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Insights Into Engagements Of Host And Migrant Stakeholders In Education With The Positioning Of Arabic In Dubai

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Abstract

I would like to thank Mrs Ghadeer Abu Shamat, CEO and Superintendentof GEMsAl Khaleej InternationalSchool (gemsakns.com), for welcoming me to her school and professional community. As a part of our partnership I have become a governor on the school's board and we are developing a strategy to enhance English-Arabic biliteracy. Mrs Ghadeer Abu Shamat has provided me with opportunities to consult different stakeholders in order to inform our joint work. I have been especially inspired by the young learners in her school, who have addressed with an impressive level of maturity most profound issues to do with language positioning and language inequalities.

Introduction

This report is based on the insights gained through consultations with school leaders, inspectors, teachers, parents and children in Dubai. This consultation had been carried in the period January – May 2021. This process has identified that there are serious concerns about the provision, positioning and future of Arabic in education and everyday life in the UAE. Although not unique, this is a very unusual situation since Arabic is the official and mother tongue/home language of the UAE. There are other Arabic speaking countries also battling marginalisation of Arabic and therefore this is an issue of wider importance in the Gulf region and other world regions, where Arabic is the mother tongue/home language. According to a number of research reports: "Arabic tends to be seen as the least liked subject for students in schools, and speaking, reading, and writing in MSA (Modern Standard Arabic) are the last things they want to do, and actually are able to do(AlZeny, 2016; Arabic for Life, 2014, Taha, 2019)." All the educators who have been consulted are very anxious about the future of Arabic in public and private spheres. In their own families they observe their relatives, now young parents, using English in their private time. Emirati children, consulted for this report, as young as 8 years old worry about language loss and language inequality.

This report focuses on the questions: Why is this happening to a language which is considered a world language, ranked 5th in the world with over 313 million of speakers globally? What can be done to prevent Arabic language loss in the host community? What can be done to increase engagement of migrants with the acquisition of Arabic?

Participants

For this report three international schools in Dubai were visited and the following stakeholders were consulted in these schools:

Three headteachers, two teachers of Arabic, one teacher of English and students from Grade 4 to Grade 9.

Outside of schools one inspector and two CEOs of agencies with the education brief were consulted too.

In terms of their ethnic backgrounds the professionals came from the following backgrounds: Emirati, Jordanian, Lebanese, Syrian, Moroccan, Dutch and British, while the students were of Emirati, Egyptian, Syrian and Chinese background.

All the consulted professionals talked also about their experiences as parents or family members in the UAE.

Key issues

Arabic in school and family time

The three headteachers leading international schools talked about their efforts to secure provision of English which needed to satisfy high demands of the curriculum taught in English and at the same time ensure that their students were developing age appropriate skills in Arabic. In all three schools it was acknowledged that four hours a week of Arabic was not sufficient to achieve desired proficiency and that parents from Arabic speaking backgrounds were expecting more input in Arabic. One of the Arabic teachers reported that she took

her children from an international school into an UAE government school, because she was worried that her children were not using Arabic enough while they were attending the international school.
Another Arabic teacher provided insights into observing Emirati parents using English with their children while enjoying family time. This teacher has been using his own initiative to approach parents in such situations and advise them about the importance of using Arabic when interacting with their children. He has also been raising awareness amongst students in his school and making the point of stopping students who use English during break times, in order to have a conversation with these students and raise their awareness regarding language choices and language use. These examples show – that the struggle is real for every instance of using Arabic in school corridors, during meal times, while on a family outing and during many every day activities, where English has silently become the language of choice.
This same Arabic teacher also talked about challenges in his own family with his child who after starting early years provision in English started using English only in the home environment. He dealt with it by introducing a firm 'home policy and practice' where the child had to ask or repeat in Arabic in order to get what he wanted. He described this type of 'language discipline' at home as painful for a few months, but achieving the desired results. This example shows that it takes knowledge, skills, a high level of awareness and a great deal of discipline to secure use of home language during family time. This kind of 'policy and practice' in the home environment is essential in order to address the imbalance of language exposure in education. Parents who are often rushing to prepare children for school, having to focus on completing a task or organising essential activities can easily abandon the hard way described above as 'painful at times' and just use English, because it will be easier and quicker. Other consulted professional/ parents talked of having nannies and other domestic help who do not use Arabic. They have little choice but to use English at home and their children will be using English most of the time in their absence.
A consultation held with a school inspector and an Emirati national revealed thatprofessionals in education fear for the future of Arabic in the UAE. When asked how she perceived the future of Arabic in 20-30 years herreply was: '*Don't make me cry.'* The anxiety about the near future was based on the professional and private insights. In most schools there are four hours of Arabic per week, which has been judged as insufficient by all the consulted stakeholders. Inspectors are aware that only one school in Dubai has been able to achieve 'outstanding' delivery and this demonstrates that excellence in Arabiccannot be achieved in the current system by an overwhelming majority of schools and students.
All the educators who have been consulted are very anxious about the future of Arabic in public and private spheres. In their own families they observe their relatives, now young parents, using English in their family time. Emirati children as young as 5 fear going to school, because they are aware they cannot function in Arabic, only to find out, to their big relief, that in school everybody speaks English too, most of the time.

