



One Size Fits All? An analysis of heritage and non-heritage language learner performance in GCSE Arabic.

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Research conducted at: Department of Education, University of Oxford

Report commissioned by: British Council (2016)

INTRODUCTION

As the first language of an estimated 300 million people across 23 countries, stretching from Morocco to the borders of Iran, Arabic is the fifth most widely spoken language worldwide and one of the six official languages of the UN. Arabic also plays an important role in the Islamic faith and is utilised by over a billion Muslims for liturgical purposes. In the UK, it is the fifth most widely used community language, with Arabs constituting 4% of the British population (Bernasek & Canning, 2009).

Both the demand and opportunities for learning the language have grown rapidly worldwide over the past decades (Al-Batal & Belnap, 2006). The Arabic GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) is one of the main avenues via which the learning of this language is pursued in the UK educational context. As yet, however, the nature and suitability of this GCSE has yet to be examined, particularly within the context of the diverse population of pupils studying the language, including many who fall into the category of heritage language learners (HLLs). This report presents the details of a two-phase study exploring the learning and teaching experiences of students and teachers of the GCSE and the performance of heritage and non-heritage language learners (NHLLs) on exam tasks. The findings of this study are presented, and the implications and recommendations for research, practice and policy are discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

Arabic belongs to the Semitic branch of languages. Its alphabet contains 28 letters, all of which function primarily as consonants; vowels are added as diacritical marks (Figure 1). The script is cursive, written from right to left, with the shape of each letter modified depending on its position in the word. Arabic morphology is rich both inflectionally and derivationally; the language follows a root and pattern system in which three-letter roots are adapted to different verbal or noun forms. The language boasts an extensive vocabulary, with a large number of synonyms, and involves a range of complex agreement patterns.

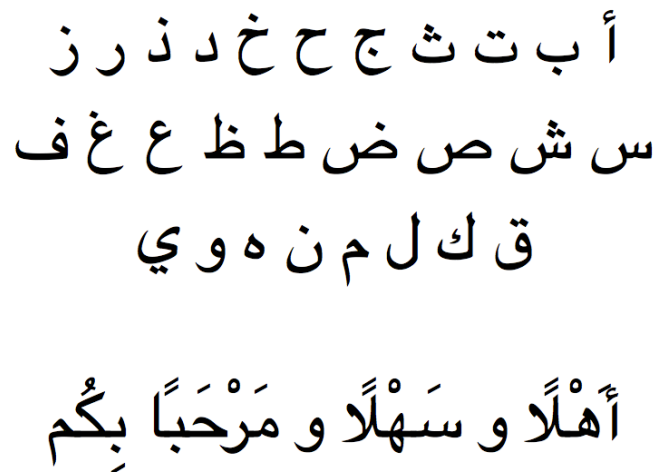


Figure 1. The Arabic Alphabet and Script

IS ARABIC A DIFFICULT LANGUAGE?

The perception of Arabic as a 'difficult' language is pervasive among both native-speakers and foreign language learners alike (Belnap, 2006). Reasons cited for this include the pronunciation of some letters, and the lack of cognates between Arabic and English (England, 2006). A further challenge to learners is the 'diglossic' nature of the language. Arabic is branched into spoken dialects (*'amiyyah*), and a formal, standard variety (*fusha*) (Anderson & Suleiman, 2009). This differentiation between varieties is important in a pedagogical context since, in the majority of educational settings, only the formal variety is taught (Wahba, 2006). Although important, it has been argued that learning only MSA essentially restricts learners' application of the language, leaving them unable to function in a range of social situations. This issue affects different learners in a number of ways since their exposure to and orientations towards the language will dictate the variety they most require.

Dialects (*'Amiyyah*)

Dialects are the medium for every-day communication in the Arab world (Wahba, 2006). They are not taught but acquired through natural interaction in the home environment. Whilst every native speaker of Arabic speaks a local dialect as their mother tongue, in which they eventually reach spoken proficiency (Allen, 2004), nearly every speaker of Arabic, native and non, is socialised into accepting the notion of supremacy of *fusha*, the higher variety and the official language of government, media and academia in Arab countries (Belnap, 2006). Dialects are distinct from formal Arabic in a number of aspects, including elements of pronunciation and morphosyntax (Albirini, 2014) and vary, often quite drastically, from country to country.

Formal Arabic (*Fusha*)

Although *fusha* is not spoken as a native language, it is the variety of Arabic taught in educational institutions in the Middle East and around the world (Wahba, 2006). Exactly what the term *fusha* denotes is the subject of continuing debate. While it is used by some researchers to denote only the Modern Standard variety of Arabic, it can also be expanded to cover Classical Arabic, which includes the Qur'anic variety (Wahba, 2006).

- *Classical or Qur'anic Arabic*: This is the language of classical texts, which includes pre-Islamic poetry, liturgical and scholarly texts. The sacredness of the Qur'an and the importance of learning *fusha* in order to access its meaning lead to the preservation of this strand of Arabic. This variety shares its syntax and morphology with MSA, but is usually studied as a separate skill and subject (Wahba, 2006).
- *Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)*: MSA is used as the language of the media, academia, and government across the Arab world (Scott-Baumann & Contractor, 2012). The ability to operate in MSA is a specialised skill learnt in schools, thus proficiency in this variety is dependent on a person's level of education. Traditionally, it was held that MSA was a 'unified and unifying pan-Arab language variety' (Elgibali & Taha, 1995, p.97), and advocates claimed that it could be used anywhere in the Arab world by non-native speakers (NNSs) and they would be understood. Whilst there is an element of truth to this axiom, since all Arab speakers study MSA in schools, the issue in learning

this strand as an all-purpose communication tool is whether or not learners can understand what is being spoken around them. Communication in MSA by native speakers is unnatural and, as a result, attempts to engage in it for the sake of learners usually disintegrate (Elgibali & Taha, 1995).

What should be taught?

In light of the different strands of Arabic and their uses, the challenge for curriculum designers and teachers is ensuring that the Arabic taught in the classroom both fulfils students' motivations and equips them with the skills to function in Arabic with regards to their personal areas of interest. Whilst instruction in MSA is certainly a valuable skill, and the call for diversification in Arabic classrooms is in no way a cry for the abandonment of the study of formal Arabic, the perpetuation of this one-size-fits-all approach creates problems in meeting the needs of students, and ensuring authenticity of content.

Learning is most likely to take place when learners perceive the content to be relevant to their interests and goals (Spolsky, 1989). In line with Doughty's (2003) stance that language instruction is effective only where it is relevant to the learners' needs, students must be assured that what is being taught are skills applicable in real-life situations, and that materials used for teaching these skills match this.

ARABIC IN THE UK

Arabic teaching has enjoyed a long history in Britain, dating back to the 1600s. Of late security benefits have driven the demand for Arabic language teaching (Worton, 2009), as has the growing UK population of both Arabs and Muslims. Recently, the British Council released a report calling for the learning of Arabic for economic, social and political reasons, situating Arabic in second place on its list of languages Britain needs for the future (Tinsley & Board, 2013). It highlights schools and school curricula in its broad outline of strategies that need to be pursued to boost the learning in the coming years.

The most comprehensive account of Arabic in schools and supplementary classes in the UK was published in a report entitled 'The Teaching of Arabic Language and Culture in UK Schools' (Tinsley, 2015). This report identifies 207 schools (a mere 4% of schools in the country) teaching Arabic either as part of the curriculum, or as an extra-curricular activity. The vast majority of these were Muslim faith schools. Arabic, in all schools, is more likely to be offered in KS4 than KS3, given the availability of the GCSE.

THE ARABIC GCSE

The GCSE is usually taken in Year 11. Examinations and course syllabus are offered solely by the Pearson Edexcel exam board. The course typically takes two years to complete. Although figures for the Arabic GCSE represent only 1% of overall GCSE language entries, it has seen rapid growth in uptake since its introduction in 1995, with the latest figures showing over 3,000 entries for 2014, compared to just 1,000 twenty years ago (Tinsley, 2015). What is unclear from official figures however, are both levels of achievement, and

the numbers of students sitting exams as independent candidates¹, and those who have been taught the subject as part of their school curriculum.

Specification

Both a short course and full Arabic GCSE course are offered by the Pearson Edexcel exam board. The full course covers four units: Speaking, Listening, Reading and Understanding, and Writing. For the short course, students can focus on either Spoken or Written language. In line with recent reforms in the education system, the Arabic GCSE was recently updated for first teaching in 2017. It now includes a Higher and Foundation Tier, though one level must be taken across all papers.

The specification offers details of the grammatical features and topic areas to be covered during the course, along with a list of core vocabulary (Edexcel, 2016). Topics include Identity and culture; Local area, holiday, travel; School; Future aspirations, study and work; and International and global dimension.

The specification makes no explicit mention of the type of Arabic that should be taught in the course. However, an examination of the core vocabulary and exam materials clearly indicates the Modern Standard variety has been adopted. Although brief reference is made to the 'standard spoken' variety in the context of the speaking and listening papers, a definition and the parameters of this variety are not elaborated. Furthermore, no guidance is provided in the mark schemes as to how to deal with instances of dialect use, either in the spoken or written units of the exam. In light of the descriptions of the varieties of Arabic and their uses hitherto extrapolated, even a cursory glance at the topics covered in the course, all of which represent topics that would fall comfortably under the umbrella of daily interactions and thus dialects, should set off alarm bells, raising issues regarding both transparency in the marketing of the GCSE Arabic syllabus, as well as the authenticity of the language and skills being taught.

HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNERS²

The term 'heritage language' originated in Canada in the 1970s (Cummins, 2005) and the concept has since spread to the UK, where the term has become synonymous with 'community' language (Murphy, 2014). To date, no consensus exists on exactly what constitutes a HLL. A framework for categorising different definitions of HLLs is proposed by Bale (2010), who divides them into ancestral- and proficiency-based approaches.

