Investing in Cutting Edge Arabic Language Education

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Abstract: Investing in Arabic language has to start by investing in cutting edge Arabic language education. Results from international literacy and reading tests such as PIRLS and PISA are showing that students across the Arab world are not being able to read well and are not being taught in ways that would make them competitive at home and abroad. Ministries of education across the Arab world are increasingly realizing the importance of modernizing the teaching of Arabic but lack the needed infrastructure and expertise to make it happen. This paper briefly looks at reasons why Arab countries are falling behind in Arabic language literacy and will argue for research-based solutions that will put Arabic literacy on par with other world languages where learners are thriving, and competing internationally.

Key words: Arabic language – Arabic language education – Standardized Arabic tests – Arabic literacy

Introduction

"A person who won't read has no advantage of a person who can't read." Mark Twain

Student results on Arabic International literacy tests have consistently been below international averages for literacy (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012). Reasons underlying those results are multifold ranging from the kind of preparation and training Arabic language teachers receive, to the lack of a unified, long term vision to Arabic language education reform that is able to choose the right drivers and ensure a well-trained middle management that is capable of implementing the reform initiatives well (Taha, 2017).

This article will analyze the reasons behind the lagging performance of students in Arabic language and will highlight some research-based solutions that can pave the way to a successfully implemented reform of Arabic language education.

Student Performance in Arabic Language

Student learning outcomes are the most important litmus test in the educational process. It is through those learning outcomes that we can know whether the system has succeeded or failed in its mission to educate them and prepare them for college and beyond.

Student results on international Arabic language reading tests have been quite disappointing to many teachers, school systems and ministries of education in the Arab world. Arab countries participating in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study have consistently scored below the international average (Brombacher et al, 2012; Faour, 2012; Taha, 2017; Taha & Sabella, 2015). The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is a world-wide, standardized, literacy achievement test taken by native fourth graders in primary schools all over the world. Each country takes this literacy (reading comprehension) test in its own national language.

The objective of the test is to measure students' ability to read in their native language and comprehend both literary and informational texts using the following processes: (1) ability to access straightforward, direct information that can be found in the text, (2) ability to make explicit inferences, (3) ability to explain ideas in the text, and (4) ability to analyze the meanings, linguistic features presented in the text (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012). The PIRLS test was first administered in 2006 with the participation of 46 different educational systems from around the world.

In 2011, the PIRLS test was administered with the participation of 45 different educational systems including five Arab countries (Morocco, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Oman). Ten reading passages were used in the test, five were informational texts and five were literary texts. The test was designed to have a 20% focus on retrieving explicitly stated information, 30% focus on making direct inferences, 30% focus on interpreting and synthesizing ideas and information, and 20% focus on examining and evaluating content, and linguistic features (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012). The latest PIRLS was administered in 2015 and the results are expected to be announced in December of 2017.

Results from the 2011 PIRLS test had Morocco in the 45th place being dead last, with Oman being 42nd, Saudi Arabia 41st, Qatar 37th, and United Arab Emirates 34th all scoring below the international scale average of 500 (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012; RTI, 2012; Taha, 2017). Those results were not very different from the ones in 2006, which might be a depiction of a problem that we have in the teaching and learning of Arabic language.

Countries that scored well on the PIRLS 2011 test were Hong Kong, Russian Federation, Finland, Singapore, and Northern Ireland (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012). Students from high performing countries are usually able to interpret the texts in the test in addition to being able to integrate, and evaluate reading comprehension skills and strategies (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012). The PIRLS test results include five indicators that could affect students' reading performance. Those are (1) home environment, (2) teacher education, (3) school resources for reading, (4) school climate, and (5) classroom instruction (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012; Taha, 2017).

The PIRLS results alongside the many international reports that point out to the seriousness and gravity of the Arabic language teaching situation in the Arab world should be enough incentive to make some drastic changes in how Arabic is being thought of, taught, learned, designed into textbooks and classroom materials and how it is generally being used (AlAmoush, 2009; Faour, 2012; Taha & Sabella, 2015).

