

What's it for? Views on the purpose of Arabic education in Muslim schools

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to better understand the relationship between language and ethnic background and perspectives different stakeholders have regarding the goals Arabic instruction in elementary K-5 Muslim schools. The study looked at three different stakeholders' views regarding Arabic education in general and as relates to their school. The three stakeholders are: administrators/principals of Muslim schools, teachers, and parents. The current presentation, however, will analyze only the data obtained from teachers and parents from 3 Muslim private elementary schools in Southern California.

The Study's Main Question:

The proposed study asks: How do the elements of language and ethnic background relate to stakeholders' attitudes and perspectives regarding Arabic education in Muslim schools today? Implicit in this question is the following one: How do these perspectives reflect the schools' cultures regarding Arabic education in Muslim schools today?

Study Background:

Most people would argue that Qur'anic study, Islamic subjects, and Arabic classes are the essential ingredients in a Muslim school's curriculum. However, Arabic is often one of the most ineffectively taught and underestimated subject areas in Muslim schools. Disagreements about how to teach Arabic, who should teach it, and sometimes even whether it should be taught at all are common, and the question is why? And how does one go about resolving these disagreements so that the quality of Arabic instruction can become first-rate.

One of the reasons why might be the differences in language backgrounds. From the administrators to the teachers, to the parents, Muslim schools encompass every ethnicity from Southeast Asia to Europe to North Africa to South America. Some students come from Arabic-speaking homes, while others come from homes where Urdu, Bengali, Tigrinya, Turkish, Kurdish, Circadian, Farsi, Spanish, and other languages are spoken. A large majority of students, teachers, and administrators also come from mixed language backgrounds. Even within homes where Arabic is the heritage language,

students differ in the extent to which they speak and understand Arabic. Some students are native speakers of Arabic, others might be near-native speakers, still others are of Arabic-speaking homes but who do not speak the language at all and could be considered non-natives for language education purposes. All of this impacts the language ideologies and attitudes people have towards teaching Arabic. Briefly, a language ideology is a set of beliefs, values, and understandings regarding the use of a particular language.

The diversity within Muslim schools is a clear strength in a world whose societies are increasingly multicultural and multilingual. However, with such a diverse pool of language and cultural backgrounds, it is natural to expect different perspectives and attitudes towards Arabic and the goals of Arabic education. It also follows that where there are different perspectives and attitudes, these differences play a role in the quality of the Arabic curriculum and instruction provided at the schools, which until now have no cohesive K-12 standards or accountability processes in place for Arabic language education. A study presented at the American Association of Applied Linguistics recently showed that language ideologies have a powerful impact on the success of heritage language programs (King, 1999).

In nearly every Muslim private school, the Arabic subject is taught as a stand-alone subject exclusive of other “secular” content areas like math, history, science, language arts, or social studies. Integrating Arabic language instruction with instruction of various other subject areas remains limited. Perhaps the only subjects in which the Arabic language is incorporated is in Islamic studies or Qur’an classes. In effect, it is taught in the same manner as a foreign language class at a public school, or a heritage language at a minority group full-time school. The emphasis of these Arabic curricula is, in most cases, grammar, reading and writing skills, and to varying degrees communicative competence. The goal tends to be making the students literate in Arabic with varying levels of success. Unfortunately, no statistics currently exist as to the success rate of Muslim private schools in yielding students who are fully literate in Arabic or proficient in the oral domain.

It is important to note that recent efforts, such as those by BIAE (Bureau of Islamic and Arabic Education) are being made to establish standards for learning Arabic at the early elementary levels. The standards place a strong emphasis on oral language in

the early elementary Arabic curriculum. Still, the effort towards establishing standards-based Arabic curricula are too few and uncoordinated.

While Arabic is not taught based on existing dual language or bilingual education models, it is often the case that students being taught Arabic at Muslim private schools are bilingual in Arabic or whose home-language is Arabic. This is perhaps one of the key areas of controversy for the stakeholders in Arabic education, for where stakeholders from Arabic-speaking backgrounds might see the existence of Arabic education as a non-issue; those from non-Arabic speaking backgrounds may view it as preferential to students of Arab backgrounds. This is in stark contrast to private schools where other heritage languages are taught, such as Korean, Armenian, Chinese, or some of the Native American languages. At schools such as these, the student populations are almost exclusively of the same ethnic and linguistic backgrounds wherein the languages being taught are or were native. Student populations, as well as teacher staff, and administration are also less heterogeneous in ethnic and linguistic make-up as they are in Muslim private schools. Thus, the controversy surrounding Arabic education at Muslim schools may partly stem from the reality that Arabic is native only to some of the students and not others thereby lending the impression that the native Arabic language ability of one subgroup of students is more privileged by the school and especially by the Arabic curriculum. A common complaint that illustrates this is that Arabic instruction often depends on material that assumes students speak Arabic as one of their first languages.

