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Arabic Language Education in the UAE: Choosing the Right Drivers

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Abstract: This chapter describes the many initiatives that have been spearheaded by the United Arab Emirates in an effort to develop the teaching and learning of Arabic in the country. Although there has been unprecedented attention given to Arabic language education in the decade up to 2018 including an Arabic language charter, a reading law, the Arabic reading challenge, the Arabic for life report, and the Arabic award to list just a few, private and public schools are still having some challenges in bringing best practice to the Arabic language classrooms with students still underperforming. The UAE vision and initiatives set in place to develop Arabic language education are to be applauded, however, it is the direction of that vision that needs to be adjusted to focus mainly on teacher preparation and teacher and school leadership training. Teachers and school leaders are the most important piece in the educational fabric and without ensuring that they receive the best preparation and continuous and meaningful training and support throughout their careers, these initiatives will have little impact on Arabic language education outcomes.

Key words: Arabic language –Arabic language teaching and learning – Arabic PIRLS - Arabic teacher preparation – Arabic language professional development – Arabic language teachers credentialing.

Introduction

Over the years, the UAE has experimented with many school models and many approaches to develop its educational system and elevate the status of Arabic language education. Formal schooling started in 1972 with the establishment of the Ministry of Education (MOE), and although the journey has been a short one compared to other nations, it has been a very ambitious and serious one. Over the past decade, the UAE has gone through several iterations of school models and schools of thought on teaching and learning including introducing bilingual education in the early years, to introducing just English language as a world language in early years with all other subjects taught in the mother tongue (Arabic). The country has also experimented with standards-based approach, and more recently with a light version of the literature-based approach where many of the texts included in the Arabic language curriculum for the 2018 academic year were licensed from authentic Arabic children’s literature. The MOE has also experimented with an array of specialized programs introduced in schools including the integration of technology and stem labs, the restructuring of leadership and teacher supervision, and the upscaling of facilities and resources, as well as the recent introduction of standardized testing at the national level (Litz & Scott, 2017).

This paper will discuss challenges that characterize the teaching of Arabic language in the UAE today and will highlight some of the initiatives and policies introduced by the Emirati government in order to overcome some of those challenges.

Student Achievement on Arabic Language Standardized Tests in the UAE

In this section, UAE students' achievement on Arabic language standardized tests, namely PIRLS and EMSA, will be discussed. Results on the PIRLS test will be further compared to other Arab countries that took that test.

The International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)

A standardized test of international impact and reputation is The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). PIRLS possibly qualifies as the most important study of literacy amongst young students around the world.

The purpose of PIRLS is to measure students' ability to read in their native language and comprehend both literary, and informational texts (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012; Taha, 2017). In the UAE, students who study in Arabic take the Arabic language PIRLS and students studying in English medium schools take the test in English. Data that is published and available to the public is the combined data from the Arabic and English PIRLS.

Results from the 2011 PIRLS test show that out of the 45 countries participating in the test, Morocco was ranked 45th, Oman 42nd, Saudi Arabia 41st, Qatar 37th, and United Arab Emirates 34th. Although the UAE outranked all Arab countries that took the PIRLS 2011, it, however, still performed below the international scale average of 500 (Mullis et al., 2012).

The latest PIRLS was administered in 2016. 51 countries took the test including eight Arabic speaking countries. The UAE came in the 43rd rank ahead of all the other Arab countries who took it (Bahrain 44th place, Qatar 45th, Oman 47th, Kuwait 48th, Morocco 49th, Egypt 50th) again with a score of 450 which is 11 points higher than the 2011 score. This is a commendable improvement for the UAE, however, measures in modernizing Arabic language education need to continue if the country is to reach the international average of 500 and beyond.

The Abu Dhabi External Measurement of Student Achievement (EMSA)

In 2016, 105,665 students in grades 3-12 (in private and public schools) in Abu Dhabi, Al Ain and Gharbiyyah took the The Abu Dhabi External Measurement of Student Achievement (EMSA). The EMSA program has been designed to provide data to a wide variety of stakeholders on students' achievement in languages, science and mathematics (ADEC, 2016).