Focus on children:

'Arabic is my mother tongue - I need to know Arabic well. English and Arabicshould be equal.'
(8 -year-old student)

The children who participated in the consultation session were asked very open exploratory questions:
'I'm interested in different languages you use and learn at home and in school.Talk me through your day.'

These are the main themes of our discussions:

1. Number of lessons: Perceptions of inequality

The interesting commonality between discussing language provision with professionals in education and children is that both adults and youngsters talked first of all about the number of Arabic lessons on their timetable. Both groups agree that four lessons a week is not sufficient. Children as young as 8 demonstrated being aware how important the number of lessons is and the implications of their timetable on the perceptions of how languages are positioned in terms of their importance and status. They were very quick to compare the number of lessons they had of English and number of lessons they had of Arabic. The fact that it was not an equal number of lessons led the discussion towards discussing inequalities between English and Arabic. A very confident 8- year-old pupil stated with an impressive level of clarity:
'Arabic is my mother tongue - I need to know Arabic well. English and Arabic should be equal.'

This statement implies several key points: we should know well, even best, the language of our origin, our mother tongue. English is important, but it should not be more important than Arabic. Education provision should secure equality amongst languages used in the system. The most obvious markers of the current inequality between languages is the number of allocated lessons. Children noted that they have double lessons in English, but not in Arabic. In particular they felt concerned that on Tuesdays they had no Arabic. Consulted children felt very strongly that they should have Arabic every day and that their advisory sessions, which are of pastoral character should be conducted in Arabic.

2. Use of Arabic in other subject areas

The children demonstrated being aware of the language skills teachers had across the curriculum and their willingness to integrate Arabic into teaching their subjects:

'***Sometimes in Science the teacher explains, gives an example in Arabic.That helps. The Maths teacher does not speak Arabic.*'**

In order to explore use of Arabic across the curriculum I asked additional questions:
'Are you ever given key words in Arabic? Do you ever do a brainstorm in Arabic?'
All children responded that they had no experience of that.

Some learners addressed the issues of knowledge transfer. This student reflected on the fact that he could not do Maths in Arabic:

'When I go back to Egypt my little brother asks me to help him in Maths. I cannot do that - I don't know Maths in Arabic.'

He was keen to find a solution for this issue and he suggested:

'I would like once a week some Maths in Arabic. But not too much. I don't want to be confused.'

It needs to be noticed here that this learner is worried about being 'confused', if he is taught Maths in Arabic too often. It would be interesting to explore in future consultations how this misconception of confusion caused by bilingual methods was formed. Was it through messages this child received at home? Or in school? This misconception is labelled in literature as one of 'the outdated false myths about bilingualism'. Use of two languages in any subject area supports children and adults in knowledge transfer between languages and contributes to their better understanding of key concepts and processes. It is considered good practice for teachers to support and encourage children to do to homework and have discussions about what they are learning in all languages they use. The fact that this child observes that he cannot do Maths in Arabic is a testimony of what happens to learners in contexts where they are not given opportunities to embed they knowledge in both languages, to learn key concepts and processes in their mother tongue as well as in the language of instruction. Education practices in leading bilingual schools, such asEcolint | International School of Geneva | Switzerland,have developed models of teaching with active use of two languages across the curriculum, which enable children to be able to discuss any subject area in English and French.

Some learners talked about feeling more creative in Arabic, but not being able to utilise it:

'I often have lots of creative ideas in Arabic, but not in English. This is because everything outside of school happens in Arabic. And we spend more time away from school. But I never write them down in Arabic.'

This child is expressing that his taught processes in Arabic do not have a natural outlet. Future consultation should be looking to explore if he may also be experiencing his thinking in Arabic as of lesser importance. Or he may not see that anybody is interested in them, because they are not in English.

3. Fun activities in Arabic

Students also talked about the lack of fun activities in Arabic. They mentioned not having word games, creative writing clubs or reading clubs in Arabic. They said they would like to read traditional stories, poetry and humour in Arabic. Also they suggested having a photo club in Arabic. It was mentioned that there are no action movies in Arabic. Children were united in stating very clearly:

'We need more fun activities in Arabic!'

This request confirms findings of Taha (2019) report as discussed in the following section.

Children also expressed enthusiasm for having access to bilingual texts:

'I like reading in English and Arabic. If there is a story written in both languages, I will read both.'

