The Challenges Facing the Study of Arabic in the UK

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Introduction

If one accepts that language is an important key to understanding and interacting with different cultures, then the significance of nurturing expertise in Arabic and other Middle-Eastern languages such as Persian, Turkish, Kurdish and Hebrew needs little explanation beyond opening a newspaper in today’s tumultuous political climate. Yet the study of Middle Eastern languages faces serious challenges that, unlike some modern European languages, are not directly related to student uptake at university, which has remained relatively constant. This paper will begin by explaining briefly why the study of Arabic is important. It will then outline the major challenges currently facing the creation of UK expertise in Arabic. These fall into three overlapping categories, elements of which also resonate with language study more broadly in the UK. First are the practical challenges, such as the near impossibility of producing competent expertise in so-called ‘difficult’ languages from scratch at university. Second are the substantive challenges, such as the need to recognize and stream different types of Arabic to cater to a variety of learning goals that are clearly mapped onto targeted outcomes; (crudely put, there is little point in sending speakers of Egyptian Arabic on intelligence missions to Iraq). The third and final set of challenges relates to strategic planning and funding. Lastly, the paper concludes by proposing broad solutions to counter the challenges identified.

The Importance of Studying Arabic

There is, of course, intrinsic scholarly, cognitive and intellectual value in the study of Arabic but, for the sake of incontrovertible argument, this paper focuses on values that are of immediate relevance to UK interests. The rationale is at once driven by cultural, security and economic imperatives. Arabic is one of the six official languages of the United Nations and is now the fifth most widely spoken language in the world. Close to 300 million people speak Arabic as their first language, covering a vast region of 23 countries (referred to as the Arabic-speaking world) stretching from the Persian Gulf in the East to the Atlantic Ocean in the West, from the Mediterranean Sea in the North to the Indian Ocean in the South. The Arabic-speaking world encompasses a complex multiplicity of cultures and religions, including Christians, Jews and other religious minorities whose first language is Arabic, alongside a Muslim majority that itself embraces a variety of different and often conflicting religious strands. Moreover, there are approximately a further billion Muslims worldwide who are not native Arabic speakers, but who are expected to engage with Arabic as the language of divine revelation, enshrined in the Holy Qur’an and used daily in the five prayers. Both the Arabic-speaking world and the broader Muslim world have rapidly expanding populations. About 40% of those in the Arabic-speaking world are under the age of 14 and they have almost doubled as a proportion of the global population over the last half century. Even more significantly, Islam is the world’s fastest growing religion. There are about two million Muslims living in Britain. It is therefore clearly in UK interests to equip the next generation with at least some linguistic and cultural understanding of the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Added to this cultural rationale are the obvious security benefits (both at home and abroad) of being able to understand and communicate effectively with a highly volatile part of the world.
Many experts now believe that, had we nurtured Arabic expertise on a broader scale decades earlier, certain events such as the drawing up of artificial borders in the Arabic-speaking world to create new nation states, or various recent Western interventions in its internal affairs, might have been undertaken with greater sensitivity, perhaps sparing at least some of the challenges faced by the region today. The dependence of Middle East experts on information selected for translation or originally transmitted in European languages inevitably imposes a filter. A recent practical example of this might be the 2011 analysis and reportage in the early days of the Egyptian revolution, which tended to be skewed towards articulate media-friendly English-speaking protestors located in Tahrir Square, creating an impression that Egyptian society was composed of secular liberals until Islamist election victories revealed otherwise.

Third, it is in the UK’s economic interests to create the linguistic expertise that enables us to engage effectively with the Arabic-speaking world. A 2008 CBI report highlighted the lack of language skills amongst British employees as genuinely problematic. 72% of Britain’s international trade is with non-English speaking countries, but only one in ten people in Britain’s work-force can speak a foreign language. 49% of employers are dissatisfied with even university leavers’ foreign language skills.¹ The 2009 Worton report singled out Arabic as important for both the security and business contexts. 15% of British employers are now looking for staff with Arabic language skills and an understanding of Arab culture(s) and business behaviour.²

Practical Challenges

Now that we have outlined why the study of Arabic is important, what are the challenges to implementation? Currently, Arabic is taught as part of a degree course at 16 British universities, Persian at six universities and Turkish at four. Compare this with German which, with a third as many native speakers as Arabic and roughly the same as Turkish or Persian, is currently taught at 54 British universities. The point here is in no way to diminish the importance of sustaining support for and encouraging greater uptake of German and other European languages, but rather to stress the urgent need to enhance provision for Middle Eastern languages. This is no easy feat, for it is not simply a question of increased funding, but a more complex matter of quality control, coordination and long-term strategic planning.