Results on the 2016 EMSA Arabic reading, show that students in grades 3-12 displayed proficiency in retrieving literal information and finding information in texts – these are memory and recall skills that involve finding direct and key words or phrases in texts (ADEC, 2016). However, students seemed to be challenged by items that require higher order thinking skills including interpretation, inference, understanding meaning, and items that require students to analyze and reflect on longer texts with questions focused on ideas late in the passage - these types of questions test understanding rather than memory or local recall skills (ADEC, 2016). Girls consistently outperformed boys in Arabic reading

by one year of learning across all grades. This gap between boys and girls does not narrow as students develop towards secondary school (ADEC, 2016). Generally, results in Arabic Reading, did not show the expected rate of growth in the later years of schooling (ADEC, 2016).

Arabic as a Diglossic Language

Arabic language is a diglossic language (Aldannan, 2010; AlMoosa, 2007; Ferguson, 1959, 1991; Obeid, 2010) that has many regional spoken dialects and a higher level written standardized variety. The diglossic nature of Arabic can be represented on a continuum with Classical Arabic, the language of Qur'an, Hadith, and Classical poetry set at one end, and probably the uneducated dialects and vernaculars on the other end with Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), educated dialects, enlightened dialects all spread in between (Kaye, 1994). Unfortunately, this diglossic feature, which is a point of great strength, distinction and richness has been overshadowed by certain practices in Arabic language education in the past seven decades, where diglossia was dealt with as a weakness rather than a strength (Shousha, 2014). Most children come to school having acquired one variety or dialect of Arabic, and that is the one they have heard at home from parents and family members. At school, the language of all textbooks, children's literature, and supposedly instruction is MSA, which is the standardized variety of Arabic used in media, literature, and all formal and written communication. Feitelson, Goldstein, Iraqi, and Share (1993) and Abu-Rabia (2000) tested the causal links between MSA, and dialects in children. They found that the more children's

literature is read early on to children, the easier their move from dialects to MSA becomes. However, Arabic language is usually taught in a rigid way that is focused on grammar and accuracy. This has stifled the ability of Arabic language learners to use it as a tool for science, creative work, modern terminologies, innovative ideas, playfulness, inquiry, and laughter (Taha-Thomure, 2008). Students are consistently corrected on the spot in classrooms and are taught that one cannot make a mistake when reading or writing in MSA, and that invented spelling and making words up are unacceptable practices (Taha, 2008). In class, most teachers observed use dialects to explain language features, which presents yet another level of complication towards helping students make the move from dialect to MSA, and close the gap between them (Taha, 2017; Taha-Thomure, 2008). As a result, Arabic tends to be seen as the least liked subject for students in schools, and speaking, reading, and writing in MSA are the last things they want to do, and actually are able to do (AlZeny, 2016; Arabic for Life, 2014).

Given the challenges cited above, modernizing the teaching of the Arabic language has become a priority for the MOE in the UAE due to the language's status as the official and the mother tongue of the land. The MOE has been trying to introduce different best practice initiatives in the hopes of improving Arabic language teaching and learning in schools. One initiative has been the adoption of the Arabic language arts standards (Taha, 2017b) by the Abu Dhabi Education Council in 2010 (ADEC, now ADEK). In 2011 Dubai developed its own content standards for Arabic language as a core subject in schools. The standards-based

approach called for the use of common standards that were rigorous, standardized between all schools, and aligned to a certain extent with the resources available in schools (Taha, 2017b).

Several other initiatives, which will be discussed later in this chapter, have been introduced in the UAE, and have started to impact the thinking surrounding Arabic language as an untouchable body of rules and syntax that cannot be modernized, and cannot be flexible, fun or evolving. The increasing awareness, and knowledge in the field of teaching and learning Arabic language are leading many stakeholders to reflect on old, and current practices that have not yielded any results to date. It is hoped that by raising awareness, it will lead to activism in modernizing the teaching and learning of the Arabic language, and propel forward a field that has been stagnant for decades.