In addition to language background, language ideologies also differ depending on adherence to religious practice. Persons of non-Arabic speaking backgrounds with strong adherence to religious practice may believe the goal of Arabic education at Muslim schools to be strictly for liturgical purposes (dealing with the Qur'an) and religion, while those of Arabic-speaking backgrounds may view the goal of Arabic education as literary, historical, and cultural, as well as religious. Still others, be they Arab-speaking or not may view Arabic education in Muslim private schools as a main tool for promoting Muslim children's heritage and identity. In this study, we did not have the opportunity to look at religious adherence of stakeholders and their views on the goals of Arabic education. Rather, we focused on their ethnic/language background and knowledge of Arabic because although Muslims clearly link learning their book and faith to knowing

Arabic, they often differ bitterly about how Arabic instruction should be structured, what should be emphasized in the curriculum, and what the learning outcomes should include.

Much research has been done on heritage language education (Feuerverger, 1997; Hornberger, 1998) to name only a few. With respect to Muslims, Arabic is a common heritage language because it is the language of the holy book, the Qur'an. In a study conducted on parent attitudes towards Chinese heritage language education, the findings showed that parents differed in their views regarding the reasons for Chinese-English bilingual education based on whether they were English or Chinese dominant (Lao, 2004). This indicates that parents' language backgrounds can affect their views regarding the goals of a heritage language curriculum, be it structured as a bilingual or second language program. However, while studies looked at parents' views, fewer have studied teachers' views on heritage language or compared their views to parents' views. Furthermore, while research has looked extensively at the relationship between heritage language programs and students' outcomes (Cummins, 1983), few studies have illustrated the intersection between parents' and teachers' views about the goals of heritage language instruction.

This study hopes to shed light on the gap that exists with the hopes that it would inform the research community and help practical steps towards a more effective Arabic language curriculum in Muslim schools.

Study Hypothesis:

The key claim in this study is that attitudes towards the goals of Arabic education differ depending on the different stakeholders' language backgrounds and depending on their views regarding the goals of Arabic education in Muslim schools.

Study Methods:

DESIGN

This cross-sectional, exploratory study is based on a survey of: parents, teachers, and administrators. A paper-and-pen survey questionnaire consisted of questions related to ethnic background, home language, immigration status, and knowledge of the Arabic language. Responses to the survey were entered and analyzed using SPSS, a statistical software. Content analysis of the open-ended questions was carried out to determine patterns of responses.

PARTICIPANTS

Parent Participant Information

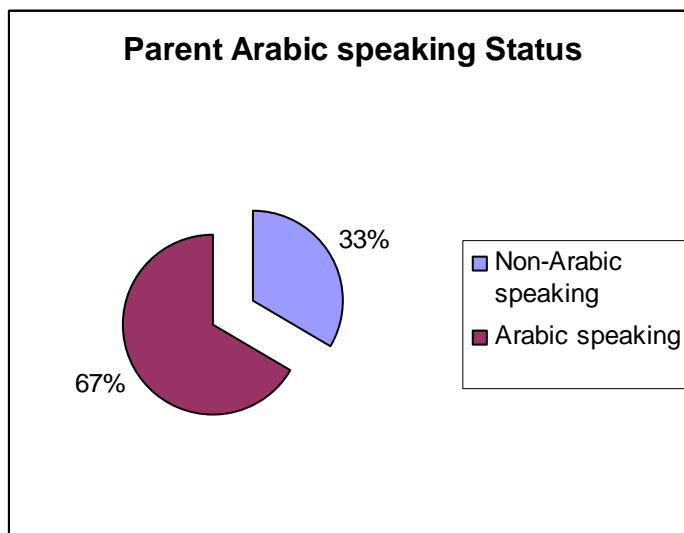
The total sample size of parent responses was: N=54

The number of mothers who responded to the survey was higher than the number of fathers who responded:

Mothers: n=42, Fathers: n= 12

18 of the parents surveyed were non-Arabic speakers, while 36 of them were Arabic-speakers. Because over half of the sample were Arabic-speakers this can potentially bias the results. Interpretations of the findings will take this discrepancy into account. Figure 1 below shows the percentages of parent participation based on language background:

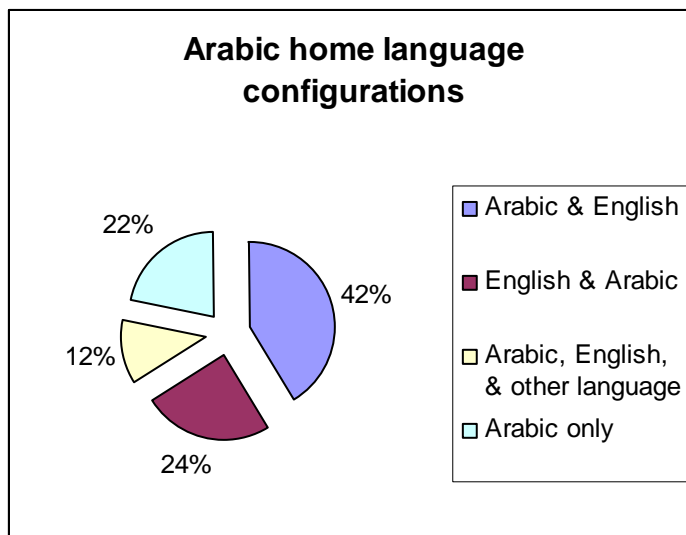
Figure 1. Breakdown of parent responses by language background



