24      | 49            | 70      |
| I am not sure        | 1   | 1   | 1          | 5       | 2             | 9       |
| I do not assess this | 0   | 0   | 0          | 6       | 9             | 16      |

Note. Total respondents 143. R&W=Reading & Writing; L&S=Listening & Speaking.

### Testing/Assessment Practices

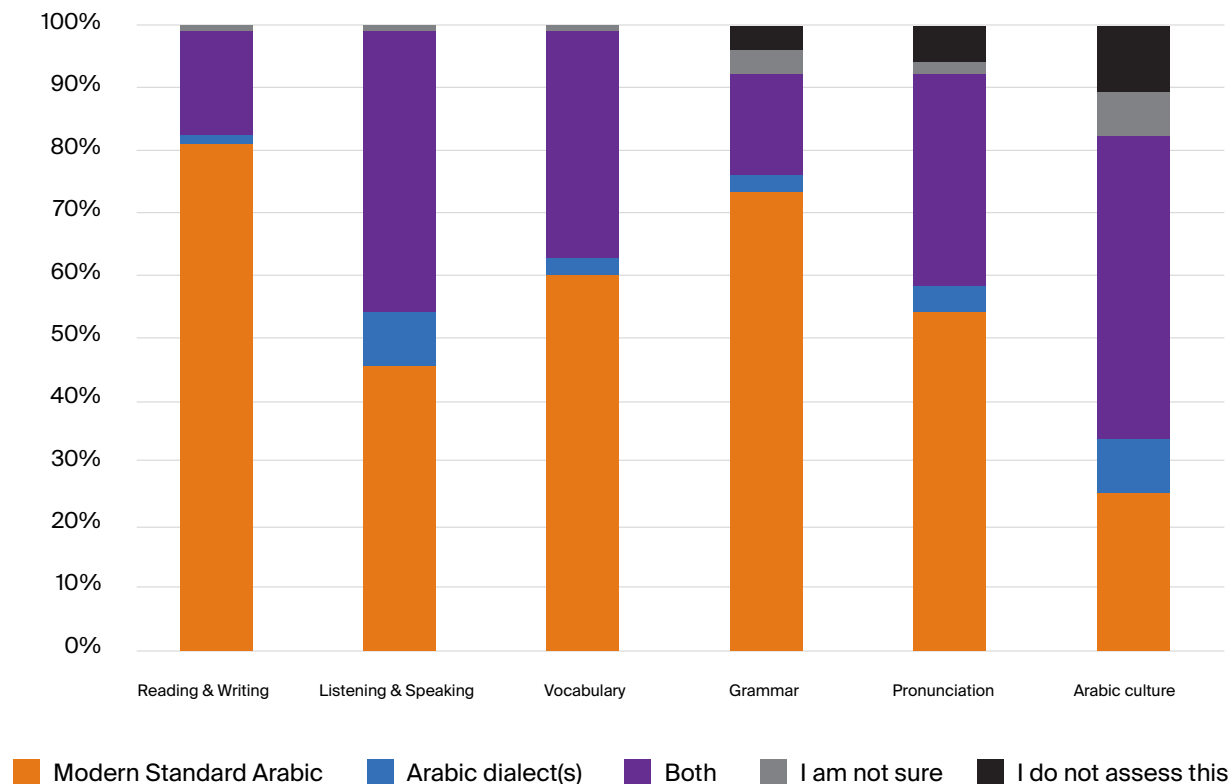


Figure 3. What type of Arabic do you focus on when assessing the following student learning areas? (in percentages for 143 respondents).

## *Findings from the Survey Results and Their Implications*

The small sample size of the survey (n=143) precludes generalizations to the entire U.S. population of Arabic language teachers in the United State. However, the results offer some useful points of comparison to Abdalla and Al-Batal's (2012) survey. Theirs was responded by a sample of 209 Arabic teachers who were working in U.S. colleges in the year 2009, thus representing findings suggestive of the state of the Arabic language teaching profession in higher education some 15 years ago. Our results can also be used to inform future efforts at comprehensively surveying the national workforce of Arabic language teachers in the U.S. In what follows we offer here some thoughts, as an exercise at searching for meaningful implications by extrapolating, instead of generalizing, our findings to a characterization of the U.S. Arabic language teaching workforce and their language awareness of dialects and integration.

In terms of the identities of teachers of Arabic in the U.S., four extrapolations can be made:

(1) Nonnative speaking teachers of Arabic remain a minority in the U.S. We found slightly over a quarter of nonnative Arabic speaking teachers (27.5%) in our sample, only a slight improvement over the 20% that Abdalla and Al-Batal's (2012) reported for the workforce in college 15 years ago.

