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# Educational Language Policy and Arabic Teaching in Iran: insights from teachers

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### ABSTRACT

Three languages dominate the linguistic atmosphere of the present day Iran, namely, Persian, English, and Arabic. While Persian is the singly official language of the country and English is a case of English in an expanding circle in Kachru's terms, the status and functions of Arabic are less straightforward to delineate. The educational policy of the country is for the teaching of Persian and Arabic to begin in kindergartens and primary schools and postpone English till secondary schools. Arabic is taught under various guises like including teaching Quran, religion, prayers, etc. Despite all the resources, both financial and humanistic, that goes into Arabic teaching, little is known about how the language is taught in terms of syllabus, aims, and language teaching methodology. This study was an attempt to approach Arabic language teaching in an ELT orientation to throw some light on how Arabic is currently taught in Iranian secondary schools. Moreover, we investigated the nature of final examinations and their effects on language teaching. Findings indicate that the productive skills of speaking and writing are given little, if any, attention and final tests and language teaching parallel one another, making it difficult to decide the teaching methodology is under the influence of final tests or it is the tail that wags the dog, i.e., tests driving the syllabus. We also attempted validating an instrument for future studies dealing with Arabic pedagogy. The factors that appeared were not however interpretable sufficiently, mainly due to the inadequacy of the sample of the study.

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### Introduction

The establishment of nation states in the last few centuries gave rise to serious language planning issues and the role of languages in unifying people within geographical boundaries and building a sense of national identity came to the fore like never before. In Iran the triple languages of Persian, English and Arabic are the subject of major state language policies. While Persian remains the single national language, English is taught a foreign language. Arabic however has a more complicated story and does not lend itself easily to dichotomies and classifications through which languages are assigned various functions in different contexts. Arabic resembles a foreign language in the sense that the ordinary Iranian are not capable of writing or speaking in the language; nor are they capable of making sense of everyday Arabic written passages. However, this is one side of the coin and there are certain other features that give Arabic a status different from that of a foreign language. One such feature is that a great number of Arabic words are in common use in Persian, so much so that few Iranians can afford to produce statements that are purely Persian. It also serves as the language of religion and almost all religious rituals are conducted in Arabic. For all the above-mentioned reasons the language policy of the country is that Arabic should be taught to all Iranian students from primary schools. Despite this prevalence, it is Arabic language teaching is extremely underexplored. While the EFL research community is very active in doing numerous research studies on the different aspects of ELT, it is indeed not easy to find empirical studies dealing with Arabic teaching. This study is a preliminary effort to examine a few aspects of Arabic

language teaching in Iran. In particular, it is going to focus on the following areas:

The areas of language are emphasized in final tests.

To what extent teachers deal with the skill of listening.

How much teachers are interested in authentic uses of Arabic which can contribute to their professional development.

And whether teachers with various educational credentials are different in their approach to language teaching.

The literature on Arabic language teaching within the framework commonly in use in other areas of applied linguistics is very scarce. Our search for such studies in Google Scholar failed to yield any results. A handful of studies that were found were mainly in local journals whose publication process we are not sure of. But the thing we are sure about is that none were based on firsthand data from the main stakeholders such as teachers, learners, administrators, or classroom observations. 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

Collecting data from state educational institutions is far from easy because external researchers are not welcome in doing studies in that context. The Ministry of education is the only body in charge of Arabic teaching, therefore any research

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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 seen with pessimism and are advised to limit their studies to areas which the authorities prefer. 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.

In this section we first focus on the psychometric qualities of the instrument we used in collecting data. To probe into its construct validity we ran a factor analysis of variance. The following tables summarize the result of this analysis.

Table 1. KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.498
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1254.722
	df	666
	Sig.	.000

Results from KMO and Bartlett's test show that we can proceed with factor analysis as the KMO value is very close to

the cutoff point value (.5) and Bartlett's test of Sphericity is also significant, indicating that factor analysis can be conducted with the given data.

	Component					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Arabicprofi	.641	.448				
CanSpeakAr	.707	.437				
ArbicSpkClass	.629					-.424
WriteArbic	.816					
SpkArbcOutside	.746					-.406
FarsiExplainAll		.473				
StandardArbic						
ArabicDialects			.678			
TeachCulture	.693					
CultureFamiliar	.734					
Proud	.616			-.423		
Press	.747					
FilmWatch	.726					
FilmButCant					.544	.435
PupilArbcTeach				-.488		
DigitalUse						
ListeningPupil	.508					
TeachSpeak	.777					
Accent	.646					
ReadTranslate	-.430			-.416		
LearningObjs		.453		-.554		
LearnObjBut						
LearnObjButt				.537	.403	
FinalTests				.576		
StatusColleagu			.641			
Prestige	.475	-.423				
PrestigePupil	.617	-.473				
MyChild	.530					.432
NoMotivat		.668				
HaveTo		.719				
BestLang	.470	.416				
HolyLang	.471					
Quran			.667			
Books						
EngTeach			-.564		.511	
LikeMyChoice	.416				-.448	
ArabicTheolog			.417			.471
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.						
a. 6 components extracted.						