Proficiency-based definitions categorise HLLs as individuals who have learned the HL in childhood but have not reached native-speaker status due to a language shift before adulthood (Murphy, 2014). This proficiency-based definition is the most commonly assumed in studies regarding classroom practice since it has more immediate pedagogical consequences, enabling teachers, in theory, to understand and interact with learners based on their levels of proficiency and the nature of their previous exposure (Murphy, 2014).

¹ Those who know or have studied Arabic independently and simply sit the exam at school.

² A full discussion of the complexities of defining heritage language learners of Arabic is offered by Ramezanzadeh (in press).

The ancestral-based definition centres around a personal, historical, ethno-linguistic connection to the language in learners who may have had no previous exposure to the language putting them, in terms of competence, on a par with *ab initio* learners. Fishman (2001) highlights the centrality of historical and personal connections to the language to the definition of a HLL. This could either be in the form of a historical tie to the country or population that speaks the language, or the learner may have been raised in a community where the language is spoken (Comanaru and Noels, 2009).

Identifying HLLs of Arabic using an ancestral-based definition is complex. This is largely due to the sacred ties between Arabic and the Islamic faith. Since Arabic is the language of the Qur'an, and most Muslims are raised in homes and communities where Arabic is used for worship (Scott-Baumann & Contractor, 2012), a broad definition of HLL would thus encompass an enormous range of learners. It also conflates the varieties of Arabic that different students have been exposed to since the Qur'anic variety that non-Arab Muslims will have been exposed to differs in many respects from the colloquial, unwritten forms spoken in Arab households.

The proficiency definition appears thus more useful, however, in the context of Arabic there are a number of issues with its application. The primary one being exactly which strain of the language the term 'heritage' refers to. Are students raised in a home where only a dialect is spoken, considered HLL in a classroom in which only MSA is taught?

A small number of studies have attempted to establish a specific definition of 'Arabic HLLs'.

- Husseinali (2006) identifies three distinct groups of learners in his study into Arabic learners in an American University. The first group includes learners of Arab descent, the second non-Arab Muslims, and the third students of all other ethnic and cultural backgrounds. He goes on, however, to collapse the first two groups into one, identifying the only criterion for qualifying as a HLL, therefore, as an affinity to the Arabic language.
- Mango (2011) also proposes two groups of HLLs: those who come from homes where Arabic is spoken, and those whose connection to the language is predominantly through religion. Little theoretical basis for this definition however, is offered, although it is in line with the proficiency/ ancestral distinction hitherto outlined.
- Ibrahim and Allam (2006) propose perhaps the most detailed breakdown of HLL categories available thus far in the literature. They divide learners into four categories: those with Arabic as a home language, those with one Arab parent, but where Arabic is not spoken at home, non-Arab Muslims, Arabs who lived in Arab countries but who attended international educational institutions.

What all of these distinctions still appear to ignore, however, is the aforementioned problem that learners are being exposed to different varieties of the language in each of these categories.

METHODOLOGY

To address the gaps in the literature on Arabic HLLs in the context of the GCSE this study is both descriptive and exploratory in nature. The study starts by collecting background data on the sample recruited to provide information on which to base HLL/NHLL categorisations. Performance scores on a range of authentic GCSE exam tasks are explored to shed light on any differences between participants based on existing theoretical definitions. Information on the perceptions of students and teachers concerning distinctions between different groups of learners are collected and analysed to judge whether these perceptions support or diverge from those categories proposed in previous research. Data on participants' learning and teaching experiences is also collated and analysed as a source of possible explanations to any differences or trends noted among participants. Data on these variables are collected using both quantitative and qualitative measures to provide a detailed picture of HLL and NHLL performance in relation to the Arabic GCSE³.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A total of five research questions (RQs) were formulated to explore patterns in the performance of HLLs and NHLLs:

- 1) What are the ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds of students enrolled in Arabic GCSE courses in a sample of secondary schools in England?
- 2) Do the backgrounds of students enrolled in Arabic GCSE courses in secondary schools in England correspond to the different theoretical conceptualisations of a HLL?
- 3) Is there a difference in performance on Arabic GCSE tasks between students of different heritage backgrounds? If so, in what direction?
- 4) Do students and teachers perceive differences in the performance of learners of different heritage backgrounds?
- 5) What are the perceptions of students and teachers of the Arabic GCSE regarding their respective learning and teaching experiences?

PARTICIPANTS

The population were teachers and students of the GCSE Arabic in schools around England offering the subject as an optional or compulsory component of their curriculum. No database of schools in England offering the GCSE is currently available, which made identifying members of the population a complicated process. Muslim faith schools are the most obvious candidates in this group, and these were identified via the website for the Association for Muslim Schools. Mainstream secondary schools offering Arabic were identified via internet searches, schools identified in *The Teaching of Arabic Language and Culture in the UK* report (2015), and contacts made via the British Council's Arabic Schools Team.

³ See Ramezanzadeh (2015) for the full details of the original study.

The complete sample consisted of 8 teachers, and 102 students. These participants were recruited in two phases⁴:

- Phase 1: All secondary schools offering Arabic were contacted and invited to participate. In the initial round of data collection, a total of five schools, 6 teachers and 75 students were recruited. Although the population included faith and non-faith, single-sex and mixed, independent and state schools, all 5 of the schools recruited in this phase were Muslim girls schools. Participants in this sample completed the questionnaires, exam tasks, and took part in interviews.
- Phase 2: In order to widen the representative scope of the sample, two non-faith schools were later invited to participate in the study. For logistical reasons, participants in this sample completed the questionnaires only. This sample consisted of 2 teachers, and 27 students from one girls (8 students), and one mixed community school (19 students).

INSTRUMENTS

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were used to gather data concerning participants' backgrounds and their perceptions of the Arabic GCSE. Since no previous study has specifically focussed on differences in performance amongst learners of different heritage backgrounds with regards to the Arabic GCSE, both the questionnaires for teachers and students are unique to this research and were developed by the researcher. Items included closed, multiple-choice as well as open-ended questions.

Student Questionnaire

The Student Questionnaire was divided into four sections with a total of 36 items. The first three sections were designed to ascertain whether students fit into different categories of HLL by building a profile of their ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds. The final section asked students to respond to items regarding their perceptions of the Arabic GCSE and any perceived differences in the performance of HLL and NHLLs.

Teacher Questionnaire

The Teacher Questionnaire was completed at the same time as the Student Questionnaire. It was divided into three sections with a total of 25 items overall. The first section was designed to elicit information about the nature and extent of the provision of GCSE Arabic in their school, including class size, hours of delivery, and the exam board options being taken, as well as the resources used, and the language of delivery. The second asked teachers for their views on student performance, and whether they detected any noticeable differences in the performance of students from different backgrounds.

⁴ Where findings of the questionnaire are discussed, data from both sample groups are presented. Statistical analysis of the performance of different groups of students includes data from Phase 1 only.

Interviews

A semi-structured interview protocol developed by the researcher for use in both group and one-to-one interviews. Each interview lasted between 10 - 20 minutes, and all were recorded digitally. These were conducted to give students the opportunity to expand on their questionnaire responses, particularly in relation to their linguistic backgrounds, and to air their views on any perceived differences in performance between different students and their perceptions of their own performance, and any reasons for these. Teachers of Arabic were also invited to participate in one-to-one semi-structured interviews in order to expand on their responses to the questionnaires, and to elaborate on their overall experiences in providing Arabic instruction.

GCSE Exam Tasks

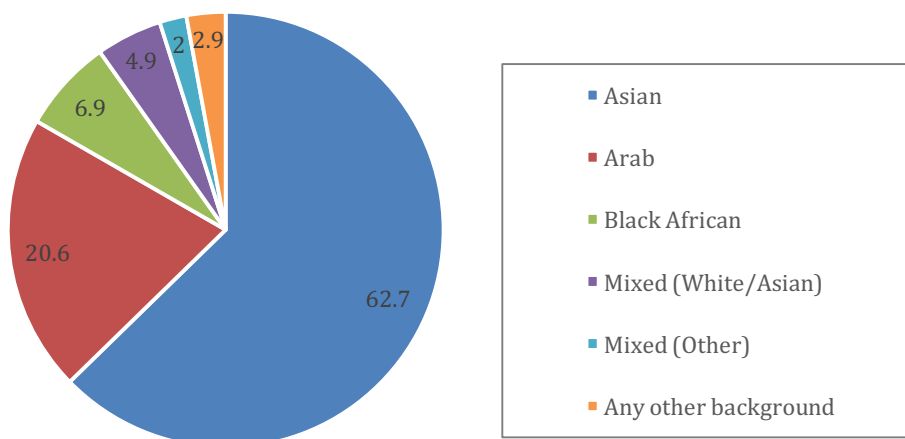
Measures of students' performance were elicited by administering exam tasks taken from previous GCSE exam papers. These were scored according to the official Edexcel mark-scheme, by both the researcher and a qualified Arabic examiner. In total, students were asked to complete five tasks; two listening tasks (5 marks each), two reading tasks (5 marks each), and one writing task (20 marks). A total of 40 marks were available overall. This combination of tasks was chosen to provide as complete a picture of students' performance across different skills as possible during the time available. The administration of speaking tasks unfortunately proved unfeasible since there was insufficient time to conduct these tasks within the schools' schedules.

FINDINGS

1. What are the ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds of students enrolled in Arabic GCSE courses in a sample of secondary schools in England?

Across the samples from both phases, the majority of students were of Asian origin, as shown in Chart 1. A further 20% were of Arab heritage. All students indicated that they were from Muslim backgrounds, despite the sample including two non-faith schools. Profiles of the students from the two phases are presented separately below.