(2) The teacher pipeline for nonnative Arabic speakers seems to disproportionately lead to college teaching. We found strong evidence in our survey of this, since 15 nonnative teachers, or 68% in our sample of Arabic nonnative speaking teachers, worked in college. It is perhaps no coincidence that the very few studies that exist for nonnative teachers of Arabic are situated in college (Oulbeid, 2018; Samimy, 2008).

(3) The U.S. workforce of Arabic language teachers is female-dominated in k-12 school settings. We infer this because in our k-16 teacher sample, in addition to native, the majority of teachers were female, and indeed very few teachers self-identified as males in secular k-12 schools (6 of 38 respondents) and in k-12 Islamic schools (4 of 51). This differs from the findings reported for college by Abdalla and Al-Batal (2012), who found a more balanced gender distribution (56.5% male and 43.5% female).

(4) The U.S. workforce of Arabic language teachers is highly educated across the board. This is because our teacher sample was very well educated, including in k-12 and Islamic schools, and even for a majority female sample like ours (69.2%). For their sample from 15 years ago and college only, Abdalla and Al-Batal (2012) also reported high levels of education.

In terms of teacher awareness of dialects, our survey captured favorable teacher attitudes towards MSA-dialect integration: 62.9% of teacher respondents reported integrating dialects. Moreover, we were able to detect several teacher identity factors that are favorable to integration (1) teachers in college and nonnative speaking teachers were more likely to say that they integrate. More tentatively, (2) younger teachers, male teachers, and teachers who hold a master's or doctoral degree may also be more inclined to say they integrate Fushā and āmmiyya. Critical language awareness also mattered, in that (3) teachers who think familiarity with dialects is important for Arabic teachers had higher odds of saying that they integrate Fushā and āmmiyya when teaching in U.S. classrooms. Finally, (4) for teacher professional development we would like to suggest that culture, listening and speaking, vocabulary, and pronunciation offer ideal curricular pathways to introduce teachers to integrative pedagogies; integrative goals for reading-and-writing skills and grammar may be a harder sale for teachers.

We were somewhat surprised at the contrast between the large proportion of teacher respondents in the present survey who reported integration (62.9%), and the reports in many previous studies of greater teacher resistance to integration, be it because they say they find it difficult to practically work out integration pedagogies (Al-Mohsen, 2016) or because they view Fushā as the language of 'perfection,' 'majesty,' 'purity,' Pan-Arab unity, and the Quran (Abourehab, 2024). Other researchers have recently underscored the need for sensitizing teachers of Arabic specifically in K-12 settings about the usefulness—and feasibility—of simultaneously teaching standard Arabic and colloquial dialects (e.g., Abourehab & Azaz 2020; Turkistani, 2019). It does seem from our combined survey findings that perhaps integration pedagogies may be less commonly adopted in k-12 than in college. It is important therefore to investigate the reasons behind teachers who say they integrate or do not integrate dialects in their teaching. This can be best done through the methodology of interviews, which brings us to the second phase of our study.

## ***Phase 2: Interviews***

### ***Recruiting Volunteers To Interview***

Of the 143 teachers who completed the survey anonymously, 91 indicated their willingness to be interviewed and shared their contact information with us. This is a very encouraging 64% of the total sample, suggesting that teachers of Arabic in the U.S. are eager to share their experiences and expertise and they want to be listened to. However, 42% of those worked in college, and our focus in the interviews was on k-12 Arabic teaching. In the k-12 native speaking teacher category, this still left us with a large pool of possible interviewees: 22 in public or private secular k-12 schools and 19 in k-12 Islamic schools. Unsurprisingly given the survey findings, we had a very small original pool of volunteers who were nonnative speakers of Arabic teaching in k-12 settings: Only 6 volunteers (4 in secular schools and 2 in Islamic schools). We had also hoped to conduct interviews with teachers for whom Arabic was a heritage language, defined as teachers who had learned Arabic through exposure to the language at home while growing up in the United States. In the entire survey, we only got 2 respondents who fitted this profile, but they taught in college and thus were ineligible for the interview (and neither volunteered to be interviewed). In an effort to expand our k-12 nonnative speaking and heritage speaking pool of volunteers for the interviews, we pursued referrals from the interviewees during interviews. In this way, we were able to identify one more nonnative teacher and one heritage teacher. Upon being contacted by us, both agreed to take the survey and be interviewed (both are counted in the 143 survey respondents).

