

Qatar Foundation International Symposium Brussels 9-12 May 2023 Arabic Language Learning in Europe: Realities of Policy and Practice

Fhiona Mackay and Lisa Hanna

Scotland's National Centre for Languages

Keywords: innovative approaches, Arabic language and Arab cultures, online course delivery, professional learning, symposium, teacher community, international collaboration, educational policy, common challenges, teacher identity, assessment, teacher workforce planning, initial teacher education, curriculum, lesser taught languages

Background

Scotland's National Centre for Languages (SCILT) has partnered with Qatar Foundation International (QFI) since 2018 to bring Arabic to schools in the state sector in Scotland. Since 2020, the Discovering the World of Arabic programme has brought Arabic language and Arab cultures to a range of schools in both primary and secondary sectors. Our pioneering programme delivers weekly live online lessons taught by teaching associates of Arabic directly into classrooms all over Scotland, from Lockerbie to Aberdeen, and from Campbeltown to Edinburgh. Innovative approaches to online delivery, professional learning and resource creation have emerged from Discovering the World of Arabic, and we were enthusiastic about sharing the lessons learned from this journey. We were also keen to meet with colleagues at a more advanced stage of the delivery of Arabic and this symposium provided us with the perfect opportunity.

We were excited to attend the symposium in Brussels, capital city of the EU. Our partners at QFI had identified the city as a central location for travel, and over 40 colleagues joined the event from across Europe and beyond. The benefits of this were particularly noticeable in post-Covid times: the refresh of liminal space, and the fact that no one participant or participant group had hosting responsibilities, allowed delegates freedom to engage fully with all aspects of the issues, as well as with each other. We were all there to learn with no hidden hierarchies or agendas. As the three-day event opened with a drinks reception on the rooftop terrace overlooking the Grande Place, our minds were open to the possibilities that the symposium would offer, and the networking opportunities afforded by such an international delegation.

Key objectives

The symposium organisers had set broad objectives for the event, namely:

- to bring partners and potential partners together to network, share, and to better understand the current context and players;
- to identify synergies;
- to articulate opportunities for collaboration and growth.

Our own objectives were aligned with these, but we also wanted to form connections and learn from colleagues and their different experiences.

Key Questions

The importance of language learning is now gaining more recognition in education policies across the world. Scotland's Languages Policy follows the European 1+2 model: learners start their language learning journey when they start school aged 4/5 with a second additional language learned from around age 9. The significance of Arabic as the fifth most spoken language in the world is also being recognised, and is being offered nationally by SCILT as an L3 experience. However, the Arabic language is generally not a mainstream offer and, therefore, not a realistic option for many learners in primary and secondary schools outside of the Arab world. The Scottish perspective would therefore provide an interesting alternative that delegates who are keen to introduce Arabic could consider.

Key questions posed to symposium delegates were:

- In considering the current situation of language learning and the teaching of Arabic in Europe and the UK: what are the opportunities and constraints that Arabic faces in these contexts?
- How can Arabic language education become a more common offer as a modern language for all types of learners – those with or without prior knowledge of the language?
- What is needed to shift the perception of Arabic language education?
- What is needed to produce a professional pool of teachers of Arabic to develop sustainable language programs?
- What accreditations currently exist for learners of Arabic? How do teachers / schools decide what kind of assessment to use? Which linguistic competencies are being assessed? What are the standards being applied and how are they agreed?
- What could Arabic teachers learn from other languages that are more commonly taught? How can Arabic be more fully integrated into the curriculum?

These questions were debated in a series of panel sessions, as well as open forum round-table discussions. We were struck by the high level of engagement from all delegates: this felt like a safe space for people to feel confident in sharing their experiences and questions, without fear of judgment. One innovative aspect of the conference was the presence of a cartoonist who produced images that captured the

salient points of each panel discussion – not only was this a novel way to record the main threads, but provided a stimulus for thought and a talking point as delegates gathered at the end of each day to reflect.

Common Issues

There is a risk when gathering colleagues from a wide range of systems and approaches that time will be wasted on explaining the idiosyncrasies and needs of each individual context. This symposium sought to bring colleagues together to discover and focus on the common issues faced when bringing Arabic into mainstream education.

All delegates were supported and encouraged to think beyond teaching in their own context and examine the bigger issues, and we found that we had many challenges in common:

- **Teacher Identity** – Arabic can be viewed as “special”, “different”, and “niche”. It is easy for teachers of Arabic to fall into the trap of seeing themselves as somehow separate and distinct from the rest of the profession. They tend to focus on themselves as teachers of Arabic, rather than teachers of children and young people. There emerged a shared determination to change this mindset, so they are less isolated and able to engage more widely with other teachers, the curriculum, and its drivers.
- **Approaches to Assessment** – the need to rethink approaches and make them more fitting for a modern world. This means asking learners, “What can you do?” and giving them opportunities to demonstrate what they have learned and can produce, rather than setting bars to jump over and asking, “Can you do this?”
- **Teacher Workforce Planning** – there is a capacity to harness, upskill and develop the potential teacher workforce that is already existent within our communities. Are there accessible pathways for Arabic speakers to have their language skills accredited, and to acquire credible teaching qualifications? What is the best and most robust way of ensuring a pipeline of highly qualified entrants into the profession?
- **Initial Teacher Education (ITE)** – we must ensure that newly qualifying teachers, who are often from a heritage background, and frequently not a product of the system in which they wish to teach, understand and develop a deep and rich enough understanding of practice, policy, and theory to be confident and effective in their new context.
- **Career-Long Professional Learning** – ideas and suggestions were mooted and shared for ways of empowering teachers of Arabic by giving them access to high quality professional learning. There is no such thing as a “finished product” teacher – ITE and isolated professional development courses are not enough. The most effective teachers are active members of a community of practice and have opportunities to learn from each other.

- **The Position of Arabic within a Modern Curriculum** - Arabic must be for all and offered in a way that is socially just. It cannot be the preserve of heritage speakers and/or an elite group of academic learners. Educators and educational systems need to remove barriers so that all learners feel they can take part in learning about the Arabic language; its associated cultures, and understand how they may benefit from this.
- **The Promotion of Arabic language and Arab Cultures** – all activists need allies. We should make the case for the learning of Arabic clear to policy and decision makers. We need to amplify the benefits that learning the language can bring to the individual and society by harnessing the voices of learners, parents, employers, community leaders, academics, and other stakeholders

This symposium allowed delegates to truly become educators without borders: they were free to look outward rather than be constrained by the demands and minutiae of their individual systems and contexts. This freedom led to many potential solutions and suggestions being shared: not everything can work in every context, but ideas and inspiration are often born of discussions such as these.

We are convinced that this opportunity provided attendees with the chance to build connections and networks. We found it especially important for those, like us, who are in the early stages of introducing Arabic into the curriculum – in fact, we agreed that much of our learning could be applied to other languages. Lesser taught languages, in particular, are at risk of becoming marginalised. There is a possibility that there will in turn be fewer educators qualified to teach, and to advocate for these languages. This teacher community has an even greater need to expand horizons in order to avoid introspection. New and fresh ideas need to be exchanged and new voices must be given a platform.

Certainly, this symposium gave us space and perspective to think more deeply about the professional learning we offer our team of Arabic teachers. Our reflections enabled us to make changes that we believe will better suit their needs, encourage them to learn from each other, and give them opportunities to learn, discuss, and share ideas with teachers of other languages. Thanks to the symposium, we have made international connections and, since our return, have been in contact with colleagues from Italy and Australia to plan future collaborations.