



Arabic Language in Australia

Supporting the teaching and learning of Arabic in Australia

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Background

The key feature of the teaching of Arabic in Australia is the diversity of learners at primary and secondary school, tertiary and adult levels. Starting from its introduction in universities as a 'scholarly' language to rapid expansion at school level in the 1980s as a 'heritage' language, Arabic remains a main language taught in schools. This report argues that this challenge of diversity also constitutes the strength of Arabic. Describing Arabic as a 'foreign/modern/ heritage' or 'second' language limits its future growth.

Arabic language teaching in Australia forms a 'pyramid', with over 21,000 primary-aged children studying Arabic in government, non-government and community languages schools. This drops to an estimated 4,000 learners in secondary schools with only 400 students learning Arabic for their final year of schooling. At tertiary and adult education levels there are some 600 learners.

There are many key strengths of Arabic language provision in Australia. First is the use of Arabic in the communities: Arabic is the main language after English and Chinese, spoken in NSW, the largest state. There are high levels of language maintenance into the second generation. Secondly, the push for multiculturalism in the 1980s led to Arabic having a strong curriculum base, government-funded programs in primary and secondary schools in several states, support for the out-of-hours Arabic language schools and k-12 Arabic language syllabi and Year 12 exams.

Arabic language teaching faces many challenges. In any class there will be a wide range of learners. Some students may be recent immigrants and have high levels of written and spoken Arabic. Others may be non-background beginner learners of Arabic. Some children may come from mixed marriages or be third generation Australians and have no access to Arabic in the home. For teachers, differentiating learning may be planning for four or five groups in the one class.

The second issue is the low status of Arabic language in the broader community compared with 'prestige' languages such as French. Until the establishment of QFI, there was no Goethe Institut, Alliance Francaise or Japan Foundation to correct the image of Arabic language learning. Political events have impacted badly on the image of Arabic language learning.

The third issue is the decline of Arabic language learning. There has been a political shift away from multiculturalism. Heritage languages have become marginalized from the mainstream to heritage language schools. This has been exacerbated for Arabic with the shift to second and third generation learners. In 1990 over 21% of students of Arabic background studied their language for Year 12 tertiary entry; this dropped to 9% in 2011 and has continued to decline.

What is the future for Arabic language teaching? Despite the challenges, Arabic is in a strong position. There are increasing numbers of learners at primary school and adult levels. At primary level, many schools are teaching Arabic to **all** students, no matter what background. At adult levels there are many learners studying Arabic for career, travel and other reasons.

There is also a shift in community attitudes. Arabic-speaking families are now travelling much more and there is evidence of Arabic in the media, communication technology and on the internet. Children now have greater access to Arabic in their home and in the community.

In most OECD countries the percentage of teachers from diverse backgrounds is half the percentage of students. In Australia, however, government programs are leading to large numbers of Arabic-speakers gaining accreditation to teach in mainstream schools. There are now numbers of Arabic-speaking school principals and teachers in leadership positions. A former school principal is now a government minister. The other change is the demographic change in the communities themselves. In the past 30 years there has been a marked change in the status of Modern Greek language, as the second generation gained high levels of education and entry to the professions, including teaching. Modern Greek is now a high-status language, This shift is occurring with Arabic. The other change has been in the quality of teaching. Arabic language teachers, especially those who are generation 1.5 or 2, are gaining success in engaging the learners through quality teaching.

This report was compiled by the Sydney Institute for Community Languages Education (SICLE).

Arabic in Primary schools

Arabic is the second main language taught in government primary schools in NSW, Australia's largest state. Numbers increased from 9,194 in 2012 to 10,357 in 2021. There was a drop to just under 8,000 post covid but numbers are climbing back up. There are 65 Arabic teachers with programs in 46 schools. Arabic is also taught in government primary schools in other states: Victoria has over 280 primary-aged students are learning Arabic in the Victorian School of Languages.

All Arabic teachers are accredited generalist primary teachers with a specialisation in teaching Arabic. Students must receive at least two hours language learning per week. Arabic teachers follow the state/national syllabus and many also support outcomes in other subjects such as Creative Arts, History and Geography.

Arabic in Secondary schools

Arabic is taught in 17 NSW government and independent secondary schools from Year 7 to Year 12. It is also taught in faith-based secondary schools across Australia. In all states there are government schools which provide classes for students unable to learn the language in their mainstream school. The NSW Secondary College of Languages has 399 students learning from year 7-12 with the

majority in Year 11 and Year 12. Most students who complete Arabic as part of their Year 12 Higher School Certificate. In Victoria a total of 415 students are learning Arabic through the Victorian School of Languages. Many students also study Arabic for their final years of secondary school. There has been a 24% increase in the past decade in numbers with 400 students in NSW and Victoria graduating in Arabic.