There have been too many calls and attempts in the past decades for large scale reforms in education most of which have randomly focused on numeracy, science, and English language leaving Arabic language lagging behind or giving it some lip service and keeping it in the hands of less capable experts who have become part of the problem than the solution (Toukan, Alnoaimi, & Obaidat, 2006). Most Arabic language reform initiatives revolve around changing the textbooks rather than changing the whole philosophy or approach to teaching and learning Arabic in addition to investing heavily in preparing and training teachers. Moreover, textbook writing and design in Arabic have been a task left to untrained ministry specialists who lack the deep curriculum design and pedagogical knowledge needed for such a daunting task. The results have recurrently been, textbooks that are socially, technologically, pedagogically and developmentally out of touch and lacking alignment with the national vision, priorities and aspiration (Taha-Thomure, 2011; Taha, 2017).

Challenges Facing Arabic language Education

In the "Arab Education Report Card", Faour (2012) highlighted the issue of poor student results in the Arab world. Faour linked those results to deficient teacher education programs in the Arab world that do not equip the graduates with the preparation needed to engage their students in any of the 21st century skills including critical thinking skills, higher order thinking skills, oral presentation skills, and accepting the unlimited possibilities of interpretation when it comes to classroom discussions. Student results in Arabic language and other subjects reflect the many pieces that have gone wrong in the larger educational system puzzle including:

1- Weak and traditional Arabic language teacher preparation colleges that failed in attracting good quality students, good quality faculty and good quality leadership to ensure that the graduates leave the college with the needed 21st century skills (Allen, 2003; Bannayan & Al-Attia, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Ghanimeh, 1996; Taha, 2017).

2- Broken K-12 system that treats Arabic language as purely a language taught irrespective of linking it to thinking, culture, art, science, technology, community, and the modern world in general (AlDannan, 2010; AlMazrouie, 2010). The K-12 educational system has not succeeded in becoming a system, which means that major policies, initiatives and projects get adopted or cancelled depending on the new minister in town. This has handicapped the system from developing the way it should have developed and it has prevented the system from benefitting from what could have been accumulated national experiences (Faour, 2012; Haddad, 1995). There are very few success stories that can be related or even documented in the K-12 educational system.

3- The lack of an international or Arabic language authority on teaching and learning that can be consulted on matters relating to linguistic & pedagogical policies and that can oversee producing quality studies on Arabic language teaching and learning, assessing Arabic language national learning outcomes and drafting

policies, designing Arabic language arts standards, and creating a professional learning community for Arabic language teachers (Taha, 2017).

4- The lack of effective, informed, efficient and mobile middle management cadre in ministries of education that can put the policies into practice in the field and follow up on them. Currently in the Arab world there are some ambitious and worthy government policies and national vision and priorities that could make a difference if implemented. UAE's vision 2021, Saudi Arabia's vision 2030, Bahrain's vision 2030, Egypt's vision 2030 and Morocco's vision 2030 are all examples of new thinking for education. However, the vision needs a capable, well supported and empowered middle management that can translate the vision into tangible tasks to be implemented in the field. This stratum has not been a successful endeavor in the Arab world and Arabic language teaching and learning as well as all other subjects have greatly suffered from the weak implementation of some governments' worthy vision.

5- Failing to choose the right drivers in large scale reform (Fullan, 2007) and preferring to always on quick wins such as introducing technology and smart boards in classrooms rather than investing that money is high-quality teacher preparation and training, leadership training, instructional resources and classroom environment.

6- Impatient ministries of education wanting to see immediate results to policy changes made leading them in most instances to stray away from the set course or approach they have chosen to experiment with. Ministries of education in the Arab world move from one approach to the next, one project to the next, one textbook to another and from one philosophy to another without benefitting from the accumulative nature of change. Change takes time and in the life of schools, reform initiatives need to be given time to test their effectiveness and results.

7- Lack of well trained and well supported educational leaders in schools including principals and Arabic language literacy coaches who ensure that teachers are well trained and supported, students are supported and well cared for and the school environment is conducive to learning and inviting (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Haddad 1996; Taha, 2008).

