The Elephant in the Room: An analysis of the Arabic language initiatives in the UAE from the perspectives of educators

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Abstract

The government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has designed a range of policies, initiatives, and projects that aim to improve and revive the Arabic language on political, cultural, and educational levels. During the past decade, these initiatives emerged as a response to a perceived decline in the use of the Arabic language and challenges faced by its first language (L1) learners. The impact of some of these initiatives extended beyond the UAE and had a wider outreach. This article discusses the outcomes of an interview-based study focusing on the UAE Arabic language initiatives, with implications that are transferrable to most Arab countries. The research analyzed the perceptions of a select group of educators and policy makers of the Arabic language initiatives of the UAE (ALI). The study adopted the *What's the problem represented to be* (WPR) framework for policy analysis, with data from 29 semi-structured interviews. The outcomes of the study highlighted the role of the targeted Arabic language initiatives in raising the profile of the Arabic language but exposed a critical policy gap. Important language-in-education policies for the Arabic language were found to be urgently required. The implications of the

study suggest new pathways for the development of Arabic language policies with a focus on teacher training and curriculum development.

Introduction

Across Arab countries, a range of initiatives have emerged over the past decade to revive the Arabic language and assert its significance as a marker of identity, an international language, and as a language of the future to counter a perceived decline in its use in native speakers. Taking the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as a case study, this study analyzed a series of initiatives that were led by the UAE government as a response to a perceived decline in the status and usage of the Arabic language.

The initiatives, referred to in this article as the *Arabic language initiatives* (ALI) of the UAE, emerged in the past 12 years and are still ongoing. The ALI are not merely policy texts authored by the government, but rather a combination of discourses, texts, and practices that set the scene for new knowledge and ideologies about the Arabic language (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016a). The ALI are part of an endeavor that boosts the Arabic language, led by the UAE government over time. As a result, they constitute a "form of truth" about the Arabic language (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016a). Questions arise as to how the initiatives are perceived, and how they can impact curricular and pedagogical practices in the teaching of the Arabic language in the UAE.

This study intended to address a gap in the field through a policy analysis of the ALI, to uncover unexplored spaces within these policies, and problematizations that inherently embed pathways to resolving critical challenges for the Arabic language. There is limited evidence of how initiatives to improve the Arabic language are

perceived, and what their possible impact can be. The ALI are relatively new and literature on efforts for Arabic language policies and planning is limited especially in the Gulf region (Hopkyns & Elyas, 2022). I refer to these gaps that have gone unnoticed through the system's oversight as a big elephant in the room which reflects invisible policy opportunities beneath the ideological expert discussion regarding Arabic language policy and planning discussed in this paper. The focus in this research paper is restricted to the educational dimensions of the initiatives (ALI).

Carol Bacchi's (2009) research framework informed the interview process and the subsequent analysis of qualitative responses. WPR refers to "What's the problem represented to be"(Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016a). The six conceptual questions of this framework helped explore the 'problematizations' of ALI from the perspectives of experts in the field, resulting in a view about the Arabic language that can be developed through future language policy efforts. Instead of a problem-solving approach, the framework takes a 'problem-questioning' stance. The deep-seated assumptions in a policy are questioned and perceived as hidden opportunities for looking at the problem and finding solutions in the text itself (Bacchi, 2009).

A summary of the initiatives of the Arabic language in the UAE (ALI)

This non-exclusive summary is a briefing of the UAE's ALIs and few from the wider Gulf region. Initiatives include a range of long-term projects, actions, and decisions that

emphasize the presence of the Arabic language. Since the start of this analytical research study, the ALIs continue to evolve and grow.

Initially, the UAE established an integrated strategy for transforming the country into a Centre of excellence for the Arabic language, through the Arabic language charter (Emirates 24/7, 2012). A dedicated committee designed a blueprint policy document entitled "*Al Arabiya lugha lil Hayat*" meaning, "Arabic for life,"(Committee for Modernisation of Arabic Language Teaching- United Arab Emirates Government, 2013). In 2016, the UAE government additionally endorsed the national reading law outlining a reading policy and promoting engagement of all institutions and entities nationwide in the pursuit of reading (c).

