

Teaching the Arabic Language: Dealing innovatively with challenges

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This article sheds light on the situation of teaching of Arabic language in a bilingual school where the main delivery of learning is in English. It highlights the strides an Arabic Department is making in raising the attainment and progress levels of students in their knowledge and understanding of the Arabic language. The introduction of targeted learning strategies coupled with an influx of students with a skill set predominantly below expected norms, the challenge for Arabic teachers in raising standards is not an easy task. Teachers of Arabic reading this article will be immersed in strategies that have made a difference for students. This timely article hopes that the information and plans provided will limit the difficulties faced by other teachers of Arabic and help the students achieve and build more effective Arabic language skills.

Introduction

The importance of studying Arabic language has increased enormously in recent years. Arabic is part of local culture and needs to be preserved. It is a key subject in the curriculum, and it's as important as any other subject the school offers, such as Mathematics, Science and English. In any language, there are differences between the spoken and written language, and these have been linked with levels of cognitive complexity (Olson, 1977). In the case of Arabic, the differences between the spoken and written language are very pronounced. The language of the Gulf area in general shares its major features of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar with the Bedouin Arabic. To measure the difficulty of Arabic language teaching and learning, some researchers used the number of classroom hours that it takes students (as well as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) to reach the mastery level; approximately twice as long as it takes students of French or Spanish (Gasparro, 2003). In language study, there are two types of Arabic language; "Low language" which is the informal daily life language, and "High language" which is forming the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). MSA is the standard language of the educated Arab in formal speaking situations and in almost all writing and reading.

Facts about Arabic Language:

- The Arabic language is considered as one of the oldest languages. The Arabic position in Islam is very special and unique as it is the Qur'an's language.
- Arabic language is based on four language skills. These language skills are listening, speaking, reading and writing. These skills help students to master the language in stages. Each of these skills guides the students to understand and master the language as soon as possible (Zamri & Ibtisam. 2014).
- Arabic is a language spoken by an estimated 200 million people worldwide. It is an ideal vehicle for the beauties and complexities of the Arabic calligraphic tradition. For all of its complexities however, the Arabic alphabet consists of only 28 letters. Further,

it has an excellent phonological fit, as most words are spelt as they sound (Scott-Baumann, 2012).

- Arabic is extremely useful as a strategic, global language. It is one of the six official working languages of the United Nations and the official language of over 20 Middle Eastern countries (Hamed Al-asaadi, 2014).
- Most importantly, the fact of diglossia presents significant challenges at levels of administration and teaching. In establishing an Arabic program, in training Arabic teachers, in devising learning goals and curricular goals, deciding on methodologies, and choosing instructional materials, Arabic instructors and Arabic language program supervisors must keep the fact of diglossia constantly before them.
- Most Arabic language textbooks do not teach naturally spoken language; they teach Modern Standard Arabic. Modern Standard Arabic is usually a written variety. In its spoken form, Modern Standard Arabic generally occurs in situations where language use is routinized or scripted, such as news broadcasts, university lectures, religious sermons and political speeches (Benkharafa, 2013).

Challenges to Teaching and Learning Arabic

Academic strategies in education are considered to be one of the important tools that can improve Arabic language and clarify its meanings and ideas. Language is an essential part of a human's life as it helps in communication and in obtaining life's needs. It also helps in expressing one's feelings and ideas, protecting oneself and in creativity, which leads to developing one's lifestyle and daily routines.

Language plays an important role in students' lives. If used in the right way (ie following correct grammar rules and reading and writing rubrics), the student will be able to interact competently with their world. That is, learning the language of the community you live in enables you to interact with society. Being fluent in the mother language makes it easier for students to learn other foreign languages, especially the English language.

However, there are several key challenges in teaching and learning Arabic in most of the schools in the Arab World. These include:

1. Bilingual education is still relatively new, not only in the Arab World but in general. There is no close example or model on which to build. Additionally, the Arabic curriculum focuses more on knowledge acquisition than the utilization of the language.
2. Most of the Arabic formal assessments still use writing as the key evidence of progress or as a measure for having competent skills in Arabic. Writing is the most difficult skill in the Arabic language and needs much time and practice in order to be mastered. Moreover, there are no stated specifications of the proficiency criteria according to which a native speaker of Arabic may be rated or assessed, which results in inaccurate judgments (Elfatih, 2008). The complexity of the language often leads to lack of interest in studying Arabic by the students.
3. Arabic is one of the less commonly taught languages; and therefore, far less international research has been conducted on it, either as a first or as a second language. Only very recently, particularly in the last decade, have we begun to see serious research on Arabic as a foreign language, partly through the efforts of the American Association of the Teachers of Arabic (AATA); this will hopefully lead to more research in the area of teaching Arabic as a first language.

