

**Lessons learned from Qatar Foundation International's Arabic Language and Culture
Programme in British Schools
Presentation to the BATA conference June 2021**

The QFI Arabic language and culture programme, which supports the teaching and learning of Arabic in British schools, is now in its eighth year. Working in collaboration with the British Council in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and with Scotland's National Centre for Languages (SCILT) in Scotland, the programme supports 41 Schools across UK: (England 18, NI 6, Wales 3, Scotland 14) 29 secondary schools and 12 primary. Over 3600 pupils are learning Arabic as a result.

Since the programme began much has been learned about Arabic education in British schools: who is learning it and why; who is teaching it and how; what materials and resources exist; and what training and professional development opportunities are available for Arabic teachers.

Who is learning Arabic?

There is a wide range of student diversity in the Arabic classrooms that QFI supports. A primary school Arabic class in Derry where almost every pupil is Roman Catholic Irish is very different from a class in Bradford where 80% of the pupils speak English as a second language and more than 30 different languages are spoken among the school's population.

Pupils with no prior knowledge or link to Arabic are learning the language as they might learn French, Spanish, or Mandarin. In the Arabic programme QFI supports in Scotland, 47 out of 50 secondary pupils who studied the language in 6 schools in the 20/21 school year had no prior knowledge of Arabic at all.

A significant proportion of Arabic learners in the UK are pupils of Muslim heritage who may have learned to read the Quran. They may have a knowledge of the script, and some can recite beautifully, but their understanding of Arabic may be limited, and their ability to communicate in the language may be non-existent.

Pupils born in UK to Arabic-speaking parents may speak a dialect of Arabic at home, or if they don't speak it regularly, at least understand it. However, they may have little knowledge of *fusha**, and cannot read and write. Many attend Arabic supplementary schools where they learn *fusha* and often go on to sit the Arabic GCSE.

There are pupils who have recently arrived in UK from Arabic-speaking countries who speak the language fluently and have been educated in it. They too are entered for the Arabic GCSE and A Level and typically score high grades. Some are refugees and arrive in UK fleeing conflict.

This diversity of learners and the wide range of needs, attitudes, and motivations it entails, creates numerous challenges for teachers. Where once we might have thought of language learners as native or non-native speakers and tweaked approaches accordingly, the contemporary demography of Arabic learners in UK is significantly more complex than that.

Who is teaching Arabic?

There is also wide variety among those who teach Arabic. Some Arabic teachers are trained formally in the UK to teach Arabic in British schools, have completed a PGCE, often with another MFL, and they have Qualified Teacher Status. Others have gained teaching qualifications or degrees in education in their own countries prior to coming to UK.

Some teachers of Arabic have no formal teaching qualification but may have attended the training programmes and CPD opportunities currently available either face to face or more recently online through different institutions or Arabic teacher associations. It is also important to remember that many Arabic teachers work alone on a freelance or hourly paid basis. A significant number are volunteers, particularly in the supplementary sector. Very few Arabic teachers working in UK today are full-time members of staff at a state school where they teach.

How is Arabic being taught?

The various backgrounds and career paths of Arabic teachers are reflected in the wide range of teaching approaches they employ: some teach Arabic like any other MFL, using communicative activities and often embracing the use of dialect alongside *fusha*. Some take a more grammatically focused approach and teach *fusha* exclusively. They consider correctness of form a priority over fluency and reject any role for the dialect.

Some teachers approach Arabic as a sacred language; they look at the language from a spiritual, theological perspective rather than a secular linguistic one. As a result, their teaching of the language focuses on replicating an accepted version of excellence rather than communicating meaningfully in a real-world context. The recent report from the UAE Ministry of Youth and Culture published in 2020, *تقرير حالة اللغة العربية ومستقبلها*, explains:

“the view that Arabic is a sacred language ties it to the past and limits it to fixed frameworks and forms beyond the laws of change and development that govern living languages. This sanctification of Arabic poses real problems for speakers of the language particularly their feelings about the extent to which they are able to master it, for how can a person who believes in the sanctity of the language use it and engage with it as a means of everyday communication.” (p432)

QFI's research and experience suggest that while some learners are enjoying their Arabic lessons, and the activities are relevant to their lives and aspirations whether they are learning the language for the first time, or they have links to it through religion or family, this is not the case for all learners, and many are frustrated and disappointed with the Arabic learning experience. Anna-Maria Ramezanzadeh, in a 2016 report in which she conducted interviews with learners of Arabic, states:

“These positive attitudes were dwarfed, however, by the tide of comments concerning students' frustrations, boredom and overall demotivation towards learning the language which emerged during the interviews. (p24)

Perhaps most important of all, the vast majority of pupils studying Arabic in British schools, state and supplementary, are learning to speak *fusha*, and even where their lessons encourage communication and interaction, the variety of Arabic they are using is *fusha*. Consequently, they are being taught to speak Arabic in a way that no one in the Arab world actually speaks it. Are teachers teaching to the test and ignoring the reality of the linguistic situation in the Arabic speaking community?

How do the examinations affect the teaching of Arabic?

One possible reason for this neglect of the spoken form is the examinations that Arabic learners sit: the GCSE and A Level. The GCSE focuses entirely on *fusha* even in the speaking and listening questions, while the A level, which involves a full-length feature film in an Arabic dialect, does not include any speaking at all.

There is no clear data about the pupils who take the exam, although many are heritage and native speakers. We know of very few non-heritage non-Muslim students taking either the GCSE or the A Level. Many teachers believe that the exams are too difficult for pupils with no prior knowledge of Arabic. It seems that the GCSE has been developed to the same specifications as the French or Spanish exam even though Arabic takes longer to learn. A framework guideline compiled in 2018 by members of UK university language departments indicates that to reach A2-B1 on the CEFR in a Romance language takes 200 hours of study, while to reach the same level in Arabic requires 360 hours.

