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Modern Standard Arabic Proficiency and Dialect Learning in UK Higher Education: An Exploratory Comparison of Three Intensive Courses

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Abstract: Demand for Arabic in UK higher education has grown, and with it the pressure to teach spoken dialects alongside Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). The choice of which dialect to teach, however, is often made without a stated pedagogic rationale. This exploratory article asks whether the dialect chosen or the learner's prior level of MSA was associated with differences in reported communicative competence. Thirty-three language graduates aged 21–25 were divided equally into three groups and took intensive two-week courses in Yemeni, Tunisian and Syrian Arabic, starting from upper-intermediate (B2.1), lower-intermediate (B1) and ab initio MSA respectively. End-of-course competence was described qualitatively. Informal enquiries to three UK institutions and an informal comprehension test with young Arab listeners complemented the study. Because starting level and dialect varied together, the comparison cannot separate their effects. Descriptively, the group with the strongest MSA foundation reported the most extensive competence, and none of the three institutions could describe a clear course design. This article offers a critical discussion of dialect-course design and proposes, as hypotheses for further research, that dialect teaching might build on advanced MSA grammar, train learners to switch between MSA and dialect, and be delivered by specialists.

INTRODUCTION

In the author's field study at the University of Leeds, the number of learners in a single Arabic as a foreign language (AFL) class rose from fewer than ten in the early 2000s to thirty-two in 2011.[1] Over the past twenty years, Arabic departments across the United Kingdom have also seen, in the author's account, a sharp increase in student numbers. This growth has been accompanied by rising demand, within universities, for the teaching of Arabic dialects. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) remains by far the variety taught at universities, yet that demand

[1] Field study data gathered at the University of Leeds, 2001–2011.

has led academics to favour one dialect over another.[2] Some strides towards teaching dialects have been made in the past decade, but a basic question remains open: to what extent is the teaching of dialects in higher education reflective of the reality of the Arabic language?

Learners' interest in dialects, prompted by political, religious and sometimes social motives, dates back at least to 1998.[3] Learners typically wish to live or work in an Arab country and to use Arabic in everyday situations, and spoken varieties have accordingly been encouraged in the United Kingdom, the United States and some other European universities as a route to communicative competence.[4] The rising popularity of MSA teaching in the United Kingdom has, in turn, reopened a controversy over the practicality of MSA in real-life situations and over the extent to which it serves as a language of communication within and beyond Arab borders.[5]

Two positions can be distinguished. Traditional views maintain MSA as the lingua franca of all Arabs and of anyone wishing to communicate with them. More recent thinking encourages the teaching of dialects, often Egyptian or a Levantine variety, for communicative purposes. The author argues that the preference for one dialect over another does not reflect the spread or actual use of the dialects. It results instead from the availability of dialect speakers who are willing and able to teach in UK University departments, or from teachers' patriotic choices. The Arabic situation also differs from that of other diglossia languages. MSA is not the language that Arabs speak natively in daily life, because it is used in formal speeches, the media and religious texts.[6] At the same time, the author argues, MSA historically unified the Arabic varieties, and it contains the root-and-pattern system shared by all the varieties that never developed into written languages.

The problem this article addresses is therefore which dialect, if any, should be taught to students at UK universities, and on what basis. Learning one dialect does not give access to other dialects or to communication with their speakers. The author argues that studying a dialect without a certain level of proficiency in Arabic is a false economy: learners spend more energy trying to understand other varieties and may end up unable either to speak to, or to understand, Arabic speakers.

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[2] Paul Anderson and Yasir Suleiman, "Arabic on Campus and Beyond," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 1 (2009): 125–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530190902749655.

[3] Ghassan Husseinali, "Who Is Studying Arabic and Why? A Survey of Arabic Students' Orientations at a Major University," *Foreign Language Annals* 39, no. 3 (2006): 395–412, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2006.tb02896.x.

[4] Sonia Shiri, "Intercultural Communicative Competence Development During and After Language Study Abroad: Insights From Arabic," *Foreign Language Annals* 48, no. 4 (2015): 541–69, https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12162.

[5] Saad Al-Gahtani, "The Development of L2 Interactional Competence in Arabic: The Case of Multiple Requests," *Foreign Language Annals* 55, no. 2 (2022): 610–34, https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12603.

[6] Laila Abdullah Al Suwaiyan, "Diglossia in the Arabic Language," *International Journal of Language & Linguistics* 5, no. 3 (2018), https://doi.org/10.30845/ijll.v5n3p22.