The greatest practical challenge to creating UK expertise in Arabic is the short lead-time currently allocated to this task. On starting my own degree, I was disconcertingly informed by my professor that “the first 25 years are the hardest”. Whilst I remain hopeful that this is an exaggeration, it is certainly the case that starting from scratch at university is unlikely after three or four years to create well-rounded Arabists with the flexible repertoire of dialects and familiarity with classical Arabic texts required to produce a deep knowledge of the region’s different societies, cultures and religions. For example, a fast-track Masters degree in Middle East Studies or Arab World Studies with bolt-on language will rarely impart more than a superficial practical ability to engage linguistically; the sophistication of Arabic required to read proficiently, let alone conduct deep research, requires a much longer lead-time. Likewise, it is a mistake to believe that language can be taught in isolation from the history and cultures of the societies in which it is used, particularly given the complexities of the Arabic-speaking world. The notion of farming out language teaching to a specialist Language Centre may

² Worton, para 110.
produce efficiencies of scale but such decisions must be taken on the understanding that the quality and depth of societal knowledge, which is generated inter-dependently with linguistic knowledge, will be compromised. Conversely, in recognition of the challenges associated with learning Arabic, some universities offer entire degrees in ‘Arab Studies’ that do not require any Arabic language study at all. In short, the foundations on which claims to Arabic expertise are based, both by institutions and their graduates, vary enormously.

The first and most obvious step to tackling the challenge of creating genuine expertise is to encourage the study of language at primary and secondary school levels. A robust grounding in a European language can both encourage and provide the building blocks required for the accelerated acquisition of other ‘lesser-taught’ languages later on. Naturally, the ideal solution would be for the UK to embrace Arabic and other strategically important languages as part of the mainstream school curriculum. At present, many Muslim parents send their children to mosque school to learn Arabic, meaning the formal highly classical Arabic of the Qur’an. The British school curriculum, by contrast, could teach a contemporary living Arabic with a broader application. Creating an environment in which Muslim and non-Muslim pupils learn everyday usable Arabic side by side would help to build community cohesion. This is clearly important in a time of mounting tensions between elements within the community and the potential radicalization of young Muslims. Language is a major lever for cultural understanding, and hostility is largely bred of misunderstanding. Cultural disagreement will still occur, but it need not be threatening and divisive when it is based on knowledge rather than ignorance. Even the most modest initiatives on this front can reap significant benefits and carry huge symbolic value in the community.

Several British primary and secondary schools already offer Arabic.\(^3\) The quality of teaching, however, varies considerably. It is sometimes assumed that a native Arabic speaker, perhaps someone already on the school staff, might be able to teach extra-curricular Arabic. There are several problems with this assumption. First, the written form of Arabic differs significantly from its current spoken forms, having been protected from evolving apace owing to its sanctification as the language of the holy Qur’an; thus even native speakers need to have learnt formal written Arabic. Second, the vast geography covered by the Arabic-speaking world engenders significant divergent forms of spoken Arabic (Gulf, Egyptian, Levantine, North African and so on, as well as their many sub-groups), despite the political desires of pan-Arabism enthusiasts to play down these differences. This means that the language being taught may not be standard Arabic and may not be broadly applicable. A third element to consider is that language teaching is an acquired skill rather than a natural by-product of native linguistic ability. The idiosyncrasies of Arabic or Turkish grammar, at however basic a level, are not necessarily best explained to those attuned to Indo-European languages by someone who has grown up considering them ‘normal’. Even in university departments, core language training is a grueling task and is therefore often passed to native-speaking postgraduates or early career staff rather than trained specialists.

Here, it is worth pointing out that grammar does actually matter in the context of many, although perhaps not all, desired learning outcomes. At the simplest level, grammar provides the infrastructure that enables one to make logical sense of a language such that one can connect words accurately and manipulate them to function in different contexts. Even dialects follow their own peculiar ‘grammar’, however flexibly they relate to formal grammar. Often

\(^3\) In 2010, only nine state schools offered Arabic as timetabled classes, although a further 69 state schools offered informal lessons via after-school clubs and the like.
the key to full comprehension lies in an understanding of the grammar, particularly in languages like formal Arabic and Turkish where sentences can be several lines long and one cannot rely on word order alone to reveal the gist.