Quality of Arabic Language Programs Based on School Inspections

Private schools in the UAE are inspected on an annual basis. All private school reports, and ratings are posted on the KHDA website. Receiving an “outstanding” rating means that the school is doing exceptional work on a range of components including school culture, classroom environment, academic standards and curriculum delivery, safety procedures, provisions made for special needs students, and levels of achievement in every content area (KHDA, 2018).

Inspection reports are meant to give an in depth review the performance and standards of private schools in Dubai (KHDA, 2018). School inspection reports include a ‘parent report’ section which gives parents detailed information about the

quality of education provided by their child’s school, helping them make informed decisions. In addition, each report includes specific information about the quality of provisions available for students with special needs and the quality of early years education. Information contained in the reports is designed to assist parents in working more closely with schools, “as partners in their children’s learning, and facilitates school improvement” (KHDA, 2018).

Most private schools offer Arabic for native learners and Arabic for non-native learners to be able to cater to the linguistic needs of their linguistically diverse student body. Thus, school inspection reports have one rating for Arabic as a first language, and another rating for Arabic as an additional language. The rating scale used has five levels: outstanding, excellent, very good, acceptable, and weak (KHDA, 2018). Upon searching the KHDA’s website for schools with outstanding rating, it was found that 15 schools out of 149 schools inspected in 2016 were rated “outstanding”. Studying the details of every report of those fifteen schools, the researcher found that although those schools were rated as “outstanding” on every aspect of school academic and social life, they, however, consistently had a less than “outstanding” rating in Arabic language. Results for Arabic from those fifteen “outstanding” schools inspected in 2016 are summarized in table 1 below:

Table 1: Outstanding School Inspection Ratings of Arabic Language Programs

Outstanding Schools (2016)	Arabic as a first language	Arabic as an additional language
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1	N/A	Good
2	Acceptable	Acceptable
3	Weak	Good
4	Acceptable	Acceptable
5	Acceptable	Acceptable
6	Acceptable	Acceptable
7	Acceptable	Acceptable
8	Acceptable	Good
9	Acceptable	Acceptable
10	Acceptable	Acceptable
11	Acceptable	Good
12	Acceptable	Good
13	N/A	N/A
14	Good	Acceptable
15	Acceptable	Acceptable
Source: https://www.khda.gov.ae/en/DSIB/Reports		

Results summarized above are in line with parents' perceptions of Arabic language education in private schools, who think that Arabic teaching in private schools is not up to the level that they expect and want (Issa, 2013). Issa added that experts she spoke to said that private schools don't give Arabic language the attention it deserves. This is quite alarming and merits some in depth research and

analysis into the reasons why Arabic is not getting the attention it deserves, and why students are not attaining the proficiency levels expected in Arabic.

Challenges to Arabic Language Education in the UAE

Looking at students' results and the consistent underperformance on Arabic language tests discussed earlier in regards to the PIRLS, the EMSA test and school inspections, it is essential to discuss the reasons leading to those results as those could shed light onto the solutions that need to be introduced in order to improve performance. The researcher has identified seven main challenges or impediments to quality Arabic language education in the UAE. Most of those challenges can be found in most Arabic language classrooms across the Arab world as well.

1- Time Allocated to Arabic Language

The first challenge according to Samia Al Farra (2011), is that Arabic language is not given the importance it deserves in most private schools. Time spent learning Arabic in most private schools threatens the language. In addition, the quality and quantity of teaching and educational resources available are not similar to what students receive in English language, which could threaten children's identity (Al Farra, 2011; Bell, 2016). Arabic language is the only official language of the UAE. Most private schools in the UAE treat Arabic as a "special subject", meaning it is not the language of instruction and the time allocated to it usually does not exceed 45 minutes. Not having enough immersion time in Arabic

means that native learners of Arabic are not given the opportunity to delve deeply into the language and be immersed in it (Al Farra, 2011).