Chart 1: Ethnic Backgrounds
(Complete Sample)



Phase 1: Students came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, with the vast majority (77.3%) of Southeast Asian descent (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi) as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Phase 1 – Participant Ethnicities		
Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent
Asian Indian	18	24
Asian Pakistani	31	41.3
Asian Bangladeshi	9	12
Arab	5	6.7
Black African	4	5.3
Mixed (White/Asian)	5	6.7
Mixed (Other)	1	1.3
Any other background	2	2.7
Total	75	100

The number of students from Arab backgrounds in this sample was comparatively low. These students were asked in the questionnaire to state their country of origin. In response, two identified themselves as Algerian, one Palestinian and the other Iraqi. The fifth student who selected the ‘Arab’ option stated her country of origin as ‘Somalia’. This is interesting since three other students who identified as Somali did so by selecting the ‘Black African’ option in the ethnicity item, and identifying Somalia as their country of origin when asked. One student who selected ‘Mixed (Other)’ noted that she was of mixed Pakistani and Algerian parentage.

In addition, five students of non-Arab heritage responded that they had lived in an Arab country and had spent two or more years of their early or mid-childhood in there.

Phase 2: In this sample, despite being drawn from two non-faith schools, all participants indicated that they were from a Muslim background. Interestingly, learners in each of these two schools had comparatively very different ethnic backgrounds. In School 1, 16 of the 19 students indicated that they were of Arab ethnicity. The remaining three consisted of one student of mixed heritage (Arab-Kurdish), and two of Somali origin. In School 2, 6 out of the 8 students were identified as being of Asian ethnicity, along with one Somali student, and one Albanian student.

Linguistic Backgrounds

The linguistic profiles of students were formed on the basis of their responses to items regarding their home language, whether or not they communicated in Arabic with family or friends, and whether Arabic was spoken by anyone else at home.

Phase 1: When asked to identify the languages they *personally* used at home, five students in this group wrote ‘Arabic’, either solely or in addition to other languages. When asked whether anyone *in their home* spoke Arabic, a total of 15 students confirmed that this was the case. This figure included the five students who answered ‘yes’ to their own usage, plus a further 10 who had not listed Arabic as a language they personally used at home. It is

interesting to note the discrepancy between responses to these two items, which is perhaps indicative of the fact that while students may not see themselves as active communicators in the language, they do understand the language being used.

Students were also asked to provide further information regarding their level of Arabic usage at home, if any (Table 2):

Level of Use	Freq
I use a few words in Arabic	4
I hold some basic conversations in Arabic	8
I speak fluently in Arabic	4
I understand a few words	3
I understand basic conversations	6
I understand the Arabic spoken at home well	7

These results highlight a spectrum of proficiency levels amongst students who use or are exposed to Arabic in their homes. Whilst over half of these students can hold some basic conversations in the language, only four claimed to be able to speak Arabic fluently.

Phase 2: Students in the non-faith schools presented different linguistic profiles. All students in School 1 indicated that Arabic was spoken in their homes, 17 of them indicating that this took the form of an Arabic dialect. When asked about their level of Arabic usage, 17 of them indicated that they spoke Arabic fluently and/ or understood the Arabic spoken at home well. Only one indicated their highest level of skill as 'I hold some basic conversations in Arabic', and the other that they understood basic conversations in Arabic.

Participants' levels in School 2 were starkly different, with 6 indicating no level of communication in Arabic, and only two indicating that they used or understood a few words in the language. It seems clear from these results that all students in the first non-faith school were proficient, if not fluent in Arabic, whereas in the second school, learners had only had contact with the language through their faith.

Overall, the questions regarding students' demographic profiles present a picture of the complex make-up of students in this sample of GCSE classrooms. Not only do some classes contain students of Arab heritage, but also those of different ethnicities who have lived in an Arab country during childhood. These students are being taught alongside those who, whilst not exposed to Arabic for communicative purposes in their homes, may be familiar with the language through religious observance. Even amongst these students however, the level of exposure, previous study and indeed current study differ based on whether or not they attend extra-curricular classes, and what those classes involve. Furthermore, it cannot be presumed that students in non-faith schools will be foreign language learners, since clearly based on the responses of two schools, class cohorts can be radically different, and in fact in School 1, all students have Arabic spoken in their homes, whereas the backgrounds of those in School 2 resemble those of the students from faith schools.

2. Do the backgrounds of students enrolled in Arabic GCSE courses in secondary schools in England correspond to the different theoretical conceptualisations of HLLs?

The background data from students in Phase 1 were analysed according to the proficiency and ancestral definitions outlined by Bale (2010) to identify whether students could be categorised meaningfully according to this framework. Data was also viewed from the perspective of Arabic-HLL-specific definitions with the same intention.

The Ancestral Definition

If we consider religion to be an integral part of a person's identity or ancestry, then all participants in this sample would be considered HLLs by virtue of their adherence to the Muslim faith, as proposed by Husseinali (2006) with his conflation of the categories of learners of Arab ethnicity, and those of non-Arab Muslim heritage.

This use of the ancestral definition is problematic for a number of reasons. Not only does it make it impossible to test for any differences between HLLs and NHLLs within this sample, since no students of a non-Muslim background were recruited, it ignores the fact that students exposed to Arabic at home will not only have been exposed to a dialect variety, but are unlikely to have learned orthographic or decoding skills, since dialects are not written. In contrast, students exposed to Qur'anic Arabic will memorized certain phrases and will usually have learned to phonetically decode the Qur'anic script (Scott-Baumann & Contractor, 2012). To further complicate the matter, these two categories are likely to overlap, with some Arab Muslims learning to speak in dialect, but also read the Qur'an, though with limited comprehension. This is reflected in the considerable variation within participants' characteristics and their performance (which varied between 2.5-100%).

That being said, the fact that many Muslims begin learning Arabic outside of school from a young age (Scott-Baumann & Contractor, 2012) there are grounds to suggest that non-Arab, non-Muslim students may be at a significant disadvantage at GCSE level. This is an area that clearly requires further study.

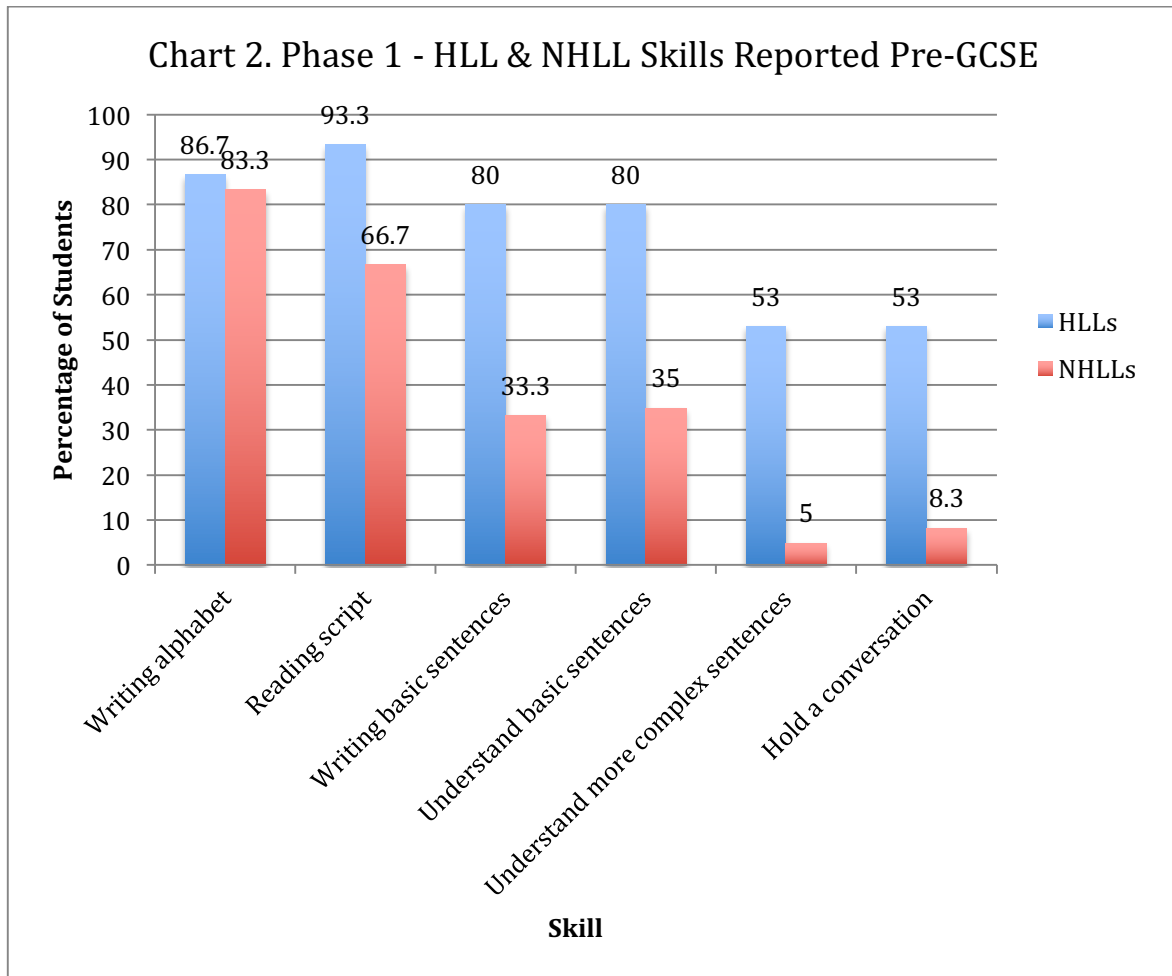
The Proficiency Definition

It appears, from the descriptions of students' backgrounds outlined above, that the proficiency definition can be applied with caution and caveats. In total, 15 students in Phase 1 fell into this category based on their questionnaire responses (Table 3), indicating the use of Arabic in their home environment.