Arabic Community Languages Schools

Community Languages schools (called 'complementary' schools in the UK and 'heritage' language schools in the US) are parent/ community run out-of-hours schools with mainly volunteer parents who teach language and cultural understanding to young children. There are over 140 Arabic language schools across Australia teaching over 10,000 students. These schools represent linguistically and culturally diverse communities from across 22 Arabic countries. Since 1980 the schools have received government funding to support resources and teaching (around \$200 per

student per year). In NSW schools received free use of government school premises. To receive funding schools must show evidence of a teaching program and also provide at least two hours of language teaching per week. Enrolments in these schools have grown in the past decade. Teachers report a shift in second and third generations who are proud of their Arabic heritage and want to expand their linguistic and cultural connection whether here in Australia or overseas. There may be social media influence from music and also lifestyles they are being exposed to in the gulf region.

Tertiary Provision of Arabic

Arabic is also taught in adult education and colleges. The learners are largely non-background: journalists and other professionals, intending tourists and spouses in mixed marriages. Arabic is taught as a major sequence at seven universities across four states and territories: ANU, Deakin

University, University of Melbourne, University of Sydney, University of South Australia, University of Western Australia, University of Western Sydney and as an individual subject at Monash University (Dunne and Pavlyshyn, 2011, p. 18).

Arabic Curriculum and resources

Australia has a national K-10 Arabic syllabus <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/languages/arabic/> NSW also has a Modern Languages K-10 Framework with support resources in Arabic. The syllabuses are aligned with current international research and provide different pathways for the range of learners. One of the inherent strengths of Arabic education is its inclusivity. Rather than labelling students as either "background" or "non-background," the curriculum acknowledges the diversity within classrooms and caters to all learners irrespective of their linguistic backgrounds. This approach not only promotes inclusivity but also recognises the value of Arabic

language and culture for all students, regardless of their heritage.

There are multiple resources in Arabic to support the syllabus. These resources include scope and sequences and units of work with assessment tasks:

Early Stage 1 – It's me (أنا اذہ))

Stage 1 – We are family – (ةلئاع نحن)

Stage 2 – My pet is lost! (فيلألا يناويح عاض!)

Stage 3 – My shop (يرجتم) Quirky comics

is a series of entertaining six videos in Arabic.



The *Open Language* portal <http://openlanguage.org.au/> was established to collect and share current teaching resources for schools. There are over 3000 resources uploaded across 17 languages, seven topic areas and three language proficiency levels. Resources include teacher-created worksheets, sample units of work, games and quizzes, links to youtube clips of commercials, movie trailers, music performances, online repositories of readers and textbooks and more. Teachers can share resources via the online submission form on the Home Page. The 200+ resources for Arabic were collected and reviewed by teachers in a series of workshops. They were checked for quality and copyright and then uploaded to the portal. The resources receive one to 2,000 hits per month worldwide. The portal has been one of the most remarkable achievements of SICLE in

bringing teachers together and providing support and professional learning and a strong sense of community. The SICLE Quality Teaching project links existing CL school resources to government Arabic and other language syllabuses. A team of four writers developed a set of Quality Teaching tasks. In August 2019, 24 key K-6 community languages teachers participated in a series of workshops developing scope and sequence and two units of work in one of 12 languages. Teachers trialled these units of work with their own classes in term 4 with support from SICLE project team visits. They then presented findings at workshop in December 2019. These 28 units of work were uploaded on the *Open Language Portal* for all teachers. There have been over 200,000 hits on this site from teachers in Australia, North America, Europe and the Middle East.

Support for Arabic teachers

There is a strong network of Arabic language teachers promoting Arabic language learning and support Arabic language education. It hosts four network meetings annually, one in each Term. These meetings are conducted both face-to-face and in blended mode. Two experienced Arabic teachers serve as leaders and organize and facilitate these meetings. The Arabic network meetings support Arabic teachers in several ways:

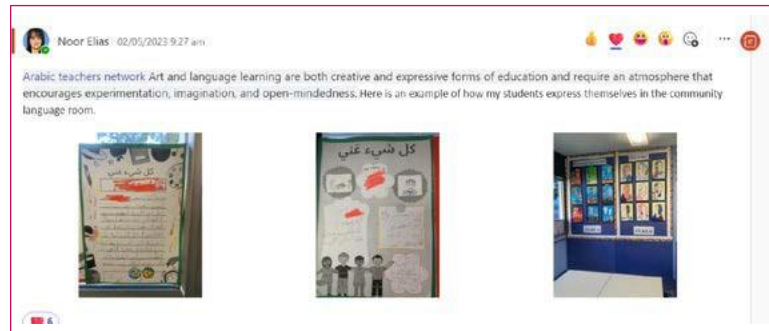
- Offering curriculum support to schools and teachers, assisting them in implementing language programs aligned with state curriculum standards. This support may include curriculum resources, professional

development opportunities for language teachers, and guidance on effective language teaching methodologies.