2- Rigor

The second challenge to Arabic language in both private and public schools is that not enough rigor is given to teaching Arabic due to the lack of teacher expertise and suitable curricula (Bell, 2016). Teachers need in-depth training on what, and how to teach non-native learners and how to carefully design learning and linguistic experiences that build on students' learning year after year. Parents often say that their children study Arabic in schools for years, yet they don't learn much and remain unable to fluently speak, read, or comprehend MSA.

3- Uninformed Leadership

A third challenge to learning Arabic is that private schools in the UAE are mostly led by expert western leadership who do not speak Arabic and who do not have sufficient, if any, background knowledge about Arabic, its diglossic nature, and how best to approach teaching it. This leaves them at a loss regarding what to do and who to turn to for best practices in teaching Arabic. Parallel to that leadership in public schools is quite focused on paperwork and the principal is rarely seen an educational leader who needs to be informed and involved in all things academic at the school.

4- Arabic across the School

A fourth challenge is that very few private schools, for example, encourage learning Arabic music, or the use of Arabic in newsletters, talent shows, theater, announcements, or artwork displayed. This limits the presence of Arabic language to the classroom only and often times sends the message to teachers, parents, and students that Arabic is not an important and fun language.

5- Teacher Quality

A fifth challenge in teaching Arabic in the UAE has to do with the quality of Arabic teachers hired in both private and public schools. Outstanding private schools in the UAE, and across the Arab world strive to hire the best caliber of teachers from around the world. They have an annually scheduled “hiring season”, where they scout great teachers in job fairs that are dedicated to matching the best candidates to schools (Teachaway, 2017). There are no job fairs available to Arabic language teachers, and thus private schools find themselves limited a smaller pool of candidates who happen to reside in the UAE and who do not necessarily possess the quality of preparation and training needed to teach well. Thus, many private schools end up with a two-tier quality of teachers: well prepared and trained teachers for English medium subjects, and ill-prepared and untrained teachers for Arabic language, which in turn has unfortunate consequences on students’ learning and on how Arabic is perceived. In public schools, Arabic language teachers are hired locally and regionally once they pass a test in Arabic language content and a short interview. However, student performance and Arabic language proficiency

as depicted on national and international tests could be a depiction of the quality of preparation and training their teachers received.

6- Curriculum Quality

A sixth challenge has to do with the quality of Arabic language curricula and resources used in both private and public schools. Most curricula available in schools are textbook-based, grammar-based, and not well aligned with the 21st century skills nor with the other subjects in school (Faour, 2012). Moreover, there are very few quality Arabic digital resources available. There has been in the past few years a welcome surge in the production and quality of Arabic children's literature, but we have yet to see children's literature utilized as one effective and essential language learning tool in the classroom.

7- Professional Development

The seventh challenge has to do with Arabic language professional development in both private and public schools. Although private schools strive to train their teachers well, and provide them with annual and continuous professional development opportunities, however, when it comes to training their Arabic language staff they find themselves either training them in English language on issues that either do not relate to Arabic language education or are at a level quite above what the teachers need, or not training them at all (Taha, 2017). Public schools do not have a sustained and targeted training plan for its teachers. Instead, all teachers are provided with three weeks of general training throughout the year that is held in a large facility where they choose to attend any two-hour session they

like even if it is not in their field or grade level. No follow up on the training is usually done in public schools and teachers are not required to transfer any of that learning into their classrooms.

Arabic Language Teacher Preparation and Training in UAE

The importance of quality Arabic teacher preparation and training cannot be emphasized enough. They are the backbone of any successful and competitive educational system. Educational research has consistently emphasized the role of competent teachers in ensuring quality instruction and learning outcomes (Alamouch, 2009; Darling-Hammond 2006, 2010; Darling-Hammond, Holtman, Gatlin, & Vasquez-Heilig, 2005; Faour, 2012; Taha-Thomure, 2009; Taha, 2017). In this section, Arabic language teacher preparation (pre-service), and training (in-service) will be discussed as two main issues impacting student achievement.

