



Applied Linguistics

Elixir Appl. Ling. 68A (2014) 22488-22491

Elixir
ISSN: 2229-712X

Arabic Teaching in an ELT Mirror: Is it theory-informed?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 13 September 2013;

Received in revised form:

22 February 2014;

Accepted: 14 March 2014;

Keywords

Mirror,
Religious circles,
Arabic language,
ALT.

ABSTRACT

Talking about Arabic language invokes mixed feelings in Iranians. On the negative plane, it brings to mind bitter memories of Arab invasion a millennia ago, when they dominated the empire of Persia for three centuries during which radical changes to the language and culture of Persia were engineered. On the positive side, Arabic is the medium of all religious occasions, and enjoys an air of awe, authority, and sacredness to it. This situation makes Arabic unapproachable and innovations and changes to Arabic language policy and its related educational policies difficult, dangerous, and complicated because one easily runs the risk of being accused of hostility, heresy, or conspiracy against a sacred language. It is for this same reason that the major agency responsible for policy planning and implementation about Arabic resides outside of the organizations commonly in charge of language and educational planning; the responsibility lies with the seminary and other religious circles and anyone outside of that circle talking differently about the language, no matter what his professional credentials are, is considered an intruder and is seen with suspicion. In such an ideologically-driven atmosphere, disentangling beliefs from facts proves daunting. As a consequence, despite its prevalence, the quality of Arabic language teaching in Iran remains a mystery, as no serious large-scale study aiming to subject it to empirical investigation has yet been carried out. Aiming at filling this lacuna, we undertook a study in the hope that we may throw some light on of Arabic language teaching (ALT, henceforth). Our study was informed by theories and practices commonly in vogue in teaching other modern languages, particularly English. Collecting data from a survey administered to 53 Arabic teachers, we found that ALT is a different world from ELT in its various dimensions and it clearly fails to meet the standards of modern language teaching orthodoxy. Teachers were found to be lacking the minimum requirements of language teachers such as proficiency, language teaching methodology knowledge base, and the basics of linguistic knowledge needed for a language teacher.

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Introduction

In his Language Policy textbook, Spolsky (2004) identifies three components of language policy namely, practices, beliefs, and attempts at interventions to turn around the former two components. Language education is one of the main channels through which governments implement the interventions they desire to the practices and beliefs of their citizens to languages. In Iran, the official language policy limits language education to the triple languages of Persian, English, and Arabic. While Persian (Farsi) is the single official language of the country, English is taught as a foreign language or to borrow from Kachru (.....), is a case of English in the expanding circle. The situation of Arabic is however different, making it difficult to place it along the boundaries of second or foreign languages.

Arabic is not only the language of the dominant religion (Islam) of the country, it has also established very close ties with Persian language and literature so much so that it is next to impossible for any Iranian to write or say a sentence without using at least one Arabic term. With the exception of those in language-related fields, lay people in Iran are not even able to tell words with a Persian origin from those of Arabic etymology. All main classic religious texts are written and read in Arabic, with Quran being the typical example. Although today's Qurans frequently come with translations, it is the Arabic version that carries sacredness and authority, and translations are often

relegated to an inferior status. Paradoxically, most people do not study the translation that accompanies the verses despite the fact that the majority are not proficient enough in Arabic to comprehend the main text. They do so because of the language beliefs they hold about Arabic, the pronunciation of very words of which brings salvation, purity, and peace. This comes from a language ideology that has been encouraged by Quran itself. In numerous examples throughout Quran, it is emphasized that the word of Arabic is to be revered as it is the most eloquent language.

Iran has also an Arab population, mainly in the south and south west. As such, Arabic programs are broadcast over local and national channels to help integrate them more into the dominant Iranian culture and community. To its south and west, Iran's neighbors are all Arabic speaking countries (i.e., Iraq, IAU, Kuwait, Bahrain, etc.), some of whose citizens have close ties with Arab citizens inside Iran. In general, anyone trying to clearly define the status of Arabic in the context of Iran finds it hard to whether to assign it a foreign, second, or third language status. Whatever its status is, the official policies realized through media and education system; officials use all their resources to promote the status of Arabic in the community, and insult to the Arabic language amounts to an insult to religion, bordering on blasphemy, which makes one eligible for capital punishment.

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This was to give a background to a reader who might not be familiar with the linguistic policies and practices of the Iranian society. The rest of this paper is about Arabic language teaching. Arabic teaching officially starts in junior high school, where students spend four hours every week learning Arabic. It is a compulsory part of the curriculum and no student can choose not to take it. However, Arabic teaching starts even before children go to schools. In kindergartens, the main learning materials are prayers that are all in Arabic. Kids often come home showing their parents and care-takers their mastery of a new prayer in Arabic, which is often taught and recited in a rhythmic manner. In primary school, Arabic is taught through courses like Quran and religion. By the time they enter secondary schools, most school have memorized many religious Arabic sentences though they are often unable to translate them into Persian in a word for word fashion.