The most recent ALI was the establishment of the Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Centre (Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Centre, 2003), and the inauguration of the annual Arabic Language Summit to promote the Arabic language. Among other impactful initiatives, the Madrasa, a leading e-learning platform and one of the Mohammad bin Rashed Global Initiatives, has been awarded the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize (UNESCO, 2022). The platform was initiated to address the need for accessible high quality educational content in Arabic. The ALI includes the most recent UAE Declaration of Arabic Language to commit to enhancing the status of the Arabic language. This constitutes a roadmap for developing all areas related to Arabic, including its use in digital space, its use by the youth, encouraging the use of technology in education, and

expanding into a wider use of Arabic (Dubai Media Office, 2021). Finally, it is noteworthy to refer to the Arab Reading Challenge and its wide global reach. Its value lies in its implications for schools in the UAE and how it highlighted the significance of reading in the Arabic language.

Other initiatives to boost the Arabic language include the King Salman Global Academy of the Arabic Language (King Salman Global Academy for Arabic Language, 2023) that works on making more visible the role and presence of the Arabic language and culture in daily and academic life. Additionally, the Arab Thought Foundation (ATF), a regional non-governmental organization, launched a series of initiatives to develop and promote the teaching and learning of the Arabic language, and promote openness to world languages and cultures (Arab Thought Foundation, 2023).

The status of the Arabic language in the UAE and the region

Many researchers have argued that the use of Arabic by its speakers is diminishing (Abanmi, 2017; Al-Issa & al Dahan, 2011; Boyle, 2012; Qassem, 2022; Taha Thomure, 2008). As the prevalence of foreign languages, mainly English, is on the rise, local regulatory authorities in the UAE raised concerns regarding Arabic language outcomes of Arab native learners. Simultaneously, the results of international assessments, mainly the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS, 2016*)* for native speakers identified gaps in Arabic language acquisition. These observations triggered policy makers to focus on reading literacy gaps, mobilizing the government to raise the profile

of the Arabic language in the education sector as well as through other social, cultural, and economic aspects in the UAE.

Many factors have influenced the use of the Arabic language in the Gulf region including geo-politics, globalization, and economic changes (Al-Issa & al Dahan, 2011; Barnawi, 2018). Specifically in the UAE, the linguistic landscape is quite complex given the international labor residing there. The UAE has flourished over the past 40 years, emerging from Shaykhdoms, better known as the Trucial States (Davidson, 2005; Ulrichsen, 2017). The country gained its independence from the British mandate in 1971 after a series of treaties culminating in the federation as we know it today, ending a phase of 151 years of British mandate (Davidson, 2005; Ulrichsen, 2017; Zahlan, 1978). The oil phase and the developments in the country following the end of the British mandate came with implications on the sociolinguistic development of the Emirati population, especially its youth. In fact, the UAE, as is the case of other countries in the region, experienced tensions resulting from the enforcement of English language by colonial rule which has had implications on its people (Canagarajah, 2005). The evidence is clear on how the UAE's language policies and planning went through phases, from monolingual instruction to the introduction of English as medium of instruction (EMI) at earlier stages, to enforcement of English at the higher education levels, and to more recent proposals of multilingualism policies. Today, the UAE, hosts a massive range of internationally known higher education institutions including the Sorbonne University and the New

York University (NYU) in Abu Dhabi (Gallagher, 2019; Ridge et al., 2015). The message behind this expansion of the education sector consolidates the need for the English language in education, while at the same time, the discourse favoring Arabic speaks volumes about the equal importance of both languages in the context of the UAE (Gallagher, 2011).