It is not clear, however, from the survey, how many of the parents who reported having Arabic as a home language came from a home that was Arabic dominant, or predominantly Arabic-speaking. The figure above also should not be interpreted as parents who spoke only Arabic outnumbered those who spoke other than Arabic. The majority of parents who listed Arabic as a home language also listed English or other

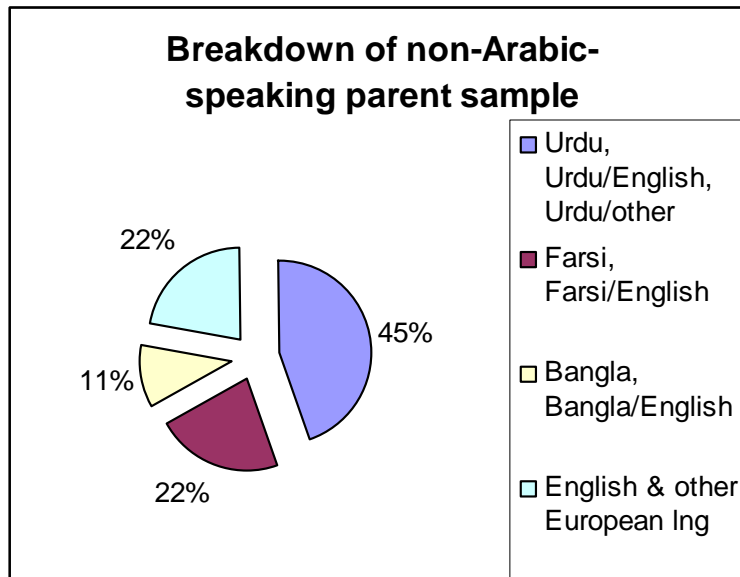
languages such as Spanish. In only two cases did parents indicate that the home language was predominantly English with “very little Arabic” spoken in the home. A few parents wrote down “English and Arabic” as opposed to “Arabic and English”, which was interpreted as English is the first language, Arabic the second. The following graph shows a more fine-grained representation of the Arabic home language group based on the other home languages reported:

Figure 1. Breakdown of Arabic-speaking parent sample



The next largest language group after those who reported speaking Arabic at home was the Urdu or Urdu/English home language group. Parents who reported speaking Urdu or Urdu/English at home were a total of $n=8$, comprising about 15% percent of all the parents surveyed and about 45% of the non-Arabic-speaking parents surveyed. The breakdown of the non-Arabic-speaking parents is represented in the figure below:

Figure 3. Breakdown of non-Arabic-speaking sample by language



Teacher Participant Information

Teacher responses in the study were by far fewer than the number of parent responses, $N=14$, ($n= 5$ Arabic language teachers, $n= 9$ Teachers of other than Arabic language).

The rationale for surveying teachers of both Arabic and other subjects was to try to capture all teachers' attitudes towards Arabic education since all teachers at a Muslim school contribute to the school culture regarding the teaching of Arabic.

The average number of years the Arabic teachers had taught Arabic was five years, $M= 5.2$. Almost all had taught at the elementary level particularly early elementary Pre-K through second grade. Only one teacher had experience teaching Arabic to all grade levels between 1 and 6, and only one teacher had previous experience teaching Arabic at the high school level. All the Arabic teachers were immigrants, having lived an average number of fifteen years in the U.S. $M = 15.5$. Their educational backgrounds varied, with only two out of the five having had a degree or certificate in education, and only one carrying a degree in Arabic as well as education/child development. The remaining teachers' educational backgrounds spanned the sciences, humanities, and other degrees. All, however, had immigrated from Arabic-speaking countries in the middle east and North Africa and were native speakers of Arabic.

The teachers of other than Arabic subjects had a variety of educational backgrounds but only three had degrees or certificates in education, child development, and only one held a teaching credential from the state of California. About half of this group of teachers were born and raised in the U.S. from mixed immigrant and American native backgrounds as well as African American and Caucasian American backgrounds. The other half were immigrants who had lived in the U.S. for an average number of fifteen years, $M= 15.25$.

