

The Status of Arabic Language Teaching Today

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to map out the status of Arabic language teaching as practiced in the Arab World today and to bring into focus the main issues that any improvement to that discipline would need to look at.

Design/methodology/approach – A review of the current teaching practices and needs in the teaching of the Arabic language.

Findings – Arabic language teaching practices remain teacher centered and bound to teaching the textbook and overlooking the importance of aligning the curriculum to instruction and assessment.

Practical implications – The need is critical for writing national standards for the Arabic language in addition to establishing teacher colleges that offer quality pedagogical training all backed by sound research and generous funding

Originality/value – To highlight the importance of teaching and seeing the Arabic language in a totally new light that preserves national identity yet embraces best teaching practices.

Keywords- Arabic language, Curriculum, Teacher Training, National Standards, Teaching, Research, Child Rearing Practices, Parenting, Arab World

Paper type- Viewpoint

There has recently been an unprecedented interest in and awareness regarding the importance of developing and adopting new methodologies in the teaching of Arabic language. This interest has not confined itself to the realm of schools in the Arab World, but has transcended those borders to places such as the United Kingdom and the United States where increases in the number of students taking Arabic language courses at American universities have reached 126% according to the Modern Language Association MLA in 2007 (Furman *et al*, 2007). For decades, the Arabic language took a back seat in the Arab World (especially in private schools that make up the majority of schools in those countries) while the other languages taught at K-12 schools, namely English, blossomed pedagogically, politically and financially. For a long time, most schools' funds, professional development allocations and enrichment resources have been poured into educational technology, English language materials and school facilities. Little has gone to buying resources for Arabic, to training Arabic language teachers and

investing in a credentialing system that helps the Arabic language teacher become a well-rounded educator.

Currently though, the Arab World is witnessing an “awakening” period when it comes to the importance of employing modern methodologies in the teaching of the Arabic language. Ministry of Education officials, private schools boards and administrators, and Arabic language teachers have been on the look out for experts who can train the teachers, author new textbooks and instructional materials and devise tools to measure student learning. Conferences are being held around the Arab World that are not shy any more to address issues pertaining to the teaching of the Arabic language and Arabic language and teaching experts are starting to take center place in those conferences and discussions. If done right, the ripple effect of such a trend will change the face of the Arabic language teaching forever. I’m trying to keep away from using the term “reform” which is here as much a fad nowadays as it is in the Arab World for reasons that could be discussed in a later article.

Amid all the excitement of the newly found value of addressing the teaching of the Arabic language around the world and in particularly in the Arab World, educators need to be careful not to entangle themselves in the web of endless discussions that lead to more discussions and less work. At this very moment the teaching of the Arabic language needs immediate overhauling that is carefully thought through, professionally done and comprehensively evaluated. Some of the main aspects that educators, parents, ministries of education and communities need to address are the need for national Arabic language standards and guidelines that form the backbone of a modern day and effective curriculum, the need for quality teacher training and professional development, the need for research and the need for funding that ensures that efforts in that regard are sustained and improved upon.

Arabic Language National Standards & Guidelines

One of the biggest challenges facing Arabic language teaching in the Arab World is, according to (AlRajhi, 2006), the absence of an academic body in charge of setting educational guidelines and standards. Most schools or institutions are left on their own to come up with what looks like an acceptable set of standards, guidelines and skills to teach Arabic. The articulation of Arabic language standards, guidelines and curricula found in each school or through ministries of education in charge of the Arabic language programs in public schools is mostly text book driven. There is usually one textbook accompanied by a workbook both of which sum up the entirety of learning that ought to take place in the Arabic language classroom (Taha-Thomure, 2003). When teachers finish “the book” then they have done what is expected of them. If they do not finish “the book”, then the idea is that the students have missed out on some essential and key elements of their education. The way in which the concept of “curriculum” is conceived and implemented reflects necessarily the philosophical roots and educational outcomes behind the learning process. In that sense, the way curriculum is understood and implemented has massive implications on the students, teachers, parents, administrators and the whole community it evolves out of. A curriculum that is bound to a textbook is essentially lacking in

assessment, instruction methodologies, world outlook and technology. One of the main underpinnings of any successful curriculum is its alignment to national standards, assessment and instruction. Any disregard for any of those elements will be shortchanging the students and the educational system as a whole.

Many schools do not have an Arabic curriculum and by curriculum here I mean an articulation of standards, guidelines, a scope and sequence, skills to be taught, assessment strategies and finally the actual lessons and instructional materials to be used. Having well-articulated standards for the teaching of Arabic is the first step towards building a curriculum that is effective and modern. Those standards and guidelines have to be written by experts not only in the language but more importantly by experts in education and first language acquisition.

