

Qatar Foundation International

Raising Awareness and Supporting Recognition of *Regional Varieties in the Teaching of Arabic*

Qatar Foundation International

Principles and Guidelines for Integrating Regional Dialectal Variation in the *Arabic Classroom* and *Curriculum*

Fall 2023

Prepared for Qatar Foundation International
by Dr Rasha Kadry Soliman and Dr Melissa Towler,
University of Leeds, School of Languages, Cultures and Societies

This set of guidelines is directed at Arabic language teachers, at all types of schools, with all types of Arabic learners, regardless of age or linguistic background.



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Scope and aims of the guidelines

This set of guidelines is directed at Arabic language teachers in the school sector, at all types of schools with all types of Arabic learners regardless of their age or linguistic background.

There is a lack of guidance on how to deal with the presence of dialects, or regional varieties (RVs), in teaching Arabic, especially for teachers who only teach fuSHa.¹ This document directly addresses that gap by providing suggestions and practical examples of how to: raise awareness of linguistic variation, expose learners to the different Arabic dialects, and support their recognition and understanding of as many Arabic dialects as possible that they encounter outside of class. These guidelines stem from research conducted by Dr. Rasha Soliman and Dr. Melissa Towler at the University of Leeds within the Arabic teaching community in UK schools, both mainstream and supplementary. The research investigated teachers' beliefs and approaches to the integration of different Arabic varieties in their teaching. Although these guidelines emerged from research specific to UK schools, we believe they are applicable to the teaching of Arabic in other contexts.

These guidelines are not meant to provide a step-by-step guide to integrating dialects into Arabic language curriculum, nor are they meant to develop an awareness of ALL dialect varieties at once. Rather, they aim to help you as a teacher to utilize your students' linguistic profiles and familiarize your class with dialectal variation in Arabic. Whether your approach to teaching Arabic focuses purely on fuSHa or is based on the Integrated Approach of teaching fuSHa and one dialect simultaneously, these guidelines aim to help you enrich the learners' knowledge of the variational reality of the Arabic language that goes beyond only one or two varieties. They aim to support learners in gaining the skills of proficient Arabic speakers who understand and speak fluent Arabic (a mother-tongue dialect and fuSHa) and who possess an awareness of other Arabic dialects, and who can, to various extents, communicate successfully with other speakers.

Qatar Foundation International (QFI) works with educators and classrooms across the world. We are committed to promoting teaching Arabic in a communicative way, one that supports the various modes of communication (interpersonal, interpretive, presentational, and intercultural) in classrooms that demonstrate 21st-century skills and global competency in action—classrooms that are interactive, student-centered, and encourage critical thinking. QFI strongly believes that classrooms must provide engaging environments that connect learners with the world around them. Working globally, we understand that each context is unique, and that the applicability of this approach to Arabic instruction must be tailored depending on context. However, in every context, QFI believes that an emphasis should be placed on pedagogies that are based on communicative teaching.

These guidelines are in-line with the communicative approach to teaching, and they represent an essential first step for teachers to realize that approach in their classrooms.

¹ The term 'fuSHa' in this document refers to both Classical and Modern Standard Arabic, while the urban Arabic dialects are referred to as the 'Regional Varieties' (RVs).

The Guidelines

What does ‘raising awareness and supporting recognition of regional varieties’ in teaching Arabic mean? ?

Raising awareness and supporting recognition of RVs in teaching Arabic does not mean teaching 20+ different varieties of Arabic with all their vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Instead, they mean:

1. Raising awareness of the presence of regional dialectal varieties and helping learners to appreciate them and understand their contextual use.
2. Helping learners to understand ‘as much as possible’ of the varieties that they hear and read by:
 - iii. Exposing them to variation in language use.
 - iv. Encouraging them to listen to, recognize and comprehend varieties of Arabic.
 - v. Encouraging them to be independent and analytical when encountering variation.
 - vi. Teaching them some of the similarities and differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar across the main regional varieties, so that they may comprehend, and even produce, as much as possible of the Arabic RVs.