Critics argue that teaching MSA alone is insufficient for the aims of communication, such as conversing fully in Arabic-speaking countries, doing business and interacting with native speakers,[7] while also being able to read literature.[8] The author reads this criticism as implying that the communicative approach is failing in the teaching of Arabic, since MSA is not commonly spoken in everyday situations in the Arab world. Over the past decade, scholars have urged the teaching of dialects at universities, in some cases in addition to MSA and in others as a separate, stand-alone course.[9] The argument that follows is that, if learners wish to communicate with native speakers, overall proficiency in MSA should not be required. MSA is authentic and realistic for formal scenarios between educated native speakers, and a strong MSA foundation should precede dialect teaching for learners who aim at advanced proficiency.

One such argument, advanced by al-Batal, holds that using MSA in the classroom creates an unreal, inauthentic situation and renders meaningless the claim that instruction is proficiency-based.[10] This article contests that position. The use of MSA is a real and authentic scenario between native speakers, often the most educated, in formal situations. Because such scenarios cannot be erased from intra-Arab communication, the corresponding registers must be taught as an integral part of an Arabic course.

Research on learner and native-speaker behaviour points in a similar direction.[11] Soliman describes the strategies that learners of Arabic use to communicate, which require specific behaviours and a series of mental processes to fill gaps in their speaking.[12] Another study show that limited borrowing from MSA by native speakers, who depend more heavily on dialect. MSA nonetheless served as the core foundation to which interlocutors turned in order to fill gaps and aid comprehension.[13] Wahba likewise states that native speakers know how to use each variety, mixing and switching between them appropriately.[14]

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[7] Karin C. Ryding, "Proficiency Despite Diglossia: A New Approach for Arabic," *The Modern Language Journal* 75, no. 2 (1991): 212–18, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1991.tb05352.x.

[8] Melissa Anne Towler, "Language Variation on Arabic Undergraduate Degree Courses in England: Students' Perspectives," *The Language Learning Journal* 53, no. 2 (2025): 173–200, https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2024.2351938.

[9] Abdullah Mohammed Harbi, "Arabic Diglossia and Its Impact on the Social Communication and Learning Process of Non-Native Arabic Learners: Students' Perspective," *Arab World English Journal*, no. 283 (January 2022): 1–46, https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/th.283.

[10] Mahmoud Al-Batal, ed., *The Teaching of Arabic as a Foreign Language: Issues and Directions*, Al-'Arabiyya Monograph Series ; No. 2 (American Association of Teachers of Arabic, 1995).

[11] Ghaleb Rabab'ah and Dogan Bulut, "Compensatory Strategies in Arabic as a Second Language," *Poznań Studies in Contemporary Linguistics* 43, no. 2 (2007), https://doi.org/10.2478/v10010-007-0020-5.

[12] Rasha Soliman and Saussan Khalil, "The Teaching of Arabic as a Community Language in the UK," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 27, no. 9 (2024): 1246–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2022.2063686.

[13] R. Soliman, "Arabic Cross-Dialectal Conversations with Implications for the Teaching of Arabic as a Second Language" (The University of Leeds, 2014), https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Arabic-Cross-dialectal-Conversations-with-for-the-a-Soliman/f8f3dd6f0d8f441e33e0812c13c8d0ddc8f155b2.

[14] Kassem M. Wahba et al., eds., *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006).

Two gaps follow. First, the author identifies a lack of approaches to teaching dialects to learners of Arabic as a foreign language (TAFL): few resources are available, and teachers must rely on their own course design and materials. Second, the rationale for selecting a particular dialect is rarely made explicit. Some institutions offer the dialect of their year-abroad programmes or the dialect spoken by their appointed staff, while others argue for the dialect most comprehensible to other Arabic speakers.

This article contributes an empirical comparison of three learner groups and an argument about the respective roles of MSA proficiency and dialect choice. This article is an exploratory comparison of three short intensive courses, supplemented by informal enquiries to three UK institutions and an informal comprehension test, together with a critical discussion of dialect-course design. It does not establish an optimal sequence for teaching MSA and dialect. Its contribution beyond the existing literature is limited to three things: First, a descriptive account of reported end-of-course competence in three learner groups who began from different levels of MSA and studied different dialects under equal contact and self-study hours, Second, a preliminary indication, from three institutions, that the rationale and curriculum of dialect courses may not be stated clearly. Third, a reasoned set of hypotheses about sequencing, curriculum and teachers.