Biliterate texts are considered the best way to encourage children to compare and contrast languages which supports development of their metalinguistic skills and building bridges between languages they use for knowledge transfer.

4. Language loss

Children also spoke about compering themselves to other Arabic speakers in their home countries:

'When I go to Egypt I feel I am losing my language. Children there speak more Arabic than me.'

This is a chilling reflection of an 8- year-oldgirl, already worrying about her own language loss.Language loss was also addressed by a professional in our discussions, who reflected on the fact that it was noticeable in their environment that children and adults were making English the language of their choice at times when Arabic could and should be used, for example during school play time or in an office where everybody is from an Arabic speaking background. One of the reasons is that using English is increasingly seen as more prestigious, but very strong concerns in our discussions were also about issues with Arabic literacy amongst adult employees in education and correspondence in Arabic often being full of errors, hence English was also becoming a safer choice in terms of everybody being more confident to write in English. This demonstrates that the insufficient provision in Arabic thus far is clearly showing its impact on Arabic literacy skills of the current generations of professionals. Lack of confidence to use written Arabic was predicted to get worse in our discussions.

5. Online learning

Year 9 students focused on the impact of online learning, without being prompted:

'I used to be very confident in speaking, but not anymore. My confidence has gone down.'

'Online teaching is bad, boring, I cannot focus, I cannot communicate with my friends, I just look at the screen.'

Year 9 learners had very strong feelings about the negative impact of online learning and these comments are not just about the provision of Arabic, but all subject areas.

There was also a sharp contrast between younger learners and year 9 learners in terms of perceiving the importance and value of Arabic. While young learners were arguing for equality of English and Arabic, Year 9 students were suggesting that Arabic should be 'dropped' in favour of another language:

'From year 10 drop Arabic and offer another language. We learn Arabic from when we are born. We know Arabic. In Year 10 we should learn another language.'

These contrasting attitudes towards Arabic in the same school community between different generations of learners need further explorations. Educators need to seek insights into what factors might be influencing such stark differences in valuing their mother tongue/home language.What leads to this shift in values; from arguing for equality of their mother tongue and having more input to arguing that five years later their mother tongue has become redundant in their school day?

6. Users of other languages

The consultation group included only one user of another language, a Chinese Mandarin speaking student. This student said that she was not aware that she could take an exam in Mandarin, but felt that this would be good.

Encouraging and supporting students to prepare and take exams in their first languages is beneficial in multiple ways for students and schools; it will support language maintenance efforts in immigrant communities, it will enable students to gain another good grade and perhaps see their language skills as an important aspect for their employability in the future and it will hopefully add to the overall schools' achievements.

Here presented views and experiences are of randomly selected students for a pilot consultation session. Key issues raised by these learners should be used to develop a more in-depth consultation process in order to give

more learners an opportunity for their voice to be heard and to inform policy and practice development at school's and regional levels.

Previous research: Main challenges

A search for previous relevant research has identified a recent report which outlines the complexities to do with diglossia and teaching Arabic in schools. The quote from Taha report (2019) identifies very clearly that the teaching of Arabic needs to be modernised and widened, which cannot be achieved without investing in initial teacher training and professional development for Arabic teachers:

According to a recent report Taha (2019): "Most children come to school having acquired one variety or a 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 (Modern Standard Arabic), which is the standardised variety of Arabic used in media, literature, and all formal and written communication. 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. The main issues which need addressing are: modernising teaching and learning of Arabic, initial teacher training and professional development for teachers of Arabic; very few private schools, for example, encourage learning Arabic music, or the use of Arabic in newsletters, talent shows, theatre, announcements, or artwork displayed. This limits the presence of Arabic language to the classroom only and often sends the message to teachers, parents, and students that Arabic is not an important and fun language."

One issue regardingthe initial teacher training not mentioned in this report, but highlighted by an Arabic teacher I consulted, is the fact that the only course for Arabic teachers in Dubai is offered by Birmingham University and can be only done in English. Arabic teachers in Dubai schools come from a variety of countries: Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt – are the backgrounds I have encountered, but not a single Emirati Arabic teacher. There is a probable link between the absence of opportunities to gain qualification as an Arabic teacher in UAE and absence of Arabic teachers from the host nation.

Successful previous initiatives

The leadership of the country, especially Sheik Mohammad Bin Rasheed, the vice president of the UAE and ruler of Dubai, has put a lot of effort and resources into developing policy and initiatives and supporting Ministry of Education in the UAE to improve positioning and provision of Arabic in the education system. The results of these initiatives have been welcomed by the schools and educators. In my consultations with educators of different profiles it has been acknowledged that there are visible improvements in terms of numbers of hours for the provision of Arabic, which is currently four lessons a week in international schools and required standards of Arabic provision: for a school that aims to have overall outstanding status, Arabic provision has to be at least evaluated as good. Currently only one school in Dubai has their provision of Arabic judged by the inspectors as outstanding.