How to raise learners’ awareness of the presence of regional dialectal varieties in Arabic and their contexts?

Utilize Learner’s Knowledge

As a starting point, it is always crucial to have a conversation with your class about why they are learning Arabic, and to find out if they come from Arabic heritage or have been exposed to certain varieties of Arabic. This will guide your approach to integrating language variation into your teaching as it will vary from one class to another, depending on your learner population and the goals of the Arabic class.

For example, if most of your learners come from certain Arabic speaking backgrounds such as Levantine, then in addition to the generic awareness-raising listed in the following points, it will be sensible to refer to how Arabic is used in the Levant region and to encourage these learners to bring to class what their families use at home. However, if the majority of your class are non-heritage learners who are new to Arabic, then you can follow the suggestions below more widely without having to focus on a specific region.

Context, Context, Context

As early as possible, tell learners that Arabic has different varieties: the old Classical Arabic, the Modern Standard Arabic (both referred to as fuSHa) and the many RVs that Arabic speakers use in their day-to-day lives. This is in addition to the fact that Arabic speakers often mix between these different varieties depending on the context. And in fact, varieties differ within a region. For example, not everyone across Lebanon speaks the same Levantine dialect and people can pick up the nuances in language that can place them to be from the north or the south of the country. The same happens across the Arab world. This is also not unique to Arabic. Tell learners that variation exists in all languages.

As an example of a classroom activity, ask your learners if they know which variety of Arabic they expect to hear in the following situations – feel free to add to the table. Get them to tick the variety/ies that is likely to be used in each context, and they can tick more than one. This can be introduced in different ways, for example, as a quiz. It's important here to also inform learners that these choices are not set in stone and that there is no wrong or right – that is the point! They can be variable depending on the contexts and the individuals.

	Classical Arabic (fuSHa)	Modern Standard Arabic (fuSHa)	A regional variety	A mix between different varieties	A mix between fuSHa and a regional variety
A religious sermon at a mosque or a church	✓	✓			✓
A news broadcast on an Arab TV station		✓			
A parent telling children to finish their food and go to bed			✓		
Two Arab neighbors (from different Arab countries) chatting outside their houses			✓	✓	✓
Someone giving directions to the taxi driver			✓		
Someone in the street being interviewed by a TV presenter		✓	✓	✓	✓

	Classical Arabic (fuSHa)	Modern Standard Arabic (fuSHa)	A regional variety	A mix between different varieties	A mix between fuSHa and a regional variety
Someone reciting Arabic poetry	✓	✓	✓		
A customer greeting a shopkeeper			✓		
Someone chatting on WhatsApp with a friend			✓		
Someone writing a CV		✓			
A journalist writing a report		✓			
A parent joking with their children			✓		
A job interview		✓	✓	✓	✓
Someone giving a presentation at work		✓	✓	✓	✓
A post on Facebook about politics		✓	✓		✓
Two friends chatting about the weather			✓	✓	
Participants in a talk show discussing political, social, and environmental issues on Arab TV				✓	✓
Actors in a TV series on Arab TV				✓	✓

Table 1: Examples of the different varieties of Arabic used according to contexts.

Engagement in learning

Engage learners to find out about the different varieties of Arabic by asking them to speak to their Arab friends, neighbors, and relatives about how they say certain phrases in their dialects. Ask them to watch and listen to different dialectal varieties and share what they learn. Make sure that such discussions are part of the day-to-day class routine without taking too much time from scheduled lessons.

For example, if you have a lesson that deals with talking about daily routines (whether your lesson is conducted in fuSHa or in an RV), ask learners to find out how certain verbs associated with daily routines are used in different Arab regions, i.e. the verb 'to go': يذهب - يروح - يمشي. This can be part of their homework. Even if your students are non-heritage learners, encourage them to search online. The goal is that you, as the teacher, are devoting time to activate knowledge of RVs. Students can then share what they learn at the beginning of subsequent classes.