At the level of teaching and learning, Modern standard Arabic (MSA) is the language of instruction of most public schooling systems in the Arab region including the UAE, and the language of formal communications, through media and print. In UAE national schools, Arabic language teaching is compulsory for both Arab speaking and non-Arab speaking expatriate residents. The UAE Ministry of Education governs the regulations for both public and private schools. Alongside the MoE, local authorities such as Abu Dhabi Education and Knowledge Authority (ADEK), Dubai Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), and the Sharjah Private Education Authority (SPEA), operate to regulate the private education sectors in the respective emirates. Across the government schools, during the past few years, the language of instruction has been mainly Arabic. Schools identified as Madaris Al Ghad (Schools of the Future) were an exception, where the sciences and mathematics were taught in English to improve the students' competence and accessibility to high performing universities that follow English as the language of Instruction (EMI) (Ridge et al., 2015). This, however, was reverted in 2018, and the language of instruction became Arabic again for all subjects

in most of the Emirates of the UAE, except for Abu Dhabi (Ministry of Education of the UAE, 2023) .

According to regulatory authorities, teachers of Arabic need to be holders of a relevant qualification of Arabic language arts or literature to be permitted to teach L1 Arabic learners (Ministry of Education of the UAE, 2023). This poses limitation as to the preparation of teachers to have both subject matter and pedagogical knowledge.

Key challenges for Arabic language policies at curriculum and pedagogy levels

In the Arab region, individual country constitutions decree that Arabic is the official language, however, there is absence of an explicit language policy for Arabic (Batakji Chazy & Taha Thomure, 2022; Fehri, 2013; Karamani, 2005; Troudi & Al Hafidh, 2017). The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (2003) report explains that, in a region where knowledge economies are emerging, the native language is usually in a crisis. The report indicates that the lack of policies for the Arabic language at a national level in Arab-speaking countries markedly weakens language teaching efforts and significantly diminishes their resources and impact (United Nations Development Program, 2003). Hopkyns and Elyas (2022) demonstrate how the under-researched language policy and planning of Arabic in the Gulf region makes for a lost opportunity to understand how identities are consolidated, and what impact language policies have on the development of speakers' identities (Hopkyns & Elyas, 2022).

Taha-Thomure (2019) discusses key challenges in the teaching and learning practices of Arabic in the UAE. In addition to parental attitudes, and the prevalence of English, one core challenge is that Arabic language is taught in traditional ways that reflect rigid focus on grammar and usage (Taha Thomure, 2019). Traditional teaching and didactic approaches are a common feature of many Arabic language classroom experiences, particularly in the UAE, as reported in many of the school inspection reports of Dubai private schools (Knowledge and Human Development, n.d.). The World Bank report on advancing the Arabic language highlights notable deficiencies in the teaching and learning of the language (Gregory et al., 2021). The report discusses the learning poverty defined as the percentage of ten-year-old students who are unable to read and understand a text at their grade level (Gregory et al., 2021). The report cites an alarming 59 percent of children in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) who fall within the leaning poor identification (Gregory et al., 2021) . Despite the macro-level growth of the education sector in the Arab region, and in the UAE in particular, the literature indicates a need to raise the standards of Arabic literacy (Taha Thomure, 2019). Research findings indicate that the diminishing instructional time in class and exposure out of class to Arabic language are not the only barriers, but also the limited number of lessons that are mandatory for Arabic is not sufficient for L1 speakers to achieve the needed proficiency (Taha Thomure et al., 2023).

According to Liddicoat (2013), there are four main areas of language planning. The first is *status planning*, which involves making choices about language varieties in a community for specific purposes, including decisions about language use in education. The second area is *corpus planning*, which pertains to decisions about how a language is codified and designed at the levels of syntax and lexicon, to develop the necessary resources. The third area is *image planning*, which deals with how language varieties are valued in a community. Lastly, language planning involves *language-in-education* or *acquisition planning* which addresses core issues in teaching and learning (Liddicoat, 2013). Fehri (2013) argues that much of the known Arabic language initiatives at the regional level are at the level of *corpus planning*. Very little is done at the level of *status planning* or *language-in-education planning* to guide the education system regarding how the Arabic language is to be used, by whom, and to what standard (Fehri, 2013). Tollefson and Tsui (2014) argue that sound language policies are a 'gatekeeper' for language in education, where they are closely linked and should remain at the core of discussions of learners' outcomes and reducing inequalities of access to their education (Tollefson & Tsui, 2014).