- Organizing professional learning opportunities and workshops for Arabic teachers to improve their teaching skills, share best practices, and stay updated on the latest developments in language education.
- Providing access to online resources, digital tools, and interactive materials through the Arabic teacher's network MS channel to enhance Arabic language learning and teaching in innovative ways.



There is also an online Staffroom a virtual space that includes a dedicated channel for Arabic teachers, providing a platform for sharing ideas, resource sharing, or asking questions



Teacher Professional Learning for Arabic language schools

The demand for professional learning has been a key finding of all major reports on language teacher education and was confirmed in our own studies. SICLE runs three 60-hour professional learning programs which are accredited by the teacher authorities and also count for advanced standing into tertiary teacher education programs. The Community Language Teaching (Foundation) program provides a basic introduction to teaching in Australia. The programs are run online and in blended mode on weekends and week nights to suit teachers' work and family commitments. Over 3,700 teachers (including 700 Arabic language teachers) have successfully completed this program since 2008. Teachers cover topics such as behaviour management, planning and preparation, teaching

listening and speaking, using IT in the classroom. Arabic language teachers have 10 hours specifically in Arabic on teaching Arabic as part of the program. They also spend a day in mainstream primary schools observing classes. The CLT (Advanced) Program is designed for experienced teachers and curriculum developers in schools. The main focus is on reflective teaching, assessment and resource and curriculum development. The third program is Leadership and Development in Community Languages Schools. Principals and school leaders learn about academic leadership and recent changes in education, financial management, finding/ employing and mentoring teachers. They conduct an 'audit' of their school and develop plans to address key issues in their school.



Assessment and Arabic

Crediting student learning in Arabic is a major issue. A recent review of education in Australia found that the lack of continuity of learning assessment in languages such as Arabic is the major hurdle

A key challenge is the lack of continuity in language learning. Languages, like mathematics, are subjects where much of the learning is cumulative and progresses in certain ways. Very few students, however, anywhere in Australia have access to continued language learning through their primary and secondary schooling... There is no way to know, in fact, that any student is gaining any level of language proficiency at any stage of schooling.

Masters review

In Australia and internationally there are many assessment tools for English literacy and language learning: IELTS, TOEFL and in Australia the ESL Scales and EALD Progression. The EALD Progression is a classroom-based assessment tool and a recent study found that trained teachers using the EALD Progression can assess learners as well or better than external tests and assessments. These developments led to our working on the development of learning progressions in Arabic supported by the NSW government.

The first step was a key researcher, Dr. Michael Michell conducting an extensive literature review of the development of Arabic as a 1st, 2nd and heritage language and of heritage language in general. He then surveyed the range of classroom-based assessment tools. He then worked from the construct of learning milestones which come from early childhood and describe the key stages in the development of fluency. These milestones are by necessary broad and cover a range of different behaviours. The second key concept is

that of language repertoires which refers to the range of languages skills and behaviours. The milestones were then reviewed and adapted by Arabic researchers with background in language development.

A writing group of experienced primary and secondary Arabic teachers was formed. These teachers were briefed on the milestones and then collected and analysed work samples to develop indicators in listening speaking reading and writing for each milestone. This was an interactive process which included discussions with progression writers in other languages and reviewed by experts in light of existing curriculum and scales and frameworks. The next step was the training of a wider group of teachers in primary secondary and community languages schools who were working across the range of learners. These teachers trialled the milestones in primary, secondary and community languages schools.

They assessed and collected student work samples. These work samples were then annotated and used to develop a complete set of indicators. At all stages the milestones and indicators have been aligned with CEFR, ACTFL, Australian Arabic syllabus and curriculum documents. Students also receive an online passport on which their assessment (and self-assessment) of their progress in Arabic is recorded.

The final step will be the development of professional learning materials. All teachers involved in the development and trailing will be accredited by NESA. Student online passports will be developed and all students will have their outcomes recorded on their passport.