4. To develop the skill of writing in any language program, more time is probably needed to be able to reach the desired outcomes. Therefore, a lot of coordination is needed in order to realize the needed proficiency skills.
5. Resources for studying and teaching Arabic, have not kept up with increasing demand. High-quality teaching materials are scarce or difficult to find.
6. The information about establishing Arabic programs, hiring and training instructors, planning and developing curriculum, and evaluating progress in individual learners and in programs as a whole are very rare (if it exists at all).

Arabic Education & Learning in a Private School in the UAE:

The focal school for this article is in the UAE and is a new school, established in 2014 to follow the American curriculum. Located in a new and growing suburb of Abu Dhabi, the school's vision is to be:

...an inspirational, leading-edge international school dedicated to nurturing outstanding role models, responsible global citizens and informed leaders of the future.

The school has a variety of courses and is implementing 21st century pedagogical strategies to meet the needs of the global learner. It takes into account the individual differences and the different abilities of students. The school also cares about fostering students' personalities and helping students to develop their hobbies.

The history of Arabic language instruction in schools is guided by the UAE Ministry of Education's Arabic textbook series. We consider this book as one of our learning sources sitting beside other sources that our school uses in the educational process. Our school teaches the Arabic language as a mother language for the local Emirati students (being the predominant group of students in the school).

The school is interested in developing students' Arabic language through teaching the three main subjects in Arabic (Arabic, Islamic Studies, UAE Social Studies) and gives it an important place in the curriculum. The school administration supports these subjects with targeted professional development for the Arabic staff.

Prior to the 2016/2017 Arabic action plan the instructional strategies included -but not limited to- the following approaches:

- **Transition from textbook-based learning:** The school used Arabic textbooks published by Emirates Ministry of Education as the focal point of each Arabic lesson. However, the textbooks are not the only resource for knowledge acquisition. The current cultural exploration and the current cognitive explosion requires us to learn how to access information in unconventional ways.
- **Integration of ICT in Arabic classes:** New and expanding ICT programs of Arabic language began with high energy and high expectations. These programs encourage students and instructors to practice Arabic language both by first-language speakers of Arabic and learners of Arabic. These programs facilitate teaching and learning of Arabic language skills inside and outside the school to help parents support their children at home. Such programs include "Nahil and Naheel" and "Al Hodhod".

- **Multi-sensory approaches:** teaching the Arabic language to students using gestural activities has been explored. Also, visual and kinaesthetic activities are helping to move away from the rote learning model towards a more personalised approach to learning Arabic.
- **Teaching staff:** The Arabic department has been fortunate in terms of teaching staff with both first language Arabic teachers being native speakers. Some of these teachers having taught Arabic for ten years or more. All our Arabic teachers are considered to be very dedicated members of staff. The Arabic teaching staff provide Arabic for non-Arabs classes as well, for Arabic as a second language learners.
- **Applying EMSA:** (External Measure of Student Achievement) Standardized tests designed to measure individual student performance in 5th and 7th grades in The focal school provide data on both student attainment and progress. Additionally, it indicates how the school (and the wider Abu Dhabi education system) is improving. The objective of EMSA was to establish a baseline using an external assessment framework that is based on international standards.

Moving Forward: Arabic Language Learning Strategies at The focal school

The beginning of the new school year saw the appointment of a new Arabic Head of Department. As part of the induction process, the previous year's data was analysed, and with the Arabic team, an action plan was devised. Underpinning this action plan was the provision of targeted professional development aimed at improving the pedagogical approach within the classroom. The central tenets of the action plan were:

1. ***Make Arabic a living language in the school by developing co-teaching opportunities:*** Arabic teachers and homeroom teachers plan together regularly to make sure instruction can and will be integrated to the extent that it will improve both programs. Teachers work together as a team to improve the ability of students to understand and retain instruction easily. Bilingual learning techniques are highly suggested to unlock the concepts and ideas in words and then put them into another language.
2. ***Promoting Arabic language and culture as a community of learners:*** One aspect of this initiative involves putting the students in charge of each other as learners (ie using peer learning approaches). This can work for 5-year-old up to any age. This cooperative learning approach is a great motivator; it consolidates one's own learning, and in the context of Arabic can be used to engage more fluent Arabic speakers with less fluent speakers. This work draws on Vygotsky's theories about entering the learner's competence range in order to take them to the next level (zone of proximal development). More specifically, as a pedagogy for language learning, the learning through teaching approach helps students articulate their knowledge and understanding (Scott-Baumann, 2012).
3. ***Ensure the summative assessment data accurately reflects classroom achievement in all grades.*** Through the disaggregating of student assessment results teachers are able to focus on various subgroups within the class and the year group. By comparing to previous test results, teachers over time, are able to determine areas for improvement in curriculum. This will help prepare the students for the mandated EMSA test and giving them practice with questions similar to those they will see on the EMSA assessments.