Arabic Language Teacher Preparation in the UAE

Quality teacher preparation programs are expected to graduate effective teachers who not only know their subject matter well, but who have a portfolio of pedagogies, and methodologies they can use with ease to ensure that learning happens (Darling-Hammond, 2000, Darling-Hammond, Holtman, Gatlin, & Vasquez-Heilig, 2005; Faour, 2012, Taha, 2017).

In his work entitled “Arab Education Report Card”, Faour (2012) recognizes that most teachers in the Arab world do not have the content knowledge, and pedagogical skills required to succeed in a 21st century educational system.

Most teachers in the Arab world are not able to engage their students in higher order thinking skills (Faour, 2012; Taha, 2017).

Arabic language teachers in the UAE share with many other teachers in the Arab world the same plight of being ill-trained. This is an alarming issue that can have national security repercussions. Arabic language teachers are entrusted with ensuring that the students reach adequate fluency and accuracy in their native language (Arabic), can access information, can communicate effectively and appropriately in different situations, and can learn to think critically using this language (Gallagher, 2011; Taha, 2017). Arabic language proficiency is so critical in all public schools in the Arab world because it is the language of instruction. Success in other subjects including Math and science is dependent on the students' ability to read fluently, and with comprehension (Gallagher, 2011). Being able to read fluently, with comprehension, and critical thinking are a must in today's world. Those skills will dictate what higher education institution students get accepted at, and what kinds of jobs they can get in an increasingly competitive job market (ADEC, 2014; Allen, 2003). Without a solid foundation in their mother tongue, it will almost be impossible for students to understand texts they are required to read, and they will most probably struggle throughout school with other subjects as well if not dropping out of school altogether (Perfetti, 2007; Stanovich, 2000).

In its 2016 edition, the Arab Knowledge Report (AKR) stipulated that in order for the Arab world to move into the knowledge economy, and ultimately

knowledge society, it will need to move from spending on wages, infrastructure and logistical requirements to focusing more on the quality of the teaching, and learning (AHDR, 2016; AKR, 2016). This of course is not attainable without having high quality teacher preparation and training programs.

It has to be noted that most Arabic language teachers are the product, or most likely the victims, of low-quality education systems, and teacher education programs that fall short of adequately preparing them in content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and higher order thinking skills (Education in the Arab World, 2009; Faour, 2012; Taha, 2017). Many teachers of Arabic are found to be lacking in content knowledge, and in adhering to the use of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as the language of instruction in their classrooms (Alamouh, 2009; Obaid, 2010; Taha, 2017) which is what prompted the MOE in UAE to issue a directive in 2016 requiring all teachers to use MSA. Unfortunately, this directive remains largely ignored because teachers are not being trained to master MSA, and they have not to date been appraised or held accountable based on their use of MSA in the classroom.

The UAE has five federally funded higher education institutions and more than a 100 private higher education institutions (Nassir, 2017). Very few universities in the UAE offer Arabic language teacher preparation programs. No federal institution of higher education offers any Arabic language teacher education program (ECAE, 2018; HCT, 2018; UAEU, 2018; Zayed University, 2018). They all offer a primary years Education program that is focused on general pedagogy

which might include a couple courses in Arabic or linguistics, but none offers a stand-alone Arabic language teacher preparation program (ECAE, 2018).

There are a few scattered private institutions that offer Arabic language teacher preparation programs, but these programs have not proven to be of the quality, rigor, and modernity that the country and the field need. This has had great ramifications on the schools and on the quality of Arabic language instruction. It has also manifested itself in students' results and achievement. The quality of teaching has been shown to be related to the quality of preparation, and pre-service training teachers receive (Bannayan & Al-Attia, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Taha, 2017). The links between student achievement and teacher preparation are quite strong and telling, and therefore, merit a closer look at some of the results on international literacy tests.