The benefits of this project are obvious. Learners have a portable Passport accrediting their learning. There will be recognition and accreditation at all stages of schools, especially when this is combined with the Seal of Biliteracy. The key benefit is in the training of teachers and the washback effect on planning and programming. Trained teachers will be able to conduct reliable assessments of student learning – assessments which help them to program and which are linked to their curriculum.

Overseas-trained Arabic Teachers

In many countries there are overseas-trained Arabic professionals and teachers wanting to gain accreditation as mainstream teachers but unable to do so. In Australia there are an estimated 900 teachers in this position. To meet the needs of these teachers, SICLE has introduced a series of steps to provide a pathway. SICLE has four Careers Advisors (one of whom is an Arabic speaker) whose role is to help teachers decide on learning and career pathways and develop plans for the future. They offer free advice sessions and have held single and multiple sessions with over 90 Arabic teachers/ professionals. Many want help in gaining recognition for their overseas qualifications and navigating Australia's higher education system. Many secondary teachers from overseas have undergraduate degrees and years of experience, but they have insufficient teacher education to meet Australian standards. Primary teachers often began their teacher training at Year 11 level and so in Australia are only recognised as two-year (not four-year) trained. Teachers of refugee background sometimes have inadequate documentation or incomplete studies. There is also a large group of teachers from different career backgrounds – engineers, administrators, journalists, doctors – who decide to become teachers because of

their experience as volunteers in the Community Languages schools! The Careers Advisors have several sessions with those teachers interested in upgrading their qualifications. English levels are assessed and the teachers are directed to programs that meet their language needs. Advice is given about getting transcripts, translations and original documents together; information is provided on the differences in the Australian system, and what grades and subjects to teach. We find that about 20% of teachers can then apply directly for accreditation. Others are directed towards our academic preparation program at Western Sydney University. This program provides academic skills preparation and support in sitting for English language tests. Applicants then gain advanced entry into the Master of Teaching Program. The program is tailored around the needs of the teachers in terms of family and work commitments. Many sessions are online or offered after work hours or in block on weekends. For the first half of the program teachers are in a special cohort and then join other classes depending on their subject choices. So far 71 teachers have completed this program, 20 of them of Arabic background. All have gained full-time employment as teachers. This program has not been embedded in two universities with another 100 teachers undertaking programs in 2025.



Crediting Teachers Arabic Proficiency

A second initiative has been the accrediting of teachers' language proficiency in Arabic and pathways for existing teachers to become teachers of Arabic. The Australian authorities require two to three years undergraduate study of Arabic to become a teacher of Arabic. Having tertiary qualifications for study in Arabic and being a native speaker is not enough. We found that there is a pool of Arabic-speaking teachers already working in mainstream schools who wanted to gain accreditation to teach Arabic. There are also numbers of fluent Arabic speakers wanting to undertake preservice teacher education as Arabic language teachers. SICLE developed an Arabic language test (VLPT) which assesses Basic Vocational Proficiency in Arabic. It is equivalent to Level 3 ISLPR. The test has three target groups

- Arabic primary school teachers in the K-6 Community languages program gain permanent employment as language teachers based on
- Preservice applicants for the Master of teaching programs are accredited with having

the equivalent of 2 years tertiary study and can undertake Arabic language teaching method

- Existing teachers who are fluent in Arabic can gain specialisation in Arabic or Arabic as a third teaching method if they pass the test and complete appropriate language teacher training and practicum. SICLE has also developed a 45-hour online language teaching method program for these teachers who want to gain approval to teach Arabic.

In 2024 we conducted a study reliability and validity. The evidence is that the test has strong evidence of validity/ reliability in Arabic. One specific recommendation was that a higher level of proficiency be required for teachers of students in Years 11 and 12. We are now promoting the test across Australia. The key benefit/ outcome has been the increase in the teacher supply for teachers of Arabic. It has also enabled the introduction of the teaching of Arabic Across a wider range of schools as teachers of subjects such as Maths, Science and other subjects can also teach Arabic.



Arabic Project Officers

SICLE has three Arabic Project Officers, Enaam Darido, Ruba Shhaab and Nada Awad, who are also experienced Arabic language teachers. The Project Officers worked hard to gain the trust and support of teachers and schools. For four years the Project Officers have been running workshops for teachers, especially in classroom teaching, using technology in the classroom and planning and programming. The project officers have brought together teachers from across states and across secondary, primary and community languages schools. They run workshops in Arabic and for Arabic language teachers in community and mainstream schools across Australia. The most important of these was during the shift to online teaching during covid 19. During the first two weeks of April 2020, project officers were trained in using Zoom as a web conferencing to land how it could be used in the virtual community languages classroom. Aside from Zoom itself, they also explored how to use other apps such as Padlet while on Zoom. After these initial sessions, the Project Officers then promoted and ran multiple