Table 3. Phase 1 - HLL Participant Profiles							
No	Ethnicity	Home Languages	Arabic at home?	Variety	Arabic with family	Arabic with friends	Arabic TV
1	Arab	Somali, English, Arabic	Y	Dialect	Y	Y	Y
2	Pakistani	Pushto and English	Y	MSA ⁵	N	Y	N
3	Pakistani	English	Y	Dialect	Y	N	N
4	Mixed Other (Pakistani/Algerian)	English	Y	Dialect	Y	N	Y
5	Mixed (White/ Asian)	English	Y	Dialect	Y	Y	N
6	Arab	Arabic (Algerian)	Y	Dialect	Y	Y	Y
7	Bengali	English, Bengali	Y	Dialect	Y	N	N
8	Arab	Arabic	Y	Dialect	Y	Y	Y
9	Black African	Somali	Y	MSA/ Dialect	Y	N	Y
10	Arab	Arabic, English	Y	MSA	Y	Y	Y
11	Black African	Somali	Y	MSA	Y	N	Y
12	Arab	Arabic, English	Y	Dialect	Y	Y	Y
13	Black African	Somali, Arabic	Y	MSA/ Dialect	Y	N	Y
14	Mixed (White/ Asian)	English	Y	MSA	Y	N	N
15	Bengali	Bengali	Y	MSA	Y	N	N

Obviously the use of a proficiency definition implies a level of proficiency in the language. One questionnaire item was designed to elicit information regarding students' language skills prior to beginning the GCSE (Chart 2). According to the results of this item all students who fit the abovementioned definition reported some level of proficiency in the language before they started their GCSE, with over half able to write sentences and hold a conversation.

⁵ It is unclear as to why or how students selected the MSA option for the Arabic spoken at home. There are a number of possible explanations. One is that students were not aware of the term 'MSA', and its distinction from a dialect. Another is that family members did indeed use MSA in the home, perhaps in cases where parents had gone abroad to study Arabic in an educational institution in an Arab country and returned with the ability to speak in MSA. Further studies would be required to investigate this issue.

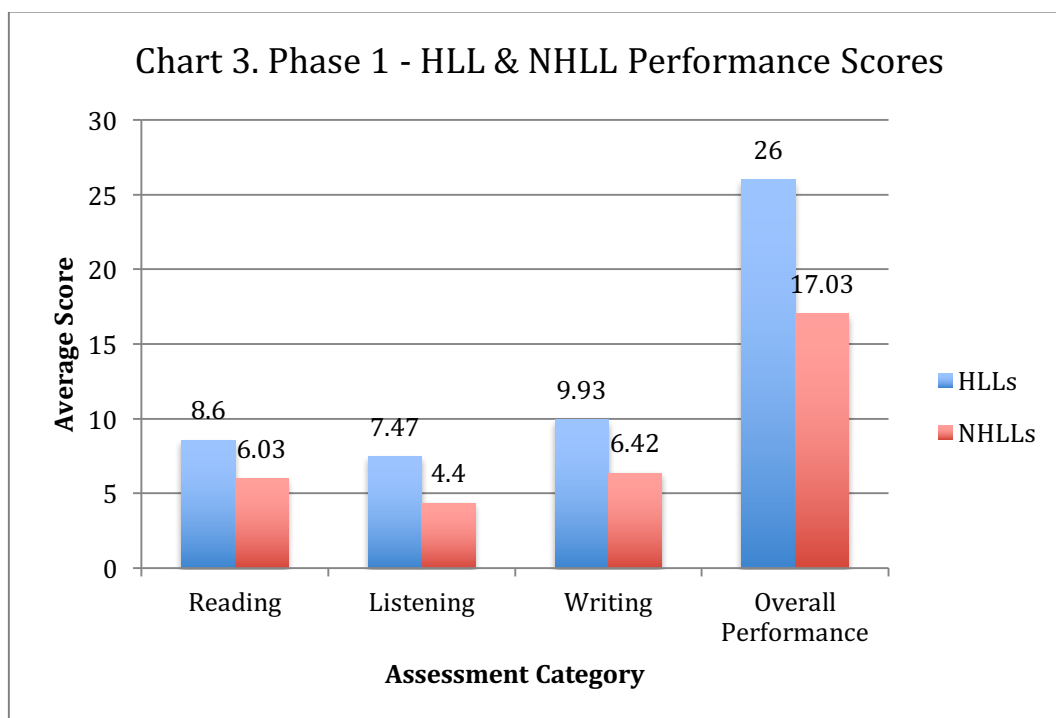


This proficiency definition conforms to Ibrahim and Allam’s (2006) distinction between students exposed to Arabic as a home language, and non-Arab Muslims exposed to the language through religious practice. It should be mentioned that whilst this definition does do away with the conflation of Qur’anic Arabic and other varieties, there is still the issue of conflating dialects with MSA in the cases where students identified the variety of Arabic used in the home as vernacular. In the absence of any other framework, the proficiency definition is here adopted, though with caution.

3. Is there a difference in performance on Arabic GCSE tasks between students of different heritage language learner classifications? If so, in what direction?

This section concentrates on the findings of Phase 1, which identify an advantage amongst students in the HLL category. Although performance data was not collected from participants in Phase 2, students were asked to provide their predicted or actual GCSE Arabic grades. In School 1, in which all students recorded Arabic as being spoken in their homes, 100% of students reported a C-A* grade. 74% reported that they had either achieved or predicted an A*, thus adding support the findings presented below.

Comparison of Overall Performance



Performance for HLLs and NHLLs based on the proficiency definition were compared definition using statistical analysis⁶. Participants' performance was measured via their scores out of a possible total of 40 on a series of five GCSE exam tasks. Participants' scores on these exam tasks provide an insight into their current levels of performance across three of the four skills tested in their final Arabic GCSEs.

Firstly, the total overall performance scores were compared for HLLs and NHLLs. Participants in the HLL group significantly outperformed those in the NHLL group, scoring on average almost 10 marks more.

This difference is perhaps unsurprising given the fact that the HLL category was established using a proficiency-based definition, meaning students had prior linguistic knowledge and skills attained in their home environment before commencing formal study of the language. This is despite the fact that the language that the majority of these students had been exposed to was of a colloquial nature. It appears, therefore, that knowledge of an Arabic dialect did aid in these participants' performance in responding to exam tasks requiring use and understanding of MSA. Dialects do differ in their distance from the standard variety (Abirini, 2014). It would be interesting to see whether there were any differences in performance of students from different dialect backgrounds, though unfortunately samples of such student in this study were too small to analyze.

⁶ An independent samples t-test.

Skill-Based Comparison

In order to identify whether or not these differences were reflected across all three skills tested, total reading, total listening, and writing scores were compared for HLLs and NHLLs⁷. Scores for listening were significantly higher for HLLs than NHLLs. Reading scores were also significantly higher for HLLs. Differences in writing between the two groups, on the other hand, failed to meet statistical significance.

Judging from the lack of significance in differences between participants' writing scores, it appears that, whilst an HLL advantage existed overall, knowledge of a dialect failed to translate into more advanced writing skills in this particular sample. The confinement of dialects to the spoken realm meant that, although HLL students may have enjoyed increased access to speaking and listening opportunities, unless students were schooled in orthography and spelling, these skills would have been lacking.

4. Do teachers and students perceive a difference in the performance of learners from different backgrounds enrolled in GCSE Arabic courses?

Based on the analysis and coding of the interview data and questionnaire responses of teachers and students from Phase 1, it appears that higher performance levels were perceived across four different categories of students. These groups are presented in Table 4, along with a description, and examples of the responses from both students and teachers supporting this category.

Table 4. Phase 1 - Categories of Students Perceived to Perform Better than their Classmates in the Arabic GCSE			
Category	Description	Quote – Teachers	Quote - Students
Arabic speakers	Students of Arab heritage and those who were raised in an Arab country.	<i>Students of Arab heritage are familiar with most of the vocabulary. They perform well in all four skills.</i> <i>For Arab speakers it's fine.</i>	<i>Obviously the Arabs are better than us, because they're Arabs.</i> <i>I learnt Arabic when I was living in Egypt... I know a greater range of vocabulary.</i>
Somali students	Students of Somali heritage are also deemed to have an advantage in learning Arabic.	<i>They might be good in speaking and listening because their language is a bit closer to our language, plus the parents can speak Arabic</i>	<i>We have quite a few Arabic words in our language, so that really helps me in Arabic.</i> <i>There are so many similar words...and you just, like, understand it.</i>

⁷ A Mann-Whitney U test was used to statistically compare the scores for the two groups.

'Alimah students	Students who are enrolled in 'Alimah courses.	<i>These students perform better than other students</i>	<i>The people who go mosque and they're in the 'Alimah classes, they know the general vocabulary and little grammar rules, so for us lot we're learning it from scratch whereas they already know it and they can apply it quicker.</i>
Urdu speakers	Students who identified 'Urdu' as a language they spoke at home.	<i>Students who speak Urdu find it easier to learn Arabic.</i>	<i>Urdu helps me learn Arabic. I think it has (helped) because some of the words are really similar, and the alphabet's really similar.</i>

Arabic Speakers

Of the five classes participating in this phase, four contained students from an Arabic speaking background. It was decided that this category would be labeled 'Arabic speakers', rather than 'Arab students', since it included students who were not ethnically Arab but who had been raised in Arab countries or were exposed to Arabic in their home environments in childhood. Students in this category generally felt they had an advantage over other students in either all or some of the four skills, and were perceived to have an advantage by teachers and other students.