8- Unprofessionally written and produced Arabic language curricula and scarcity of engaging teaching and learning resources. Most Arabic language curricula tend to be written by ministry employees who lack the training, credentials, expertise and support to design curricula. The result usually is boring, in-house made Arabic textbooks that pale next to all the other textbooks in English, math and science students have. Arabic language textbooks for the most part do not align well with the national Arabic standards or learning outcomes, they do not engage the students in reading widely and deeply and they do not include authentic children's literature that has been deemed essential for developing literacy (Faour, 2012; Hall & Ozerk, 2008, Taha-Thomure 2008). Arabic language textbooks focus usually on the same themes that just spiral up with each grade level. Reading from textbooks in which the same themes repeat for 7 years (even though the texts will differ and will be diversified) will not change teachers nor students' attitudes towards reading which is one of the first issues that need to be addressed in schools nor will it give the students the skills and knowledge needed to tackle the diverse texts and topics students will see in an international test like PIRLS. Having such spiraling, recurring themes through 8 grade levels cannot but put a cap on students' innovative and higher order thinking, make learning essentially boring and mindlessly vertical rather than vertical and horizontal, wide and deep all at once. There is still a less than effective understanding of literacy in Arabic language and the focus on reading remains very thin and lacking in a systematic implementation of reading aloud (done daily by the teacher), guided reading and shared reading (Taha 2008, 2009).

9- Quality control measures are absent and periodical national standardized tests that illicit useful data to help track students' progress and achievement are almost non-existent (AlDannan, 2010; Alrajhi, 2006; Obaid, 2010, Taha, 2017; Taha-Thomure, 2008). Even when tests are available and done on an annual basis, little has been done to benefit from the data provided to inform teaching and improve learning.

Ways to Invest in Arabic Language Teaching & Learning

Innovation cannot blossom nor thrive in the absence of excellence. Excellence in teaching, excellence in school leadership, excellence in the resources available to teach with and excellence

in assessment forms and approaches are all the building blocks of innovation and cutting edge work in Arabic language. Without that, we will be just having another dream that will go unrealized. Key to innovation also is the ability to work with students, teachers and school leaders on 21st century skills including critical thinking, conflict resolution, independent and collaborative thinking, meaningful communication and flexibility. Those skills must form the backbone of the any successful and modern Arabic language curriculum.

Innovation in the teaching and learning of Arabic language needs to start by adopting a model of excellence and measuring its effectiveness over time. Innovation needs disruptions in thought and flare ups of ideas for sure, but it also needs stability of expectations and high standards for it to thrive. For Arabic language teaching and learning this means that there is a need to start looking at international innovative practices and thinking out of the traditional box that has been in place for decades and yielded very little in terms of results. I can foresee innovation and modernization in the teaching and learning of Arabic language revolving around investing in nine basic tents:

1- Restructuring Ministries of Education. Ministries of Education in the Arab world need to shake off their webs of bureaucracy and inefficiency. This is a challenging job that will require taking a deep look at the organizational structure of each ministry and measuring the output of each directorate and unit they have (Haddad, 1995; Hall & Ozerk, 2008). Currently, most ministries have in their structure a Curricula and Textbooks Directorate responsible for setting the general/subject-specific outcomes and in charge of developing Arabic language and Islamic studies textbooks. The employees who develop the textbooks are for the most part inexperienced and untrained, which makes the whole exercise of curricula development an exercise in futility. It will be more practical and eventually financially responsible to downsize curricula directorates and outsource development of textbooks (Taha & Sabella, 2015) to expert entities in each country. In such scenario, the curricula department would assume an advisory role that supports the outsourced textbook development process and liaises with the relevant parties involved. Another directorate in ministries of education is the Testing & Evaluation Directorate. It can be argued that having such a directorate under the ministry of education can pose a conflict of interest since the ministry will be the one overseeing teaching and learning and then at the same time

overseeing the assessment of that. Assessment should be undertaken by an independent entity that can maintain its objectivity and validity.