Findings

The survey instrument was designed for the study. Both the parent and teacher versions included questions about teacher qualifications, the effectiveness of the Arabic instruction at the school, their thoughts on what the goal of Arabic education should be, what should be emphasized in the Arabic instruction grades K-3 and then 4-8, and what they would change in their school's Arabic program if they could. Other than that, the teacher survey had questions relating to their educational background and their instructional needs. The parent survey asked about their Arabic knowledge level and their impressions regarding the school's attitude towards teaching Arabic. A copy of the survey can be seen upon request.

The findings from the parent survey responses will be presented first, followed by the findings based on the teacher survey responses. Later a discussion of the responses will be presented in light of one another.

I. Parent survey responses

The main research question was, "What do parents think the goal of Arabic education at Muslim private schools should be?"

Parent responses were as follows, and are represented in chart form below:

6 parents did not respond to this question

4 parents answers were listed as "Other" due to their irrelevance to the question

4 parents stated that the goal should be Arabic literacy with comprehension (reading and writing Arabic)

2 parents stated that the ability to speak and converse in Arabic should be the goal

7 parents stated that the goal should be to teach Qur'an or the religion of Islam only

3 parents stated that the goal should be a combination of Arabic literacy and conversational Arabic

5 parents stated that the goal should be a combination of Arabic literacy, conversational Arabic, comprehension, and learning Qur'an

9 parents stated that the goal should be to teach the heritage, culture, faith, traditions, and build identity

11 parents stated that the goal should be to teach literacy, ability to read Qur'an, and other issues, such as analyzing Qur'an, comprehending...etc.

The figures based on parents' responses to the survey question "What should the goal of Arabic instruction be?" reveals a discrepancy between parents who listed conversational ability in Arabic language as one of the goals of Arabic instruction, and those who do not, or who list literacy, comprehension, and Qur'anic language as the goals of Arabic instruction. Parents did not exclusively mention either literacy in language or conversational Arabic as goals of Arabic education. Rather, the overwhelming majority of them chose a combination of Arabic literacy and conversation, or Arabic literacy but no conversational Arabic. Very few parents of either language group wrote conversational skill in Arabic as the only goal of Arabic instruction at Muslim schools. After we present the findings from the teacher surveys, we will compare the parents' responses to the responses teachers provided for an even more complex picture of the perspectives surrounding the goals of Arabic education at Muslim schools.

While parents across language lines seemed to overwhelmingly want command of Qur'an as a goal of Arabic education, they differed sharply on what ought to be emphasized in instruction.

Arabic-speaking parents seemed to want an emphasis on all aspects of Arabic: oral language, literacy, as well as grammar and conventions, but non-Arabic-speaking parents placed less emphasis on oral language and more on actual Arabic literacy. The figures below juxtapose Arabic-speaking parents' emphases and non-Arabic-speaking parents' emphases.

Figure 4. Domains of Emphasis in Arabic Instruction (Non-Arabic-speaking Parents' views)

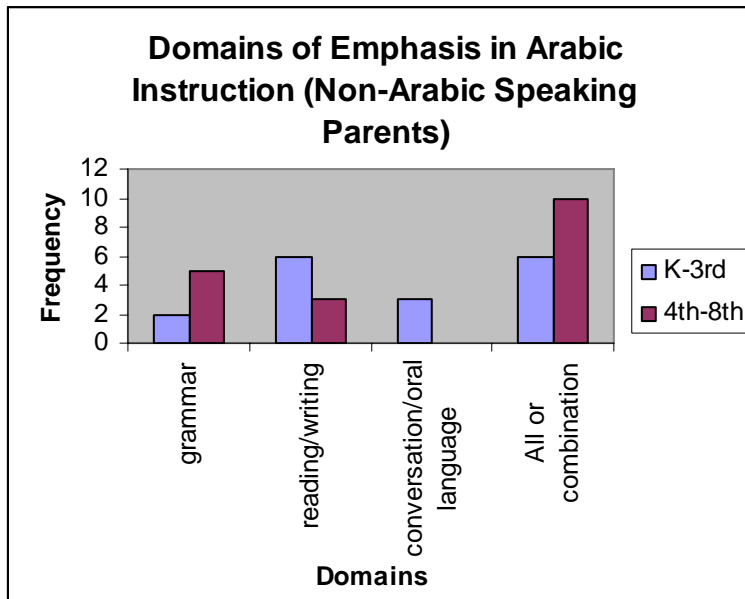
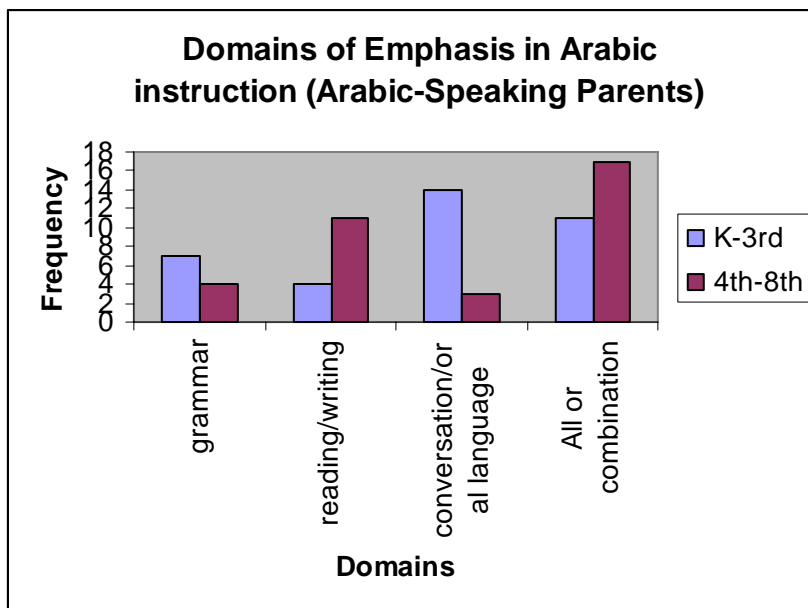