Teachers' Perceptions

Teachers noted differences between the performance of these students and those who did not fit this category, with Arab-speaking students performing better either across all four skills or in individual ones. A number of different reasons were cited as contributing to this advantage, in particular a familiarity with most of the vocabulary. One teacher noted, however, that it was not solely knowledge of vocabulary that gave these students an advantage but a grasp of the appropriate way to use the words they'd learned: 'If I take a non-Arabic speaker and an Arabic speaker and they learn the same vocab it will be easier for the Arabic student to put that vocab in the right context, but for a non-Arabic speaker it needs time and skills to do that.' This same concept was described by another teacher as the 'style' of Arabic. This could be interpreted either as appropriate use of vocabulary in the right semantic context, or the appropriate integration of words into sentences by correct usage of morphosyntactic rules. A detailed error analysis of the students' written responses would shed light the exact nature of the differences in 'style' between Arabic and non-Arabic speakers.

Students' Perceptions

Students identified as having an Arabic-speaking background spoke themselves of finding the GCSE course generally easier than their classmates. They also spoke of an advantage in terms of vocabulary, as well as exposure and opportunities to use the language outside of the classroom. One student, for example, who usually communicates in English at home, will ask her mother to speak to her in Arabic if she has an exam. This is in contrast to those students who do not fall within this category, the majority of whom have 'never spoken Arabic outside of school.'

Nevertheless, the perceived advantage of speaking Arabic or being exposed to it in a home environment brought with it its own challenges, largely due to the aforementioned differences between MSA and dialects. It is interesting to note, for example, that one student of Arab origins wrote 'Algerian Arabic' as her home language; perhaps alluding to the fact that she felt it was different from standard Arabic.

A further problem was using the Arabic they had learned in school in their home context. Some students felt that the course content did not help them with conversational skills: 'I think 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 a conversation.' Or, as another student pertinently put it, 'it's not the same Arabic.' This goes back to the issue of language authenticity.

On the other hand, transferring the skills they had accumulated at home into the classroom environment met with varied success. Whilst students did feel that knowledge of a dialect helped overall, they faced problems in switching to MSA in the classroom. As one student phrased it, '[It's] challenging sometimes because you have to go from the words that you know to the words that you're supposed to be speaking instead.' Another also found difficulties not just in switching but in sticking to one variety, 'I was mixing them up; the formal and my Arabic. It doesn't sound good...' It's interesting here that this student uses the term 'my Arabic', highlighting the gulf perceived between the 'formal' MSA strand and the language she is familiar with. This difficulty seemed to be most apparent in the speaking component, unsurprising given that dialects are spoken rather than written. The writing paper, on the other hand, presented less of a challenge given the opportunity for students to edit before submitting their paper, 'it's easier in the writing because you get more time to think about what the actual word should be, but in speaking it's hard because you have to say it on the spot, so you get confused between which words you should be using.' Even with this advantage however, students still faced some problems in the area of syntax. In spoken Arabic it is common practice to place the subject at the beginning of a sentence whereas in MSA the sentence structure follows a strict VSO pattern (Alhawary, 2011), a difference that some students found challenging, 'I still get confused whether to put the noun or the verb first'. It is perhaps this that caused the lack of significance in writing performance since grammatical accuracy constitutes a portion of the marks for the writing paper according to the mark-scheme.

Overall however, the advantage of speaking a form of Arabic for performance, as opposed to no Arabic at all was deemed to outweigh the difficulties faced in switching from a dialect to MSA.

Those students who did not fall within the Arabic-speaker category highlighted what they perceived to be an advantage amongst those from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. They picked up on others students' lexical knowledge, and the resulting facilitation in understanding, 'she knows the answers, she knows most of the vocab.'

A number of students spoke of the benefit of having Arabic-speaking individuals in the classroom, since they provided an extra resource through which to seek help. 'It makes me feel I can learn things from them as well when they talk'/ 'They also help us as well, we can ask them questions.' This is in line with Lee's (2005) findings that HLLs often act as 'linguistic and cultural brokers' in class (p.558).

Conversely, the presence of Arabic speakers may have also had a demotivating effect on some individuals in the class who spoke of having to work extra hard in order to keep up, 'It's sort of a setback because you need to be constantly learning vocabulary so you can be up there with the rest of the class.' This is a problem exacerbated by the fact that all classes in this study were mixed-ability, meaning Arabic-speaking students were taught alongside those who had had much more limited exposure.

Somali Students

Two classes also included students of Somali origin. Whilst these students fell under the category of HLL according to their questionnaire and interview responses, there are a number of issues distinct to this group worthy of note.

Teachers perceived that these students had a potential advantage in the speaking and listening components of the course due to Arabic exposure at home and similarities between Somali and Arabic. It is not clear how far this advantage translates into writing skills, since the teachers noted difficulties amongst these students in spelling. These students also highlighted the difficulties they faced in spelling, but overall expressed a familiarity with Arabic for the same reasons as cited by their teachers. 'We have quite a few words in our language, so that really helps me in Arabic; 'there's so many similar words and you just, like, understand it.'

What is interesting about these students is that their advantage in Arabic stemmed both from their exposure to Arabic in the home, and also the similarities between Somali and Arabic. The relationship between Somalis and the Arabic language is a complex one. Whilst Somali is situated in Africa, it is a member of the Arab League, though Somali and English are the official languages of the country. The Somali language itself contains a large number of Arabic loan words (Ahmad, 2013), though it does not share the Arabic script. The issue of whether Arabs identify as African or Arab is complicated, demonstrated by the fact that whilst one Somali student selected 'Arab' on the ethnicity item, her teacher identified her as 'not Arab' but said that she did watch Arab television. Somali communities, on the whole, retain a strong adherence to the Islamic faith with an emphasis on memorizing Qur'an (Andrzejewski, 2011). Little research exists on Somalis, particularly those living in the UK, and the relationship between their identity and familiarity with the Arabic language. Unfortunately the number of Somali students in this sample was too small to run statistical tests, making further studies into this area all the more important.

'Alimah Course Students

In two schools it also became apparent that some students attended extra-curricular religious studies classes, known as the '*Alimah* course, a program of Islamic studies, taken either in English or Urdu, which involves explicit instruction in Arabic grammar. These participants were perceived to have an advantage in the Arabic GCSE by students and teachers. During the interviews it became apparent that studies at the mosque meant different things to different students.

Teachers' Perceptions

It was noted by teachers that students who were undertaking the '*Alimah* course were performing better in their Arabic studies in school. One teacher said that 'students who study in [the mosque]... perform better than other students'. She also noted that the style of Arabic studied in the mosque was Qur'anic, but that nevertheless it appeared to help them across the four skills. Another teacher also highlighted the impact of mosque studies on students' motivation, noting that those students were more interested in learning the language and so didn't complain like other students about the fact that it was compulsory.

Students' Perceptions

Students, when asked about their mosque studies and their relation to the Arabic GCSE, attributed their advantage to the fact that they covered a lot of the vocabulary from school in the mosque, 'everything we do in mosque we do in school'. Students who did not attend these classes appeared to perceive their mosque-going classmates' advantage, 'sometimes in writing when there's a certain writing task and we only know a bit of vocabulary, but some people can add anything to it because they know lots of vocabulary.'

Unfortunately, given the different uses of the term 'mosque', unbeknownst to the researcher beforehand, it was not possible to separate out the students taking this course from those who were not studying it in order to compare performances. Future studies would benefit from this differentiation.

Urdu Speakers

A significant proportion of students in this sample spoke Urdu at home. Although studies on the linguistic closeness of Arabic and Urdu are sparse, a number of ties have been noted. The most obvious is the shared script. Also apparent is the large number of Arabic loan words in Urdu (Islam, 2011). An interesting issue raised in the interviews was the use of knowledge of Urdu as an aid to learning Arabic.

Although only one teacher felt that students who spoke Urdu had an advantage, there was a strong sense amongst students that this helped them in some ways to learn Arabic. The similarities in the script were noted; however more prominent was the use of Urdu knowledge as an aid to vocabulary learning, noting, 'Urdu and Arabic are quite similar; some words you can just make into Arabic'; 'We speak Urdu at home, so some of the words are similar, and it's just easier to remember it, and some words sound the same so you can just sort of relate to it.' Students thus appear to benefit from some of the Arabic loan words

in Urdu, and spoke of finding associate words in Urdu as well as English to help them retain new Arabic vocabulary.

However, it should be mentioned that not all Urdu speaking students felt this was the case. In fact, some students felt the similarities between Urdu and Arabic were a hindrance, 'It's confusing because we're doing Urdu as well... and they're kind of similar so we get confused with them both.' Another issue is the variability in literacy and fluency levels among this category of student depending on their home environment and whether or not they had studied the subject in or outside of school. This is alluded to in the aforementioned quote, since this student is not only a speaker of Urdu as a home language but is also studying the language at school.

These groups highlight new levels of complexity in the context of Arabic HLLs and warrant further study in order to determine the exact relationship between their distinct experiences and relationships to Arabic and their performance in the language.

5. What are the perceptions of students and teachers of the Arabic GCSE regarding their respective learning and teaching experiences?

Together, the interviews and questionnaires gave participants from Phase 1 and 2 opportunities to expand on their experiences with the Arabic GCSE in general. These responses were coded, and fell under the three categories, presented in Table 5. These provide interesting insights into some of the differences between groups of learners, and the overall performance of this sample.