2- Marketing the Arabic language teaching profession and repackaging it to be what it is supposed to be: a fun profession that is reserved only for the best high school graduates. This means that changes will need to be done at the government legislative and executive levels introducing new teacher and administrator salary scales and new promotions cadre that will make the profession well paid and well respected.

3- Reviewing teacher education programs and ensuring that students accepted into the Arabic language teaching track at teacher colleges are well supported by faculty members who are real practitioners rather than theoreticians. Arabic language teacher trainers need to have had considerable amount of hands on experience in first rate, best practice schools around the world. Teachers' effect on student learning is immense (AlRajhi, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2010, 2012; Guthrie, 2004; 1982; Taha, 2017) and the instructional behaviors they display from teaching to reinforcement to explaining, giving feedback and monitoring student work have been shown to be linked to increased student learning (Guthrie, 1982).

4- Moving the whole system towards a standards-based approach. The benefits of standards-based approach are multifold: 1) Its philosophy is based on the premise that all children can learn and achieve the same learning outcomes, however, they do so at a different pace; 2) Standards allow for the move towards a literature-based approach, an approach, that is highly praised in international literacy circles; 3) Standards ensure that all students will be learning the same skills and strategies regardless of the school, teacher, or textbook they use (Taha, 2011; Taha & Sabella, 2017;).

5- A focus on MSA. The Arabic language is a diglossic language (Aldannan, 2010; AlMoosa, 2007; Ferguson, 1959, 1991; Obeid, 2010; Taha, 2017) which means that it has many regional vernaculars and a higher level written standardized variety. All school textbooks are written in MSA and students in public schools are tested on all content almost in MSA. This means that conducting Arabic language class using local dialects, which can vary from community to another and from one Arab country to another and from one geographical area to other, causes a gap in students' learning and ability to fully comprehend the subject matter they will be assessed on (Arab Thought

Foundation, 2009). The same can be argued for subjects taught using Arabic language which might include mathematics, science, social studies, and extracurricular activities.

6- Well-designed Arabic language curricula. A curriculum typically includes standards, benchmarks, performance indicators, teaching methodology aligned to standards and assessment techniques and instructional resources. The Arabic language curriculum needs to focus on literacy reading and writing rather than focusing on memorizing poetry and grammatical and spelling rules. Research has solidly documented in the past four decades that the amount of time spent in silent reading in class is significantly correlated with achievement (AlMazrouie, 2010; AlRajhi, 2006; Guthrie, 1982, 2004; Obeid, 2010). Ministries of Education strategic plans, 10-year policies and budgets need be fundamentally reconfigured to spend less money on technology, for example, that has not yet been proven to enhance learning in Arabic language classrooms, spend less funds on outdated textbooks and ineffective consulting companies, and spend more on buying beautiful, leveled and engaging children's literature, on designing little reading nooks in every classroom and on training the teachers on how to teach using authentic Arabic literature. This will ensure that children will learn about science, technology, mathematics, humanities, social studies and citizenship by reading great and interesting books on those topics.

7- Choosing the right drivers in large scale education reform that best serve the needs of our children, our future and our countries is key here (Fullan, 2007; Toukan et al, 2006). Budgets, time and energy are finite entities and when one has to make hard choices in large scale reforms, looking at what research say can be helpful and can save us a lot of money and failed attempts. Research has clearly documented the correlation between reading and achievement, so given that, won't it be more effective to plan reform initiatives for Arabic language teaching and learning around international best practices, research evidence and data from the field?

8- Acknowledge the close relationship between literacy and science and start looking at the two disciplines as inseparably complimentary (Guthrie, 2004). The world today is abuzz with STEAM (Science, technology, Engineering, Arts and math). We need to add an R for Reading to that acronym making it STREAM and we need Arabic language literacy and sciences experts work together to come up with engaging ideas,

concepts, projects and possibly products that can modernize the Arabic language and bring it to the 21st century in schools and universities. We need to see in the Arabic language classroom texts about the "Life cycle of a frog", or a butterfly, or texts answering questions like: "Can we hear a scream in space"? "Can snakes move backwards?" being discussed in the Arabic language classroom.