Figure 5. Domains of Emphasis in Arabic Instruction, Arabic-speaking parents' views

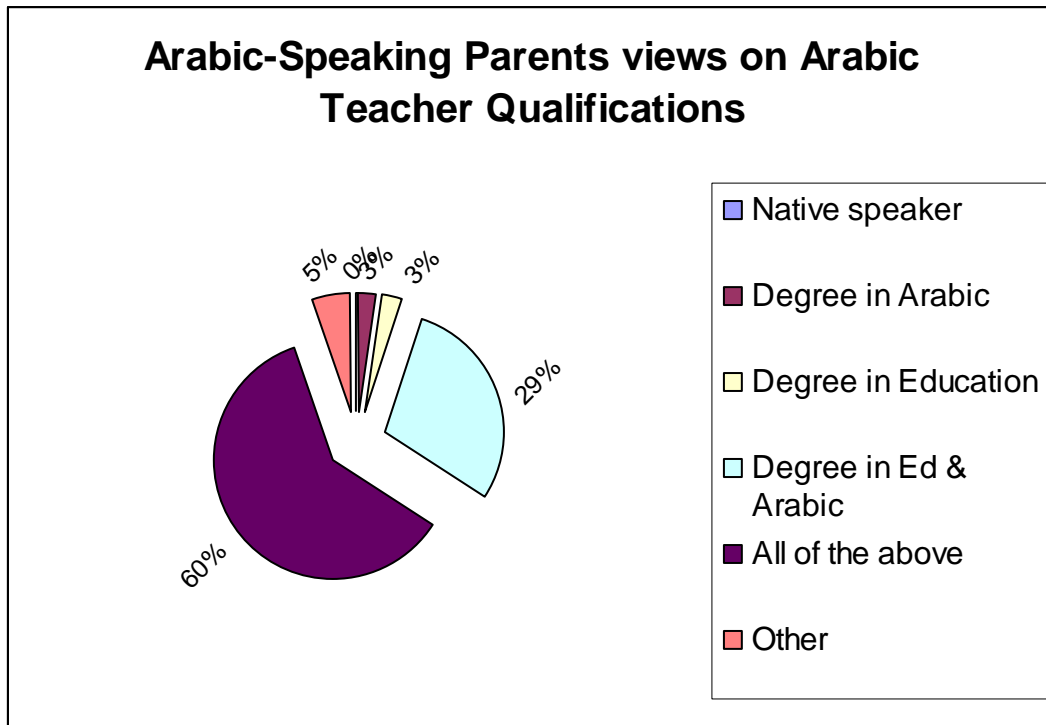


The two graphs show a distinct difference in what parents of different language backgrounds believe should be most emphasized, particularly in the domains of literacy skills and grammar. However, the graphs also show that parents more likely than not want a combination of domains to be emphasized in Arabic instruction particularly with respect to the older grade levels. This pattern in parents' responses is the same with

parents’ of both language groups. Both parent groups reported the desire to see grammar, literacy skills (reading, and writing) as well as conversational skills emphasized in the curriculum.