In the end, then, we interviewed a total of 15 teachers: (a) 4 native teachers in secular public/private k-12 schools out of the 22 available, after failed recruitment of 5 more who had volunteered in the survey but did not respond or declined our invitation; (b) 5 native teachers employed in Arabic language programs housed in Islamic k-12 schools out of the 19 available, all at first invitation; (c) 5 nonnative teachers who taught in secular k-12 schools, 4 who volunteered and 1 after referral; and (d) 1 heritage speaker after referral, who taught in a public charter school.

### ***How We Collected the Interview Data***

The 15 interviews were conducted from May to December of 2023. All took place on zoom and were conducted in English. We structured our interview protocol into four parts, pertaining to (a) critical dialect awareness, (b) pedagogical practices, (c) workplace and professional experiences, and (d) linguistic identity as native/nonnative/heritage/multilingual speakers. Each section was led by a different researcher on the team (the rest would wait for their turn in a zoom room or would be listening while muted and off-camera). The multi-interviewer design was an important and intentional element. Namely, as we each posed our set of questions, we were able to project different positionings and to establish different kinds of common ground thanks to the diverse identities of the five interviewer-researchers. Ethnically, none of us self-identified as White or Anglo. Only two of us were fluent in Arabic: Elabdali, as a native speaker originally from Libya, and Mukherjee as an advanced nonnative speaker with high fluency in the Jordanian dialect.

Ashraf was familiar with Arabic through reading the Quran, and Goswami was a non-Muslim beginner learner of Arabic. Ortega had zero knowledge of Arabic and established some shared ground through explicit connections as a nonnative speaker of English and a native speaker of Spanish who is originally from a small city in Southern Spain very close to Northern Africa. In addition, this diversity meant that our questions were often taken to require clear or extra explanations designed for outsiders, and often illustrations were spontaneously offered by teachers (“let me give you an example”). Moreover, we strove not to be judgmental in our questions or our interactional demeanor, for example, avoiding any implication that we ourselves support dialect integration or believe dialect integration is a right or wrong pedagogical choice.

A written consent form was signed by each interviewee at the point of scheduling, and each interview zoom session went as follows. First the researchers introduced themselves to the teacher. We then retook consent from each interviewee, by restating the interview was confidential and voluntary. The researchers then announced that they would rotate and take turns covering the four topics, by moving to a zoom room where they would wait for their turn, or by shutting off their sound and camera while waiting for their turn (we did both, depending on the interviewee’s preference). We attempted to devote 15 minutes to each of the four sections. In practice, we let teachers speak as much as they wanted, and most of them proved eager to share their experiences with us. The interviews lasted 1 hour and 15 minutes on average, with the shortest being 55 minutes and longest 1 hour and 47 minutes (SD=20 minutes). The multiple-interviewer format worked remarkably well, eliciting a wealth of data and animated insights by each teacher. We deduce this through multiple instances of laughter, smiles, and personal and candid stories shared.

## *Interpretive Analysis of Interview*

In total, we transcribed and analyzed 17 hours and 20 minutes of interview data. The transcription was broad, as we were interested in developing a thematic analysis following grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). All five researchers reviewed all interviews, and each of us undertook an in-depth analysis of 3 or 4 teachers. We listened to the interviews and read the transcript, and we created summaries of the biographies, context of teaching, and stories of the teachers in our care. We then coded the transcripts for any mention of dialect and of MSA (regardless of the labels used by the teachers). We selected significant quotes that encapsulated a teacher’s attitude and positioning towards Fushā, āmmiyya, and integration of the two. We met weekly to discuss our interpretive work, proposing and discussing recurring topics, comparing teachers for similarities and differences in how they spoke about Fushā and āmmiyya, and exploring together the teacher identity dimensions that might help explain their similar and different ways of speaking about integration of dialects with MSA. These weekly meetings allowed us to iteratively compare and synthesize patterns within and across teachers and eventually led to our emergent themes. The goal was always to arrive at themes that captured an insider understanding of the teachers’ perspectives on Fushā, āmmiyya, and integration of the two, from their own professional standpoint, or what is often known as emic understanding (as opposed to an etic or outsider understanding). Thus, just as we tried not to be judgmental in how we posed our questions, we also strove during the interpretation of the data not to impose a researcher judgment that dialect integration is the right pedagogical choice.

Instead, we tried to listen to the voices of these teachers. In our report of the interview results below, we have also tried to preserve the voice of the teachers and their sense-making around Fushā, āmmiyya, and integration.