The article addresses three questions. Is any Arabic dialect better suited than others for teaching at UK higher education institutions, and what lies behind the choice of one dialect over another? How does the learner's prior level of MSA affect the speed and level of dialect acquisition and the ability to switch between MSA and a dialect? To what extent is the teaching of dialects in UK higher education reflective of the reality of Arabic, and how realistic and effective is it for communicative competence, long-term knowledge and a thorough understanding of how the Arabic system functions?

The scope is the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language in UK higher education institutions. The empirical study compares short intensive courses in Yemeni, Tunisian and Syrian Arabic. Egyptian Arabic is discussed in connection with its claimed status as the most widely understood dialect. The significance of the question is both pedagogic and ethical, because courses that promise communication with Arabic speakers on the strength of a single dialect may raise expectations that the dialect cannot meet.

The article advances six arguments, which are of different standing. Proposition 1 is discussed against the literature, because the design does not allow dialect to be varied independently of starting level. Proposition 2 is examined descriptively against the study data and the literature. Propositions 3 to 6 are the author's position and are offered as hypotheses or recommendations for further investigation First, no dialect is inherently better to learn than another. Second, the learner's level of MSA affects the speed and level of dialect that can be

acquired. Third, neither MSA nor a dialect is sufficient on its own: learners must be taught how to switch between them. Fourth, for long-term knowledge and a thorough understanding of the structure of Arabic, a long MSA course supplemented by dialectology sessions is, in the author's view, unmatched. Fifth, dialect courses require a clear curriculum that includes grammar, and teachers who are specialists in the dialect. Sixth, understanding and speaking a dialect does not guarantee full communication with native Arabic speakers, and learners should not be led to expect it.

METHOD

The study is an exploratory, descriptive comparison, not an experiment. It compares three groups of learners who took intensive dialect courses at different starting levels of MSA. Because each group also studied a different dialect, starting level and dialect vary together, and the design cannot separate their effects. The unit of analysis is each learner group's end-of-course competence in spoken Arabic. The data are primary: competence statements for each group, the author's enquiries to three UK higher education institutions, and an informal comprehension test. Secondary sources are the scholarly works.

The study covered 33 learners aged 21–25, all language graduates. All had taken the Modern Languages Admissions Test (MLAT) and were judged linguistically competent. They were divided equally into three groups of eleven (Table 1). Group A began at level B2.1 (upper intermediate), equivalent to a year-four student on an Arabic degree programme at a UK university and took a course in Yemeni Arabic. Group B began at level B1 (lower intermediate), equivalent to a first-term year-three student on a four-year Arabic programme and took a course in Tunisian Arabic. Group C began ab initio and took a course in Syrian Arabic.

Table 1. Course Design by Group

Group	Dialect	Starting level of MSA	Duration	Contact hours	Self-study
A	Yemeni	B2.1 (upper intermediate); equivalent to year 4 of an Arabic degree at a UK university	2 weeks, full-time	40 hours a week, 5 days a week	20 hours
B	Tunisian	B1 (lower intermediate); equivalent to first term of year 3 of a four-year Arabic programme	2 weeks, full-time	40 hours a week, 5 days a week	20 hours
C	Syrian	Ab initio	2 weeks, full-time	40 hours a week, 5 days a week	20 hours

Each course was an intensive, full-time, two-week short course using authentic, freshly designed material. The author states that the same number of contact hours and self-study hours was given to every group, so that differences in outcome could not be attributed to unequal input. Group A's course covered

listening, grammar, writing and reading in the dialect. After finishing the course, Group A was introduced to a second dialect, so the draft reports no outcomes for this stage.

Two further sources of primary data were used. First, the author contacted three higher education institutions to ask which dialects they offered and which curriculum their dialect teachers followed. Second, to test the claim that Egyptian Arabic is widely understood across the Arab world, the author played a clip from an Egyptian television soap opera of the 1990s to 25 young Arabs aged 18–20 from Morocco and Algeria, and to native speakers aged 45–50. End-of-course competence was recorded as descriptor statements for spoken Arabic, organised by skill (sociolinguistic appropriateness, listening comprehension, spoken interaction and, for Group B, transcription and translation). The statements were compared across groups.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results are organised by research question. Section 3.1 presents the reported outcomes of the three learner groups, which bear on RQ2 and, in part, RQ1. Sections 3.2 to 3.4 take RQ1 to RQ3 in turn. Sections 3.5 and 3.6 discuss the historical relationship between MSA and the dialects and the written use of dialect, which support the argument. Findings are compared throughout with the sources reviewed in introduction section. Table 2 summarises the competences that each group displayed in spoken Arabic at the end of its course.

