2020 cohort

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Re-writing the script within Modern Foreign Languages: How does teaching Arabic in school impact on pupils' experience of learning?

THE ISSUE: Since 2001, Arabic has been considered a relevant subject for secondary schools for many different reasons: faith, commerce, and politics (Tinsley, 2015), its presence in school is often a reflection of government policies at a given time. In 2014, Arabic, with Farsi and Turkish, was de-prioritised as an A-level (Slattery, 2001). In 2016, the Education Secretary announced that Arabic, among other languages, would be 'saved' at GCSE and A-Level (DofE, 2016). With Anti-Racist curricula developing apace (CRED, 2020), the politics of LTL language-learning – and linguicism, the marginalisation of some languages in relation to others (Skutnabb-Kangas 1988)- in England has become deeply connected to key debates on widening participation. These debates are key, concerning pupils of minoritized backgrounds who may lack confidence in their contributions to knowledge (Lander 2020).

THE GAP: Whatever the politics of Arabic within secondary schools, many pupils at pre-GCSE and GCSE -level experience access that learning Arabic outside of school settings is not systematic. It can often depend on geographical, cultural, and religious location. Ways of learning Arabic however differ from other languages due to its diaglossia in speech and writing: that Arabic that we speak at home, and what we write in in Arabic, regardless of script, are very different to each other. For speakers of other languages less taught in the UK, such as **Turkish** (Baykusoglu, 2009) and **Portuguese** (Demie & Lewis, 2010), the inclusion of these languages in school however did enhance pupil participation and outcomes

THE SPACE: While I cannot direct intervene into the provision of all community languages on a wider scale, I could intervene in my local setting: by teaching Arabic in my school for pre-GCSE pupils x1 a week/ The aim of this intervention is two- fold: firstly, as one way of preparing pre-GCSE pupils for formats of the GCSE. The second aim of the class was to build confidence in their learning in school.

My research, and its premises of inquiry concerning Arabic in school relates to how could the teaching of written Arabic in school impact on pupils' pre-GCSE learning experience & participation?

In terms of action, I have been delivering one lesson of written Arabic teaching per week in this school to pre-GCSE pupils identifying as Arabic-language-speaking. The project is called 'The Expert Linguists Programme. Pupils have joined for differing reasons. Some pupils have future GCSE attainment in mind. Others wanted to develop friendships. The share starting point was to establish for pupils a sense of pride in their very different ranges of knowledge and to foster belief in potential academic attainment in Arabic.

As the project has only been running for a short period of time, I have been exploring initial impact of this interventions from pupils' perspectives. I have divided up my scope of inquiry into 5 sub-sections:

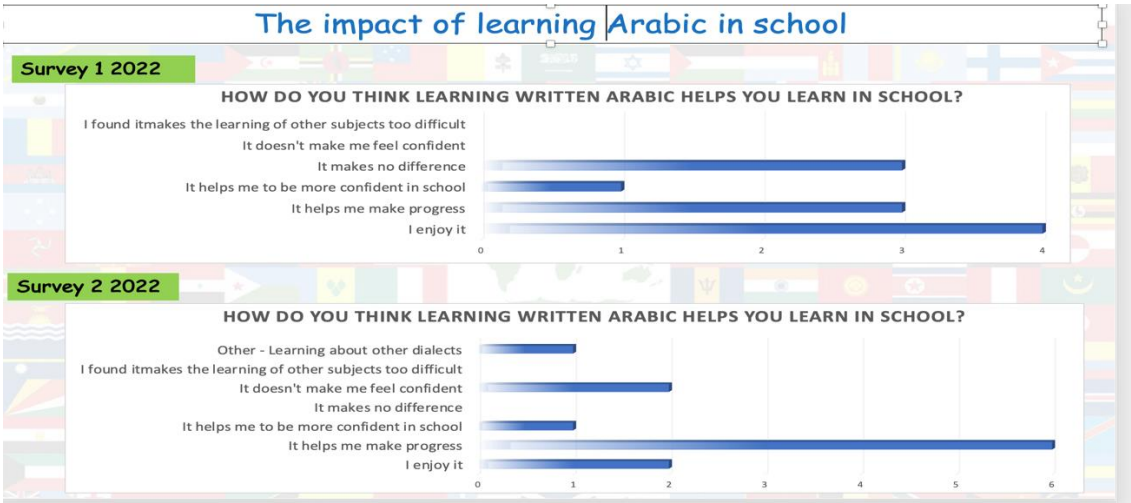
- How pupils use written and spoken Arabic now
- How pupils do access and use language learning in school
- Opinions of learning written Arabic in school
- Opinions of others learning written Arabic in school
- How learning Arabic in school if at all, impacts on their learning in school.