The issue of national standards brings with it a myriad of elements necessary for the successful teaching/learning of the Arabic language. One of the most important byproducts of not having national standards is the lack of effective instructional planning in most schools when it comes to the Arabic language. This is fully understood because any effective instructional planning depends on the in depth knowledge on the part of teachers and on the part of Arabic language experts regarding the concepts and skills to be taught, students' knowledge, changes to be made to allow for differentiation, the development of the knowledge necessary and accompanying skills in the Arabic language, grade level standards and benchmarks and a knowledge of the available instructional materials (Tollefson and Osborn, 2008). The efforts made by Qatar and other neighboring countries in the creation of an educational body in charge of writing the national standards and disseminate them deserve to be followed and researched and if proven successful ought to be emulated.

Arabic Language Teacher Training

The teaching of Arabic as is the case with teaching any language ought to be governed by 1-the teachers' mastery and in-depth knowledge of the subject matter or the language and 2- the teachers' knowledge of pedagogical principles including classroom management skills, curriculum, various teaching and learning methodologies and child development and psychology. The goal of pedagogical knowledge for the Arabic language teachers is to provide them with the skills, knowledge and experience necessary to employ the best practices in the field in their own classrooms (England, 2006).

The relationship between efficacy in the content area or subject-matter and the use of the best teaching practices is one of highest importance for ensuring a successful classroom experience. Having the knowledge of the content area alone will result in classrooms that are mostly teacher-centered and that deprive the student of the strategies that effective teachers employ to help them develop their linguistic skills by using the language and by taking charge of their own learning. Having the knowledge of the best teaching practices alone without a solid and in depth articulation of the content area or in this case without sufficient knowledge of the Arabic language will result in a learning situation that does

not offer the student the best model for recognizing, understanding, creating and producing the language in a semantically and syntactically correct manner.

One of the most pressing issues in the teaching of the Arabic language has to do with the quality of teacher preparation programs available in the Arab world. For the most part, teachers with a Bachelors degree in Arabic language and literature are offered teaching positions without having had training in teaching methodologies and this is most dominant in the less affluent private schools and in many public schools across the Arab World. Graduates of majors other than Arabic such as psychology, sociology, and other disciplines are often offered Arabic language teaching positions without truly being well trained or prepared in the content area or in the teaching methodologies. This translates itself to the classroom where the Arabic language used by many teachers (especially elementary schools) is laden with grammatical and structural errors and where all the students are taught using the same pace and the same method, and where the teacher takes center stage when it comes to learning. As such, the whole process becomes more about teaching rather than about learning (Kaagan, 2009).

What is urgently needed are quality, cohesive and well rounded teacher training programs (such as the one found at the American University of Beirut) that require teachers to go through them before being commissioned to teach in any school.

It has always been the belief that to teach Arabic language, one has to have degree in Arabic literature. As important as it is to have subject matter competency, however, teachers have not been required to pass a national subject matter test that proves the teacher's mastery of the language. More importantly, Arabic language teachers in Arab countries have not been required to take courses in educational pedagogy or andragogy, child development, educational technology, teaching methodology, assessment and classroom management that prepare them to go into the classrooms and be able to interact with the child or the young adult.

Schools need to work with departments of education in their local universities and with universities abroad in addition to curriculum specialists who would help them set up a series of courses that can prepare Arabic language teachers to become 21st century educators and to help them stay current on educational pedagogy through continuing professional development after they become authorized teachers of Arabic.

Research Based Arabic Language Instructional Materials & Resources

Arabic language teachers have historically been disadvantaged when it comes to the quality and the availability of instructional materials and resources. Most resources available are grammar-based, teacher-centered materials that do not help the teachers to teach Arabic in a communicative, research-based, student-centered and differentiated way. Most students are always working on the same assignment at the same time. Arabic resources be it textbooks, enrichment materials or children's literature & stories need to be subjected to definite standards and quality control. Teachers need to be

trained in how to recognize a good quality, “purchaseable” resource using certain criteria. Those criteria include:

- 1- Production quality: font size and style, paper brightness, color or black and white, binding quality, resolution of used pictures and art work, number of words per page, diacritics, indexes, numbered pages, and tables of content.
- 2- Content: is it standard aligned, does it incorporate aspects of the child’s or young adult’s interests, community and culture in it? Does it offer various writing genres that the child and young adult can be exposed to or is it all literary and fictional? Do the enrichment materials introduce a new method or way to learn and practice the language rather than learn ‘about the language’? Are the textbooks and instructional materials worksheet driven with monotonous drills and exercises or are they task and research based?
- 3- Pedagogical and linguistic theory: another criterion that teachers and curriculum specialists of Arabic should look at is whether the textbooks and instructional materials adopted by their schools are based on a sound learning and language acquisition theories or approaches such as humanistic, Montessori, student centered, cognitive, multiple intelligences, total physical response, etc. If those resources do not spell out clearly the methodology and approach they have been created under, then most likely those resources are not to be trusted as academically sound materials to be used to teach Arabic.
- 4- Authors: who are the authors and what are their backgrounds? Are they teachers, Arabic language, education or curriculum specialists or none of the above and how would that lend them or take away from their credibility and the credibility of their product?
- 5- Authenticity: do those resources and instructional materials incorporate some aspect of authentic materials in them? Authentic materials could be defined as any material that was not written for an educational purpose. Arabic newspaper articles, advertisements, invitation cards, opinion pieces, plane tickets, receipts, menus, etc. are some examples of authentic materials.