We can't know everything

Learners must understand that they are not expected to know every single word in every single variety, but that throughout their Arabic learning, they are familiarizing themselves with words and expressions they are likely to encounter at some point. Tell students which varieties of Arabic you speak yourself, and that no single person (including teachers!) knows everything. This is also a good time to point out that despite not knowing every single word or rule of every single dialect, speakers of different RVs can still understand each other. The way that variation is explored in class is a fun learning journey for everyone—including teachers and learners. It's never meant to be an extra cognitive burden.

If you are asked how to say a certain word/phrase in a certain variety that you don't know, tell your learners openly that you do not know that word/phrase and encourage them to look for an answer while you do the same. In your next class, you can all share what you learned. Make sure you always praise learners for sharing something with you and remind them that it's both helpful and fun to learn from your students.

All Arabic, all beautiful and all correct

Ensure learners understand that all Arabic varieties are beautiful and correct, but each one has its own context of use. All have some unique vocabulary, grammatical structures, and pronunciation. Have an open discussion with learners about the kinds of biased or uninformed perceptions they may hear outside of class. They will love these discussions.

For example, after introducing learners to Arabic variation as mentioned above, try to have an open class discussion that will make them think critically about the realities of the language. Write the names of a few Arabic varieties on the whiteboard, e.g. Saudi Arabic, Libyan Arabic, Iraqi Arabic, fuSHa, then ask them: Which variety of Arabic is correct? Or beautiful? This will make them think, and maybe even share some of their own preconceptions. Make sure to tell them that all Arabic varieties are correct, all have grammar, all are useful, and all are beautiful. They're just different!

FuSHa	One of the meanings of the root of this verb [ر-و-د] is about 'seeking'	أَرِيدُ
Iraqi	Same root as fuSHa with a slight pronunciation difference	أَرِيدُ
Saudi	Similar to the root of أَرِيدُ, the root [ب-غ-ي] is also about 'seeking/ desiring'	أَبْغَى
Gulf	The same as أَبْغَى but the غ disappeared	أَبِي/آبِي
Egyptian and Sudanese	Stems out of the root [ع-و-ز] which refers to 'needing' something, behaves like an adjective rather than a verb	عَاوِز/عَاوِز
Levantine	Is a short form of يُوَدِّي 'wanting/liking' and literally 'to-my-liking,' therefore conjugated differently from other RVs' equivalents i.e. يَدِي، بَدُّكَ، بَدُّهُ	يَدِّي
Moroccan	Stems out of the same root as the 'Saudi' equivalent but conjugated in the past tense.	بُغَيْتَ

Table 2: Arabic variants of 'I want' and their analysis.

Teaching

Introduce some of the basic differences and similarities in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar across different varieties of Arabic, which most speakers of Arabic as a first language are aware of.

These include:

Pronunciation

Out of all the sounds and the 28 Arabic letters, the following Table 3³ shows the 11 letters with considerable variation.

Examples	Possible pronunciation	The letter/sound
Think about how the 'alif' in the word بِنَايَةَ is pronounced in different RVs.	Various long 'a' sounds close to the 'a' in English words like: 'arm', 'bath', 'fat'	ا
ثلاثة - ثلاثة ثورة pronounced as 'sawra'	th as in the English 'think' t - s	ث
Think about how دَجَاج is pronounced as 'dadajaj' - 'djadj' - 'dyay' - 'dagag'	dj - j - g - y	ج

³ More pronunciation details can be found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_phonology