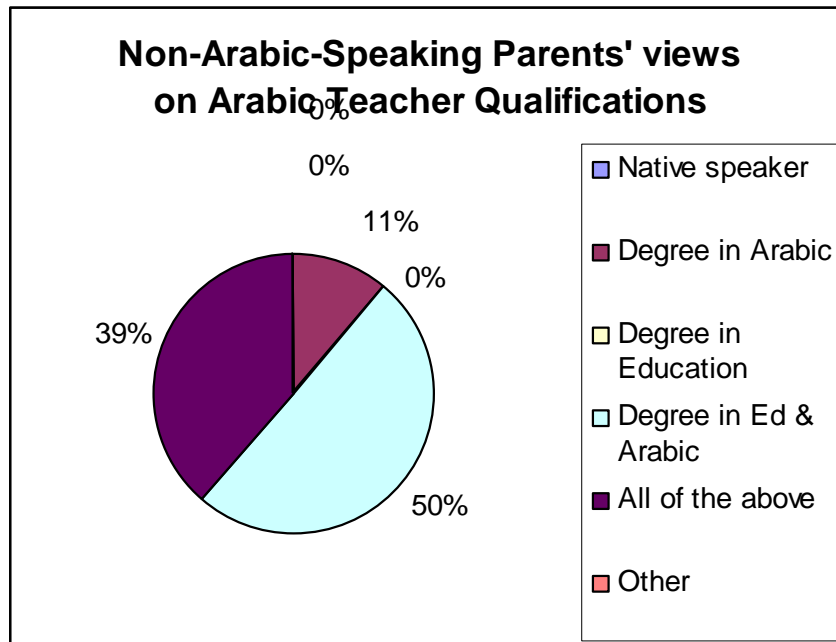
With respect to teacher qualifications, parents’ responses to the question: “What do you think is the most important qualification for an Arabic teacher to have” varied significantly by language group. Parents who were Arabic speakers overwhelmingly believed that a teacher must ideally be a native speaker of Arabic *and* have a degree in both the Arabic language and education. See the figure below for the Arabic-speaking parents:

Figure 6. What Arabic teachers should be qualified in, Arabic-speaking parents’ views



Non-Arabic speaking parents’ responses differed, however, in that they largely reported that teachers of the Arabic language should ideally have a degree in Arabic and Education more than that they need to be native Arabic speakers. The figure below represents their responses to the aforementioned question regarding qualifications:

Figure 7. What Arabic teachers' qualifications should be, non-Arabic-speaking parents' views



This slight discrepancy between non-Arabic-speaking parents' and Arabic-speaking parents' beliefs about what an Arabic teacher should be qualified in can possibly be attributed to non-Arabic-speaking parents' outlook that nativeness in the Arabic language is not a guarantee of sound Arabic language instruction. In their view, teachers with formal education in the Arabic language and education could teach Arabic just as equally as a native speaker who has the same degree. Arabic-speaking parents' might disagree because their view is a native speaker would be more familiar with the language than a non-native speaker. Certainly, in the world of bilingual education, a myth prevails that a native speaker can teach the language he/she speaks better than a non-native simply by virtue of knowing the language firsthand. Research, has shown, however, that being a native speaker does not qualify one to teach necessarily, nor to facilitate learning. Rather professional training and education qualifications determine teacher quality, and ultimately program quality (Crawford, 1999).

II. Teacher survey responses

Teachers of Arabic were fewer in this study than teachers of other than Arabic subjects. However, this difference still resulted in a majority of teachers stating that the

goal of Arabic instruction should be to make children literate in Arabic and able to read and understand Qur'an. The breakdown of responses from teachers is as follows:

2 teachers provided no answer

4 teachers responded that Arabic instruction's goal should be literacy in standard Arabic and ability to read and understand the Qur'an

2 teachers responded that the Arabic instruction should be for the purposes of learning the Qur'an only

1 teacher responded that the Arabic instruction should be for the purposes of becoming literate in the Arabic language with no reference to learning of Qur'an

2 teachers responded that the goal should be literacy in Arabic, conversational ability, and learning Qur'an

2 teachers responded that the goal should be to make students love and appreciate or feel motivated about Arabic as well as become literate in Arabic and learn Qur'an

1 teacher cited heritage and cultural awareness as the goal of Arabic instruction

Teachers of Arabic did not differ significantly from teachers of other subject areas in their views of what Arabic education SHOULD be for. The goal, tended to be for the purposes of learning Qur'an, and the Arabic language itself for its own sake. Some teachers articulated this in terms of specific language domain goals, others simply stated that the goal should be to learn the Qur'an or be proficient in the language.

Teachers surveyed differed, however, on what should be emphasized in Arabic instruction at the early elementary and the upper elementary to middle school. Arabic language teachers believed that the emphasis should be on literacy skills and grammar with little focus on conversational skills or oral language at either level. Teachers of other subjects, however, emphasized conversational Arabic and oral language skills. See the two figures below, the first of which represents Arabic teachers' views, and the following one represents the "Other Subject" teachers' views:

Figure 8. Domains of emphasis in Arabic instruction (Arabic language teachers' views)