Table 2. Reported End-of-Course Competence in Spoken Arabic

Group	Dialect	Starting level	Reported competence
A	Yemeni	B2.1	Took part, with some effort, in group discussions even when speech was fast and colloquial; sustained relationships with native speakers; understood the main ideas of complex speech, including technical discussions, and most radio documentaries and broadcast audio in a standard dialect; interacted with fluency and spontaneity.
B	Tunisian	B1	Understood everyday conversations on familiar topics at normal speed; communicated effectively on familiar topics at near-normal speed, with some difficulty under pressure; transcribed straightforward audio; summarised and translated social and political material, though output could seem awkward.
C	Syrian	Ab initio	Understood basic features of Syrian culture, dialect grammar and phonology, and key words, phrases and idioms; understood short conversations at near-normal speed, usually through repetition and explanation; communicated on course topics at slow speed; dealt with culture-specific situations.

Group A's reported competence was the most extensive. In sociolinguistic terms, learners can express themselves appropriately in situations and avoid crass errors of formulation. In listening, they could follow extended speech and complex lines of argument on reasonably familiar topics with explicit markers and could identify a speaker's mood and tone. In spoken interaction, they could follow what was said to them in detail even in a noisy environment, outline an issue or problem clearly, speculate about causes and consequences, weigh advantages and disadvantages of different approaches, and follow discussions in their own field.

Group B's learners could distinguish main ideas from details and make sensible guesses, although they were sometimes uncertain and unable to discern nuance. They rendered the key points, most of the details and some ambiguities, but tended to adhere to the source language.

Group C's descriptors were of a different kind. They concern culture, the diversity of Syrian dialects, grammatical features (verbs, adjectives, interrogation, pronouns, demonstratives and negation), phonetic features (pronunciation of letters and intonation), and the basic features of everyday register.

Descriptively, the ordering of reported competence (Group A most extensive, Group B intermediate, Group C basic) parallels the ordering of starting levels of MSA. This is the finding the data support, and it is an association within one small sample. The groups also differed in dialect. The descriptors for Group B include transcription and translation, those for Group C concern cultural and linguistic features, and no scores were collected, so the three sets of statements are not strictly parallel. Reading across the groups, the author concludes that the more advanced the MSA foundation that learners bring to a dialect course, the more efficient their communication with Arab speakers becomes.

Does the Choice of Dialect Matter?

On the evidence of the three courses, the author concludes that it matters little which dialect is studied, if learners invest the same number of contact and self-study hours. The same applies, in the author's view, to varieties not taught in the study: it makes no difference whether the learner studies Saudi, or Algerian Arabic, if the foundation is there together with an understanding of the mechanism of switching. Unless a learner is to move or work in a specific area of the Arab world and wants to study its dialect, teaching should not privilege one dialect on the grounds that it is closer to MSA or easier.

The author further maintains that there is no such thing as a "widely spoken" dialect in a sense that justifies privileging it, since every dialect is widely spoken by its own community. Yet the rationales offered by institutions are of this kind. Some offer the dialect of their year-abroad programmes or of their staff; others justify the most comprehensible dialect; and some well-known UK universities advertise dialect courses on the ground that the dialect is closer to Arabic than others. The author regards the last of these claims as unproven.

Related studies shed light on what lies behind the choice. The only UK-wide data on what is taught come from a British Academy mapping survey of 2016–17. Its table records MSA as taught at 41 institutions, against 12 for regional varieties, six for Educated Spoken Arabic and five for Classical Arabic.[15] Among the regional varieties, Levantine was the most common (seven institutions), followed by Egyptian (three) and Gulf (two). The report attributes the prominence of Levantine probably to the perception that it is the variety closest to MSA and to its media popularity, and notes that Egyptian is perceived as the most widely understood dialect because it dominates film, soap opera and theatre.

Earlier, Dickins and Watson had found the communicative approach in use only at the University of Cambridge, where Levantine was taught.[16] Reported reasons for choosing a dialect are largely practical. Soliman describes institutions choosing the dialect taught at partner institutions abroad or spoken by their own staff, while others choose the dialect they judge most comprehensible to other Arabic speakers.[17] The same pragmatism appears outside the UK, the US Foreign Service Institute adopted Levantine forms for its Formal Spoken Arabic because most of its teachers came from that region and many of its students were headed there.[18] These sources support the author's claim that staffing and destination, rather than linguistic merit, drive the choice. They do not support the further claim that teachers' patriotic preferences are responsible, for which no source has been found. The author further maintains that there is no such thing as a "widely spoken" dialect in a sense that justifies privileging it, since every dialect is widely spoken by its own community. Some well-known UK universities, in the author's account, advertise dialect courses on the ground that the dialect is closer to Arabic than others.