Examples	Possible pronunciation	The letter/sound
Think about how لذيذ can be pronounced as 'lazeez' ذَهَب - ذَهَب [gold]	th as in the English 'the' z - d	ذ
Think about how رَضِي can be pronounced as 'radi' or 'radhi' closer to ظ sound Think about how ضابط can be pronounced as ظابط	Emphatic d - Emphatic dh ظ - Emphatic z	ض
Think about how ظَلَّ can be pronounced as ضَلَّ	Emphatic dh - Emphatic z - Emphatic dh ض	ظ
Think about how قَلْب can be pronounced as 'qalb, galb, or alb'	Emphatic q - g - glottal stop ⁴	ق
Think about how يَحْكِي can be pronounced as 'yiHki' or 'yiHchi'	k - ch	ك
Think about how لُون can be pronounced as 'lawn,' 'loan' or loon'	A diphthong aw - Long o as in the English 'more'	وْ
Think about how بِيْت can be pronounced as 'beet' or 'bait'	A diphthong ay - Long ee as in the English 'bean' Close to the sound ai as in the English 'paid'	يْ
Think about how سماء زرقاء can be pronounced and written as سما زرقا Think about how لا بأس and لا يأكل can be باس لا - ياكل Think about how عائشة - جئت - مئة - هادي - لؤلؤ can be عايشة - جيت - مية - هادي - لولو	A glottal stop, replaced by a vowel, or disappears altogether	ء

Table 3: Pronunciation differences across some of the regional varieties

⁴ A glottal stop is a sound of /hamza/ همزة

Introducing Variation in Pronunciation

From the very beginning of teaching Arabic letters and their sounds, make sure learners are aware of the variation in pronunciation in the RVs you are focusing on. Give them examples of words that can be pronounced differently, starting with the simplest ones where there is only one sound that is obviously variable, then move on to words with multiple pronunciation differences. To be specific, this is not setting an expectation that students should know all the various sounds of each letter. Rather, it is something to make students aware of. Later, you can teach them combinations of pronunciation and structural variation. Remind them that they are not obliged to know and remember all variations. Remember to engage them in figuring out how words might be pronounced differently. As you continue to do this, your learners' ability to recognize pronunciation variation will develop and solidify (ultimately mimicking how variation among the RVs is used and understood by speakers of Arabic as a first language). All of this should be done gradually.

For example, when you introduce the letter ج, teach them how a word like 'جمال' is pronounced as 'djamaal,' 'jamaal,' or 'gamaal,' or a word like 'دجاج' is pronounced as 'dadjaj,' 'dajaj,' 'dagag,' or 'dyay.' After they have developed more confidence with their basic knowledge of the alphabet, teach them examples that have a combination of pronunciation variation such as 'جائزة / جائزة' and see if they would guess the different pronunciation possibilities, 'djaa'iza,' 'jaayza,' 'gayza.' When they move on to learn more vocabulary and grammar, explore the combinations of pronunciation and structural variations, as in teaching the verb 'he runs' 'يجري', which can be pronounced as 'yadjri,' 'yijri,' or with additional present tense prefixes 'b' and 'k' in some RVs, like 'b-yijri,' 'b-yigri,' 'k-yjri.'

Vocabulary

It's always best to start with what the learners may know already. It's impossible to teach all vocabulary variants in all RVs, so the best thing to do is to always be selective and engage learners in the process of selection. Choose to introduce word variants in topics that they are interested in or that are commonly used and encountered. Remind learners that they are not expected to remember each variant, but to be aware of them and to choose certain ones to stick to if they wish.

For example, if you are teaching young learners who are interested in animals, do your research, and provide them with variations. For example, for the word 'cat,' بَزْوَنَة - بَسَّة - قُطَّة - قَطَّ, make them aware that these are all variants of the word 'cat,' and ask them to choose the one they want to use. Get them to listen to each other and find out what each learner chose to call a cat in Arabic.

Teach the frequently used words slowly and gradually, especially if they are very variable, such as the interrogatives (إيه - إيش - شنو - شو - ما/ماذا). Do not try to teach all of them at once, as this is overwhelming and defeats the purpose. One by one, they will start to know them, provided you highlight them whenever you get the chance. Other common words that you may consider introducing include common adjectives like 'good' منيح / طيب / مزيان / كويس / جيد and common verbs such as 'to see' يشوف or 'to go' يمشي / يروح or 'to want' as listed in Table 2.⁵ Again, be sure to introduce these gradually and encourage each learner to choose one variant to use, but to be aware of the other variants.