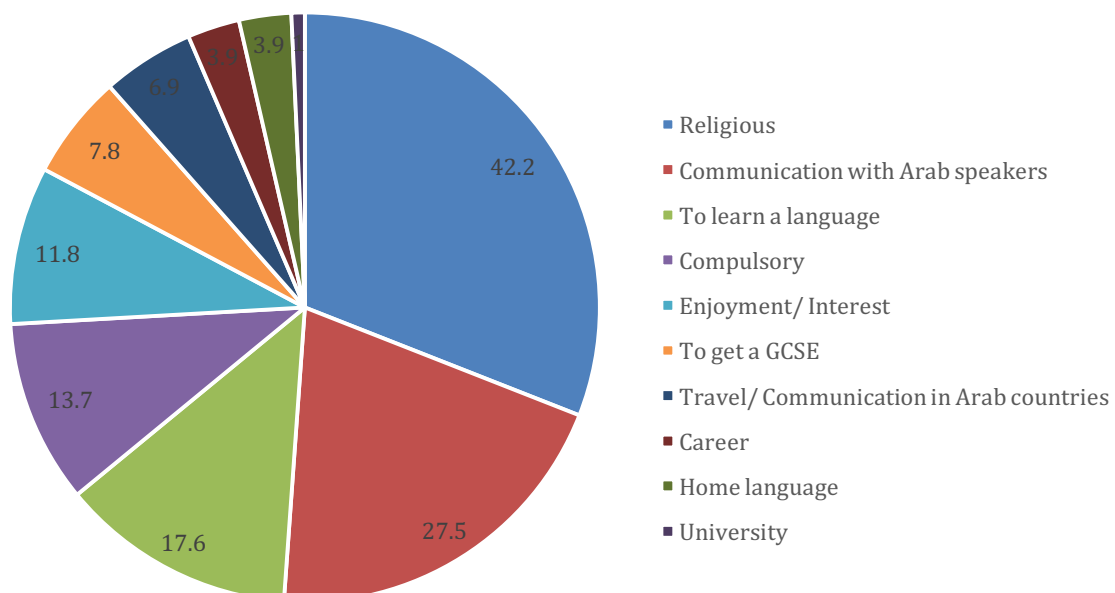
Table 5. Phase 1 & 2 - Themes in Perceptions Regarding Learning and Teaching Experiences		
Theme	Categories	Quote
Reasons for Studying Arabic	Religious, travel and communication, enjoyment/ interest, career prospects, further study, compulsory	<i>I want to be able to understand the Qur'an</i> <i>...to communicate better with my family members</i> <i>...It's the love of the language</i>
Attitudes	Positive attitudes towards language learning Negative attitudes	<i>For them it's like a dead language...</i> <i>I don't really like learning it. It can be really hard to learn sometimes... I'd prefer not to do it.</i>
Resources	Lack of Resources	<i>It's really hard, to be honest, to find good resources. That's the first obstacle in teaching Arabic, especially to non-Arab speakers.</i>

Reasons for Studying Arabic

Students were asked in an open ended question to identify their reasons for studying Arabic. The main reason cited by students was a desire to understand religious texts, primarily the Qur'an. Given the fact that five of the schools were Muslim faith schools, the emphasis on understanding the Qur'an is not surprising.

Very few students gave the use of Arabic for career purposes as a motivation. This small percentage may be due to restrictions on girls' career prospects in Southeast Asian cultures (Ghuman, 2005), or it could be a lack of awareness of particular jobs that may require Arabic in contrast to other career paths, though this would require further investigation in order to determine the validity of these interpretations.

Chart 4. Phase 1 & 2 - Reasons for Learning Arabic



Just over a quarter of students stated that they wished to communicate with Arab speakers, either in the UK, or through traveling to Arab countries. This was supported in interviews with statements such as, 'half of my family... I don't understand them when they speak Arabic, so I can understand what they're saying at home.' Though this is the second largest category, it still small in comparison with the findings of other studies, such as Soliman (2008) who recorded these particular motivations as being one of the most prominent amongst learners of Arabic. This may be due to the limited opportunities perceived by students to communicate with Arab speakers given the makeup of their communities at home, and cultural restrictions on women traveling abroad (Mohee, 2011).

13.7% of students indicated that they were only studying Arabic since it was compulsory in their school, giving no other personal motivation, noting in their interviews and questionnaire responses, that they were taking it 'because I have two (sic).' A further 17.6% of students simply wrote 'to learn a language', or a variation of this statement, with no explanation as to what use they were hoping to put it. These responses could possibly be

interpreted as students taking the subject only to fulfill the language criteria in their list of GCSE options.

Only around a tenth of students indicated an element of enjoyment or interest behind their study of Arabic. This may be due to the fact that in 4 of the 7 schools the subject is compulsory.

Awareness of the utility of the Arabic language for career prospects and further study was extremely low, with only 1 student mentioning this in their response, and only 4 indicating a desire to use the language for employment purposes. This is also in contrast to studies conducted in other education settings, and highlights a worrying lack of attention being drawn to the importance of Arabic as a valuable world language.

Phase 2: When examined separately, some interesting findings arose from the analysis of responses from the non-faith schools. These are presented in Table 6. In particular, it emerged that a large number (42%) of students from School 1 stated that they were studying Arabic solely for the purposes of ‘getting a GCSE’. It appears from their responses that they were given a choice between Arabic and Spanish, and since their home language (another response common only to this group) was Arabic, this was therefore the easier option: *‘because I had a choice between Arabic and Spanish and I don’t know a lot of Spanish’/ ‘Mainly because it’s an easy GCSE so I’m mainly doing it for the GCSE’.*

Table 6. Phase 2 – Reasons for Learning Arabic				
Category	% Total	Frequency		
		Total	School 1	School 2
Enjoyment/ Interest	14.8	4	0	4
To learn a language	18.5	5	1	4
Communication with Arab speakers	7.4	2	1	1
Career	3.7	1	1	0
Travel	7.4	2	1	1
Religious	22.2	6	3	3
<i>University</i>	3.7	1	0	1
<i>Home Language</i>	14.8	4	4	0
<i>To get a GCSE</i>	29.6	8	8	0

This appears to contribute to the view that many students of Arab origin take the GCSE as an ‘easy option’. This view is problematic on a number of fronts. Firstly, it can undermine the value of a qualification in another language amongst bilingual learners, presenting it as less of an achievement for them since they may speak the language at home. It is also misleading: whilst in this sample, many students appear to be taking the exam for the purposes of obtaining a good grade, HLL students in Phase 2 noted certain difficulties in answering exam questions. Their written responses in fact were not significantly different to those in the NHLL group, indicating that students’ exposure and familiarity with the language varies dramatically within the HLL group. Furthermore, the perpetuation of the idea that the exam is designed for native or heritage speakers is demotivating for students of other backgrounds, adding to the perception of Arabic as a difficult subject. Nevertheless, the distinct advantage in at least some areas of the GCSE, raises the issue of the validity and accessibility of the exam for a wide range of learners.

Attitudes

Positive attitudes towards learning the Arabic language were expressed by students across the sample. When asked about their experiences studying the Arabic GCSE several students expressed their love of the Arabic language with phrases such as ‘I think it’s a beautiful language’ and ‘It’s interesting’. One student also expressed a desire to continue learning the language through higher education.

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 (Table 7). In all [Phase 1](#) schools⁸, students expressed feelings of apathy towards the Arabic GCSE. This was also highlighted by most of the teachers. Students in School 3 had opted to take the Arabic GCSE out of a choice of Arabic and Urdu, and levels of demotivation in these students appeared lower during their interviews. However, of the remaining 47 students who were obliged to take the GCSE, almost half (46.8%) explicitly expressed the fact that they would drop the subject if possible. Given the volume of comments relating to students’ demotivation in interviews and questionnaire responses, the qualitative data pertaining to this issue were coded into two themes:

Table 7. Phase 1 - Themes in Negative Attitudes Towards Arabic GCSE		
Theme	Description	Quote
Lack of utility	Distinct lack of instrumental and integrative motivations amongst students. Students only taking language because they are obliged to.	<i>There’s no point. It’s not like we need it or something, or we’re going to a place where we’re going to speak Arabic.</i>
Difficulty of the language	Arabic perceived as a difficult language, often in contrast to other MFLs, concerns over the volume of vocabulary/ topics that need to be covered for exams.	<i>The GCSE Arabic syllabus is very intense, especially for non-Arab speakers</i> <i>You look at the words and you get this sort of feeling, like, ‘I’m not going to remember this’, so you leave it. I don’t revise.</i>

Lack of Utility

Students in many interview groups expressed their concerns about the lack of utility of the GCSE. This came from students of all backgrounds. Of the NHLLs, several expressed the fact that they could not see themselves ever needing to communicate in Arabic, either abroad or within their communities. This was especially true in schools situated in areas with low Arab populations or where there was perhaps less integration between the various Muslim

⁸ Although it was not possible to conduct interviews with students from the non-faith schools, the lack of survey responses relating to future career or study prospects, and the high number of responses suggesting the students were taking Arabic simply to gain a GCSE, suggest a similarly worrying picture as to the perception of the utility of the GCSE past results day.

communities. In this context, one teacher described Arabic as 'a dead language'. She continued that 'they only learn it here in class, they go home, there's no chance to practice, no activities, no cultural activities in town'. This is an interesting observation since students' daily lives are certainly not devoid of Arabic given the fact that they use the language every day in their prayers and worship. What is highlighted here again, albeit indirectly perhaps, is the schism between the Arabic used for religious rituals and the Arabic in the classroom.

This could explain why, despite the fact that almost half of the students identified religious motivations behind their Arabic learning, levels of motivation and interest in the subject were low. Students and teachers mentioned the fact that they perceived a difference in the Qur'anic and MSA varieties, even though at a basic level it could be argued that they very similar in both syntax and morphology (Wahba, 2006). When asked whether Qur'anic Arabic or examples were incorporated into the lessons, teachers commented on the fact that it was not a part of the curriculum, and that with time and resources already tight, they were not able to accommodate this extension in content.

Furthermore, the fact that students gave religious motivations for their Arabic learning was explained by one teacher as 'aspirational', rather than a realistically achievable goal, 'I think it's just an aspiration, that the Qur'an is in Arabic, I want to learn Arabic'. It could also be argued that such a response was expected in the context of an Islamic school. On the other hand, some may feel that this interpretation undermines the integrity of students' responses, and that in fact they did harbor a keen desire to access their religious texts but that the content of the GCSE, and the way it was being taught was not in line with these interest, which, despite genuinely strong motivations, had left students feeling disillusioned with Arabic altogether. Either way, the mismatch between the expectations of these students and the aims of the Arabic GCSE, and the worryingly high levels of demotivation in this respect are a cause for concern and need to be addressed.