Recommendations based on the conducted consultations

Following are the set of recommendations at classroom, school and national level. They are divided into two categories. Category one is based on a question: what can every teacher and school leader do quickly and efficiently to address some of the key issues raised? Category two is about: what can be done to address these issues strategically which would result in a significantly better positioning of Arabic in schools and education system?

1. Classroom level

Every teacher could introduce small bilingual aspects into their classroom routine which would support knowledge and skill transfer between English and Arabic. For example:

1. Having a bank of key words in both languages and displaying relevant bilingual terms for each unit/topic;
2. Having bilingual reference books available in the classroom and including their use in classroom activities: bilingual/multilingual picture dictionaries for the appropriate level;
3. Having bilingual displays;
4. Encouraging children to do their homework bilingually; organising bilingual homework clubs where older students help younger students.

Strategic approach:

A working group: ***Biliteracy across the curriculum*** should be formed with a representative from each department. This group should look to: share existing good practice in the school; support teachers who have not been using bilingual methods; develop and test new initiatives, organise relevant professional

development; work closely with learners in order to be aware of their views and experiences and to develop learners led extra-curricular initiatives.

NB: This model is based on the strategies used during the National Literacy Strategy roll out in England (2000-2002). The author of this report was involved in the implementation of this strategy at the regional, school and classroom level in London.

School level

Addressing a key issue quickly and efficiently:

1. Looking to close the gap on the day when there is no Arabic lesson by:

organising an extracurricular activity, for example: anArabic reading club. All members of the school community – children, teachers, head teachers, classroom assistants, caretakers – select and read a text of their choice. Parents can take part in this too.

2. Compensating for an unequal number of English-Arabic lessons by organising extracurricular activities in Arabic; creative writing club(this could be bilingual in Arabic and English too); drama club, poetry and traditional stories club. (NB: All the suggestions here are based on what the consulted students expressed their interests in.)

3. Schools keen to support biliteracy development of their students and staff should look to ensure their libraries and classrooms have bilingual: reference books, dictionaries and texts for children to engage with and teachers to use for classroom activities.

Strategic approach

In order to address key issues raised in the consultations with the aim to significantly improve school practice and experience of bilingual learners, schools should plan to invest time and effort into developing bilingual policies with the involvement of all stakeholders: learners, parents, teacher, middle and senior leaders in developing school's bilingual policy which would address: teaching and learning; literacy landscape of the school; professional development of teachers and leaders; parental involvement; library stock and activities; partnerships with other schools and institutions. Working on a school policy in this way will produce a template for the development of school ethos and policy in which stakeholders experience the ownership of and commitment to agreed initiatives.

NB: A model of working with a London school in this way can be provided by the author of this report.

National level

Throughout the consultation process with professionals and children what resonated the most clearly is that implementing the following two requirements has made the most visible positive impact on school practice:

1. every school has the obligation to offer four lessons a week of Arabic;
2. every school aiming to be outstanding has to achieve a certain standard in Arabic provision, recognised as good.

However, the children involved in the consultation have also clearly identified that this policy falls short of having an Arabic lesson every day. Having Arabic on the timetable every day seems of key importance to children, although it would still not mean having the same number of lessons as English. Never the less having Arabic everyday would certainly mean a lot to learners in terms of input, but also improved sense of equality between the two languages. **Would it be possible that the Ministry of Education considers raising the compulsory number of Arabic lessons to five – one a day each day of the school week?**

Strategic approach

Efforts should be made to create a **Centre of excellence for Arabic in the UAE**, which would have a team of relevant: researchers, school improvement partners and professional development specialists. This Centre should be working closely with the Ministry of Education and a key Dubai university in order to lead on the development of a**National Excellence in Arabic strategy** which would include: initial teacher training, early and continues professional development, biliteracy across the curriculum and active involvement of all stakeholders with the aim to improve the positioning of Arabic in the education system.

NB: This suggestion is based on the insights and experience of the author of this report in developing the National EAL (English as an Additional Language) Strategy in England (2007-2010).

Conclusion

Having schools, universities and public services in one's mother tongue/home language is taken for granted in most contexts by the most of the world populations. Gaining insight into more recently formed nation states, such as the UAE which was created only 50 years ago, is an important reminder that every nation has a history of developing their languages and rights to use their languages, and that some communities, even those whose mother tongue is classed as a world language, are still engaged into battles against many overt and covert

factors which may lead to language loss at the individual level and language death at the regional/global level, in less or more distant future.

Strategic efforts led and monitored by the government, investment of resources and relevant specialists are essential in order to secure a more optimistic future for Arabic in the UAE.

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