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The evolving needs of Arabic language teachers in US K-12 Education

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June 29, 2022

Prepared for the Qatar Foundation International

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Suggested citation: Elabdali, R., Ashraf, H., & Ortega, L. (June 29, 2022). *The evolving needs of Arabic language teachers in U.S. K-12 education*. Qatar Foundation International. Available online from https://www.qfi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/QFI_Publications_WhitePaperA4print.pdf





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Introduction

More youth and adults in the United States are choosing to learn Arabic than ever, and the growth has been sustained for two decades now. Undoubtedly, the importance of Arabic as the fifth most spoken language on the globe (Ethnologue) is not lost on Americans who wish to invest in language learning and global citizenship, nor on the 3.7 million of Arab Americans (AAIUSA) who wish to pass on the Arabic language and culture for generations to come. These are exciting times for Arabic language educators.

But the growth in Arabic language learning is more noticeable at the college level and less felt in the public K-12 school system. In college programs, Arabic is one of only five languages that have seen enrollment increases between 2013 and 2016 (MLA, 2019). Over 30,000 college students were studying Arabic in fall 2016, and 28 different US universities granted degrees in Arabic that same year. By comparison, public school settings show more mixed signs of growth. For example, Arabic fares well among the languages that earn students the Seal of Biliteracy. In the academic year 2018–2019, 80% of 30 states surveyed reported Arabic as one of the awarded languages (Black, Chou, & Hancock, 2020). On the other hand, there are only four or five Arabic dual-language programs in public schools, depending on how one counts (Allaf, 2020; ACIS, 2022). This is a tiny number amidst the 3,600 dual-language programs counted in the fall of 2021 (ACIS, 2022). As for regular Arabic-language offerings in public school, the latest survey based on 2014–2015 data (ACIS, 2017) estimates that only 4 Arabic language programs existed in the early k-8 grades and only 161 at the high school level. A total of about 26,000 students were taking Arabic in public schools across 38 states, with the highest concentration in North Carolina (16 schools), followed by Virginia, New York, Minnesota, and Texas (all with between 10 and 12 schools). This presence of Arabic in K-12 schools is small when we think that Arabic is the second most spoken home language for English-learners (ELs) in US schools, ranking only after Spanish; there were over 122,000 Arabic-speaking ELs in the school system in 2016–2017 (OELA, 2019). About half of them were concentrated in the four states that also boast among the highest populations of Arab Americans: Michigan, Illinois, New York, and Virginia. That even these four states should have only 5 to 12 public schools each offering Arabic seems like a lost opportunity.

The enrollment growth at the college level has spawned an impressive body of research into the learning of Arabic as a world and heritage language in the US. It has also opened pathways for increasing professionalization of Arabic teaching. What do Arabic language teachers in primary and secondary schools need so they can reap the benefits of these wider favorable developments? How can they be supported to play an active part in the growth of Arabic programs for school-aged children and have fulfilling professional careers in US. K-12 contexts?

Research Evidence for Teaching Arabic as One Language with Many Varieties

Scholars devoted to the teaching of Arabic have made great strides in responding to the increasing demand for Arabic learning in US society. Already nearly three decades ago, Al-Batal (1995) advocated for teaching Arabic as one language with many varieties from the onset of any course and regardless of level. This has come to be known as the integrated approach. He envisioned breaking the “firewall of separation” between colloquial Arabic dialects (CA) and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), so that learners would fully appreciate the intricacies of the Arabic language and the cultural vibrancy of the Arab world. Since then, research has demonstrated that Al-Batal’s vision was right. Students of Arabic become keenly aware of the value of colloquial varieties as soon as they have the opportunity to encounter them; moreover, they do not fear dialects or find them confusing and instead they welcome any knowledge or familiarity they can develop in them (Shiri, 2013). If they experience sufficiently rich interactions with speakers of Arabic outside the classroom, students are able to pick up dialectal features and expand their multidialectal repertoires (Al Masaeed, 2020; Trentman, 2017). In the classroom, students who learn through an integrated curriculum demonstrate robust multidialectal development and are able to shift along the dialectal continuum during classroom activities; for example, they know to use *laakin* (but) or *a’rif* (I know) in a more formal context and *bas* (but) and *ba’rif* (I know) in a more informal context, and they draw skillfully on features that are shared by MSA and dialects, like *laa* (not) or *biSaraaHa* (honestly) (Nassif & Al Maseed, 2020). This multidialectal competence is precisely what is expected and natural of proficient Arabic speakers. Teachers wanting some practical support with reading this, and other relevant research, can find these and other studies of Arabic summarized in accessible one-page format on OASIS.