The lack of accredited, highly responsive, modern, and rigorous programs for preparing Arabic language teachers in UAE higher education institutions is an issue that will need to be addressed with urgency given the increased attention Arabic language has been receiving in the past decade (Burden-Leahy; 2009). One promising development in 2018 has been the announcement of a teaching licensure process. This will be discussed later in this chapter, but it will be very interesting to see the impact this will have on Arabic language education.

Continuous Professional Development for In-service Teachers

Continuous professional development or what is called “professional learning” (Fullan, 2007, cited in Taha, 2017) is essential in ensuring that in-service

teachers deepen their knowledge, reflect on their practices, and receive support from peers within their network. According to Fullan (2007), student learning depends on ensuring that every teacher is learning all the time (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Very few teachers of Arabic receive meaningful and sustained in-service professional development (Taha, 2017). Those who do are usually offered “drive-through” professional development comprised of a few hours spent looking at a new concept or strategy that does not necessarily lead to any classroom transfer of learning (Coe et al, 2014; Taha, 2017). The MOE in the UAE is slowly recognizing the importance of meaningful and sustained professional development that is centered within each school, and that works to build its own professional learning community and link it to other communities that are doing similar things.

Currently, the MOE has allocated three professional development weeks throughout the year where teachers get 90 hours of compulsory training. The training hours are currently distributed as follows: a week (five full work days) before schools start, a week at the end of the first semester and one week at the end of the second semester. When attending these training sessions, teachers go to a large, well-equipped training facility in the emirate of Ajman where they can choose from a long list of sessions on various topics, ideas, methodologies and domains. The schools do not come to those training weeks prepared with a plan to focus, for example, on one specific topic that all teachers of Arabic must engage in, and implement in their classrooms, nor are the schools involved in how the teachers apply, experiment with, and follow up on what they have learned.

UAE Arabic Language Plans & Initiatives in the Past Decade

The concern over the status of the Arabic language and Arabic language education in schools resonates throughout the Arab world. Many initiatives have been proposed, and many projects have been funded over the years to help find solutions for the less than acceptable standards in the use of Arabic language (Gallagher, 2011). In the past decade, the UAE has been at the forefront of Arab nations that are actively working to create, and support Arabic language initiatives with the objective of preserving the language, and modernizing its pedagogical tenets all at once.

Shaikh Mohammad Bin Rashed, the vice president of UAE and ruler of Dubai, has taken it upon himself to ensure that everything from a policy level is in place to support the language. He, moreover, ensured that the federal government, in general, and the government of Dubai in particular allocated all the funds and human resources needed so that all policies and initiatives concerning Arabic language are well supported, and followed through. Many of those initiatives have proven to be quite popular, and effective not only in the UAE, but throughout the Arab world (Akhanian, 2016; Bell, 2016).

It is yet to be seen what the actual academic impact of these initiatives is. This will need some longitudinal research projects following and tracking the impact of those initiatives on teaching and learning of Arabic language, and on youth's perception about the language.

Below is a brief description of the main Arabic language initiatives that have been in place in the UAE starting in 2012:

Arabic Language Charter

The Arabic language charter was introduced in 2012. It is a frame of reference for all policies, and laws governing the long-term vision for modernizing, and preserving Arabic language. The charter includes 13 items that range from emphasizing Arabic language as the official language of UAE, and as such the language of all official written communication, laws, and decrees. Moreover, the charter indicates that Arabic language will be the language of all government services (Emirates News, 2012).

The charter encourages all private schools and language centers to offer Arabic language classes for non-native learners. (Emirates News, 2012).

According to the charter, higher education institutions and research centers in UAE will be responsible for enriching the language with new Arabic language jargon, terminology and lexicon, and conducting academic research that will inform the field of Arabic language teaching and learning including translating international literary, and scientific works into Arabic (Emirates News, 2012).

Arabic for Life Report

Commissioned by Sh. Mohammad Bin Rashed in 2012, a high-powered committee produced an evidence-based report in 2013 that proposed ways to modernize the teaching and learning of Arabic language

along five domains including curriculum development, culture of reading, teacher preparation and training, role of media, and Arabic for non-native learners (Arabic for Life, 2014). The report highlighted results from a large-scale survey of teachers, and students in several Arab countries, whereby, over 70% of teachers, and students believed that Arabic language teaching is all about grammar and 67% of students said that they have difficulty with grammar (Arabic for Life, 2014).