In secondary schools, the teaching of Quran and religion continues along with a new course in Arabic. It has the same hours on the syllabus as that for English. This goes on in senior high school as well. It is clear that Arabic is a main component of school curricula and huge educational resources go into its teaching and learning. Whether it should be on the curriculum or it should not is not our concern in this study as such decisions are made by religious leaders and politician, who are often the same in Iran. Our concern in this study is how Arabic is taught in terms of teaching methods, teaching skills, teachers' attitudes, and testing practices. Our search in Google Scholar yielded no study directly dealing with this topic. We then turned to local periodicals and publications and came up with a handful of publications, none of which were based on firsthand data from either teachers, learners, or other stakeholders in ALT. The few studies we accessed were often based on authors' own personal ideas and impressions and written with an ideological bent (see for example Mirhaji, 1993). This scarcity of serious studies examining the nature of ALT makes this study more timely and worthwhile.

As no study can be done in a vacuum, with no review of previous studies, we turned to the literature in ELT, which is, contrary to ALT, huge and endless to enrich the theoretical foundations of the study. In particular, we draw on classic textbooks in ELT such as Freeman and Anderson (2011), Brown (2000), Chastain (1988), Richards and Rodgers (2001). We benefited most from reviewing such courses in constructing our questionnaire, a detailed description of which follows in the Methods section.

Methods

The Ministry of education is the only body in charge of Arabic teaching, therefore any research into Arabic teaching should obtain data with permission from the ministry and that is no easy job because one has to undergo a complicated bureaucratic process, which sometimes leads to nowhere after exhausting the researcher. Often researchers are accused of spreading pessimism about the efficiency of the state schools. For the above reasons, one has a hard job accessing a randomly selected sample of participants for a study. Thus this study adopted a convenient sampling approach in the South West of the country where there is a big population of Arabic speaking people. Due to this demographic background of the site for this study, the sample is not reprehensive of the population of Arabic teachers given that Arabic teachers in the rest of Iran are all native speakers of Persian. Participants were 53 Arabic teachers, who were all teaching at state secondary schools at the time of this study, 27 were female and 26 male. They had an average of 14 years of teaching experience, with the most experienced

teacher having 28 years teaching record and the youngest one being two years on the job. There were 18 teachers who spoke Arabic as their first language and the rest of participants were Persian speakers, who have learnt Arabic as an additional language. It should be added that the Arab teachers all spoke Persian as their second language. Seven teachers held Associate degrees, 37 seven had a B.A, and nine held M.A degrees. Participants held a diverse range of degrees from agriculture, Islamic jurisprudence, theology, Quran to Arabic literature.

As to the data collection instruments, the researchers had to draw on their experience (the leading author holds a PhD in Arabic teaching and has been teaching it for over a decade) as well as the literature, particularly the ELT literature. We first brainstormed a pool of possible items and then selected the most relevant as to the research questions and aims of the study, ending up with a 37-item, Likert type questionnaire which had an alpha reliability index of .78. The questionnaires were written in Persian because it was thought that one written in Arabic would threaten the validity of the responses due to differential Arabic proficiency that participants had.

The questionnaires were administered to the participants by the leading author. Teachers were reached out through different means, depending on their proximity to the researcher. Some were given the questionnaires in the schools where they taught and the rest were university students of the lead author. The majority took the questionnaires home to fill out and there was a very high returning rate among the participants.

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized in the analysis of data. In particular, we ran t-tests, ANOVA, and measures of central tendency as well as measures of dispersion.

Results and Discussion

In the interest of space, we do not report on all the findings of the study. Rather we selectively go through the more salient points we feel are more of interest and significance to the readers and stakeholders.

One of the main points we liked to know about Arabic teachers was their level of proficiency in the language they were teaching. We have the assumption that a teacher who lacks a good command of the language is not much likely to successfully aid her students pick up the language. To this end, we asked teachers to self-assess their overall Arabic proficiency as well as their proficiency in separate language skills. Table one gives the results of proficiency self-assessment:

Table 1. Results of proficiency self-assessment

| | N | Range | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--------------------------|----|-------|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| Overall Proficiency | 53 | 4.00 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.6038 | 1.02544 |
| Oral proficiency | 53 | 4.00 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.3208 | 1.15648 |
| Written proficiency | 53 | 4.00 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.2264 | 1.06774 |
| Familiarity with culture | 53 | 4.00 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.2642 | 1.04054 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 53 | | | | | |

As the Table demonstrates, taken together, teachers estimated their Arabic proficiency to be moderately high, with the highest score going to the overall proficiency and the lowest for the written proficiency. This was counter-intuitive and it urged us to inspect further in the data for the causes of such a finding. It was speculated that the seemingly acceptable proficiency mean might be contributed more by teachers whose mother tongue was Arabic. To put this speculation to statistical test, we conducted a t-test to compare the proficiency of Arab and non-Arab teachers. As Table 2 shows, the mean score in language proficiency was 2.9 for teachers who were native

speakers of Persian and 4.2 for those who were native speakers of Arabic: a seemingly considerable difference.

