

Teaching Arabic and the Preparation of its Teachers before Service in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Ahmed Hassan Alghamdi
Albaha University, KSA
Ahag2006@hotmail.com

Li Li
The University of Exeter, UK
Li.Li@exeter.ac.uk

Abstract

This article aims at discussing facts regarding teaching Arabic, and the curriculum for doing so in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in order to convey the attention that the Ministry of Education has paid to the teaching and learning of Arabic in public education. It also shows the different developments that have occurred in the contents of the Arabic curriculum. On the other hand, it pays much attention to analysing the preparation of Arabic language teachers before service, in order to expose the realities, problems, obstacles, and challenges that have confronted them.

1. Introduction

Public education in the KSA comprises three stages: (1) primary (six levels), (2) intermediate (three levels), and (3) high school (three levels). Because the official language in the KSA is Arabic, the Ministry of Education (MOE) adopts education policies accordingly, claiming that the Arabic language must be the first language of education in all modules and stages [1]. For example, it allocates nine out of 30 sessions weekly, for students to learn Arabic at the primary stage, while 21 sessions are distributed in seven modules [2]. In addition, learning Arabic in these stages is compulsory.

According to the Ministry of Education [3], teaching Arabic in public educational institutions has the following general aims:

1. To provide students with sets of words, structures, and methods of linguistic eloquence that will enable them to understand the Holy Qur'an, the Hadith, the Islamic heritage, and developments in modern life.
2. To improve students' language abilities that help them to understand, analyse, and evaluate language events that face them, in order to produce language structures characterised by accuracy, fluency, and quality.

Further to these aims, the MOE specifies clear objectives for teaching Arabic at all stages of public education. Although Arabic is the first language of instruction in the KSA, a great deal of literature has pointed out that with respect to linguistics, learning outcomes are not satisfactory, particularly at the primary stage [4-6]. Alnassar [7], for instance, found

that in the areas of reading and writing, there was a marked weakness in students' Arabic language skills. Moreover, he indicated that approximately 88% of Arabic language teachers (ALT)s agreed that their students had difficulties learning Arabic. Thus, Aleasa [4] suggested that the Arabic curriculum in the KSA needed to be radically altered, particularly in terms of its content, methods, and procedures.

According to Alkhalifa [8], in terms of its aims and objectives, the contents of the syllabuses, and the selection of materials, methods, and evaluation processes, designing and organising the Arabic curriculum have usually been based on specific approaches. These approaches have been based on "theories about the nature of language and language learning that serve as the source of practices and principles in language teaching" [9]. On the other hand, Alkhuli [10] indicates that theories of "linguistics", "psycholinguistics", and "sociolinguistics" have generally reinforced these approaches, while "applied linguistics" contributes substantially to the design and structure, as well as the aims, objectives, content, methods, and evaluation that are represented in the essential elements of the Arabic curriculum.

There are different approaches to structuring the Arabic curriculum, but, in fact, most of the literature on its design indicates that "subcategory", "communication", "integration", "function", and "skill" are relevant concepts because they are consistent with the nature of Arabic and the learning of the language [8, 11, 12]. Recent literature has suggested adopting a "technical" approach to designing the Arabic curriculum in terms of its content and methods, because the nature of this era requires the use of technology and its applications to learning and teaching Arabic [13].

Based upon the preceding viewpoints, approaches to developing the Arabic curriculum in the KSA, particularly in terms of its content and methods, have witnessed two different phases [14]. The first phase extended over half a century, during which the MOE depended entirely on the subcategory approach to curriculum design, which was focused exclusively on linguistic knowledge, while it neglected students' attitudes and skills in practising the language [15]. Moreover, Arabic syllabuses and the strategies and methods of teaching it in accordance with this approach, were divided into reading, literature, expression, syntax, dictation, and handwriting [16].

Thus, Alsuhami [14] claimed that the MOE followed this approach in order to facilitate students in their efforts at learning Arabic.

Certainly, the disadvantages of this approach outweighed its advantages; one of these disadvantages was that it did not take into account the unity of Arabic, and this in turn confused students learning Arabic as an integrated unit as it was regularly practised in their daily lives [11]. There were many studies that paid much attention to considering the effectiveness of this approach in students' achievement in learning Arabic. These studies concluded by suggesting that this approach was the major factor that impeded most of the ALTs and their students in their efforts at achieving the aims and objectives of teaching and learning Arabic, in the way that the MOE had adopted [14, 15, 17]. As a result, they insisted that the MOE should select and adopt another approach to designing the curriculum according to the nature of the language and the processes involved in learning it.

In the second phase, the Ministry of Education [3] acknowledged that the previous curriculum did not achieve the objectives because it was based on a subcategory approach that focused on linguistic knowledge by dividing it into different syllabuses. On the other hand, the recent trend in Arabic curriculum design has been based on an integrated approach [14, 15, 17]. This approach concentrates on intensification of linguistic outcomes, as well as on training students to acquire skills as they are practised daily. In addition, it assumes that Arabic is an integrated language system consisting of four skills that are included in two general processes: (a) input (reading and listening) and (b) output (writing and speaking)[16]. Consequently, most of the literature on learning and teaching Arabic presupposes that the effective way of teaching these skills is by integrating them with each other, according to specific design strategies that should be based on the theories of linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics [18]. Besides, it should take into account, different characteristics of students in terms of linguistic knowledge, needs, and attitudes, which in turn directly affect their acquisition of these four skills [17].