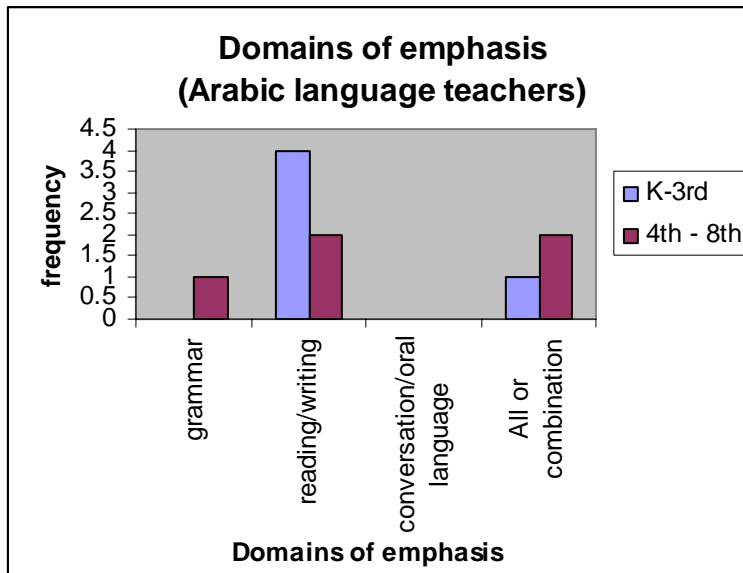
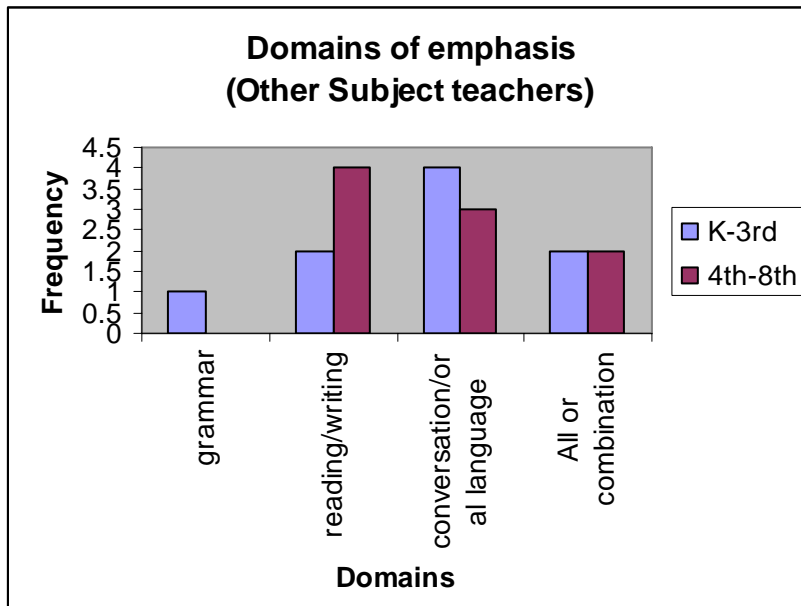


Figure 9. Domains of emphasis in Arabic instruction (Teachers of other subjects' views)



The stark difference between the two groups of teachers was in the number of instances teachers of other subjects selected conversational/oral language skills as a domain of emphasis for both grade levels, whereas Arabic language teachers almost never mentioned conversational language as an area of emphasis in either grade level.

Rather, they focused on the reading and writing, or literacy skills as an area of emphasis for both grade levels.

Interestingly, with respect to teachers's beliefs regarding the most important qualification of an Arabic language teacher, teachers who taught Arabic as well as those who taught other subjects more or less stood in agreement. Unlike with the distinction between Arabic-speaking parents and non-Arabic speaking parents, teachers of the Arabic language as well as teachers of other subjects saw that the most important qualification for an Arabic language teacher would be to have both nativeness *and* degrees in Arabic and education. The figures below illustrate the distinction:

Figure 9. Arabic teachers' views on ideal qualifications for an Arabic-language teacher

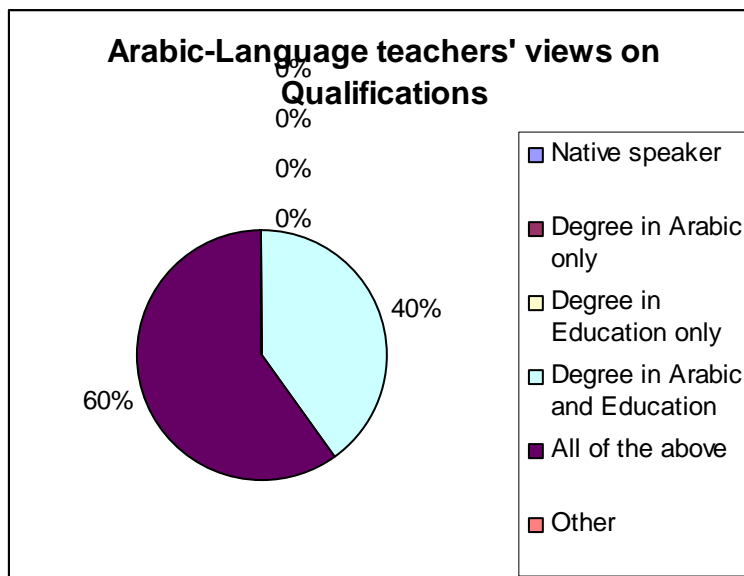
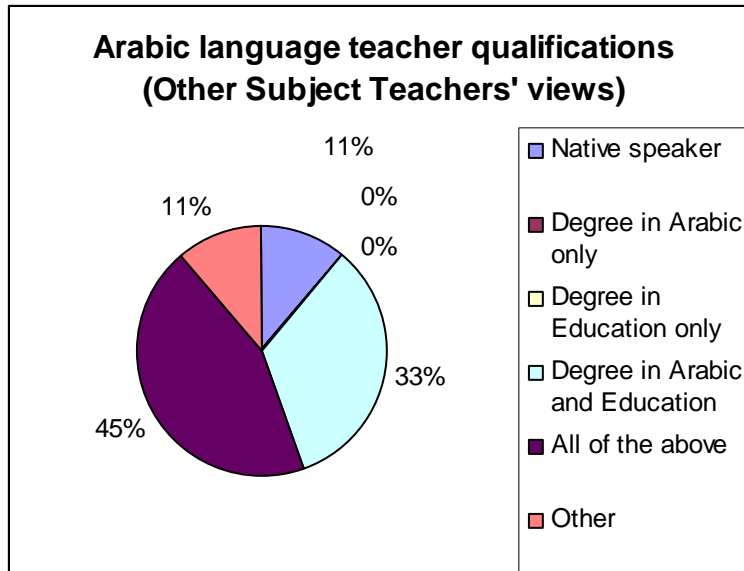