The above Table gives the results for the factorial analysis of variance using Varimax rotation. As is clear from the data, the first factor acts as a general factor many items loaded on heavily. Fewer items loaded on the other five factors and there were a good number of items that loaded on multiple factors, making interpretation and factor naming difficult. It is common knowledge in the field that factor analysis requires big sample to give reliable results. Since this study was done with a limited sample of 53, our validation of the instrument failed to give neat, separate factors. However, we hypothesize that with an adequate sample the instrument stands a good chance of validity as the items have all been designed with a clear theoretical framework of language teaching.

One of our research questions was to see if Arabic teachers engage in authentic language activities that might contribute to enhancing their Arabic language proficiency. To this end we asked them to indicate the extent to which they read Arabic press or watch Arabic films. The following table gives the results:

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Press	53	1.00	5.00	2.7358	1.00290	1.006
FilmWatch	53	1.00	5.00	3.0189	1.24793	1.557
Valid N (listwise)	53					

As the table clearly shows the mean for both activities is quite low, considering the maximum possible score that is five. However this result is counterintuitive in the sense that based on our experience we expected a far lower mean for both questions. The reason is that the sample of teachers participated in this study comprised of two categories: One group were teachers whose mother tongue was Arabic and the other were teachers who were native speakers of Persian. We thought that it is the Arab teachers who raise the mean score for the above two questions because naturally they do watch Arabic films or study Arabic press. We therefore saw it fit to run a group comparison t-test to see if the two groups of teachers really differ in their studying Arabic press or watching Arabic films. The following table shows the results.

	MotherTong	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
fp	dimension1 NonArabic	35	2.4143	.72239	.12211
	Arabic	18	3.7778	.91108	.21474

The above table illustrates the mean scores for native and non-native Arabic teachers for the two questions of studying Arabic press and watching Arabic films. The two means seem to be different (2.4 and 3.7). However, to make sure that the difference is not due to chance occurrence, we ran a t-test, the result of which are given in the next table.

T-test shows that the difference between the two mean is not a chance event because it is significant at .000, indicating that it is highly unlikely for this difference to be due to random events. Therefore, the mean score that is typical of the average Arabic teacher is the first one (2.4) because it is this group of teachers which represent the population of Arabic teachers as in provinces other than the one we did our data collection in (Khouzestan), there is no Arab population and therefore no Arabic teacher whose mother tongue is Arabic.

The other research question we try to address is the degree to which Arabic language teaching and final summative tests are aligned. In a similar study, Zamani and Razavipour (2013) found that Arabic language teaching is mainly structured around grammar and translating short stretches of language like phrases, sentences, and short passages. Here we asked teachers to show

their agreement or otherwise to the this statement: final tests only measure grammar and meaning of words and phrases. The following table shows the results of their responses to the question.

This table shows that the mean score for teachers responses to this question is 3.98, which is considering the possible maximum score of 5 is a high score and significantly above the neutral value. It means that teachers are in agreement with the proposition that final tests encourage a grammar and translation approach to teaching Arabic. It is however not clear whether it is the tests that are driving the reduced curriculum or the other way around, that is , tests are a true reflection of the content of teaching.

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.

### Conclusions

The major findings of this study were the following:

First, teachers rarely choose to study authentic materials written in Arabic, nor do they go for watching films produced in Arabic language. This raises the alarm for the decision makers because it seriously threatens the professional development of teachers.

Secondly, there is a strong alignment between the content of summative tests and that of teaching syllabus, which is the case of a dangerous liaison to the detriment of Arabic language teaching. Our findings are however inconclusive with regard to the direction of the influence, from tests to teaching or from teaching to tests.

Finally, our experiment with validating a standard instrument for future studies in Arabic pedagogy failed to give interpretable, neatly loaded factors. We put it down to the inadequacy of the sample we used in our study.

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.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
fp	Equal variances assumed	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
fp	Equal variances assumed	2.878	.096	-5.948	51	.000	-1.36349	.22923	-1.82368	-.90330
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.520	28.291	.000	-1.36349	.24703	-1.86928	-.85771

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
FinalTests	53	1.00	5.00	3.9811	1.02827
Valid N (listwise)	53				

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 it as 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.

In the end, we feel that Arabic language teaching is insulated from serious investigations in the light of new

developments in applied linguistics. This is alarming and requires serious attention from the policy makers to reconsider their policies. If they see that Arabic has to be on the curricula, the approaches to implementing this policy should be compatible with recent insights in language teaching in modern languages, especially ELT.

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