A recurrent rationale is that Egyptian is the most widely understood dialect. The author argues that this was true over twenty years ago, but that Egyptian has since lost prominence, as some Gulf states have gained weight in the Arab economic market and Levantine film and music production has grown. Egyptian cinema, once the "Bollywood of the Arab world" in the 1960s and 1980s, is in this view no longer widely understood. To test this, the author played a clip from a 1990s Egyptian soap opera to 25 young Arabs aged 18–20 from Morocco and Algeria, none understood it. The same clip was played to native speakers aged 45–50, all of whom did. The author concludes that Egyptian no longer holds the

[15] Melissa Anne Towler, "Arabic Language Tutors' Beliefs on Including Regional Varieties in Undergraduate Degree Courses in England," *Linguistics and Education* 87 (June 2025): 101427, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2025.101427.

[16] Wahba et al., *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century*.

[17] Rasha K. Soliman, "Arabic Cross-Dialectal Conversations: A Missing Element in the Teaching of Arabic as a Second Language," *Arabele12: Teaching and Learning the Arabic Language*, July 28, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/3693629/Arabic_cross_dialectal_conversations_A_missing_element_in_the_Teaching_of_Arabic_as_a_Second_Language.

[18] Ryding, "Proficiency Despite Diglossia."

position it held in the past twenty years and is no longer the lingua franca of all Arabs.

Rather than ranking dialects, Soliman argues that asking which form to teach reflects the model of non-diglossia languages and proposes shifting attention to how native speakers cope with variation, whichever dialect an institution teaches.[19] Empirical work on transfer points the same way, with qualifications. Trentman found that familiar-dialect listening ability predicted comprehension of an unfamiliar dialect in Egyptian–Levantine transfer.[20] Trentman and Shiri later found that proficiency in a familiar dialect or in MSA did not predict unfamiliar-dialect comprehension, whereas variety-identification ability did for non-native listeners.[21] None of these studies shows one dialect to be superior, which is consistent with the author's position. Two positions in the literature nevertheless complicate the claim that any variant will do. Younes's integrated approach teaches MSA and a dialect together and uses Educated Levantine Spoken Arabic, which he selects as a major variety popular with learners.[22] Ryding presented Formal Spoken Arabic as a supra-regional variety practical for communication across the Arabic-speaking world.[23]

MSA Proficiency and the Ability to Switch

The author draws three conclusions from the study. First, that the dialect studied is not decisive when hours of input are equal. Second, that a prominent level of MSA ought to be the ground for learning a dialect. Third, that the higher a learner's level of MSA, the faster and better the learner communicates across Arab varieties. Two further claims follow. The level of MSA at the outset affects the speed and level of dialect that a learner can grasp, and learning MSA and a dialect is not sufficient on its own, because learners must also know how to switch between them. For this reason, the author holds that the question of which dialect to teach will always remain open, given the number of varieties, and that the key lies in teaching students to switch between MSA and spoken Arabic.

This is consistent with the literature reviewed above. If native speakers themselves mix and switch between varieties, and if MSA serves as the core to which interlocutors turn to fill gaps and aid comprehension,[24] then advanced Arabic is needed in order to switch between dialects when conversing with different Arabic speakers. The author argues that understanding a dialect is not a

[19] Soliman, "Arabic Cross-Dialectal Conversations."

[20] Emma Trentman, "L2 Arabic Dialect Comprehension: Empirical Evidence for the Transfer of Familiar Dialect Knowledge to Unfamiliar Dialects," *L2 Journal* 3, no. 1 (2011), https://doi.org/10.5070/L2319068.

[21] Emma Trentman and Sonia Shiri, "The Mutual Intelligibility of Arabic Dialects: Implications for the Language Classroom," *Critical Multilingualism Studies* 8, no. 1 (2020): 6549, https://doi.org/10.2458/cms.6549.

[22] Munther Abdullatif Younes, *The Integrated Approach to Arabic Instruction* (Routledge, 2015).

[23] Ryding, "Proficiency Despite Diglossia," 212.

[24] Abdulkafi Albirini, "The Sociolinguistic Functions of Codeswitching between Standard Arabic and Dialectal Arabic," *Language in Society* 40, no. 5 (2011): 537–62, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404511000674.

solitary undertaking, because learning a dialect on its own is fragile, and it must be built on a solid foundation.