Substantive Challenges

This leads us to the consideration of the substantive challenges facing Arabic study in the UK. Currently, Arabic is a ‘catch-all’ label applied to a broad variety of university courses that vary considerably in the level of sophistication of the Arabic they offer. This observation is not intended to support linguistic snobbery, for it is important to recognize that every register of Arabic has its place. However, it is essential to take a more organized and transparent approach to the types of Arabic on offer. An Arab ambassador to the UK recently complained to me that he was fed up at having to smile politely as British military personnel addressed him in jaysh (army) Arabic. He found the earthy slang insulting, whereas they misguidedly imagined themselves to be jovially building cultural bridges. Ideally, courses would clearly identify and map out routes that address divergent types of Arabic to ensure graduates are fit for their chosen purpose. For example, those wishing to engage with the media, formal business or diplomacy should be able to read, write and on occasion also speak Modern Standard Arabic; those wishing to interrogate religious, legal or literary texts require a profound knowledge of classical Arabic; and those engaging in fieldwork or operations require the spoken Arabic dialect specific to the intended region. Put differently, a top Arabic graduate thoroughly versed in core Islamic texts would likely still struggle with the transcript of an everyday conversation, let alone be able to join in seamlessly, unless s/he already had significant exposure to the region in question; conversely, a fluent Arabic speaker might struggle to write formal Arabic or understand important Islamic texts.

One solution to this might be to begin Arabic training with a foundation period studying Modern Standard Arabic, then guide students to different streams of specialization, such as classical Arabic for textual research or dialect work for social sciences. Currently, such distinctions tend to be blurred, bringing two potential disadvantages. First, where courses remain opaque over the type and level of the Arabic they teach, this results in a mismatch between learning outcomes and employer (and indeed student) expectations. Second, where courses try to cover all types of Arabic, they often fail to create deep expertise in any. Of course, one excellent way to tackle this would be to teach Modern Standard Arabic in primary and secondary schools, such that universities can focus on creating specialist expertise, as is the case with most Modern European Language degrees. A further refinement might be to create more flexible options for the ‘year abroad’ which is a mandatory component of most Arabic degrees. Currently, entire cohorts of students study Arabic together at a host institution in the Arab world. The temptation is for them to live and socialize together. A better solution would be to identify internships through which students use and refine both spoken and professional registers of Arabic in real life situations whilst gaining valuable work experience and integrating with the local population. One reason why this obvious solution has not yet proliferated may be that many UK universities charge full tuition fees for the year abroad, pocketing the difference between the home fees and those of the cheaper Arab host institution.

Planning and Funding

The final set of challenges to the study of Arabic in the UK relates to strategic planning and funding. The creation of real expertise requires a coherent centralized strategy that is sustained over the long-term to avoid situations like the scramble for Arabists after 9/11. As we have
explained above, competent Arabists cannot be created overnight. In the US State Department for example, despite massive investment in Arabic language training after 9/11, only 10 of its 34,000 employees were rated ‘fluent’ in Arabic three years later.4

It was in recognition of the urgent need to invest in strategically important and vulnerable languages that the British Government funded, through the joint research councils, a national Language-Based Area Studies (LBAS) initiative with £25 million over an initial five year period (2006-11), with additional funding later approved for two further two year stints until 2016.5 The LBAS initiative recognized the need to fund researchers operating in the original languages of the regions under scrutiny and, in parallel, to create intensive language training programmes in order to provide a flow of expertise to the public and private sectors. Likewise in 2008, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) published a report on Strategically Important and Vulnerable Subjects (SIVS). It recommended that there should be a language entitlement in primary schools (this is now policy) and advocated alternative qualifications such as Asset Languages qualifications, linked to the Government’s Languages Ladder. It also recommended that the range of languages on offer in schools should be broadened, moving “away from mainstream European languages and towards languages needed by business, for example, Arabic and Chinese”. These views were reinforced in the 2009 Worton report, a review of the health of modern foreign languages in English higher education, commissioned by HEFCE.6 Subsequent reports published by the British Academy continue to stress the vital role that language expertise can play in UK diplomacy and security in particular.7