## ***Who Were The Teachers We Interviewed?***

All 9 native-speaking teacher interviewees had learned Arabic from their families growing up in an Arab-speaking country, and all had moved to the United States after completing a first college degree in their countries of origin. The 5 nonnative-speaking teacher interviewees had learned Arabic in the U.S. through a mixture of college instruction and study abroad (one of them was also married to a native speaker of Arabic and raised Arabic-speaking children in a household that included the in-laws). The single Arabic-speaking heritage interviewee grew up moving back and forth with his family between the U.S. and Lebanon and thus he had learned Arabic in Lebanon through both societal immersion and Arabic-medium schooling, from age 3 to 10 and again from age 13 to 18. However, at home his parents spoke English to him. We decided to group this “heritage” teacher in the “native” category in this report, since his Arabic learning took place at a very young age and mostly outside the U.S. Nevertheless, we recognize that he does not easily fit the triadic categorization of native, heritage, and nonnative speaker, and that much more work is needed before we can use these contested labels with clarity or comfort (Hillman, 2019).

Overall, the demographic make-up of interviewees broadly reflects the larger survey sample. We interviewed more female than male teachers, most were in their 40s, and all were highly educated. In terms of religion, our teachers self-identified as Muslim (N=10, 2 of them nonnative speaking teachers), Christian of various denominations (N=3, 1 of them a native speaking teacher), and non-practicing Christian (N=2, 1 nonnative and 1 heritage). In terms of race/ethnicity, the 9 native speakers self-identified as “Middle Eastern”; the one heritage speaker as “Middle Eastern, White”; and of the 5 nonnative speaking teachers, 3 identified as “White,” one as “African American,” and one as “South Asian.”

At the time of the interviews, the 15 teachers were located across ten different states in the United States: 8 teachers were teaching in the Northeast, 3 in the Midwest, 2 in the Southwest, 1 in the West, and 1 in the Southeast. This represented considerable geographic diversity but with the northeast oversampled, reflecting three large metropolitan areas where the Arab American population is large: New York City, New Jersey, and the District of Columbia-Maryland-Virginia larger area.

It should be noted that our 15 interviewees included 4 teachers who were both teachers and program directors. In addition, 3 teachers shared with us during their interviews that they had recently exited the profession; they openly and candidly explained to us the reasons for this decision, which we hope to analyze in the future.

# Interviews Findings

In the remainder of this report, we present six key findings we have gleaned from our thematic analysis of the interviews with the fifteen k-12 teachers of Arabic. These findings in turn informed the design of the 5 Modules that we created for the purpose of teacher development.

## *The Influence of Program Size and Student Background*

We found that in their explanations for what Arabic they teach or want to teach, teachers were affected by the size of the program where they worked. The 15 teachers worked in two types of programs, large and small. We define a program as large when it employs a team of 3 or more teachers and offers multiple sections across up to 4 levels of Arabic. We define a program as small in cases when only one teacher, or two teachers at most, are responsible for the Arabic language offerings in a school. We found that, for the teachers who worked in a large Arabic language program, without an exception, the school's official policy determined what they taught, and it was invariably MSA. For the teachers who worked in a small program, on the other hand, we found that freedom to choose the variety of Arabic they wanted to teach was complete. As they told us, neither school administrators nor parents knew about Arabic diglossia. So not only were the teachers working in a small-sized program not handed any official policy from the school, but also the question whether to teach MSA or to integrated was seldom if ever asked to them by outside stakeholders or authorities.

The influence of program size seemed to override other potential factors mediating a teacher's freedom to choose the variety of Arabic they wanted to teach, for example, whether a school was secular or Islamic and even whether a teacher was native or nonnative. Specifically, 10 teachers, including all the native-speaking teachers (5 teachers in Islamic k-12 schools and 4 in public/private secular schools) but also 1 nonnative-speaking teacher worked in large programs, reported the school policy was to teach MSA. The other 5 teachers (4 nonnative speaking teachers and our only 1 heritage speaking teacher) worked in small programs, and they all reported they had chosen whether to teach MSA or dialect, and the degree to which they would integrate both.

In addition, student background was also a clear reason for teachers to make decisions on the fly as when and how much to integrated MSA and dialects in their teaching. This was clear for a teacher who compared two large-size programs in two different schools where she had worked, one with a majority heritage student population, the other with very few (and incidentally, note that she uses "slang" as an alternating synonym of 'āmmīyah or dialect, but seemingly with affection, rather than pejoratively):

*"[in my school in the Midwest] I had the freedom and the luxury to use my slang to talk to the students, with Arabic, and to sing with them. It's just more connection, because they were all heritage speakers, and if they didn't know the song the parents would. In here [in my present school in the Southwest] I feel like it's dry" (Teacher 9)*

Several teachers commented on the need for teachers to be attentive to using dialect in ways that still allowed them to treat all student backgrounds fairly in mixed classrooms, with one expressing a concern with fairness when using dialect in mixed classrooms with heritage and non-heritage students:

*“I have to offer equitable instruction. Because I have also student who do not come from Arabic speaking backgrounds. Or they come from Arabic speaking backgrounds, but Arabic is not their main language, and actually they don’t speak it.” (Teacher 1)*

There was agreement that integration mostly benefits heritage-language students, whose exposure to home dialects inevitably spills into the classroom. But where teachers worked in classrooms where heritage students were in the minority, they expressed some uncertainty about whether letting dialect into the classroom may create inequities among students.