Additionally, the publicly available school inspection reports document an inadequate provision of the Arabic language, compared to other languages and areas of the curriculum (KHDA, n.d.). Growth of the private school sector has been remarkable in the UAE and the Gulf region, but significant reforms at the curriculum level in these

countries are still needed, especially for Arabic language provision in both private and government funded schools (Ridge et al., 2017). The weakness in Arabic language proficiency carries many implications on native learners of the language (Troudi & Al Hafidh, 2017). Arab students are faced with a "double standard" when forced to study key school subjects in a language other than their L1, as it takes the focus away from honing their native language skills (Troudi & Al Hafidh, 2017).

One of the key language policy challenges has to do with teacher preparation and language of instruction in universities. Currently, English is the language of instruction at government universities in the UAE. More recently, a study that involved 692 university students in 2019 explored the prevalence of the English language in higher education (Siemund et al., 2021) revealing that English is used between speakers of different Arabic dialects, as their knowledge of dialects and MSA are not sufficient to maintain routine exchanges in daily communication. The study concluded that there is a preference for a bilingual language policy in lieu of the EMI for university teaching to make up for the reduced use of the Arabic language (Siemund et al., 2021). Gallagher (2023) addressed the design of teacher preparation programs and highlighted the need to introduce courses that are specifically designed to prepare Arabic language teachers in the subject matter as well as pedagogical knowledge. Gallagher (2023) suggested that the course and context of pre-service preparation and in-service training need to be

contextualized for the needs and demands of teaching the Arabic as an L1 responsibly (Gallagher & Dillon, 2023).

Methodology

Following the "What's the problem represented to be" framework(Bacchi, 2009), the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: What perceptions and problematizations can be identified in the ALI texts from the perspective of the participants?

RQ.2 What are the Arabic language policy implications from the participants' perspectives for:

a. curriculum planning for Arabic as L1?

b. methodology for the teaching of Arabic as L1?

The study adopted a qualitative approach, using 29 semi-structured interviews with experts in language education, policy, and curriculum. Interview questions and protocols were designed following the policy analysis model of What's the problem represented to be, by (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016a) and Bacchi & Goodwin (2016b), as illustrated in Table 1. The WPR framework, is designed around six conceptual questions that can be used and adapted to interrogate policy issues, documents, and discourses (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016b). The questions were used as a basis of the interviews, with adaptations to the context of this study. The questions were semi-structured and

designed with additional sub-questions to gather rich data giving opportunities for participants to organically expand the discussion with additional information, ideas, perceptions, and perspectives (Cohen et al., 2007) (see Table 1). During the interviews, participants had chances to investigate the deep-seated assumptions about ALI and were able to expand their analysis of how future policies around the Arabic language teaching and learning can be improved.

Table 1:

Interview Questions adapted for this study and based on the WPR framework.

Question 1
 How would you describe the status of the Arabic language in the UAE?
 What is your view of the most recent Arabic language initiatives of the UAE:
     a. Do you think it is significant that most of these initiatives are introduced by HRH Mohammad bin Rashed? Why?
     b. What has been your role in these initiatives?

Question 2   Looking at the ALI and the way they were presented as a range of initiatives, charter, projects, etc., what do they tell you about the status of the teaching and/or learning of Modern Standard Arabic for Language 1 learners?   a. How does the view of the authorities, as reflected in these initiatives compare to your view of the status of the Arabic language for L1 learners?

Question 3
 The Arab-speaking countries have witnessed different approaches by governmental and non-governmental entities to address the teaching and learning of Arabic as a mother tongue:
     a. What initiatives in other Arabic-speaking countries are you aware of?
     b. What are your opinions of these initiatives?

Question 4
 Do you feel there is something about the situation of Arabic as L1 that is not being discussed but which we should be discussing?
 In your opinion, what else can be done to improve the use of Modern Standard Arabic as an L1?
 Do you think there are other ways of seeing the situation of L1 Arabic?
     a. What do you think influences L1 learners in their choice to use the Arabic language?
     b. What is your opinion of the Arabic reading challenge?
     c. Do you feel that the Arabic reading challenge had an impact? Why or why not?
     d. To what extent have the ALI changed the Arabic speaking public's perceptions of the Arabic language?