4. **Methods of teaching Arabic and its curriculum.** Through ongoing professional learning, engagement of the school's cooperative learning strategy and the commitment to engaging in best practice in the classroom, improvement in teacher performance will be seen.
5. **More teacher training courses for Arabic teaching.** A high quality professional development plan is designed to meet the individual needs of teachers. This will enhance the Arabic language teachers teaching and learning.
6. **Opportunities for fluent Arabic speakers** to develop more skills, through planned extracurricular activities after school such as: Arabic Drama, Arabic Newspaper, Arabic week, Arabic language competitions and Qur'an recitations, Arabic Poetry, and other extra-curricular activities.
7. **Provide innovative teaching and learning resources** for the study of Arabic. The increase of such resources will offer teachers choice to meet the needs of their students. The collation and dissemination of the resources is an important consideration for targeting individual students' learning needs.
8. **Supporting the mixed ability classes:** by grouping students according to their language level and create individual goals for students according to their proficiencies. UAE Social Studies classes are taught in Arabic and in English so co-teaching could be used easily to meet the varied levels of abilities. Islamic studies classes are taught in Arabic, so differentiation should be applied widely to match the students' achievement levels.

Results: Problems and Solutions

Findings reflect the increased interest in Arabic learning. In terms of communication, diglossia "the difference between the written and the spoken language" (High or Low) is barely noticed, as Modern Standard Arabic is used most of time inside the classrooms. The implementation of the action plan above highlighted some improvement in teacher planning and the delivery of learning. The teacher became more proficient in planning according to the modern teaching strategies, differentiating the content, process and product according to the students' abilities, learning styles and interests. Most of the teachers became aware of the available ICT programs that may support the Arabic curriculum, however still in need for more training and development. The teacher became more able to use flexible education plans that enable him/her to stretch and analyze the tasks according to the students' needs.

From the students' side, one very important aspect is that the students are living in a bilingual environment. Arabic was shown as a dominant feature at home, while English was extensively used in and outside the school. This mixing between their mother language and their second language (English) was a positive behaviour that helped them express their ideas better and improve both languages. This corresponds with Romaine's (2000) view that learning to speak more than one language often involves putting together material from two languages.

Subsequent observations of classroom practice, it was discovered that the traditional teaching methods in the Arabic classroom was the main factor for the students' achievement in Arabic language being lower than other subjects. The rote learning and the teacher lecture style approach to teaching was seen out of step with the teaching pedagogies in English based classrooms. Furthermore, it was revealed that our Arab bilingual students, especially in the middle school, showed greater interest (and attainment) toward reading and writing in English more than in Arabic. Consequently, the students' achievement in the second language (ie. English) is showing more progress.

However, it was discovered that although many students were interested in learning the Arabic language, many of them were not able to master it at the age appropriate levels. While the interest is nurtured, the message for teachers is clear; increasing student engagement and keeping them on task requires new teaching strategies in order to result in effective learning.

In respect to the educational technology that is available in schools it was found that our Arabic teachers' utilisation in the classroom was integrated appropriately to the teaching and learning process. Perceived barriers such as lack of coordination, lack of training or lack of support were reported.

Finally, as the school promotes the value and importance of learning Arabic in the school, parents should also share in the responsibility. This partnership to reinforce the children's mother tongue inside and outside the family will lead to higher Arabic standards. In the meantime, more work is being done and we hope this will lead to more appropriate interventions in the future as we enhance the teaching and learning of the Arabic Language.

Conclusion

Preserving the Arabic language needs a great effort, creativity and continuous work by both the school and the home. Searching for methods and strategies to meet the learning needs of the 21st century learner needs more work. The Arabic language teacher must always discover the pupils' abilities and techniques and seek to use them in service to the Arabic language. Through applying the previously mentioned strategies, and choosing the most appropriate ones for each student, great gain can be had in progressing our students' Arabic skills and comprehension.

The article addresses the main issues that face schools in teaching the Arabic language. It is one attempt to bridge the gap that exists between the growing demand for high-quality Arabic language programs in UAE schools and the need for these programs to have appropriate resources to help them become established. The article intended to share the experience of one bilingual school in Abu Dhabi, and it is hoped that the discussions would enlighten the practice of teachers and educationalists elsewhere.

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