The author draws a practical sequence from this. Dialects should be introduced after students have acquired an understanding of grammar and a certain ability to comprehend MSA texts. For learners aiming at near-native levels, the course should reproduce the pattern found in Arab countries, where MSA is taught in the classroom and dialect is spoken in the street; this renders MSA in the classroom authentic and realistic. Dialect teaching should follow at least two or three cycles of MSA tuition, and ab initio dialect courses are, in the author's view, counterproductive for learners who aim at advanced or proficient variant Arabic.

The author proposes, as a pedagogical hypothesis for further investigation, that dialects be introduced after students have acquired an understanding of grammar and a certain ability to comprehend MSA texts. The author envisages that, as learners become familiar with the grammar, dialects, or the principles governing them, they could be introduced progressively to support subsequent direct acquisition. The author further hypothesises that the same would hold for varieties not taught in the study, such as Saudi or Algerian Arabic, provided the foundation is present together with an understanding of the mechanism of switching. Because of the number of varieties, the author holds that the question of which dialect to teach will always remain open and that the key lies in teaching students to switch between MSA and spoken Arabic.

Teaching a dialect to an intermediate learner can, the author acknowledges, produce dialect-capable linguists, but these learners would encounter difficulty when switching to another variety because they lack a sufficient grasp of the underlying grammar. By contrast, students who understand where the variations originate can change dialect more comfortably and may even predict the changes involved when adding a further dialect. As learners become familiar with the grammar, dialects, or the principles governing them, can be introduced progressively to support subsequent direct acquisition. The author also cautions that being able to understand and speak a dialect does not guarantee full communication with native Arabic speakers, and that this must be made clear to learners.

Related studies give mixed support for the claim that prior MSA level governs dialect acquisition. In favour of an MSA foundation, Ryding concluded that Formal Spoken Arabic does not replace MSA and that a learner aiming at full proficiency must ultimately master MSA, Ryding concluded that a learner aiming at full proficiency must ultimately master MSA, formal spoken Arabic and a regional vernacular.[25] This concerns the end point of proficiency rather than grammar teaching as such.[26] MSA contains the root-and-pattern system shared by

[25] Ryding, "Proficiency Despite Diglossia."

[26] Towler, "Arabic Language Tutors' Beliefs on Including Regional Varieties in Undergraduate Degree Courses in England."

the varieties, so a grounding in MSA grammar gives learners the principles that govern variation, and the foundations of dialects are grammar and rhetoric. In Trentman's accommodation-transfer data, MSA listening ability was a slightly better predictor of unfamiliar-dialect comprehension than familiar-dialect ability.[27] Soliman's case study of five final-year students with advanced MSA found that explicit strategy training improved their comprehension of cognates in unfamiliar dialects.[28] Based on this, students who understand where variations originate can change dialect more comfortably and may even predict the changes involved, so the relationship between MSA and the dialects should be taught.

Other findings qualify this. In Trentman's Egyptian–Levantine transfer, MSA listening ability was not a significant predictor.[29] Trentman and Shiri found no predictive role for MSA proficiency or for proficiency in a familiar dialect.[30] Soliman's native-speaker data show reliance mainly on the speaker's own dialect, with fewer borrowings from MSA than earlier studies reported, and a major role for dialect familiarity in comprehension.[31] These previous studies predict different things from different abilities (familiar-dialect ability, MSA ability, and variety identification), draw on different data sets even within one study, and involve different listeners (learners and native speakers). Therefore, a prominent level of MSA is the ground on which unfamiliar dialects are best approached, because the mixed evidence shows that this position is contested.

The larger challenge is sequencing. The author's position is that dialect should follow an upper-intermediate level of MSA. Younes's integrated approach teaches both varieties from the start and is argued by its author to be the most logical and effective method.[32] Al-Batal's edited volume gathers research from programmes that use integrated teaching.[33] Palmer argues that teaching only the standard variety is a disservice to learners who wish to communicate with Arabic speakers.[34] Al-Batal's earlier call for presenting *fuṣḥā* and *ʿāmmiyya* side by side as one integrated system is, in turn, the line of argument that this article contests.[35]

On switching, Wahba's observation that native speakers use and mix varieties appropriately[36] is consistent with the British Academy report. The report describes Arabic speakers moving along a cline of intermediate varieties, with levelling, borrowing from MSA and code-switching, and concludes that a learner

[27] Trentman, "L2 Arabic Dialect Comprehension."

[28] Soliman, "Arabic Cross-Dialectal Conversations with Implications for the Teaching of Arabic as a Second Language."

[29] Trentman, "L2 Arabic Dialect Comprehension."