Question 5   In your opinion, what do you think the impact of these ALI is on:

a.   curriculum of teaching Arabic as L1?
b.   pedagogy for teaching Arabic as L1?
Question 6
Under which conditions would the teaching and learning of Modern Standard Arabic by L1 learners work best?
What types of policies would you like to see the Arab governments adopting to improve the teaching and curriculum planning of Arabic for L1 learners?

The interview questions were initially piloted twice with two of the 29 participants, after which the interview guide was modified. A range of core and sub questions were deleted or re-phrased after the first pilot. Most interviews were conducted face to face, except for a few that were done remotely via video conferencing, and were recorded upon consent of the participants. Participants received transcribed versions of their responses for them to review and validate, ensuring rigor in data collection.

Participants selected included Arabic department heads or principals of schools. Some had expertise in the areas of Arabic language, language policy, academia, and in senior decision-making positions in governmental or non-governmental entities, with some of them having had a role in developing ALI. The data analysis process involved coding the transcribed 29 semi-structured interviews to then identify key themes (Cohen et al., 2007). The organization of the emerging themes followed the WPR framework. Further analytical induction of the themes was done based on their direct relevance to the research questions.

Summary of key findings

The findings highlight what the participants perceived to be the problems with the ALI, and most importantly 'problematizations' from their own perspectives. The findings incorporated the implications of the ALI on Arabic language pedagogy and curriculum (see Figure 1 for a concise summary).

When asked about their perceptions of the ALI, participants spoke about the significance of ALI as high-level politically supported initiatives. Participants believed the political role of these initiatives was a translation of the UAE's intention to lead the revival of the Arabic language. All participants identified these initiatives as drivers and tools to consolidate the Arab identity through the Arabic language.

Themes emerging from the interviews agreed that ALI emerged because of challenges observed in learning Arabic as L1. Participants perceived ALI as political drivers that raised the profile of the Arabic language in the UAE. They commented on how the Arabic language is, as a result, viewed from a new perspective, because of the renewed image of the language. For example, the Arab Reading Challenge is a key initiative that participants considered impactful. Participants explained how the reading challenge touched learners in significant ways and streamlined the habit of reading across schools, reflecting implications on teaching and learning. Participants acknowledged the levels of engagement in the reading challenge, with positive

implications on publishing houses, on school curricula, and on the public, reaching beyond the UAE.

Second, participants identified problematizations of ALI, including a policy-practice gap. Findings indicated that there is an absence of clear Arabic language education policies that can inform the language of instruction at K-12 levels and later at tertiary levels. Participants critiqued ambiguous regulations that affect the pedagogy and the curriculum of teaching. Participants, as such, situated the ALI in their wider context and stressed the need to re-consider Arabic language policy approaches for the Arab region.

Finally, participants discussed implications of ALI, mainly on the pedagogical and curricular levels in Arab countries. This included a view of how the issues in Arabic language teaching and learning compare across the wider context of the Arab world and what has worked or did not work in supporting the Arabic language.

Figure 1:

Key perceptions of ALI, problematizations and implications
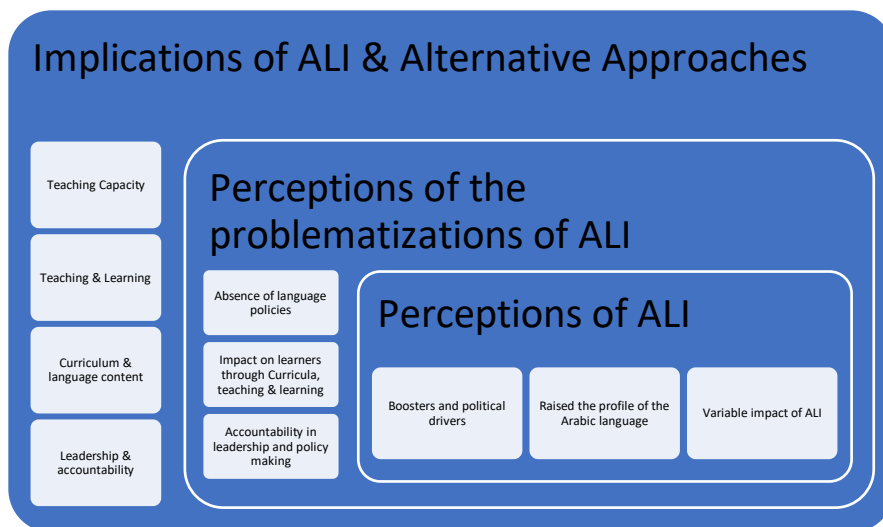
Note: The figure summarizes 3 components of the findings from interviews: (1) the participants' perceptions of ALI, (2) Perceptions of the problematizations of ALI, and (3) Implications of ALI and alternative approaches.