If school policy emerged as a pressure to teach MSA for the large-size program teachers, and student background was a central consideration, as just discussed, testing or assessment did not seem to create any pressures for them to prioritize MSA over dialects. The caveat is that we did not directly asked teachers about assessment and tests. But we do find it important that the theme did not emerge in the otherwise very rich teacher accounts of their professional lives, their needs, regrets, and desires.

# Teachers in Large-Size Programs: Three Outliers on the Extremes of Anti- and Pro-Integrations

Different from previous literature, where teachers may be found to be skeptical or reluctant towards letting 'āmmīyah into the classroom, the interviews revealed positive attitudes towards both MSA and dialect, and moderately to greatly positive attitudes towards at least some integration of the two. There were only three outliers to this general sentiment. All three worked in a large-size program at the time of the interview.

At one extreme, 2 teachers out of 15 were adamant in considering proficiency in standard Arabic as the obvious goal of teaching and learning Arabic. Both worked in a large program, but they could not be more different in their teacher identities: one was a female native speaker in an Islamic school and the other a male nonnative speaking teacher in a public school.

The female native speaking teacher professed a strict adherence to MSA and was decidedly against any pedagogical approach that would enable dialect integration. Throughout the interview, she referred to Fushā as the authentic Arabic, the core Arabic, the perfect language, and the source language of the Quran. Her conviction was that a foundation in Fushā positions all students ideally to then quickly acquire any dialects they may later be in contact with:

*"I think the best way to teach Arabic is to teach the authentic one, and then it's easy for people to learn the different dialects because they have the core."*

She seemed to be convinced that dialect learning is something that will come easily to students once they are using Arabic in the wild. As she put it, all that is required is a "switch" or a "spice" from Fushā to whatever dialect may be needed to meet the occasion.

The male native speaking teacher showed extraordinary skill and motivation in creating his own suite of multimodal Arabic materials for the 4 levels offered in his school, which he proudly showed to us during the interview. Yet, when we asked him "What type or types of Arabic do you teach?" he responded without hesitation:

*"I'm a very open-minded person when it comes to all kinds of topics. But for me, I do have a very strong opinion about people learning Arabic. I think that when you're teaching Arabic as a foreign language, you need to teach people the standard language. In my classroom, we 99% teach Fushā. I teach people how to read and write Fushā. I teach them how to be able to understand and engage with Fushā. And so I believe that, you know, an Arabic program means teaching the modern standard language."*

At the other end of the continuum, the third outlier was a native speaker in an Islamic school who was greatly concerned with students' communicative competence beyond the classroom and "fought" her program's MSA policy, even while also understanding the prioritization of MSA as a rational and natural choice for their school to make, agreeing on this with all the other 9 teachers working under such an official policy:

*So let me tell you. Yeah. As an Arabic teacher, my biggest biggest challenge is Fushā. And 'āmmīyah. We call it 'āmmīyah language or dialects, different dialects. [...] These poor students, when they go overseas to Jordan, Palestine, Morocco... if they use the Fushā, they will make fun of them. People will feel like, 'Where are you from? You don't belong here. You're using [MSA] [...] As a school, we're not allowed to do that [teach dialects]. They can't use the slang to write. They can't just use this language to read, their textbooks are all in Fushā. So if I wanna teach them 'āmmīyah... and I fought for 'āmmīyah. I fought for a slang to be taught in classrooms, and they said 'You cannot.' [...] But as a teacher from my heart I wanna teach a slang. I wanna teach this language. It's not welcomed, it's not welcomed from the school. The school goes with Fushā. Fushā, Fushā, Fushā!*

# ***The Consensus View in Large-size Programs: On-the-Fly Dialect Integration as a Means to an End***

Putting these 3 outlier teachers aside, we found that the remaining 7 teachers working in large-sized programs responded to the school-imposed choice of MSA with moderately to greatly positive towards dialects. For them, however, dialects are a means to an end, and they agreed integration should be impromptu, on the fly, not by design. These teachers spoke of unplanned and frequent integration of dialect, often originating from their heritage-language students, more rarely initiated by the teacher. To them, integration is something that can be and should be used but only as a lever to improve the quality of classroom instruction, with three end goals that differed by teacher.