Difficulty

The difficulty of the language was highlighted as a common theme amongst students from all schools, as well as some of the teachers. This category included comments about the perceived inherent difficulty of the Arabic language, pervasive across other learning contexts (Stevens, 2006) and specific difficulties in studying for the Arabic GCSE. A number of students appeared to hold the belief that Arabic was an inherently difficult language 'because if you think that you're learning a whole new language, it's not going to be easy, especially Arabic, it's quite a difficult language', particularly when compared to other MFLs: 'I'd do another language, French or Spanish, the easy ones'; 'Maybe something a bit easier, French...'

The challenge of vocabulary acquisition was highlighted by all teachers, who identified it as integral to successful performance in the GCSE. But along with the students, teachers also emphasised that the volume of vocabulary in the GCSE syllabus made teaching and learning it difficult. Students spoke of the difficulty in learning so many words in such a short space of time, 'there's lots of vocab... too much'; 'it's 50 billion words'. Students also complained about the methods in use in their classrooms for learning the necessary words. In several classrooms, according to the students, this took the form of the teacher writing words on the board for students to copy down and memorise. Whilst some teachers professed that this was the only way they could get through the volume of vocabulary required for the

exams, this appeared to be causing demotivation amongst the students, to the extent that some said they'd given up learning them altogether, 'I don't bother revising any more. I can't learn any more vocabulary. I just leave it to chance; if it comes in the exam, it comes in the exam.' It could be argued that this is exacerbating the difference between HLLs and NHLLs as hitherto defined, given the fact that not only have HLLs typically acquired a significant portion of vocabulary from home, but they are also exposed to these words in context.

Vocabulary was also noted as an issue in the context of the writing paper, which the majority of students identified as the hardest of the four papers for the exam. Teachers attributed this difficulty to the fact that the writing paper requires additional language knowledge on top of vocabulary, not required to such a degree in other papers. The writing paper is the only one in which students are required to produce the language unprepared, without prior knowledge of the topic, implementing both lexical and grammatical knowledge. This testing of grammatical knowledge was noted by students as a challenge, particularly in the area of syntax, 'I write the way I talk [in English], so it's kind of difficult for me'; 'you have to mix the words up for it to make sense'; 'when you're writing you have to keep all the rules in mind and sometimes you just don't remember all of them'. Although differences in performance on the writing paper between HLLs and NHLLs were not significant in this study, this may offer an explanation as to differences in perceptions of difficulty regarding the language, since, unlike the NHLLs, a far lower proportion of HLLs highlighted difficulties in applying grammatical rules in writing.

Resources

Teachers highlighted problems with finding appropriate and enjoyable resources for students of all backgrounds, 'It's really hard, to be honest, to find good resources. That's the first obstacle in teaching Arabic, especially to non-Arab speakers.' The paucity of resources for Arabic was further emphasised by the readily available material for other languages, 'if you compare Arabic to other languages, there's very, very few resources available online, and textbooks.' They also noted the difficulty in finding appropriate resources online, particularly audio and visual resources, since the majority of sources would, in theory, be deemed appropriate material for GCSE level, such as TV programs, or recorded conversations, are delivered in a dialect.

Students also highlighted issue of a lack of resources, expressing a particular desire for more audio and visual material and engaging classroom activities, 'I think we should do more activities because more people find it easier to learn that way.' Several students spoke of methods akin to rote learning, claiming teachers relied heavily on students copying from the whiteboard. Such methods are clearly problematic, not only in terms of efficacy, but also in terms of engagement since students found this practice boring and off-putting.

In summary, a number of worrying trends were highlighted by participants, both in keeping with themes established in the literature, as well as problems unique to this particular sample. The disparity between the language in the classroom and students' Arabic exposure, relationship with the language, and motivations not only complicates HLL definitions, but is leading to a worrying level of demotivation amongst students, many of whom express a desire to learn the language for very personal reasons which aren't catered

to in the classroom. This is exacerbated by a lack of resources and classroom activities compounding students' apathy towards the language.

IMPLICATIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Though these findings are preliminary, and further examination is needed into the learning and teaching of Arabic in the UK schools context, a number of recommendations can be made based on the outcomes of the data presented in this study for the areas of practice, research and policy.

PRACTICE

Provision

The growing importance of Arabic on the world stage necessitates an increase in the provision of Arabic in the UK education system. There is a need, therefore, to expand the number of schools offering Arabic, in particular amongst non-faith schools of which only very few offer the subject. However, as the results of this data show, expanding provision to non-faith schools is not enough. Within these schools, Arabic should be made available to a wide range of students, so that it is not just seen as an option for those with Arab heritage or religious ties to the language. Furthermore, there is a need for a strategic approach to teaching and examining the language in such settings, so that students who start learning the language from scratch are not disadvantaged in any way, in comparison to their heritage learner counterparts.

Differentiation

Since differences in the overall performance of HLL and NHLLs were significant, teachers may consider a number of options in differentiating between students' needs and abilities. One such option would be streamlining classes, offering separate lessons for each group so as to focus, for example, on reading and listening skills with NHLLs whilst concentrating earlier on in the year on writing skills with HLLs, or teaching strategies for HLLs to differentiate between their dialect and MSA, which they noted as difficult.

Alternatively, if kept within the same class, which may be more feasible for smaller schools or classes, HLLs may be encouraged to play the role of 'cultural broker' where possible, particularly when it comes to speaking Arabic, since this was noted as being useful in some classes. This could serve the dual purpose of providing HLLs with opportunities to practice their MSA speaking skills and offering NHLLs opportunities to listen to Arabic being spoken in the classroom, since audio-visual resources are scarce. This may prove a particularly useful model in cases like School 1, in which a large number of students are proficient in the language, and could help their classmates practice their speaking and listening skills. Care would need to be taken in ensuring that this exercise, however, does not demotivate some students who, in comparing themselves to their HLL counterparts, may feel intimidated or that their speaking skills are inadequate.

Resources – Sharing & Development

The issue of resources was identified by both teachers and students across the sample as an area of concern. It appears, thus, that the problem of resources highlighted by researchers such as Anderson and Suleiman (2009), Wahba (2006), and Al-Batal (2007) in the American adult learner context also applies to GCSE classrooms. This is clearly an area which needs to be addressed not only by researchers in order to establish the kinds of resources and activities which would promote effective learning, but also by teachers and curriculum designers in this country and abroad.

Whilst there are a growing number of print resources for learning Arabic in general, material aimed at students studying for the GCSE is scarce. In comparison to other GCSE subjects, online searches yield precious little in the way of quantity or variety⁹. Clearly there is a market then for the development of textbooks, worksheets, and other teaching aids. However, rather than wait for these to appear, one recommendation is that Arabic teachers share their resources online, as do teachers across the country for other GCSE subjects. The teachers in this study spoke of regularly developing or adapting their own resources, no doubt a practice adopted by Arabic teachers around the UK. Thus, online sharing platforms, whereby teachers pool resources they have developed or found themselves may not only alleviate some of the burden placed on teachers to develop their own materials, but may offer opportunities to also share ideas within the Arabic teaching profession for engaging tasks, exercises and approaches to keep students motivated throughout the year.

This may also prove a valuable tool for students. In schools in which it is unfeasible to offer streamlined provision, an alternative approach might be to direct students of differing abilities to online resources via which they can supplement their own learning, thus facilitating differentiation and offering opportunities to engage with different varieties and applications of Arabic both within and outside the classroom. This may aid in addressing some of the dissatisfaction students feel towards the course as it currently exists, as discussed below.

In addition, this may address the complaint raised regarding the lack of audio-visual material, and 'fun' language learning activities, which was a source of demotivation for some students. An online collection of resources and links to such material, may fill this gap, and help to alleviate the burden of long and arduous internet searches placed on teachers.

Timeframe

One problem identified by several teachers was the volume of vocabulary required for the exam. The specification includes 79 pages of words students are required to learn, totally almost 2,000 individual items. Teachers in one school themselves suggested taking longer to cover the GCSE material as a solution to this problem. These teachers had taken to introducing GCSE vocabulary with Year 7 students in preparation for the exam in 5 years' time. This allowed them time in Years 10 and 11 to hone students written and spoken skills.

⁹ (although there are 2 websites which exist which offer some schemes of work and worksheets, and a facebook group used by a number of Arabic teachers.)

This, of course, is only feasible in schools where there is freedom to introduce Arabic from KS3. This presents an obstacle for non-faith schools in particular, since there may not be the scope to introduce the language earlier than Year 10, thus potentially excluding complete beginners from taking up the language or attaining a high grade.

Motivation

One major theme arising from this study was that of students' motivation. This refers both to students' reasons for studying the language, as well as their engagement and interest in the subject during and outside of class. In relation to the former, it appears that many students' expectations of what they will learn in their Arabic GCSE course are often at odds with what is being taught. These desires and expectations, however, are not always articulated by the students in the classroom. Teachers are thus encouraged to gauge students' interests at the beginning of the course (and if possible, at multiple points during the year to track any changes). This would then help them to cater to students' expectations and keep students engaged throughout the year. If, for example, there are students in the class who wish to communicate with their families, extra material could be provided to highlight the ways in which students can use MSA and adapt it to their home environment. On the other hand, if students are driven by a desire to understand religious texts, examples of vocabulary or grammatical rules could be drawn from these sources so as to highlight the application of students' knowledge to that which they are interested in. This does place greater demands on teachers. However, if this strategy is adopted alongside the sharing of resources recommendation, these two practices may counterbalance each other in terms of workload. It also has the potential to produce higher levels of engagement and subsequently higher levels of achievement amongst students as a result of their increased motivation, as has been demonstrated in studies in other languages/ contexts (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013).