The section below is a brief elaboration on the problematizations of the Arabic language initiatives (ALI) followed by alternative policy approaches, as discussed by participants during the interviews.

The main problematizations discussed by participants are summed up as follows:

- Arabic language teaching and learning

- Curricula and Arabic language content

- Teacher capacity, qualifications, and drive

- Accountability in leadership and policy making.

Arabic language teaching and learning

Participants flagged some policy gaps in teaching and learning of Arabic. They raised concerns about the approaches to curriculum design, and how to assess Arabic competence on a regular basis to ensure quality teaching and learning.

Participants explained how some Arab countries are investing efforts to elevate the Arabic language teaching and learning standards. For example, they discussed the importance of teaching Arabic in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. They spoke about how Arabic language in early childhood settings is implemented differently across Arab countries or not implemented at all, and why it is important to focus on Arabic as L1 in this phase. Additionally, participants discussed the possibility of designing Arabic language exams as conditions for entry to higher education. Participants spoke about strengths in some countries more than others in their holistic approach to curriculum and culture of literary innovation observed in some parts of the Arab world. Participants noted that the UAE is investing heavily in boosting the Arabic language, mirroring some of the findings of the most recent Arabic status report (Ministry of Culture and Youth of the United Arab Emirates, 2021).

The participants used terms such as 'traditional', 'conventional', 'static', and 'not attractive' to describe the learning experiences in Arabic language classrooms. Different participants emphasized dull descriptions when they spoke about the pedagogy of Arabic. Not all participants provided alternative representations or root causes for the

challenges in teaching and learning. For example, some interviewees related the causes of weaknesses in the pedagogy to the lack of an effective curriculum, while others referred to lack of clear benchmarking assessments. Some of them related the challenges to lack of qualified teachers, whereby they spoke about deficient teacher preparation in curriculum development.

From a quality assurance perspective, participants highlighted the role of school inspections as a significant driver in the UAE for raising the profile of the Arabic language for practitioners. The focus of participants was particularly on private and international school inspections across the UAE where the Arabic language used to be less emphasized. Participants expressed how the best impact of ALI over the past 10 years has been achieved when schools began to meet the minimum Ministry of Education's time allocation requirements for the Arabic language in schools.

Curricula and Arabic language content

An interesting theme emerged in the study about significant changes in the curriculum of Arabic because of the ALI. Participants discussed curricular changes, textbook changes, and a general drive towards reviewing curricula and placing more emphasis on literature to support the national curriculum standards for the Arabic language. Participants reported a growth in publishing houses that publish authentic children's literature in the Arabic language. Publishing houses increased their support to rising authors for children's literature, to accommodate growing demands for children's

literature because of the reading challenge initiative. Participants explained how the publishing of levelled readers in Arabic was growing to meet students' different levels of ability in reading. Also, they discussed how this reading movement, coupled with the issuance of the Reading Law of the UAE in 2016, turned the attention of educators and the public to the importance of reading in Arabic. Equally, participants commented on how schools started putting efforts into better library resourcing and better use of Arabic literature. Participants reported exchanges across schools of best practices in Arabic language teaching.

On the other hand, participants were less optimistic and shared that the impact of ALI was not always visible, or clearly defined. Participants thought that teachers have not changed their pedagogical practices unless they were directly involved in the reading challenge initiative. Participants noted that one of the reasons for limited impact on learners is the reliance on a reading initiative to drive improvements in national literacy, instead of having a clear direction or leadership on language planning for improving reading in Arabic across all schools.