First, on-the-fly integration can support crosslinguistic awareness and understanding of MSA:

*“I’m trying always to centralize the learning and the teaching over the classical one. But when the students answer in dialect, or come up with the example in dialect, okay, I do not discourage that, and I do not recommend it. And then we use that to enrich the discussion and to capture the meaning, and to do also comparison and contrast”*

Second, it can foster student motivation among heritage-language students and student interest among Muslim students who have exposure to Arabic through the Quran only:

*“if I have any student who comes from a certain country, for example, Egypt or Morocco, I do not have any problem with the student using that dialect [...] Do I use a dialect in the class? I do. Actually. Sometimes I throw words here and there, sometimes, and I find that my [Muslim] students are interested also in learning other dialects, other than the standard Arabic”*

Third, on-the-fly integration can address the resistance towards the official MSA curriculum that some students may feel:

*“I encourage my students to share how they say this or that word in their dialect [...] This works well when students are resistant to sticking to MSA”*

In sum, the view of these teachers was that dialect is a “means” to various “ends,” all ultimately making dialects subservient to the success of the MSA curriculum, and the official school policy to teach MSA natural and positive:

*“I’m teaching them the standard Arabic, I can’t teach the Egyptian dialect. We teach them the Arabic language. Wherever they will go they will be able to use it”*

# Teachers in Small-size Programs: Experimenting with Dialect Integration

All the teachers in small-size programs were nonnative (4) or heritage (1) in background. They reported being free not only to choose what Arabic variety to teach but also to experiment with integration. In all these five cases, student background and their own dialectal or heteroglossic competence were factors under consideration.

One of these five teacher, for example, emphasized the pedagogical challenge created by the different background of students she taught. According to her, professional command in MSA was the desired goal for the heritage students: *“They really want to perfect their Modern Standard Arabic... because they speak excellent dialect, and they haven’t really had a thorough education in writing and reading Arabic. So they want to be able to use Arabic professionally.”* But for her students who were learning Arabic as a world or foreign language, who were the majority across the 4-level courses she taught, oral communication in Arabic was the goal: *“Whereas my other students really just want to be able to interact in the language.”* For the latter, she felt, dialect integration was useful. Since she only has 0 to 2 heritage students in each class, she told us she prioritizes oral communication and thus experiments with dialect integration. Nevertheless, this teacher told us she do not “teach” any dialect, as she feels fluent or competent in none of them, having studied MSA exclusively in college and having had limited experience with dialects through MSA-focused study abroad in Oman, some travel in Jordan, and familiarity in recognizing distinctive features of Levantine and Egyptian through media and cultural exposure. She integrated MSA and Levantine, but from a position of being an expert in MSA with what she perceives to be little fluency in any dialect, she admits to *“teaching a sort of weird hybrid that no native Arabic speaker would ever use. Where they’re like using some dialect words and some modern standard Arabic words in the same sentence...”*

On the other hand, another female nonnative teacher also working as the only Arabic teacher in her school felt she was highly fluent and competence in Egyptian Arabic, which she had learned during study abroad in her college years. She told us she taught her students no MSA but instead Egyptian Arabic. The only heritage speaker we were able to interview, too, shared with us that he exposes his students to Levantine mostly because that is the variety he is most knowledgeable about. Thus, among the small-size program teachers, confidence in their own ability to be a good speaker model for a dialect played an important role.

# ***Well-developed Knowledge about Dialects and Diglossia, But Negative Ideologies about Northern African Dialects***

The 15 teachers we interviewed were articulate, positive, and passionate about the Arabic language, and they were able to explain MSA and dialects as a natural part of the reality of the language they taught.

In general, most teachers expressed appreciation and fondness for dialects as much as MSA. One teacher at a private school, for example, expressed fondness for “*the Arabic language*” (by which he meant Fushā in the context), but also repeatedly referred with admiration to “*the richness of dialects.*” Another teacher, who worked in an Islamic school, described how colleagues celebrate their diversity of dialects through humorous teasing in the teachers’ room, when they mix dialects or they try accommodating to each other’s dialect, or they jokingly note that they failed to understand a colleague’s dialect:

*“We do tease each other using our dialects. And it’s funny. We say our dialects have been ruined because we’re sitting with each other. So sometimes I speak a little bit of Lebanese and a little bit of Egyptian [...] It is fun using a dialect. And it’s fun also using the standard Arabic as well.”*

Some teachers proved to be particularly good at explaining diglossia and at rationalizing their position in favor of at least some dialect integration. The ways in which they shared the idea of diglossia with their students were far from uniform.