Not only do teachers need to recognize good quality Arabic resources, but given the lack thereof they will need to start teaming up and developing their own materials and resources and these criteria would be a great first step and frame of reference for them to keep in mind.

Funding Allocations for Arabic Instructional Materials

Schools and ministries of education are increasingly allocating more funds for Arabic teachers’ professional development, Arabic resource and instructional materials’ purchasing. Allocation of additional funds towards the enhancement of Arabic language teaching and the development of standards based, student centered Arabic instructional and enrichment materials is of crucial importance and urgency. Without proper funding all the points mentioned above will be impossible to achieve and the status of Arabic language teaching will be rendered stagnant, obsolete and unchallenging. The time is ripe to start founding associations for the teachers of Arabic that can provide them with

some institutional, financial and academic support and that's where the importance of funding comes in. Moreover, having such associations all over the Arab World will be a great opportunity for teachers to meet, share ideas, address issues particular to the teaching of Arabic and find solutions together and start writing national guidelines that could be adopted in all Arab countries since they all teach a common language with shared skills known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Having institutional funding will undoubtedly create a buzz that will make establishing quality teacher training programs possible and would make developing effective curricula, standards and instructional materials needed in the Arabic language classroom a reality.

What is Happening at Home?

There has been a semi-new trend in Arab societies to hire foreign maids, who 'double up' as nannies, baby sitters, foster mothers, companions, cooks and teachers all at the same time. Those maids typically come from extremely impoverished backgrounds with no education and in many instances no language skills at all. They are not trained to raise children and as such it becomes an extremely dangerous and superfluous enterprise socially, linguistically, ethically and educationally to put the task of raising Arabic children in the hands of largely uneducated maids. Children are growing up missing that interpersonal bond between them and their very busy parents and along the way they may lose their mother tongue (Arabic) and not acquire proficiency in any other language. Add to this the cultivation of a dependency streak in children and a feeling of entitlement that does not in the least prepare them to be productive adults once they enter the real world and an argument could be mounted against the practice of employing foreign maids although this subject is outside the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, parents should at least set aside several hours a day (after the children get back home from school) to just interact in Arabic with their children, discuss the events of their day with them, help them with homework, do an activity together and read with them. Not doing this will result in a generation that is estranged as to its national and probably religious language and identity, unfamiliar with basic social etiquette and unversed in the simplest forms of interpersonal communication.

Another issue that has been highlighted in the 2003 Arab Human Development Report targets the styles of child upbringing most dominant in the Arab World. Those styles are mainly authoritative and overprotective both of which, is argued, deny the children the opportunity to develop independent work and thinking skills, self-reliance, creative thinking and decision making skills (UNDP, 2003). Children cannot be expected to blindly obey authority and cultivate a life rich in innovation and creativity with knowledge at the same instance. Could this style of upbringing that is heavy on authoritarian rule and obedience be a true mirror of the many authoritative regimes most families live under and could that all transfer itself to the Arabic language classrooms in which the teachers remain for the most part the sole authority whose job is to teach with the designated textbook? Many studies need to be conducted to observe the effects of child rearing styles in the Arab World on teaching in the classroom. This will definitely help shed better light on the many issues plaguing that profession.

In both issues discussed above: foreign maids and style of upbringing, it is understood that parents are generally looking for what is best for their children and that sometimes the parents do not always do what is best for their children.. Accordingly, academic and government institutions and communities in the Arab World need to get together to start fostering some kind of awareness education to all parents. Classes in best parenting and communication methods including making parents aware of the importance of using the Arabic language at home with their children are key to redirecting the paths of millions of children around the Arab World.

Conclusion

In summary, there are some great initiatives and genuine newly-found interest currently to enhance Arabic language education around the world. The teaching of Arabic in the Arab World, however, still needs to examine some of the issues presented in this paper before ministries of education start spending money on “reform” and other initiatives. These considerations include writing a well articulated set of standards and guidelines, establishing quality teacher training institutes, developing research based instructional materials, allocating proper funds to the Arabic language teaching and educating parents through a national campaign on the best child rearing practices. All of this will be truly possible and attainable if we dedicate the right resources, human and financial, to such a well deserving goal: the preservation and advancement of the Arabic language and identity.

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