9- Investing in training and deploying Arabic literacy coaches to all schools. The international literature is brimming with success stories from schools that have implemented this move. The coach gives feedback on their implementation of a newly learned teaching skill. Research has shown coaching to be quite effective in changing teachers' practices and in improving student learning outcomes (Darling Hammond, 2005, 2006; Slinger, 2004; Showers, 1984; Taha & Sabella, 2015).

A Case in Point for Investing in Arabic Language

A case in point here about investment into the Arabic language the initiative known as The Reading Challenge brought forth by H.H. Sh. Mohammad Bin Rashed AlMaktoum, ruler of Dubai, launched in 2015. The initiative has had a great effect on energizing the act of reading in the Arab world. No Arabic literacy related initiative has been as ambitious or as successful before.

Having initially set its eye on having a million Arab children read 50 books each a year, the Reading Challenge was something that went beyond imagination for several reasons including: 1) Millions of children around the Arab world do not have access to books and they do they are not good quality books; 2) Public schools in the Arab world do not engage students in authentic children's literature reading and thus, many students have not reached a level of reading fluency that would enable them to read well and comprehend what they are reading; 3) Reading for fun and as an indirect medium to acquire knowledge has not been a staple in the Arabic language literacy arena.

However, despite the challenges above and the difficulties, the Reading Challenge was a smashing success with 3.5 million students from 21 countries taking part in it, reading 150 million books. This unprecedented phenomenon should be closely studied by literacy researchers. In

addition, ministries of education and schools all over the Arab world should pay attention to how this one initiative could engage and move a whole generation into reading.

The Reading Challenge initiative as wonderful, generous, breathtakingly fresh and smart has been, will not be enough to awaken all the dinosauric ministries around the Arab world that have mostly been neglecting the importance of reading. Even when ministries acknowledge the importance of reading, they have not been successful in making it the focal point of all learning in public schools.   Unless ministries of education make reading in all of its forms (reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading and independent reading) a significant part of the daily school routine, we will continue to produce generations of non-readers and non-achievers.   All it takes to resolve many of the literacy issues in Arabic language is to make reading part of the curriculum and an essential part of the daily school routines. Reading leveled, fun and authentic Arabic books instead of stale and contrived snippety texts in current textbooks is what is needed and is the international best practice that thousands of studies have shown the effectiveness of.

The unprecedented success of the Reading Challenge should have immense washback effect on schools and on the ways Arabic language is being taught. Its success should be enough proof and evidence to bring forth a revolution in how we teach Arabic in schools. The message from the Reading Challenge Award is very clear and that is we need to teach reading by engaging kids in at least one and a half hours of reading (Guthrie, 2004) and by ensuring that the budget goes to equipping the classrooms with many wonderful children's literature titles.

Conclusion

Investing in Arabic language today is an urgent matter that needs the full attention and support of governments and communities. We have seen in recent years unprecedented governmental and national awareness about the importance of modernizing the teaching and learning of Arabic. This has led to many initiatives aimed at tackling that challenge. However, despite a few great high level laws and resolutions passed at the governmental executive branch, the actual implementation of those laws and directives has been less than desirable. The lack of a middle management that is capable, well trained, empowered and supported in most ministries of education around the Arab world is a key issue that still needs to be resolved. One way around this issue is utilizing the higher education sector and mobilizing the better faculty members found

there to take part in designing the content of Arabic language curricula and designing programs to train Arabic language teachers.   Outsourcing the writing of curriculum content and teacher and leadership training is a must if we are to save time and money and create communities that extend beyond the narrow hallways of ministries. Ministries will need to be restructured and reform initiatives reconfigured to focus on efficiency, effectiveness and results measured over time. Collaborations between ministries of education and teachers' colleges are key to ensuring that Arabic language teachers are getting the preparation needed to survive and thrive in the 21st century.

Investment in modernizing the teaching and learning Arabic language is a national and global security matter that needs the attention of the highest levels of government and the right and capable teams to make it happen.

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