BilArabi Initiative

Launched by Sh. Mohammad Bin Rashed in 2013 as part of the Mohammad Bin Rashed Foundation (MBRF), the *BilArabi* (meaning: in Arabic) initiative to inspire Arabs, young and old, to show their support in preserving the language by using MSA as their primary form of communication over social media (Ramahi, 2017). Many Arab youths prefer using English language on social media, or a mix of Arabic and English, or writing Arabic using Latin letters known as “*Arabizi*” or using their own local Arabic dialects to express themselves on social media outlets (Ramahi, 2017). Although the *BilArabi* initiative has gained a number of followers over the years (Akhanian, 2016; Ramahi, 2017), however, it is not known whether following the initiative means that followers will be using Modern Standard Arabic in their social media communication.

Arabic Award

The Arabic award was established by Sh. Mohammad Bin Rashed in 2015. It is considered “the highest appreciation of the efforts of the Arabic language individuals, and organizations, and is part of the initiatives launched by His Highness Sheikh Mohammad Bin Rashed, to promote, disseminate, and facilitate learning and teaching of Arabic language, in addition to enhancing the status of Arabic language, and encouraging those who aim to nourish it” (Arabic award, 2018). The Arabic award offers recognition in eleven categories including teaching, and learning, technology, culture, media, language policy, and translation (Arabic award, 2018).

Arabic Reading Challenge

In 2015, Sh. Mohammad Bin Rashed AlMaktoum announced the Arabic Reading Challenge considered to be the largest Arabic language reading initiative ever started in the Arab world (Arabic Reading Challenge, 2018). The challenge aimed according to its website to instill in the new generation a love for reading, making reading a habit in their lives, recognizing the role of culture in spreading the values of co-existence, acceptance and openness to other cultures, prepping a generation of talented people, developing Arabic language curricula across the Arab world, and enriching the cycle of writing, publishing and translation (Arabic Reading Challenge, 2018). The Arabic Reading Challenge had 3,500,000 participants from 15 Arab countries and 11 foreign countries in its first

round in 2016 who collectively read 50,000,000 books (Arabic Reading Challenge, 2018).

Reading Law

In 2016, Sh. Khalifa Bin Zayed AlNahayan, President of the UAE, issued the first Reading Law of its kind in the region. The law aims to institutionalize reading as a cornerstone in achieving the Emirati vision. The reading law makes reading a right that is available to all (Salama, 2016). According to this reading law, every Emirati newborn will receive three book bags that will target the child's reading needs from birth to four years of age (Salama, 2016). The reading law asks all school and university libraries, in addition to public libraries, to enrich and increase their collections of books on an annual basis. All reading "goods", and materials according to this law are tax exempt. The law dedicates one month a year as the reading month across the UAE (Salama, 2016).

Living Arabic

Living Arabic is an initiative started in 2016 by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) in Dubai. "Living Arabic is a platform where educators come together to share, and develop innovative solutions for Arabic language teaching and learning, pushing towards one common goal of providing a first-rate education for all UAE students, as outlined in the UAE National Agenda's Vision 2021 (KHDA, 2018).

Faseeha Directive

In 2017, the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) in addition to the MOE and the Abu Dhabi Education Council issued a directive that went to all public and private schools requiring all teachers of Arabic to use modern standard Arabic (MSA) during conversations and curriculum delivery (The National, 2017). The directive added that school inspectors will assess language usage during lessons and will consider the use of MSA a priority (The National, 2017).