Why, therefore, is so little progress being made? The main reason is that the approach has been piecemeal and lacks coherence at the national level. UK investment has tended to come in the form of stop-start injections rather than reliable support for long-term infrastructure. The UK government provides seed money and expects academics to work towards making new initiatives self-sustainable. Yet the creation of expertise ab initio in ‘difficult’ languages such as Arabic is costly, for it requires intensity and a low student-teacher ratio to be effective. On paper, it may look as though private funding is indeed flowing into Arabic and Islamic Studies. One 2009 report estimated that eight UK universities had between them accepted about £250 million from Middle Eastern donors since 1995, with almost 70% of this earmarked for Islamic Studies.8 Yet we must be cautious of considering this evidence of self-sustainability. Donors do not generally want to fund nuts and bolts activities such as language training, preferring instead to sponsor specific research projects that can be undertaken by those already linguistically trained. Moreover, language aside, relying heavily on private funding raises concerns over academic integrity. Donations tend to cover only a limited range of the cultural and political spectrum because institutions naturally table uncontroversial projects that are likely to appeal to,

5 Four areas of expertise were selected for funding by virtue of being both vulnerable and of national strategic interest: the Arabic-speaking world, China, Japan and Central and Eastern Europe (including Russia, the Caucasus and parts of Central Asia).
6 Worton, para 46.
7 “Lost for Words: The Need for Languages in UK Diplomacy and Security” (November 2013) and “The Art of Attraction: Soft Power and the UK’s Role in the World” (March 2014).
8 Robin Simcox, “A Degree of Influence: The Funding of Strategically Important Subjects at UK Universities”, published by the Centre for Social Cohesion, part of the right-wing think-tank Civitas, in 2009.
rather than shame, their foreign donors.\textsuperscript{9}

A further challenge worth highlighting is the creative way in which university administrators can sometimes deploy new funding such that they follow the letter but not necessarily the spirit of an agreement in order to alleviate pressures elsewhere in their budgets. Most commonly, a proportion of donations might be used to take on the burden of existing sunk costs, such as heating, lighting and office space under the rubric of ‘Full Economic Costing’. More controversial perhaps is that existing academic infrastructure might be repackaged to look like new infrastructure. This can apply to both facilities and courses. With regard to facilities, a ‘new’ centre might be created for the donor when in reality it is little more than a virtual staff reshuffle validated by a new plaque on the wall. Courses too can be repackaged to fit a new funding agreement, either by simply changing the name or by creating a new course code and doubling up, such that students recruited for a ‘new’ programme are in reality slotted into existing courses - an arrangement reminiscent of an airline codeshare that masquerades as an expansion of service.

**Conclusion**

If Britain’s need for Arabic expertise is to be addressed seriously and achieve scale, it must begin at grass roots level, in the primary and secondary education systems rather than at university. This would bring many advantages, but three stand out. First, UK policy towards the Middle East would clearly benefit from a broader and deeper resource of expertise. Developing an adequate linguistic base for this requires many years of study, so it is better for universities to offer options that build on a solid existing base rather than starting courses \textit{ab initio}. Second, knowledge of Arabic is vital to enable Britain’s growing population of young Muslims to engage critically with their religious texts rather than simply absorbing passively any given interpretation. Third, starting in schools reaches students in their early formative years, before stereotypes and prejudices take root; it also creates a basic pool of knowledge among a broader proportion of the population, some of whom would inevitably pursue further study. Currently, UK schooling remains largely Euro-centric, particularly in languages, yet our global future lies with a shifting balance of power as the importance of regions such as the Far East, the Subcontinent, Africa and the Middle East rises.

With regard to Arabic at British universities, curricula vary considerably with regard to the type, quality and depth of the Arabic on offer in ways that remain opaque. Arabic curricula need to promote the creation of real expertise by mapping out clear streams of specialization in particular kinds of Arabic to match a well-defined range of learning outcomes. The coordinated planning, intensity of training and small student-teacher ratio required to tackle this effectively is costly and requires sustained investment on a national scale over the long-term. Although funding in Middle East departments might look significant on paper, particularly from private sources in the Islamic world, it is generally linked to specific research projects and not to essential language training. To sum up, without a sustainable long-term national strategy that is comprehensive, consistent and cohesive (aligning schools, universities, policy makers, and end users), the UK will not be in a position to protect its national strategic interests at home and abroad.

\textsuperscript{9} Some examples of public concern are: “Extremism Fear over Islamic Studies Donations” (\textit{The Telegraph}, 13 April 2008); “Foreign Donors Threaten Academic Freedom” (\textit{The Telegraph}, 28 March 2009); “Dark Forces Telling Our Universities What They Can Teach” (\textit{The Sunday Express}, 13 March 2011).