Moreover, a great deal of literature has pointed out that this approach is ideal and reasonable for teaching Arabic, and designing its syllabuses and materials because it maintains the unity of the language, while having a profound impact on students' language learning and achievement [11, 15]. Additionally, it does not prevent students from learning Arabic as an integrated unit, and it saves time and effort in both the syllabus design process and the teaching process [11, 17]. As a result, in 2006, King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz's project for improving public education began with the

development of a new Arabic curriculum. Thus, at the beginning of 2011, this project culminated in a new Arabic curriculum that was based upon an integrated approach [19].

Finally, ALTs are responsible for implementing the new Arabic curriculum by employing effective strategies, methods, and skills. Accordingly, Aldahmani [17] and Alsuhami [14] propose that there are important factors that can lead to success in achieving the objectives of the new Arabic curriculum. The most important thing is that the institutions that are involved in preparing ALTs before service should provide their students with strategies, methods, and skills that are adequate to allow them to execute this curriculum in the right way. Additionally, the ALTs, who are in the field now, should enrol in compulsory continuing professional development programmes in order to qualify them to implement this curriculum effectively. Hence, there is a need to determine the different dimensions of ALT preparation before service. An analysis of these dimensions is presented in the following section to identify deficiencies in ALT preparation programmes.

2. Arabic language teacher preparation before service

Pre-service ALT preparation in the KSA began in 1926, when the MOE established the Saudi Scientific Institute for teacher preparation [20]. Subsequently, several shifts and reforms have occurred. In 1976, the MOE established Teachers' Colleges in different regions of the KSA [21]. These colleges aimed to prepare teachers for teaching different subjects such as Arabic, English, science, and mathematics at primary schools. According to Alsayegh, Alhugelal, and Alumar [22], these colleges adopted "the integrated system", which required three and a half years of study, and a half year of teaching practice at primary schools. This half year represented pre-service preparation for ALTs in the KSA. Students could then obtain a bachelor's degree, which qualified them to teach Arabic in the KSA primary schools.

According to Aljabr [23], Alkatheery and Alnassar[24], and Faraj [25], the ALT preparation programme in Teachers' Colleges was in accordance with the "integrated system" that consisted of 149 credits. These credits concentrated on three domains: (1) general (cultural), (2) professional (educational), and (3) academic (specialist). Further details of these domains are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Domains of ALT preparation in Teachers' Colleges

Domain	Allotment	Purpose
(1) General	15% of the preparation programme	To provide students with general information about Islamic culture, Saudi history, and geography
(2) Professional	25% of the preparation programme	To provide students with specific modules in three sections: 1.Social and philosophical foundations 2.General, educational, and developmental psychology 3.Educational assessment, teaching methods, curricula, and teaching practice
(3) Academic	60% of the preparation programme	To provide students with specific modules of subject matter such as applied and theoretical linguistics, Arabian and Saudi literature, and so on

Different studies have presented thorough analyses and critiques of ALT preparation programmes in Teachers' Colleges Alkatabi et al., [20]; Almonea [26]; Alnoh [27]; and Alshargi, [28]. First, these studies collectively suggested that the modules provided in the general and academic domains did not meet students' needs, because initially, they were not designed in accordance with the variety of needs that existed. Moreover, the contents and activities in these modules failed to follow the rapid developments and important changes that were taking place domestically, locally, and globally. The reason was that those who were responsible for these colleges did not pay much attention to developing these modules, but rather, they just implemented them. Second, the modules that related to the professional domain did not contribute to preparing a student teacher for the teaching profession because their contents and activities concentrated on theory more than they did on practice. Furthermore, these modules have not kept pace with the new Arabic curriculums that have been developed by the MOE. Therefore, these studies suggested that the contents and activities of these modules should be reviewed to take into account, the different needs of students, and that their contents and activities should be updated continually.

In 2005, because the KSA government had established over 20 new universities [26], the Teachers' Colleges were combined with colleges of education within these universities. As a result, these colleges changed their system of ALT preparation from the "integrated system" to the "sequential system". The latter system, however, now requires four years for students to acquire a bachelor's degree in teaching Arabic. Furthermore, students cannot teach in schools before obtaining an additional diploma in teaching Arabic, which

requires an additional year of study. This one year represents pre-service preparation for ALTs in the KSA, but excludes teaching practice at schools. Indeed, ALT preparation programmes within colleges of education—as far as I know—have not yet faced any discussion or investigation.

On the other hand, Awadah [29] believes that there are other critical issues that have had considerable influence on pre-service ALT preparation. Most of the issues—as he observes—concern the previous criteria and procedures for admission of students to study at the Arabic language departments of teachers' colleges, as compared with those currently needed to enter colleges of education within universities. He indicates that these current criteria and procedures are inappropriate for accepting students at Arabic language departments. Moreover, those who are responsible for these departments deal with these criteria routinely and apply them in the wrong way.

3. Conclusion

In summary, it can be concluded that the MOE pays great attention to teaching Arabic at public educational institutions in the KSA. Elements of the design and delivery of the curriculum for teaching Arabic, have witnessed remarkable developments in the system of education, particularly in terms of the content and methods. However, ALT preparation programmes before service, have not yet adopted new and clear strategies for keeping pace with these developments, or for bridging the gaps in these programmes. Therefore, colleges of education within Saudi universities should review their programmes for preparing ALTs as well as adopting new and clear strategies for bridging the gaps in their programmes currently.

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