For K12 teachers of Arabic it is important to know that teaching CA alongside MSA, rather than sequentially or in parallel, offers the most effective pedagogical pathway to Arabic proficiency (Al-Batal, 2018; Alhawary, 2018; Lo, 2019; Wahba, England, & Taha, 2017; Younes, 2015). Nevertheless, it is less than ideal that this research has largely been done to date with English native-speaking students in college. It would be timely, and a great support for Arabic teachers who work in k-12 settings, if researchers turned their attention to investigating the benefits of integrated curricula for school-aged students and including students from Arabic heritage as well as English backgrounds.

Arabic Teachers Using Multidialectal Pedagogies

The integrated approach to teaching Arabic postulates that from the very beginning of instruction teachers need to help their students learn to both understand and use different dialects—colloquial and standard—so they can learn to shift among expected varieties to meet the demands of different communicative situations. How is this done in practice? Two studies offer insights, both with teachers who were teaching Arabic heritage youth.

Turkistani (2019) interviewed and observed a very experienced, well-trained, and effective teacher who was a native speaker of Jordanian Arabic. She taught 16- to 19-year-olds, all of Arabic heritage, in an International Baccalaureate program on the East Coast. The program had an MSA-only policy. But this teacher implemented a more flexible approach, allowing the students to use their home dialects in classroom discussions whenever they did not know a word in MSA, while demanding the final assignments be written in MSA. She exploited the overlap between the standard and the dialects and “treated them as if they were a continuum,” all along while keeping her goal on proficiency in MSA (p. 179). In this way, she treated diglossia “as a natural part of the Arabic language” (p. 159). Abourehab and Azaz (2020) observed an exemplary Arabic teacher who was a native speaker of Egyptian Arabic. She taught 13- to-16-year-olds in a Sunday school in the southwestern US. Of the 12 students in her class, seven were of Arabic heritage and brought four different dialects from home to the classroom. In this Sunday school, this teacher went a bit further than the teacher in the International Baccalaureate. She practiced a fluid multilingual and multidialectal way of interacting known as translanguaging (García, Johnson, Seltzer, & Valdés, 2017), using all languages and dialects together for learning. For example, when her students tried to come up with the word “store” by offering souq (market), supermarket (supermarket), bikaala (shop), or dukaan (store/shop), she responded by telling them: “All of these are correct. And dukaan is the closest to fuSHā” (p. 6). That is, she accepted all students’ contributions and used them to direct their attention to the Arabic dialectal continuum, still clearly pointing out the solution that was closest to MSA. This teacher recognized that all her students spoke English, some other languages, and her seven heritage students were also at ease with colloquial Arabic varieties they knew from home. She embraced this multilingual and multidialectal classroom reality and leveraged it in support of student learning.

In sum, teachers in K-12 Arabic classrooms should know that when they treat their students’ multilingual and multidialectal contributions as learning opportunities, students learn Arabic better. By welcoming English and dialects in spoken class activities, they would be supporting the development of Arabic proficiency. Furthermore, for youth from Arabic heritage backgrounds, an additional benefit of multidialectal pedagogies is that their home varieties are validated and their linguistic and cultural identities reaffirmed (Abourehab & Azaz, 2020; García et al., 2017).

How Do Teachers Feel about the Integrated Approach?

The research evidence shows that the integrated approach to teaching Arabic works. But how do teachers feel about it? Surprisingly, very few studies have asked this question. Al-Mohsen (2016) interviewed seven college teachers and found that four of them, three native speaking and one nonnative, all males, thought the integrated approach was not feasible. On the other hand, the three female teachers in the study, one native speaking and two nonnative, were enthusiastic. Sarah and Reem, who had 10 and 15 years of teaching experience and Ph.D. degrees in Arabic, thought that not to teach students spoken varieties in addition to MSA is a “disservice” to them (p. 101). But all three teachers agreed that many colleagues, often in part-time positions, feel “a fear of failing” with the integrated approach (p. 114). They suggested that professional training on the approach and ready-made lesson plans to teach it would “ease them into implementing” it more confidently (p. 114).