Arabic Literacy Strategy & Current Pilot Study

The national Arabic language strategy came about in 2017 after a thorough study conducted by the researcher on behalf of ADEK and the MOE. The strategy revolves around strengthening the teaching of reading in grades 1-3 by training teachers on the use of the phonetic approach alongside a literature-rich approach. Classrooms according to the strategy need to be equipped with reading corners, and a semi reading workshop approach needs to be integrated into the curriculum using the four types of reading (reading aloud, shared, guided, and independent), and word study. Five pilot schools have already started implementing the strategy and teachers in those schools are being coached on a regular basis. If the pilot proves to be successful, the strategy might be expanded to all public schools across the UAE.

Conclusion: Future Needs and Plans

Arabic language education in UAE has received some unprecedented attention in the past decade. Numerous initiatives and laws have been introduced, some more successfully than others. It is worth mentioning the massive success of the Reading Challenge initiative that has within the span of three years gotten millions of children across the world reading in Arabic. Moreover, school inspections introduced in 2009, served evidence-based and eye-opening experience regarding Arabic language educational quality. There are, however, several challenges that will need the community of Arabic language educators, researchers, and policy makers in the UAE to come together and find solutions for. This will include Arabic teacher preparation and training, research based policies, leadership training, and research.

In terms of Arabic language teacher preparation and training, schools, private and public, will need to start a nation-wide initiative of training those teachers who are willing to be trained and retiring or ending the services of those who are unwilling to be part of the development journey. Well-supported professional learning communities are an urgent need in schools as they can form the impetus for school-based reforms, change, and for ensuring that students are learning (Dufour, 2004). This means that adjustments to the ministry of education's budget will need to be made to slow down the leap into automation, technology and surplus hiring so that more investment, time, and resources are allocated into teacher preparation programs and teacher development programs (Fullan, 2007). Of course, spending on technology and facilities is more visible and probably more

fun in the short term giving people something to show off for, while training teachers and principals is typically hard work that takes long to see the results of and is not as glamorous and visible as purchasing and setting up science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) lab. Some reflection into the allocation of resources and budgeting priorities will need to be done urgently (The National; 2017). The UAE has consistently highlighted the importance of investing in the human factor, and hopefully, such a proposal of investing in training and upskilling of teachers and educational leaders will resonate.

Teachers will soon need to pass a test in content knowledge, and a test in pedagogical knowledge in order for them to be licensed to teach. It will be important to see what the results of the teaching license will be and how it will affect student achievement in the long term. It is hoped that the introduction of the teaching license will have a backwash effect on teacher preparation programs in the country. It is unclear yet whether programs that will be found lacking in the quality of their graduates will be held accountable in any way. Moreover, MOE will need to foster partnerships based on trust and a common vision with prominent universities in the UAE for the proper preparation and training of Arabic language teachers. It is this dialogue between regulators and service providers that will enable them to move the field of Arabic language education forward.

This leads into the topic of policy, where there still is a great need for a clear, research-based, well-implemented, and supported Arabic language education policy that all schools public and private adhere to, and are held accountable for

(Plecki et al, 2012). Research on Arabic language classroom practices across the UAE is a requirement so that the field can be better informed about what's being done right, and what needs improvement.

Furthermore, leadership training is another point that is in need of immediate attention. Leadership in private schools needs to be trained on the key elements of best practice Arabic language education, and what best practices they should be looking at, and championing in their schools (Ghanimeh, 1996; Obeid, 2010). Private school administrations need to engage with the community and champion Arabic language by quality teaching and learning and through integrating Arabic into music classes, art, physical education, and all activities that students engage in. Principals in public school need intensive training on how to be hands-on educational leaders rather than administrative managers and gate keepers. They need to be trained on how to mentor teachers, and how to remain engaged, and up to date on educational research and best practice.

Future research will be needed in the area of Arabic language education in the UAE. Arabic classroom practices, effect of the new UAE licensure and other policy provisions on Arabic teacher education and student perceptions of Arabic are just a few topics that need to be looked at in future studies.

With its vision, leadership and resources, the UAE is positioned to possibly be the leader of Arabic language educational change in the Arab world by sharing best practices, success stories, and lessons learned. The current vision is promising

and inspirational, but staying the course and focusing on the right drivers will be needed in order to ensure effective and favorable long term results.

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