Others have commented on the relevance and content of the GCSE. The vocabulary list in the specifications includes words such as *trout* (سمك السلمون المرقط) or *cardigan* (سترة من صوف) (محبوك) but not *hummus* or *falafel* or *kufiyya*, words used daily in the Arab world. It is as if the starting point was the English word list which was then translated into Arabic, rather than a word list rooted in Arab culture and daily life.

The GCSE requires students to use *fusha*, even for everyday conversations. There is anecdotal evidence of students being marked down for using dialect words and phrases in the oral exam, even when the point they are making is clear. There is concern among many that the exam is not authentic in that it requires learners to use Arabic in a way native speakers in the Arab world do not.

There is an obvious danger here in that failure to value a student's dialect, and an insistence on teaching and learning *fusha exclusively* can leave those learners who speak a dialect of Arabic with the impression their skills in the language are inferior, and less important than the variety being taught in the classroom.

Pupils familiar with Arabic are aware that the language they are learning in the classroom does not cater to their goals of everyday communication; they know that in actuality this takes place in dialect. One pupil Ramezanzade interviewed commented:

"I think in the GCSE Arabic they don't teach you how to speak outside the school or anything. It's all based in the classroom so the Arabic they use is fusha, which is the traditional Arabic, but they don't teach you the dialect which you need... to actually carry out a conversation."
(p18)

What is QFI doing to address these challenges?

As the QFI Arabic language and culture programme has grown we have developed several initiatives to respond to these challenges:

Training

In order to support Arabic teachers with professional development opportunities QFI funded the [Arabic Certificate Course at Goldsmiths University](#), and offers grants to individual teachers who wish to attend Arabic teacher training courses through our [Maharaat programme](#). This means those colleagues who have had limited opportunities to train as Arabic teachers are able to access up-to-date programmes that feature a range of pedagogic approaches and techniques, and to become familiar with latest developments in the field.

Resources

QFI has developed a [resource portal](#) for teachers of Arabic linked to the QFI website which contains a wide range of vetted tools and materials as well as videos of best practices in the Arabic classroom. In comparison with other widely taught foreign languages such as French and Spanish, there is a relative paucity of high-quality teaching resources available for the Arabic practitioner to exploit, and QFI sees the availability of such resources as a key pillar to establishing Arabic as a fully-fledged modern language in a school's languages department.

Teacher Councils

QFI offers funding to establish regional [Arabic Teacher Councils](#) (ATCs) to serve as hubs for teachers in particular areas and support the provision of training sessions and workshops; promote Arabic language and culture in the local community; and allow for networking opportunities. There are now three ATCs in UK based in Leeds, Bolton, and London. ATCs offer teachers an opportunity to participate in a community of practice and to share thoughts, ideas, and challenges with other educators. They are teacher-driven, set their own agenda, and address the priorities of their members.

Arabic Speaking Competition

In collaboration with the British Council, we held the first Arabic Speaking Competition this year. Speaking any language is a wonderful way to show what you have been learning, and we encourage even complete beginners to take part and share the Arabic they know. Given its success and how many students participated (55), even though it was held virtually, QFI hopes to expand the numbers involved in the future and to make the competition more accessible to learners with no prior knowledge of the language. In the feedback received, participants indicated they enjoyed the opportunity to showcase their speaking skills and appreciated the challenge of competing with other learners.

Outreach Grants

QFI offers [funding to organizations](#) who want to hold events and activities promoting Arabic language and Arab culture to new audiences to increase interest in and awareness of the Arabic language. Additionally, because understanding the culture is an integral part of

language learning, QFI also supports many initiatives that foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of Arab culture. In recent years QFI has worked with the Shubbak Arab Culture Festival and Liverpool Arab Arts Festival to curate activities for schools to introduce students to the cultures of the Arab world. Culture brings language alive: music and dance, cuisine, and art, fill words with vibrant meaning and colorful tangibility and enrich the learning experience.

Conclusion

Arabic is a global language. We can use phrases such as “community language,” “heritage language,” and “home language” to describe the contexts in which it is spoken in UK, but Arabic is also the fifth most spoken language in the world. In its spoken form it includes many dialects and regional variations: in its classical form it is the vehicle of a rich and powerful heritage of literature, history, philosophy, and science, as well as the language of Islamic scripture. Modern Standard Arabic is used across the Arab world in media and communications, politics, and the arts, and continues to provide a sense of unity to the many nationalities who speak Arabic as their mother tongue.

QFI believes that the Arabic classroom should reflect this depth and diversity. If the ultimate goal in learning a language is to be able to communicate in it, then just as educated native speakers of Arabic flow naturally between spoken dialect and *fusha*, the goal for those learning Arabic should be to do the same. QFI supports the inclusion and teaching of Arabic’s various dialects, along with learning about the cultures, histories, and peoples of the Arabic speaking world, to ensure a holistic and meaningful understanding. Language cannot be taught in isolation from the history and cultures of the societies in which it is used.

**fusha* (pronounced fus-ha), also known as Modern Standard Arabic, is the written form of Arabic used across the Arab World

Ramezanzadeh, Anna-Maria, *One Size Fits All? An Analysis of Heritage and Non-heritage Learner Performance in GCSE Arabic: Report Commissioned by British Council*, 2016 (unpublished report)

UAE Ministry of Youth and Culture 2020, The Status and Future of the Arabic Language [تقرير حالة اللغة العربية ومستقبلها - وزارة الثقافة والشباب \(mckd.gov.ae\)](https://mckd.gov.ae)