Table 2. Mean score for Arab and non-Arab teachers

| Mother Tongue | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---------------------|----|--------|----------------|
| Non-native Teachers | 35 | 2.9143 | .65 |
| Arab Teachers | 18 | 4.2083 | .70 |

To make sure the observed difference is not attributable to chance, we examined the difference using independent t-test. As the results of the test in Table 3 displays, the test was significant at .000, indicating that we are safe in claiming that the observed difference is highly meaningful. This confirms our intuition that the language proficiency of non-Arab teachers must be far below the mean given in Table 1.

Table 3. T-test between Arab and non-Arab proficiency scores

| | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference |
|---------------------------------------|------|------|--------|--------|-----------------|-----------------|
| compositemprofEqual variances assumed | .000 | .993 | -6.640 | 51 | .000 | -1.29 |
| Equal variances not assumed | | | -6.465 | 32.039 | .000 | -1.29 |

As it was remarked in the Methods Section, the teachers sampled in this study are not a representative sample of the population of Arabic teachers in the rest of the country because Khuzestan, where this study took place, is the only province in the country with a population of several million Arab citizens. With the exception Hormozgan and Bandar Abbas, in other provinces of the country no Arab community can be found. Therefore, it is the means for the non-Arab teachers which is a true representative of the population of Arabic teachers not the one for Arab teachers. In the end, it is surmised that Arabic teachers do not enjoy a high level of language proficiency based on results from the self-assessment.

Another area we were interested in studying was the way productive language skills are taught in the Arabic language classroom. In particular, we focused on teaching speaking as we believed that since learners are at relatively low levels of proficiency, they are not likely to be encouraged to get engaged in any serious writing instruction.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics on teaching methodology

| | N | Mean | SD |
|--|----|------|------|
| 1. Speaking Arabic to students in the class | 53 | 2.45 | .99 |
| 2. Speaking Arabic to students outside the class | 53 | 2.20 | 1.11 |
| 3. Using Persian in the class | 53 | 4.01 | .88 |
| 4. Teaching Culture | 53 | 2.39 | .94 |
| 5. Digital Use | 53 | 2.16 | .97 |
| 6. Teaching Speaking skill | 53 | 3.07 | 1.01 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 53 | | |

Table 4 summarizes the results of items that tapped on teachers' preferred ways of teaching speaking, use of Persian language in teaching Arabic, and the extent to which they exploit the potential of digital technology in Arabic instruction.

As the table shows, the mean scores for all aspects related to speaking skill are quite low. On the first item, which is about the extent of using Arabic in addressing students in the class, the mean is 2.45 out of a maximum score of 5. It is clearly evidence to the underuse of Arabic in classes of Arabic instruction. The mean score on the next item is even lower, that is, teachers seldom choose to talk to their students in Arabic out of the class environment. This all gives the false impressions to students that Arabic language is a formal subject to be taught in the class and

not a means of communication to be exploited in everyday interaction.

Culture is part and parcel of language. A language teaching course devoid of cultural aspects is not likely to yield authentic positive outcomes. We asked teachers to report on the extent they try to familiarize learners to the culture of Arab speaking people and countries. The mean score of 2.39 indicates that culture is low on the list of teachers' priorities and it is seldom, if ever, taught.

The use of first language in the teaching of foreign/second language instruction has always been an issue. While it used to be the main medium of instruction in GTM, with the advent of Direct Method and Audiolinuilism, the use of learners' mother tongue was strongly discouraged, mainly on the grounds that it interferes with the shaping of desired language habits in the minds of students. Although both Communicative Language Teaching and Task-based Language Teaching allow for some judicious use of mother tongue if the teachers sees fit, yet the guiding principle is to keep it to a minimum so that learners can come to see language in authentic use. We wanted to know what doses of Persian Arabic teachers use in their classes. The result is very revealing; it has the highest mean among all the other items related to language teaching methodology. The implication is that teachers make overwhelming use of translation in language teaching, which reminds us of the GTM way of language teaching. Either teachers are not aware of current theories and recommendations in language pedagogy, or if they are, they choose not to apply them in their classes. The second possibility is less likely because it does not stand to reason to think that all teachers uniformly choose to act against what they believe to be true way of teaching. Therefore, we feel safe to attribute the overuse of learners' mother tongue to teachers' poor knowledge base in language teaching methodology.