Zoom trainings for teachers in their respective community languages. Overall, some 859 teachers participated in more than 120 workshops. Despite the problems of COVID, especially with younger learners, the Zoom professional learning brought teachers together from across all schools to explore different online resources and tools. The workshops broke down barriers between mainstream and community language teachers mainly because the professional learning was delivered in Arabic. Workshops catered for the different school needs, and personalised help was provided when necessary. The project officers tried to build on the links made with teachers nationally and internationally. The professional learning developed CL teacher skills in presenting to other teachers. It connected teachers with international research and development in Arabic language teaching. It also broke down barriers between community language and mainstream Arabic teachers. In 2025 they are focusing on develop stronger networks of teachers and providing professional learning to all teachers.



Engaging learners of Arabic

Our research data indicates issues with student engagement and high attrition rates in the study of Arabic after the age of 10. For this reason, we developed a series of projects to increase student engagement in learning. There are few pathways for older students into teaching in the schools – 96% of Arabic teachers are overseas-born. An Arabic language competition, *Arabic and Me* was also organised in 2021. K–2 students were asked to produce a drawing, 3-6 and 7-10 students, PowerPoint presentations or video clips around the topic of ‘Why learn Arabic?’. Some 170 entries, all of a high standard, were submitted. Over 400 teachers, students, parents and government ministers and community representatives attended the Award Ceremony where student work was displayed along with poetry recitals and performances (song and dance) at this event. Student benefits were immense. Teachers reported gains in confidence and skills, particularly the use of persuasive language in Arabic. <https://www.facebook.com/parramattaarabic/posts/913530115868357>. The second initiative was the appointment of 70 School Liaison Officers. These were ex-students from Arabic schools aged between 17 and 25 who wanted to become support teachers in the schools. They were given funding and training and worked in classrooms focussing especially on the use of IT. Many of the 15 Arabic SLOs went on to become full teachers.

Critical Connections project and Project Based Learning (PBL) The most recent project is the Critical Connections project (<https://www.qold.ac.uk/clcl/multilingual-learning/criticalconnections/>). The Project Officers workshopped two Arabic schools on PBL and helped them develop a project timeline. Teachers worked on developing units of work on sustainability and planning assessments and built skills in video making. They created bilingual resources aligned to the Critical Connections project. Teachers then

introduced their classes to the project. The key feature of this project was that students were co-researchers and collaborated with students across the globe, pulling together findings on similar topics. Students came up with suggestions for storylines and used the technology to film, edit and add photos. They drafted and translated their videos. The videos gave them the impetus to be “perfect” in their Arabic. At the end of the unit, they presented their film projects to an international audience (parent community and school community) and shared their films online with the Critical Connections team in the UK. A key outcome was the engagement of students, particularly the older ones. Students experimented with drafting, editing, evaluating and striving to improve their work. They worked during the school holidays to finish off the project and used all the limited resources available. They were eager to show their language skills and learning and were proud of their achievements. Parents and teachers saw that students became more productive and more proactive in decision making. Students reported that they enjoyed conducting research and collating different sources of information and drafting the story line with their teachers. Teachers were surprised at their students’ technological skills and reported how much they learned from their students. The two schools increased their focus on a learner-centred approach where the students managed their own learning with guidance from their teachers. Following their participation in the Critical

Connection Project, the schools involved in it shared their experiences, findings and knowledge with other Arabic schools. Teachers were supported in giving online bilingual presentations and an introductory online presentation. They shared their videos and experiences with PBL, the challenges and how they overcame them, and how this approach had improved their teaching and learning.

Research outcomes

SICLE has worked hard to support Arabic language research. SICLE initiated state (Tertiary Working Party) national (NSW, ACT, WA, SA and Victorian universities) and international networks (Australia, UK, US, Canada, Iceland, Ireland, Netherlands) in Community Languages

education research SICLE has also built a network of doctoral researchers with three Arabic HDR students, Nancy El Helou, Taghred Najdi and Safa Skaff supervised by Dr. Cruickshank, Dr. Sarwat Dabaga and Dr. Nadia Selim.

Recent Publications

- Cruickshank, K & Tsung, L. (under review) *Language, culture and schools: Community/ heritage languages in a changing world*, Clevedon UK: Multilingual Matters.
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- Selim, N. (2023). Adolescent non-Arab Muslims learning Arabic in Australian Islamic schools: Expectations, experiences, and implications. *Religions*, 14(1), 71. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/1/71>
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University of Sydney**