The participants of this study were twelve pre-GCSE pupils on the Expert Linguists Course. Other participants were three teachers of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) and English as an Additional Language (EAL) how had a wealth of experience on different generations of language learners.

I used a mixed methods approach to collect data (Denscombe, 2017; 2008) in that I used a combination of anonymous questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. I first collected data from pupils via anonymous questionnaires that pupils filled in at the beginning of the course and six weeks later. My second data collection was via semi-structured interviews with teachers of MFL and EAL.

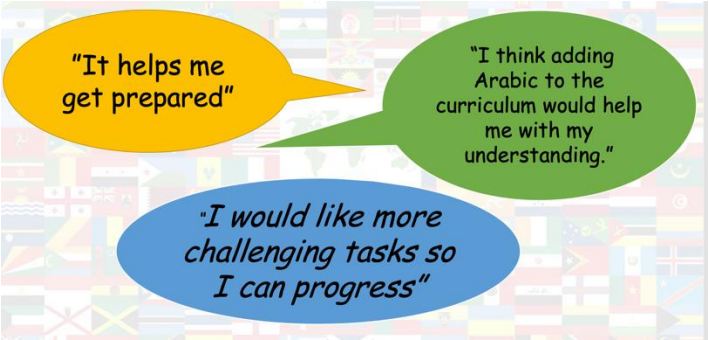
Questionnaires were brief, in pupil-friendly English-language so that pupils did not find them 'high-stakes. The questionnaires were in mixed formats: multiple choice where one option is possible and multiple choice where more than one option is possible. There were spaces for commentary.

I then 'tallied' up the responses and collated the results in another excel sheet tab. I created five visual representations to gain a snapshot of pupil opinions on the impact of learning Arabic in a school setting.



What the data shows is that differences of opinion on writing Arabic: a desire to write it seemed to emerge alongside a sense of writing Arabic being difficult in both the first and second survey. Responses given by pupils indicated that they were unsure of how learning Arabic would have impact, specifically on confidence in their school studies. In the first survey, enjoyment figured highly in the impact expressed by pupils, as was a sense that learning Arabic in school could help them progress. In the second survey, similar responses were given, but interestingly, some expressed that they felt confident *and* less confident in their Arabic. This response is not surprising, as we had moved to writing sentences, rather than working on individual words. Writing even a verbless sentence in Arabic is process which requires cognitive load

In the second survey, all pupils felt that learning written Arabic helped them learn more in school. no pupil stated that it made no difference at all to their learning. The written responses from pupils included:



As Denscombe (2008) astutely pointed out, learning is however always situated, and educational research in this case is certainly no exception. This also applies in the context of gathering comments: very few pupils gave few written responses. Comments were brief in nature, albeit valuable. One reason could be that pupils felt cautious to write for fear of being identifiable. Another reason is a sense was that they found the surveys repetitive. Another limitation is that the learning of any language takes time. After a longer period of time that we can, perhaps, gauge fuller perspectives from pupils.

Future directions relate to what or how we teach formal Arabic. While the pupils enjoy writing, they also enjoy speaking Arabic too. This style of data gathering could not capture but I could only observe anecdotally as a teacher: the smiles on pupils' faces when they heard phrases in Arabic dialects, and when they realised words in their own dialect were welcomed and valued by others too. The pupils and I now keep a post-lesson diary of their dialect words used in class as part of the legacy of the project.

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