[30] Trentman and Shiri, "The Mutual Intelligibility of Arabic Dialects."

[31] Soliman, "Arabic Cross-Dialectal Conversations."

[32] Younes, *The Integrated Approach to Arabic Instruction*.

[33] Mahmoud Al-Batal, ed., *Arabic as One Language: Integrating Dialect in the Arabic Language Curriculum* (Georgetown University Press, 2018).

[34] Jeremy Palmer, "Arabic Diglossia: Teaching Only the Standard Variety Is a Disservice," *Arizona Working Papers in SLA & Teaching* 14 (2007): 111–22.

[35] Aleya Rouchdy, ed., *The Arabic Language in America* (Wayne State University Press, 1992).

[36] Wahba et al., *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century*.

aiming at educated-native proficiency needs both MSA and a regional variety, with passive familiarity with others.[37] Therefore, if native speakers themselves mix and switch between varieties, and if MSA serves as the core to which interlocutors turn to fill gaps and aid comprehension, it is plausible that advanced Arabic helps learners to switch between dialects when conversing with different Arabic speakers.

Dialect Teaching in UK Higher Education: Practice, Curriculum and Teachers

The author's concern about institutional practice leads to the following proposals. Dialect courses should be treated as the teaching of a foreign language, with a structured curriculum that includes the grammar and morphology of the dialect. Teaching listening alone is not enough, and neither is a course built on listening and reading only, because the four skills and grammar should be covered. Because few resources are available, teachers must at present rely on their own course design and materials. The curriculum should also include dialectology, or the history and development of the Arabic variants, so that learners understand the logic behind the differences between dialects and the link between MSA and the variants.

The author further proposes that teachers of dialects be specialists in the dialect, not merely speakers of it, so that the morphology of the dialect, and not only its syntax, is transferred to students. Being a native speaker, or a teacher of Arabic as a foreign language, does not guarantee the ability to teach a dialect. Institutions would then choose a dialect according to teachers' experience and ability to design and deliver dialect courses, not according to teacher availability or origin in the Arab world.[38] The author adds that universities do not allocate adequate resources to Arabic and that courses are often taught by postgraduates rather than by specialists or linguists.

On transparency, the author finds it unacceptable for institutions to choose a dialect on the ground that most native speakers understand it and cautions against selling false hopes, because learners should know in advance that one dialect is not enough to converse with all kinds of native Arabic speakers. There is, the author suggests, no harm in teaching one dialect alongside MSA after learners have reached an upper-intermediate level of MSA, because the harm lies in promising learners that they will converse with natives with ease. Teaching one or two dialects is not enough, because the variety of speech among Arabs would have to be tackled by analysing the differences between dialects and the mechanics of each so that learners can switch to spoken Arabic. Convenience and practicality inevitably influence the choice of dialect, but the aim should be communication with people from as many Arab countries as possible.

[37] Towler, "Arabic Language Tutors' Beliefs on Including Regional Varieties in Undergraduate Degree Courses in England."

[38] Yousif Abdulazeez et al., "The Experience of Arab International Students in Universities in the UK," *Journal of International Students* 15, no. 3 (2025): 227–42, https://doi.org/10.32674/9g5p2s86.

The Historical Relationship between MSA and the Dialects

The author argues that learners must understand how MSA came into being if they are to choose the dialect that suits them, and that the origins and characteristics of MSA and the dialects should be integrated into any MSA course. In the author's study, students showed a critical lack of understanding of these matters. Because every dialect carries a component of MSA, the author holds that no single answer to the search for an "ultimate form of Arabic" to teach is possible, and that the relationship between MSA and the dialects, including the question of which came first, must be addressed.

The Arabic word *lahja* (dialect) denotes a group of linguistic characteristics belonging to one specific environment and shared by all its members. The author divides the dialects into two blocs:[39] the occidental dialects, from Morocco to Libya, and Within these blocs, regional varieties (Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, Egyptian, Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi) are distinguished, and within each region the speech of sedentary city-dwellers differs from rural speech. There are also nomadic varieties, in Mauritania, southern Algeria, southern Tunisia, Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula.

According to the author, the language of the Qur'an was the chosen dialect used by Arabs in the pre-Islamic period (*al-Jahiliya*) to communicate with one another. It was a common dialect that did not belong to a single tribe: the Qur'an encompasses more than 500 roots from various scattered tribes, and it did not use purely the dialect of the Quraysh but a prominent literary dialect.[40] New local dialects arose after the Arab conquests, but they could not develop into written languages, because Arabic spread so quickly and widely. Writing in Arabic, using it for worship, and reading and teaching the Qur'an over centuries prevented local languages from evolving in Iraq, al-Sham, Egypt, North Africa and Spain. The variants consequently became spoken languages of the populations of those regions and of those who could not maintain a proficient level of Arabic.