The last item in the above table is the role and presence of digital technology in the Arabic classes. It is today a truism that digital media have the potential to revolutionize education. Some even talk about the possibility of an era of teacherless education, that is, the technological advances have the capacity to replace teachers altogether, making a human teacher a redundancy. Given this prominent role of digital technology, we enquired into the extent to which they are drawn upon in Arabic language instruction. Shockingly, it had the minimum mean score among the items, attracting our attention to the extent to which Arabic classes are behind the time in terms of making use of technology. While today even in rural areas English language schools try to use language laboratories, they are a rarity in Arabic education (see Mirhaji 1993). This is also evidence that Arabic education has not paralleled advances in mainstream language education.

The final area we liked to explore was the language beliefs and attitudes teachers held about Arabic as well as the way teachers saw themselves as professionals. First, we liked to know whether or not teachers are aware of the diglossic nature of Arabic. The first couple of mean scores indicate that there is an acceptable level of consciousness among teachers about the diglossic nature of Arabic. In other words, they are conscious to the fact that the variety of Arabic that features in textbooks is of little authenticity as no Arab community today speaks in this way.

Regarding their own identities as Arabic teachers, teachers admit to taking pride in being Arabic teachers as the mean score of 4.03 indicates. However, when it comes to seeing themselves from the point of view of teachers of other subject matters, they

have a different opinion. The low mean score of 2.7 point to the fact that Arabic teachers feel that they are not kept in high regard by other teachers. They also feel that being an Arabic teacher carries little prestige, as revealed by the mean scores on both items five and six, with means of 2.84 and 2.98 respectively. This negative attitude towards being an Arabic teacher is indicative of the status of Arabic per se in the Iranian community. It has nothing to do with the teachers themselves because they are language teachers in the same way that English teachers are but since Arabic is not accorded a high status by in the society, teachers fail to think of themselves as prestigious professionals.

Table 5. Language beliefs and attitudes about Arabic teachers

| | N | Mean | SD |
|--|----|------|------|
| 1. Standard Arabic is mainly has little communicative functional uses. | 53 | 3.50 | .97 |
| 2. Arabic varieties are very different from the variety taught in schools | 52 | 3.44 | 1.14 |
| 3. I am proud to be an Arabic teacher. | 53 | 4.03 | .85 |
| 4. Arabic teachers have a high status among colleagues who teach other subject matters | 53 | 2.71 | .96 |
| 5. Arabic teachers are among the prestigious teachers. | 53 | 2.84 | .96 |
| 6. Arabic teachers are prestigious in the eye of learners. | 53 | 2.98 | .93 |
| 7. Arabic is the best language. | 53 | 4.41 | .77 |
| 8. Arabic is a holy language | 53 | 4.66 | .47 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 52 | | |

Finally, we elicited teachers' language beliefs. There were two items tapping this construct: one asked teachers whether or not teachers thought Arabic is a holy language and the next one asked them if they thought Arabic is best language of the world. Results of teachers' responses on this theme are interesting as very high scores on both items indicate that they believe Arabic is a sacred language as well as the best language of the world (4.41 and 4.66 respectively). These findings reveal the complexity of language policy issues and the myriad of factors that are at play in shaping citizens' attitudes about languages. In this case, the influence of religious ideology is obvious in forming the attitudes of teachers towards Arabic language. They believe that it is a sacred language. This coupled with the belief that it is the best language show that teachers have a poor linguistic knowledge base that is essential for fruitful language teaching because anyone with a basic linguistic knowledge knows that no language is superior to other languages and all languages are equally adequate in helping their speakers to get their messages across.

Concluding Remarks

Our final assessment of the situation of Arabic teaching in Iran is that of a Cinderella's sister, attesting to the importance of

the first two components of language policy and planning, that is language beliefs and practices. Although the ruling system goes to extremes in giving its whole-hearted support to Arabic, this has not succeeded much in cultivating a favorable attitude in the citizens to invest in its acquisition. A comparison with ELT conditions in the country clearly approves that the huge resources going into Arabic have failed to produce the intended outcomes. While private language schools teaching English have mushroomed across the country, even in villages there are now English language schools, no such language school exist for Arabic. This corroborates the idea that once the former two components of language policy (i.e., language beliefs and practices, discussed in the Introduction) are not for a policy, top-down interventions are doomed to failure. On the other hand, if the favorable language beliefs and practices are there for a language, the spread of the language succeeds even without state support and resources. This is true about English : although attempts are made to depict is something Western with all the stigmas associated with Western ideas and ideologies, people turn a blind eye to the propaganda and invest extensively in learning English.

This situation has left Arabic teaching in its very traditional form, with teachers remaining unaware of the latest developments in theories and practices in both linguistics and applied linguistics. To improve on the situation, a reconsideration of the curricula in teacher training programs as well as in-service training for Arabic teachers is a must.

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