As in college, in K-12 US settings, too, we can speculate that some teachers embrace the integrated approach readily and other teachers feel hesitant. The issue of textbooks and materials is an important one. The textbooks and materials for teaching Arabic that exist in the US—whether they support the integrated approach or not—have mostly been designed for college and university students, for example, the two book series *Al-Kitaab* and *‘Arabiyyat al-Naas*. Fewer Arabic textbooks are designed for K-12 students. One is the *Go up with Asala* series by Noorart Publishers. An exciting recent addition is *Jusuur*, which targets Levantine and MSA and includes a wealth of student and teacher resources. But with limited textbook choices for integrated teaching at the elementary levels of proficiency, K-12 teachers who want to incorporate CA in their teaching have to selectively adopt lessons and create their own worksheets and materials. This may burden their already busy school schedules and also exacerbate the fear of failing with the integrated approach that even some college teachers, with a better choice of textbooks, feel (Al-Mohsen, 2016).

That said, textbooks are not a panacea, and teachers who are not ready for the integrated approach may subvert the best textbook in order to avoid it. For example, a program may choose a popular book series but then use only the volumes that focus on MSA and opt out of the ones where the dialects are prominent (Weinstein and Pasekoff, 2019); or a teacher might choose to skip all the listening exercises in a book, where colloquial varieties are included, and do only the grammar exercises, in MSA (Al-Mohsen, 2016, p. 112). And the overreliance on textbooks can make pedagogy too teacher-centered and limit Arabic classroom learning to unnatural and unrealistic usage (Al-Masri, 2019). Age-appropriate textbooks and materials designed for K-12 learners would improve the professional life of teachers who want to implement the integrated approach. But ultimately it is teachers, and the personal multidialectal pedagogies they are able to develop, that will be central to effective integration of regional dialects into the K-12 Arabic curriculum.

Nativespeakerism as a Spotlight for Professional Development

When incorporating multidialectal pedagogies, teachers of Arabic will often have to negotiate their own and their students' linguistic and cultural identities as speakers of diverse native and nonnative, standard and local, varieties. A harmful ideology that can get in the way of teachers being able to do so is nativespeakerism, or the idea that native speakers possess superior linguistic competence and are more desirable teachers than nonnative speakers (Holliday, 2006). The problem of nativespeakerism has been studied most frequently for the teaching of English, but it is endemic in the world of language learning and teaching at large (Dewaele, Bak, & Ortega, 2022). In the context of Arabic teaching, little research exists and, once again, only at the college level. But two studies shed some useful light on the struggles of nonnative-speaking teachers who work, side by side, with their Arabic native speaking colleagues and teach heritage and English native speakers in the same classes.

Oulbeid (2018) documented how Adam and Thomas, two nonnative college-level teachers of Arabic, felt alienated and anxious in relation to their Arabic native-speaking colleagues. They were also concerned about being challenged by the heritage language students in their classes. Statements of linguistic insecurity were prevalent in the interviews with them. Thomas described himself as an “imposter” and felt that his students “deserve a better teacher” with native intuition; Adam felt “eternally worried” about his performance being compared to other native-speaking teachers in his department (pp. 414–416). It seems as if Thomas and Adam had internalized the harmful ideology of nativespeakerism, and this debilitated their linguistic confidence and teacher identities. At the same time, both teachers took pride in their ability to be effective role models who can guide their nonnative-speaking students on their Arabic language learning journeys.