In addition to information regarding students' motivations, increased awareness of students' linguistic backgrounds and their relationship to the Arabic language would also be of use to teachers. Knowledge, for example, of the fact that some students from Urdu-speaking backgrounds use knowledge of their home language to aid in learning Arabic is a strategy that could be utilized by teachers to aid the memorization of vocabulary, through approaches such as the key-word method. Although this may be more difficult for teachers who do not speak the same home languages as their students, an awareness of the skills students bring to the classroom would aid teachers in helping students to identify tools and methods they can use for developing Arabic language skills, thus easing the task of acquiring Arabic in the short space of time provided for the GCSE.

Furthermore, an understanding of students' identities from their own perspective could help teachers encourage students to develop an affinity with the language and so conceptualise it as part of their language identity (Dörnyei, 2005) Recent studies into students' motivation theorise that more motivated language learners visualize their future self-concepts as incorporating language skills. Care should be taken to draw links and highlight those areas of students' language learner identities that relate to the Arabic language so as to motivate students throughout the year. Whilst these may be scarce, incidents such as the mislabeling by one teacher of a Somali student as 'not-Arab' when the student herself identified as such may prove a source of demotivation for students since this creates a gulf between her identity and the language.

A final recommendation with regards to students' motivations relates to the very low levels of career and future-study related reasons given by learners for studying the language. As aforementioned, this may be due to the fact that students in this sample are limited in their travel opportunities. However, what is equally as likely is that students are unaware of career or university options that make use of Arabic language skills, nor the importance of Arabic globally. Highlighting these prospects to students throughout the year could heighten students' engagements with the language, and help them to visualize themselves using Arabic in the future in their places of work. In addition, highlighting opportunities for students to utilize their language skills during their school or university careers, for example through volunteering or charity work, may also combat the view espoused by some students that Arabic has little utility in their day-to-day lives.

Transparency & Authenticity

According to Wilmsen 'it is an open secret in the Arabic teaching profession that the language taught in the classroom is not the same as that used in speech' (2006, p.125). It is clear from a reading of the syllabus and from talking to students in this study, many of whom were disillusioned by their Arabic studies, that this statement could be applied to the UK secondary school context. There appears to be a lack of transparency about the nature of the Arabic language taught in the classroom and the potential application of skills acquired in the GCSE course to real life situations. Solving the mismatch of skills and language varieties will take time, effort, and money, but in the meantime making the nature of the course clear to students from the outset may avoid some of the frustrations and disappointment that the students in this sample felt towards the course. By highlighting and emphasizing the areas in which students can apply their knowledge, for example in reading newspapers, websites, novels, and any crossover between MSA and dialect/ classical Arabic, students can better perceive and measure the fruits of their effort.

Language Varieties

Data from both the examination tasks and the interviews indicates that both students who are exposed to vernacular forms of Arabic, and those who undertake Arabic instruction in a religious context have an advantage in the realms of MSA. Whilst further research is needed into exactly how this knowledge translates into better performance on exam tasks, it is clear that neither exposure to dialects, nor classical Arabic negatively impacted students' performance. This offers support for the introduction or incorporation of both these varieties into the Arabic GCSE classrooms. This should, of course, be done with care and caution, and offered in line with students' motivations, with a reminder that it is the MSA variety that is being examined overall. Whilst it is not required for examination purposes, exposure to and knowledge of dialects appears to have helped HLLs in both the reading and listening papers, and application of language skills to religious texts, as is done in the '*Alimah*' course, appears to have aided students in the writing component of the course. The inclusion of these varieties thus holds the potential not only to boost students' satisfaction with the course, but to boost their language skills, and increase their cultural awareness.

Networking & Representation

A further recommendation which could aid in the development and sharing of ideas amongst the Arabic teaching profession is the establishment of an organization or association which represents and brings together teachers to facilitate the improvement and expansion of Arabic language provision.

The British Council organizes an annual conference on Conference for Arabic Language and Culture, which has proved an invaluable opportunity for Arabic language professional to network, and which is being followed up via a series of events and projects. However, at present, no formal organization exists to represent Arabic language teachers in the UK. Whilst there are various networks on social media, it seems Arabic language teachers generally operate independently without the support of their counterparts in other schools. A strong recommendation from this research, one which would aid not only in improving the areas of practice but also research and policy, would be the establishment of such a network and regular events and opportunities for teachers to meet and share ideas and resources, and tackle the challenges that so many appear to be facing.

RESEARCH

Further research is needed into the areas of Arabic language learners in the UK, particularly in the settings of secondary schools, since this is the only level at which students take standardized examinations. Investigation into the teaching and learning of Arabic at primary level is also necessary. Empirical studies are required into the effects of different methods of teaching, of incorporating different varieties of Arabic in the classroom, and of streamlining students into different classes. Further investigation too into students' performance on speaking exams are also necessary, since they were beyond the scope of this study.

Differences between HLLs and NHLLs should also be further explored to strengthen the conclusions reached in this study, and to explore whether or not the differences in performance exist across a wider sample of schools. From this, new theories of the categorization of HLLs can be developed which apply to the Arabic language. Further domains of study, highlighted by this particular research also require further examination. These include: the motivations of Arabic learners, the effects of extra-curricular study on students' performance, in particular those students studying the 'Alimah course, and the links and benefits of students' home/ first languages, in particular Urdu and Somali, and how these aid learners' progress in acquiring MSA.

POLICY

Curriculum Design

The findings of this study raise serious questions for those in charge of setting and designing the Arabic GCSE curriculum and examinations. The significant differences in HLL and NHLL performance raises the issue of the suitability of a single exam for such a broad spectrum of students. If students of Arabic heritage backgrounds are not being sufficiently challenged by current examinations, and if students of non-Arabic heritage backgrounds are being excluded or discouraged from taking the exams a result of both the difficulty of meeting

the requirements for the exams, as was evidenced by the views expressed during the interviews in this study, then the current system is not fit for purpose, and certainly not for expansion.

The developments in the GCSE proposed in 2016, for first teaching in 2017, which include the incorporation of a Higher and Foundation Tier go some way to helping teachers differentiate between students. However, the raising of the levels assessed by the exam across the tiers, which brings them in line with those for French, Spanish, and other MFLs, is problematic given the fact that the teaching of Arabic in non-faith schools before KS4 is rare, and presents a further obstacle to the expansion of provision both between and within schools.

It is vital that developments be guided by a clear understanding of the structure and nature of the Arabic language, not just theoretically, but as it is used in practice, and by research into the Arabic language learner population. Provision must also take account of students' motivations for learning the language, and those practices and subject content which may demotivate them and discourage them from pursuing their Arabic studies. Whilst there is of course a need for standardization between languages in terms of the levels reached by GCSE/ A-Level, there is also a need for authenticity and skills that can be practically applied. In these domains, Arabic differs from such languages as German, French, or Spanish, a fact which should be reflected in the curriculum and examinations.

Teacher Training

If provision is to be expanded, there is also a dire need for more teacher training. As aforementioned, only one university offers a PGCE in Arabic, and whilst SOAS is also offering teacher training course in conjunction with the Qatar Foundation International, more needs to be done to make this training accessible to teachers around the country, both in terms of time and location. Bodies such as the AMS and Muslim Teachers Association may also consider providing this training in addition to the services they currently provide to UK Muslim faith schools. In the longer term, the expansion of Arabic teaching will prove highly problematic if not impossible without an increase in the availability of teacher training/ qualifications for Arabic teachers.

Whilst the push for the expansion of the provision of Arabic language learning is a good thing, there is clearly a need to investigate and improve the current system so that effective models and approaches to teaching and assessing the language may be developed before/ as expansion takes place. Further developments in research, policy, practice are needed to ensure that students are being catered to at GCSE level, and that teachers are being supported to offer the best provision possible if the aims of expanding the availability of Arabic is to be met. Not only are independent efforts in each of these arenas necessary, but a concerted and collaborative effort between teaching professionals, researchers, curriculum designers, and examiners is also needed to ensure that each area informs the other.

LIMITATIONS

A number of limitations were encountered in conducting this study, which support the need for further research to confirm the findings highlighted in this report.

- The generalizability of results is limited by the sample size. This relates both to the number of schools involved, the number of participants overall and in each category of learner, and in terms of the backgrounds of students and teachers involved. The absence of students from other faith backgrounds is a limitation that should be remedied in future studies in order to better test for differences between HLLs and NHLLs according to an ancestral-based definition.
- An exploration of differences in performance on speaking tasks would also help to expand our understanding of the extent of any HLL advantage.
- An examination of performance amongst students in non-faith schools would also be of great value, though unfortunately was beyond the remit of this particular report.
- This study offered a cross-sectional analysis of differences between students of heritage and non-heritage backgrounds, highlighting an imbalance in performance between the two groups, a longitudinal study would provide valuable insight into whether these differences persist, and if so, whether the two groups would benefit from separate learning paths, or whether instruction can serve to level the playing field and equip NHLLs with the skills needed to perform as well as their HLL counterparts.

CONCLUSION

Despite the limitations hitherto outlined, this study offers a major step forward in researching the learning and teaching of Arabic in the UK. It highlights a number of important findings relating to:

- the demographics of the Arabic GCSE student population,
- the difficulty in categorizing Arabic language learners using existing frameworks,
- significant differences in the performance of different categories of students on exam tasks,
- perceptions of performance amongst students and teachers,
- the nature of participants' learning and teaching experiences, in particular students' motivations.

A number of recommendations are made based on these findings for all those involved in the provision and development of Arabic language teaching. It is hoped that these will go some way to aiding the process of improving and expanding provision of this much-needed language across the UK.

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