Teacher capacity and qualifications

Teacher empowerment and motivation were highly emphasized by participants in this study. Participants discussed how teacher empowerment is crucial for improved performance, and this was mentioned in the context of salary scales. The current salary scales for Arabic teachers are lower than those of teachers of the main language of

instruction and other teachers, both in the private and public sectors. This reality clearly has a direct impact on their performance.

Additionally, the findings focused on a closer reading of licensing efforts and how these need to be coupled with government's decisions to support teachers of Arabic. Licensing initiatives, as suggested by participants, place the Arabic teacher on equal grounds with teachers of other subjects, and therefore would change the stereotypical view of the Arabic teacher as a less impactful staff member in schools, particularly in schools where the medium of instruction is English. Participants explained how licensure is a useful step in reducing ineffective teaching of Arabic in schools. This view is well supported by Fullan who illustrates clearly that changing the context of the teacher and improving their working conditions in a supportive community of learners has a huge impact on their performance (Fullan, 2007).

Finally, participants concluded that the drive to improve Arabic language teaching needs to be coupled with some policy decisions. Policies such as revision of salary scales, comprehensive implementation of licensing initiatives, and the attention to pre-service and in-service teacher preparation can significantly impact the performance and productivity of teachers of Arabic.

Accountability in leadership and policy making

Interviewees were critical of the minimum time allocation for Arabic mandated by the entities in charge of schools. Regulations indicate that all schools are to provide at least six

sessions of Arabic per week from Grades 1 to 3, and five sessions for grades 4 to 6. The mandatory sessions become four per week from Grades 8 until Grade 12. The time allocation diminishes in upper grades, and this, according to participants, impacts students' exposure to Arabic, and affects proficiency. When these ideas were further unpacked, participants suggested that the way decisions are executed at the learner's level is a root cause of the deficiencies found in the Arabic language teaching and learning. The curriculum, for example, has high expectations and there is a very limited time allocation to it, and so schools are pressured to meet the curriculum standards but are faced with time constraints.

For this reason, participants highlighted issues of responsibility and accountability in middle leadership and at strategic levels of planning and policy making. They explained how educational leaders have not been able to systematically take the national vision for Arabic and translate it into effective solutions at the school level. This is where accountability in middle leadership comes in the way of effective implementation of the vision on the ground and at the level of the learners.

Discussion

The "elephant in the room" started to take shape as conversations about the ALI evolved and more issues were brought to the table. These discussions rendered richer and more

telling conversations about what exists in the current policy and what remains 'silent' or otherwise lacking and deserves to be addressed.

Participants agreed on problematizing the prevalence of the English language in the UAE and how it is excessively replacing Arabic among Arab speaking learners. An alternative that was surfacing is the proposal of 'bilingualism' as alternative to English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in teachers' colleges (Siemund et al., 2021). This is one of the options that were brought to the table, to improve policies at the higher education level.

As for teacher training, the option discussed during the interviews was to restructure colleges of education and propose more relevant pathways for coursework for teachers of Arabic in their pre-service programs. The proposals reflect an urge to consider deeply 're-cultured' and re-designed education colleges that focus on the pedagogies of the Arabic teaching as these are currently lacking across the Arab world, not only in the UAE (Gallagher & Dillon, 2023; Tsimpera Maluch & Taha Thomure, 2021). Additionally, teacher colleges need to prepare teachers for the context of teaching and learning of Arabic and future teachers need to be more aligned with their target learners and the context of current day schools (Fullan, 2007; Gallagher & Dillon, 2023).

With respect to curriculum, participants suggested a move towards an updated curriculum that is not restricted to books and content but to universal standards that meet the aspirations of future-ready speakers of Arabic. A progressive curriculum inspires and

creates spaces for learners to be creative in the Arabic language, and most importantly, is produced independently from the quality assuring authority. This outcome cannot be achieved except by a literacy-based curriculum that is fueled by reading. This proposal flows in the same vein as the Reading Law that was issued in 2016. The Reading Law and the Reading challenge initiative, as discussed earlier, set the scene for possibilities for educators to resource Arabic language curricula creatively and use diverse sources to create meaningful learning experiences. Curriculum development, as seen by participants of this research, needs to steer away from the notion of curriculum as textbook development and adopt more holistic approaches. This view is supported by Ridge et al. (2017) who emphasize the importance of creating a national body of curriculum expertise, rather than relying heavily on external expertise that is not sustainable over time, to ensure contextualization of curriculum structures and content (Ridge et al., 2017).