In an earlier study, Samimy (2008) documented the case of Mark, a 39-year-old American with a decade of experience teaching Arabic in college. His proficiency had been rated as Superior (ACTFL), which is equivalent to C2 (CEFR) or Level 4+ (IRL). He was highly complimented for his Arabic. He was particularly good with Egyptian and Syrian dialects, which he had picked up during one year in Egypt and four months in Syria. He was even able to tell what part of Damascus someone was from by the way they pronounced *hniih* and *e-hniih* (we) (pp. 407–408). He had also received a university award for teaching excellence and his students considered him awesome, energized, intelligent, and infectious in his enthusiasm for Arabic language and culture. Nevertheless, Mark felt irritated and hurt by what he perceived to be microaggressions related to his being a nonnative speaker of Arabic. For example, he received compliments like: “Oh my God! How can you speak so well! Look at him and how he can speak better than we can!” But he felt these comments were backhanded put-downs with a different implied meaning: “You will never know the language. It is ours. You are ‘the other’ an ‘outsider,’ and your hair and eye color will always give you away” (p. 410). At other times, an occasional criticism from his Arabic-speaking colleagues that he wasn't making sense because he was mixing dialects would be hurtful, as he was proud at how in tune he was at both separating and mixing his Egyptian and Syrian dialects for effect, and confident that he was able to do this just like native speakers do.

Mark also reported feeling undermined in his teacher authority at times when a native-speaking teaching assistant might position themselves as the reference point for the language or when some English-speaking student would not accept his Arabic pronunciation and ask him “how would a native say that?” (p. 410). Like Adam and Thomas, Mark seems to have been resilient in the face of nativespeakerism; He remained proud and confident of his Arabic proficiency and his teaching excellence.

Nativespeakerism of the kind documented in these two studies in college is likely to be at play for Arabic teachers working in K-12 schools as well. It is therefore important to include these issues in the professional development of K-12 Arabic teachers. Part of preparing teachers for multidialectal pedagogies is to help them openly discuss, problematize, and counteract the harmful ideology of nativespeakerism, so they can learn to value and include in their teaching diverse speakers with native and nonnative, standard and local, Arabic repertoires.

The Pressure of Tests

Finally, assessment cannot be forgotten as one of the key factors that will support or deter K-12 teachers of Arabic in their desire to implement the integrated approach. Teachers are often inclined to tailor their curriculum and teaching approaches to the expectations of tests, an effect of tests widely known as ‘washback’ (Cheng & Sultana, 2022). To promote positive washback and encourage Arabic teachers to implement the integrated approach, K-12 Arabic programs and teachers need to adopt assessment measures that take the diglossic situation of Arabic into account.

Fortunately, there are encouraging signs that multidialectal competence in MSA and regional dialects is gaining recognition in standardized assessments as an integral component of Arabic proficiency. In the US, one of the commonly used standardized language proficiency tests for K-12 ages is called the ACTFL Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL), and it was created by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in 2006. As explained in the ACTFL’s Arabic Consensus Project, the ACTFL rating scales used by the AAPPL consider Arabic to be “one language represented by a continuum from all colloquial to all MSA, and a combination of mixes along the continuum.” Evidence of MSA is only expected at the Superior and Distinguished levels in the Arabic ACTFL guidelines, because these levels require formal and abstract discussions that are normally conducted in MSA. Another popular test for K-12 is the Avant Standards-Based Measurement of Proficiency-4 Skills (STAMP 4S) developed by the University of Oregon’s Center for Applied Language Studies and licensed by Avant Assessment in 2012. The Avant STAMP 4S is geared towards “students in programs that teach Modern Standard Arabic...[and] persons seeking to enter such programs, including those who have learned the language informally ” (Avant STAMP 4S Arabic Technical Report). However, as explained in the report, the fact that “most “everyday” spoken interactions would be performed in the regional dialect and not Modern Standard Arabic” is considered when developing listening materials at the lower levels. Both the AAPPL and the Avant STAMP 4S are computerized, they can assess all four skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking), and they can be administered within school facilities.

Barriers remain, however. For one, commercially available Arabic proficiency tests like the AAPPL and the Avant STAMP 4S are expensive, and many schools may lack institutional resources to pay for them. Moreover, teachers may find it difficult to know what to do in their daily teaching in response to knowing what proficiency their students got on a standardized test. This is simply because testing students in the classroom is very different from testing for proficiency. In standardized testing, proficiency is about gauging someone's language ability independent from curriculum goals. In classroom assessment, the point is to test students at regular points of the school year to evaluate what they are learning in the classroom. Classroom assessments tend to be supported by the inclusion in textbooks of end-of-unit tests and other quizzes and exams based on the book content. But most Arabic teachers, whether in college or in k-12 schools, end up carrying the burden of developing their own classroom assessments in the form of quizzes, midterms, and final exams (Norris & Raish, 2017). It can be a challenge for teachers to carry out the classroom assessments they need, endeavor to collect information about student proficiency via some standardized test, and connect it all with their teaching pedagogy and their curriculum goals.