One of the teachers shared with us how he explains the multidialectal reality of Arabic to his beginning-level students, drawing similarities between Arabic diglossia, which is new to them, and English registers and regional varieties, which is likely to be more familiar to his students:

*“I tell them like there is a written language, [and] that [any] speaking language is different than the written language. There is stuff like that. So this is the same thing [in Arabic as in English]. And also, if you go to other states [they have] different dialects than [in their city], you know what I mean. That’s this is a like. The language that we speak is different sometimes. [...] and I compare it also to social media or texting messages. So, this is how I explain it, and I will tell them that. And my students know that we there are 22 [Arab] countries. There are regions. And in every region there is one dialect”*

Another native speaking teacher who taught at a small private school explained how he introduces dialects gradually in order to curb students’ potential shock at the diversity of Arabic and instead to boost their appreciation of it. To do so, he described how he first introduces students to Fushā as the Arabic language, and gradually exposes them to dialects so they are not surprised by the diversity of Arabic:

*“Arabic first to just say to them ‘You know, this is how it st- I wouldn’t say even ‘how it started.’ This is what all Arabs agree on, the Arab League, the United Nations.’ ‘This is the language that they use.’ And bit by bit I introduce them to other, like, to other dialects. So they’re not shocked at the end to know that ‘Wow! All this variety of dialects.’” Instead of shock, “I just really show the students the richness of all these dialects.”*

A third, very different but equally well articulated illustration is another teacher, also a native speaker but in a public school, who offered a theory of dialect integration underpinned by a strong communicative rationale:

*“I would say, in my opinion an ideal approach would be 70% dialect 30% Fusha. Because in real life 70% of your time, engaging in any form of communication or human interaction, it’s gonna be in your dialect. Whether it’s over the phone making hotel booking, ordering a taxi, talking to your friend talking to your family. 70% of that is done with dialect. And then 30% in real life, in my opinion, is where you would need your knowledge. And that’s when you hear the news. When you read a newspaper. When you have to do a formal speech. Or when you have to do a presentation to defend your dissertation! So ideally, in my opinion, the course design should be a 70-30 approach, with the emphasis on the dialect [...] Now, in terms of starting one and then adding the other later on... I think it’s like shooting yourself in the foot, because you’re not acknowledging the presence of the other form early on. It’s like not telling an adopted child. They’re adopted when you first adopt them. The shock is bigger.”*

However, this teacher went on to tell us that she integrated in her teaching the Egyptian and Levantine dialects only, saying that she did not feel comfortable with other dialects, especially the Northern African dialects, and especially Moroccan, which is *“like a different world [...] just because of its French influence and the fact that it’s not applicable or helpful in other dialects.”* She explained vividly: *“Like if you’re looking geographically at the Arab world, you’ll see Morocco, Algeria, and Libya like on one side, and then you’ll see... The rest of the world can understand each other just fine.”*

Another teacher expressed similar ideologies, noting that dialects are fine to learn when and if students need to travel abroad but that, even then, he did not see much feasibility, as learning may not be very likely, depending on how *“difficult”* the dialect in question is. This teacher estimated students will pick up some dialect on their own if it is Shami (if they go to Jordan) or one of the other *“more pure”* dialects, like Egyptian *“or even the Gulf dialect.”* But in his experience students will likely struggle with more difficult dialects that are farther away from standard Arabic and *“have mixtures”* of other languages like French and Spanish, with Moroccan being the case in point for this teacher.

The negative ideologies against Northern African Arabic dialects are well documented in the sociolinguistics literature (Soulaimani, 2019), and they were found in all interviews with the native speaking teachers, except those 3 teachers who were originally from Morocco or Algeria. Some of the nonnative teachers, on the other hand, seemed relatively aware of the ideological status of such valuations, telling us they consider the purported superiority of Levantine or Egyptian Arabic over the other varieties to be a result of greater access in the U.S. to these particular dialects.

# Incidental Dialect Teaching through Culture

Resonating with one of the findings in the Survey, in their interviews, teachers talked about cultural topics and artefacts as the most frequent and natural way in which students can be introduced to dialects.