⁵ Arabic versus Arabic is an excellent introductory book. You can take what you want from it. You may want to rely only on the written phrases or combine them with the audio recordings available. See a sample here: <https://lingualism.com/product/arabic-vs-arabic-a-dialect-sampler/>

Grammar

The Arabic varieties have a lot in common when it comes to grammar. They all rely on the root and pattern system, they have very similar word order, the possessive structure is almost the same, verbs are conjugated, there are singulars, duals, and plurals of nouns, and comparatives and conditionals, etc., are used in all varieties. That said, below are some facts that teachers and learners may want to be aware of:

a. The RVs do not have case-ending rules إعراب

b. While fuSHa has 12 pronouns, most regional varieties have eight.⁶

c. The possessive pronouns for 'your' is written the same but differs from fuSHa in pronunciation i.e. كتابك - كتابك become كتابك - كتابك

d. The negation particle that is most common in the RVs is ما with a possible suffix ش as in 'he didn't eat' ما اكل / ما اكلش

e. There is an extra prefix in the present tense verbs in many of the RVs. For example, 'he eats/ is eating' in fuSHa is يأكل, but in some RVs can be any of the following: يياكل - عمبياكل - كياكل. Remember that learners are not expected to produce ALL variants. They need to be aware of them and recognize them but should be able to use/produce one variant of their choice.

f. The relative pronoun الذي with all its different conjugations become one word in most urban dialects: اللي

What to do in the following situations?

1. You or a teacher in your school does not feel confident to speak about RVs that they do not speak, or they are not familiar with:

Reassure your colleagues that every language teacher finds themselves in a similar situation. No one knows all aspects of variation in any language. The goal is to show students that using RVs is okay, and it is still 'Arabic.' Use the RVs you are most familiar with, or those familiar to your students. You are not expected to be an expert in all RVs but to encourage your students to develop a feeling for Arabic variation. For example, if you know that you will be teaching a lesson about the names of animals, plan your lesson as you normally do, ensuring sufficient activities for the students to practice the vocabulary in fuSHa, or the main RV(s) you are teaching. If you have native or heritage Arabic speakers in your class that may know a different RV from the ones you are focusing on, ask them how they say the animal in their RV. Let it be organic and allow students to activate their own knowledge.

⁶ Please note that in fuSHa, the pronoun ((هما covers the masculine and feminine dual but it has different verb conjugations, i.e. هما يذهبان / هما تذهبان.

2. You or a teacher in your school is keen to integrate variation in their teaching, but is afraid of overloading students with information:

This issue is exactly like the question of how much to teach? in any language lesson. Teachers usually experiment with the amount of information they include in their lessons until they develop the skill of sensing how much is sufficient for their learners to absorb without feeling overloaded with new knowledge. This also varies from one class to another across the different ages of learners. As a rule of thumb, it is important that learners develop some solid knowledge of each linguistic aspect before the concept of variation is introduced. For example, if you are teaching the letter ح to beginners, wait until they have practiced writing and pronouncing it well enough before you inform them of some of the different possible pronunciations, especially the most common ones across the Arabic RVs (this is like the ح and ح example above). You may introduce the variation at the end of the lesson or even in the next lesson, but do not delay this knowledge for too long so that learners do not develop a perception that there is only one way to use the language.

3. A learner says a word/phrase that you do not know:

You think it might be in their regional varieties or might just be wrong. Before you make a judgment, ask the learner questions like: where did they learn/hear the phrase? Is it used by parents? Or did they hear it in a video? Where were the speakers from? And after their answers, clarify that the phrase might be from a certain region and that it's not wrong but just belongs to that variety. This will reassure the learner that they are praised and appreciated for all their attempts at language production.