An innovative effort to address both the cost of tests and the disconnect between standardized proficiency assessments and classroom teaching is the Computer Assisted Screening Tool (CAST) developed by the Language Acquisition Resource Center at San Diego State University. CAST is a computerized assessment of oral proficiency, and it is free. Importantly, it includes a Lesson Plan Generator that helps teachers use the CAST as a way to check their students' proficiency periodically and use the results to inform their teaching. The Arabic CAST allows instructors to assess their students' oral performance in MSA, Egyptian, and Iraqi Arabic. Unfortunately, CAST is mostly used with college students. ACTFL, too, has recently attempted to address the disconnect between standardized testing and curriculum goals by releasing a comprehensive list of the AAPPL test content topics prior to each testing cycle (see AAPPL 2020 content topics for an example), The list of topics are meant as general categories which "serve as a guide for educators in planning curricula, lessons, and creating homework-based opportunities to facilitate learners' development of all modes of communication" (ACTFL, 2021).

One last barrier for K-12 Arabic language teaching to benefit from the exciting developments in the field of Arabic language testing at large is teachers' limited "assessment literacy," or the knowledge needed to both "select appropriate test instruments and interpret scores with accuracy" and "develop, evaluate, and improve their own assessment practices" (Norris & Raish, 2017, p. 255). In focus group discussions conducted with students and instructors of Arabic at the university and K-12 level, Nier, De Silvio, and Malone (2014) noted that Arabic language instructors were often unsure how to respond to students' requests that "it would make sense to base [assessment] on whatever would be most commonly understood by a person on the street" (p. 66). One Arabic high school instructor was confused about how to grade students who use their heritage dialects since dialects were not accepted when testing out of the language requirement through standardized assessments. These observations suggest that more work needs to be done in classroom contexts in order to support teachers' knowledge of standardized and formative assessments that implement the integrated approach. Greater investments in assessment literacy as part of teacher professional development will facilitate the day-to-day work of K-12 Arabic language teachers and encourage them to embrace an integrated approach to Arabic in their curriculum and teaching.

In the end, no matter how many good tests there are for Arabic, whether standardized or classroom-based, if assessment is only of reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary (Rammuny, 1999; Ryding, 2013), then a primary pedagogical focus on MSA will likely prevail. Teachers interested in implementing integrated pedagogies need to understand this and realize that, in order to promote positive washback of tests on their teaching, the assessments they choose to adopt or create must include oral communicative competence and take the diglossic situation of Arabic into account.

A Focus on K12 Teachers in Arabic Language Research and Training

These are exciting times for Arabic language educators. Arabic teachers who teach youth in school contexts should not be left behind in reaping the benefits of the present favorable conditions. They should be supported to build on the achievements of the field of Arabic language education in the last two decades, so they can have fulfilling teaching lives and feel that they are active contributors to establishing many more successful Arabic language programs across schools in the country. What can help K-12 teachers of Arabic meet these aspirational goals?

Knowing what the research says about the effectiveness of integrating colloquial and standard varieties across all levels of instruction can help. Understanding how other teachers use multidialectal pedagogies, and how different colleagues feel about integrating CA and MSA in their teaching, can help. Having textbooks and tests that have been designed to teach and assess the integrated approach in school contexts and participating in professional development that is tailored for K-12 teachers would also greatly help. Guarding against nativespeakerism and investing in teachers' assessment literacy are important too.

The time has also come for researchers of Arabic language teaching and learning to turn to K-12 schools as an important context to understand. K-12 teachers of Arabic deserve much more attention in the future. They have a central role to play in the thriving field of Arabic language education, if they can be supported to embrace the value in themselves and their students of diverse native and nonnative, standard and local, repertoires of the Arabic language and to develop their own personal multidialectal pedagogies that effectively foster proficiency in spoken and written Arabic among our nation's youth.

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