One teacher, who was also the director of a small-size Arabic language program in a private school, exclaimed: *“I love to teach really all dialects.”* But he also emphasized cautiously how his goal was to *“situate the dialect in its proper context,”* which for him it seems to mean three things. One was teaching dialect incidentally in order to support cultural learning (e.g., *“We’re speaking about Egypt, I’m gonna imbue that lesson with some Egyptian dialect”*). Culture was all-important for this teacher, as in his private school it was cultural programming for the entire school that had helped him *“create a really positive vibe around the Arabic program and attract more students to the culture and to the language.”*

Another native speaker, teaching at a large public school, similarly emphasized the importance of culture in the curriculum as a way to nurture a pipeline of long-term Arabic learners:

*“We concentrate on the language, but far more important for us is the culture. So we want students to love the culture and stuff like that. We have a saying here, ‘Always lead with culture and language will follow.’ So, ok, language. But if the student doesn’t love the culture, he will not love the language, and he will not continue with Arabic. [...] So we do a lot of culture. We want the students to love the language. We want the students to continue with the language. So, for example, last year we had 60 students who graduated [and] they’ve continued minoring in Arabic at universities.”*

For this teacher, however, compared to the concern to foster a love for the Arabic culture, the question of dialect integration is unimportant and better left for researchers, not educators on the ground:

*“So because of that [‘always lead with culture and language will follow’], we concentrate a lot on culture, more than on the dialects. I think it’s a big deal whenever I go to conferences. But for us it’s not. It’s like, Yeah, you can talk about like I know that you said at the beginning it’s a huge conversation. But for me, it’s not a huge conversation. It’s like ten minutes, and that’s it. Like, I don’t concentrate on dialect a lot”*

What seems to this teacher like “a huge conversation” at conferences is thus a 10-minute explanation in the classroom. And then he can concentrate on teaching them culture and love of language through culture. Nevertheless, the same teacher told us that he leaves some room for dialects in the classroom. He says in his teaching he lets dialects in through culture like songs: *“I include a lot of songs, for example, and all of it in the dialect, so they will be introduced to the dialect.”* But he adds they never do this in level 1 of the curriculum for fear of confusion (*“We don’t want to confuse the students too much”*). At levels 2 or 3, once certain topics have been covered, they cyclically may be covered again in dialect,

*“for example, if the students talk about family in Arabic, in 1 or Arabic 2, or did some activities already, it will be repeated in Arabic 3 when you talk about yourself. So it’s already like they will know it in Arabic, in dialect or in standard.”*

Our only heritage speaking teacher described how dialects entered his classroom through cultural materials: *“I did expose them a lot to, you know dialect in terms of music, or television from around the Arab world. Just so they got a sense of all the differences. And in my view, it’s important for students to learn a dialect as well. It’s honestly mirroring the way people learn Arabic in the Arab world as well.”* This latter comment is interesting, as this teacher seems to rely on his experience “learning” (and not only “using”) Arabic as a child in Lebanon, through a mixture of MSA and dialect both inside and outside the classroom.

Finally, culture does not need to always be understood as related to dialects. The nonnative speaking teacher who, together with another native speaking teacher in our group, adamantly opposed the teaching of dialect in the classroom centered culture in his pedagogy, but for him access to culture is via texts of different sorts (books, stories, movies, poems, song lyrics) who are in Fushā:

*“I just believe that learning about a culture is being able to read its literature and its history and everything. And if you don’t know Fushā, you can’t do any of that. You can’t, you can’t read basic children’s books in Arabic. You can’t read, you can’t read advertisements. You can’t read... anything! I mean, 99% of written materials are done in Fushā. And so yeah, to me, it’s- to me, it’s not even- it’s not even up for diss- to me the debate is over. Like, when you’re learning Arabic, you’re learning modern Arabic. I have very strong opinions about that.”*

# Conclusion

There are many more themes, nuances, and richness in our interview data. But overall, we believe together with our survey findings, our interview evidence allow us to draw some conclusions:

- Teachers of Arabic working in k-12 contexts in the US are highly educated, multilingual, and fully qualified teachers who devote themselves to the teaching of Arabic and the education of their diverse students.
- While many teachers may still mostly teach MSA, particularly if their schools mandate them to do so, many are also open and willing to use dialects in their classroom.
- The size of the program and the kind of students they teach will influence the degree to which a teacher will integrate dialects in their MSA teaching.
- For nonnative speaking teachers, self-confidence in their dialectal competence will also be a factor.
- For native speaking teachers, negative language ideologies will conspire to include certain dialects while excluding others.
- Nateness per se, however, is not a determining characteristic for whether a teacher will be receptive to integrative pedagogies.
- Three key reasons for dialect integration that teachers themselves see as meaningful are: to bond with and support their heritage students, to foster greater out-of-class communicative competence, and to cultivate a love for the Arab world and Arab culture.

Based on these insights, we have designed five research-driven modules for use with teachers of Arabic that fully draw on the teachers' voices our study has unearthed. We hope QFI will find useful in their professional development workshops.