The author further argues that the study of dialects, and of the discrepancies between their frequently used words, shows that Arabic is the result of a combination of all dialects, each of which kept its own characteristics, and that the dialects are not independent of Arabic. Because Arabs kept mixing and exchanging language through pilgrimage, trade, science and travel, the language was kept alive and a relative parity between dialects resulted.[41] The Qur'an then unified those dialects.

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[39] John Mansfield et al., "Dialect Differences and Linguistic Divergence: A Crosslinguistic Survey of Grammatical Variation," *Language Dynamics and Change* 13, no. 2 (2023): 232–76, https://doi.org/10.1163/22105832-bja10026.

[40] V. A. Rozov, "The Quran As A Source Of Information About The Features Of Morphology In Ancient Arabian Dialects," *Bulletin of Udmurt University. Series History and Philology* 30, no. 2 (2020): 183–89, https://doi.org/10.35634/2412-9534-2020-30-2-183-189.

[41] Abdel-Rahman Abu-Melhim, "Intra-Lingual Code Alternation in Arabic: The Conversational Impact of Diglossia," *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 4, no. 5 (2014): 891–902, https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.4.5.891-902.

A further development concerns the written use of dialect. The expansion of the internet, social networks and modern technologies has allowed a new written form of the spoken language, long regarded as unsuitable for writing. In the author's view this is a threat to the purity and soundness of Arabic and to its longevity, since speakers often disregard grammatical rules. The author reports that some scholars see social media as having pushed the development of written dialect and argues that this should be read as a sign of declining literacy within communities. For MSA to survive, the author argues, its status quo should be maintained, and the writing of the "street" language should not be encouraged.

Overall, this study offers an exploratory comparison of three short courses and a critical discussion of dialect-course design. Its descriptive findings are consistent with, but do not demonstrate, the proposition that a learner's foundation in MSA matters more than the dialect chosen. The proposals that dialect teaching should build on that foundation, teach switching, rest on structured curricula, relate MSA and the dialects, and use specialist teachers are hypotheses that follow from the interpretations above. The study does not establish an optimal sequence for teaching MSA and dialect. Testing the proposals would require designs in which starting level and dialect are varied independently

CONCLUSION

This article examined which dialect should be taught to learners of Arabic in UK higher education and on what basis. On the evidence of three intensive courses, the group with the strongest MSA foundation reported the most extensive competence, an association that the design cannot attribute to starting level rather than dialect. Informal inquiries to three institutions found that none could describe a clear course design, which is consistent with, but does not establish, a general lack of stated rationale. The article's contribution is therefore an exploratory comparison and a critical discussion of dialect-course design, not a demonstration of an optimal teaching sequence.

The author's position, offered as a set of hypotheses for further investigation, is that dialects cannot be taught as free-standing products, because the foundations of dialects are grammar and rhetoric, and without them a course may not deliver what it promises. Learning one dialect or two alongside MSA is, in the author's view, a short-term solution that is neither effective nor durable. There is no objection to teaching one dialect alongside MSA once an upper-intermediate level of MSA has been reached; the objection is to promising students ease of communication with natives or to justifying one dialect over another by its supposed closeness to MSA. Strengthening the teaching of MSA, including its rhetorical aspects, would also help learners to understand how dialects work. The author recommends clear curricula that include dialectology and the history and development of the variants and the recruitment of experienced teachers with

course-design expertise. Differentiated pathways, according to learner goals and program objectives, remain open, including integrated approaches that teach MSA and dialect together from the start.

The study has several limitations. The sample was small (33 learners in three groups of eleven), and the courses were short (two weeks). The groups differed in both starting level and dialect, so the effects of the two cannot be separated, and outcomes are reported as descriptive competence statements rather than measured scores. No direct measure of switching between MSA and dialect was taken. The supplementary evidence, from three institutions and from a single Egyptian clip, is informal and limited in size, and it cannot be generalized to UK provision or to the linguistic practices of Arabic speakers as a whole. The author's own call for original approaches and research to produce an adequate curriculum also points to further work. Future studies should separate the effects of dialect and starting level by holding one constant while varying the other and should use measured outcomes, including switching, while following learners beyond the course. They should also survey more institutions and test claims about Egyptian with multiple speech samples, defined comprehension questions, and larger, more varied listener groups.

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