4. A learner tells you that they only want to use their dialectal variety and they do not like fuSHa:

Deal with this according to the context of your teaching. If they are studying Arabic for the long-term purpose of writing and reading fuSHa (novels, newspapers, exams), encourage them to use their varieties as they wish, but clarify to them the contexts of fuSHa, why it is needed, and how it is not so different from their dialectal varieties. Praise them when they use their variety, but always ask them to engage with the fuSHa equivalents of what they say/know. For example, if they insist on saying بدي for 'I want,' praise them for using it correctly, and from time to time, remind them about the equivalents in other parts of the Arab World and in fuSHa. And if they write بدي, approach it in the same way, considering the purpose of the writing. Is it understandable? Does that reach the goal? Or was the assignment specific to fuSHa? Always consider the context and goal of the lesson or assignment.

5. A learner tells you that they or their parents don't like the RVs, or that they believe RVs are 'wrong' or 'bad' Arabic, or they don't want to learn anything about them:

Again, this goes back to your context of teaching. If the goal of the class is purely for fuSHa, for example for a standardized examination that only allows fuSHa, then you may need to limit the variation in your teaching but remind them that learning a language is about communication with its speakers and getting to know the culture. Explain to them how the RVs carry a lot of cultural and heritage-based knowledge and that learning about the variation across different Arabic varieties will help them understand more of what they hear around them now and in the future. It is also crucial to assure learners that exposure to RVs does not jeopardize their fuSHa learning, but in fact, it enhances their fuSHa understanding, as all these varieties are linked together. Tell them that for their future, they will need fuSHa and a good use/understanding of Arabic varieties so that they can perform as many communicative tasks as possible, such as the ones listed in Table 1.

6. A learner is making fun of or mocking what another learner said in or about a regional variety:

Treat this as any other unacceptable behavior. Encourage tolerance and respect of all varieties of Arabic. Tell them that people's mother tongues are integral aspects of their identities that are to be respected and celebrated.

7. A learner comes with a certain negative perception about their own mother-tongue variety:

Encourage a positive perception. Tell them to be proud of their mother tongue while respecting differences. Teach them that Arabs throughout history have always had different varieties that go back to pre-Islamic times and that neither is right or wrong. These are differences to celebrate. Educate them that every variety has grammar, history, culture, poetry, and beauty like any other variety of Arabic or any other language.

Appendix: Resources on Linguistic Variation in Arabic⁷

1. Dictionaries and textbooks on different Arabic dialects:

If you have access to a library, the following is a list of dictionaries and textbooks on different Arabic dialects:

Resources on the North African dialects

Bergman, E. M. (2005). *Spoken Algerian Arabic*: Dunwoody Press.

Dickinson, E. (2004). *Spoken Libyan Arabic*: Dunwoody Press.

Chekayri, A. (2011). *An introduction to Moroccan Arabic and culture*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Resources on Iraqi, Saudi and other Gulf dialects

Clarity, B. E. (2003). *A Dictionary of Iraqi Arabic*: Georgetown University Press.

Qafisheh, H. A. (1975). *A basic course in Gulf Arabic*: University of Arizona Press.

Rice, F. A., & Sa'id, M. F. (2005). *Eastern Arabic with MP3 Files*: Georgetown University Press.

Smart, J. R., & Altorfer, F. (2003). *Gulf Arabic*. London: Teach Yourself.

Resources on Levantine dialects

Cowell, M. W. (2005). *A Reference Grammar of Syrian Arabic with Audio CD: (based on the Dialect of Damascus)*: Georgetown University Press.

McLoughlin, L. (2008). *Colloquial Arabic (Levantine)*: Taylor & Francis.

Resources on the Egyptian dialects

Hinds, M., & Badawi, E.-S. M. (1986). *A dictionary of Egyptian Arabic: Arabic-English*. Beirut: Librairie du Liban.

⁷For a complete list of resources, please visit the publications page at QFI.org.