The teacher licensing regulation that was brought up in interviews was recognized as an alternative; however, some participants were not hopeful that this would resolve the problem of teacher preparation. Participants expressed a sense of urgency for reforming teacher preparation. They explained how the same individuals who created the problem will be the ones to propose solutions, and this is self-contradictory, a view supported by Fullan (2007). This again ascertains the caveat of middle leadership. The high-level direction is clear, but when the vision filters down to

operational levels, it gets diluted with policy hurdles or contradictory practices, culminating in undesired outcomes (Taha Thomure et al., 2023).

Participants finally linked the way forward to 'political will' that can drive decisive and transformative language in education policies. They expressed that the responsibility to enhance the Arabic language is legitimate and valid, however, the execution level of operations presents gaps. Middle leadership needs to take the vision forward through clearer and more efficient processes.

Conclusion

The WPR analysis of the interview transcripts uncovered ideas, narratives, and problem-questioning stances from the perspectives of educators and experts about the Arabic Language Initiatives (ALI). The analyzed text opened the window for questioning the implications of ALI at the level of policies for curriculum and teaching.

The analysis helped uncover issues that impact educators and learners. With evidence from participants, it could be established that there are key challenges in the teaching and learning of the Arabic language, not only at the educational level but also at policy level. The challenges are related to: (1) teaching and learning, (2) teacher training and preparation and (3) the need for curricular adaptation to bring the Arabic language closer to the learners. Reading skills, through the Reading Challenge, emerged as pivotal

in the discussions with interviewees compared to other ALI's. The discourse about reading has the power of being further developed if it were coupled with political will.

An interesting development emerged through the Declaration of the Arabic language in 2021 (Dubai Media Office, 2021), two years after the data was collected for this study. The Declaration suggests that Arab societies need sound language planning, to be drawn by governments and community institutions. Language planning can be translated into linguistic policies in the fields of education, media, and public discourse as well as industries related to the Arabic language (Dubai Media Office, 2021). This is a clear call for overdue language in education policies. The ALI, therefore, clearly uncovered a discourse of a renewed or a re-branded image of the Arabic language, or *image planning* as identified by Tollefson and Tsui (Tollefson & Tsui, 2014).

In conclusion, the findings of this research suggest alternative solutions, or new conceptualizations of the Arabic language which partially agreed with the proposals of Fehri (2013), Troudi and Al Hafidh, (2017) and Taha-Thomure (2019). These conceptualizations included establishing the qualifications framework for teachers, professional training, and licensing efforts in the UAE, developing clear teaching and learning best practices for Arabic, and ensuring quality resources and curriculum are in place. At the policy level, it is established that there are issues of responsibility and accountability in policymaking, to put forward regulation proposals, summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2:

Summary of policy proposals as suggested by participants.

Arabic language to be a medium of instruction of subjects other than the Arabic language arts. Participants thought this is useful and can revive the legacy of Arabic as the language of science.
Increase the daily time allocation of Arabic language lessons. Current regulation of the number of lessons of the Arabic language hardly supports students to acquire the language effectively.
Develop more partnerships between the Ministry of Education and the private sector at the level of the curriculum design to address the critical issues of teaching Arabic.
Regulate a mandate for teaching Arabic during the early years of schooling to promote competence of MSA in lieu of the prevalence of dialect as students develop their language skills.
Arabic language must be made an entry requirement for university study for Arab speaking students, through setting competence criteria or issuing minimum scores in the Arabic language to enter university.
Arabic language competence to be a job market demand to ensure that the Arabic language is investment worthy for future employment and align the role of universities in this area.

Note: The table includes the commonly identified policy proposals from all interviews, and this is not an

exclusive list.

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