Figure 10. Other subject teachers' views on ideal qualifications for an Arabic-language teacher



The distinction between these two teacher groups is that while not a single teacher of Arabic indicated that a native speaker could be a qualification for teaching Arabic, a few of the Other Subject teachers did. The reason why is not immediately clear. Teachers of other subjects also believed that teachers of Arabic ought to have some other qualifications, which they reported to include patience and kindness. Perhaps this may be due to their perspective as non-natives who could understand the challenges that learning a different language could present.

Discussion & Implications

The findings presented thus far looked at patterns in the data within groups. The data showed similarities and differences within the parent group, and within the teacher group. Now, we will discuss the two sets of findings in light of one another.

Parents and teachers from across immigrant lines believed that the main goal of Arabic education in Muslim schools was to facilitate students' access to the Qur'an. This reveals that parents and teachers are generally in agreement about the goals of Arabic education. However, they are different in what they want to see emphasized in the instruction. Parents' views on what ought to be emphasized are not always consistent with their stated goals of making students capable of reading Qur'anic Arabic, understanding it, and being able to communicate in Arabic. For example, while parents

might have stated that the goal of Arabic education should be to teach Arabic literacy, they often selected more than just Arabic literacy skills as an area of emphasis for Arabic instruction. Teachers, however, selected areas of emphasis in Arabic instruction that matched their stated goals of what Arabic education should achieve. Although teachers differed on what the domains of emphasis should be based on whether they taught Arabic or not, their responses in the emphasis question more often corroborated their responses to the question of Arabic education goals. Interestingly, however, while parents of non-Arabic speaking backgrounds rarely listed conversational and oral language skills as a domain of emphasis for instruction, teachers of other than Arabic did. It is not clear why, although perhaps it may be due to teachers' awareness of the link between oral language proficiency and later literacy skills.

Unfortunately, the survey did not adequately capture various parents' and teachers' sentiments regarding the goals of getting students to appreciate the language, to feel motivated about it, and to feel it as a part of their identity. The responses that listed these were too few for any conclusive analyses to be performed.

Overall, parents and teachers across all language and ethnic backgrounds articulated the goals of Arabic in terms of learning and students' personal growth. Only a few referred to pedagogical issues in their responses. The responses that discussed pedagogical issues were placed under the category of "Other" in the responses category.

The findings from the parents' and teachers' responses bear strong implications for the structure of an Arabic language curriculum as well as the pedagogical strategies that are implemented in the teaching of Arabic. If some parents see the goal of Arabic education as establishing communicative competence in their children, a purely academic literacy approach to teaching Arabic would fall short of their expectations. In contrast, parents who see the goals of Arabic instruction purely in terms of literacy and Qur'anic language might not agree with a communicative approach to teaching the Arabic language. Still further, parents and teachers who view the goal of the Arabic program as one that should encompass all domains: conversational language, reading and writing, comprehension...etc. might find the existing structures too limited or rigid.

Recommendations

Thus, in addition to structuring Arabic classes based on level of proficiency, Arabic language curricula would do well to promote instruction that targets both communicative and literacy outcomes. Conversational Arabic raises a question, however. Namely, the question becomes, “do we teach conversation in Standard Arabic, or in a dialectal variety? If the answer is the latter, clearly, with the existence of so many spoken varieties of Arabic, parents, teachers, and administrators of Muslim schools must devise a system to establish consensus about which variety to teach and how the outcome would be evaluated.

A second recommendation is that Muslim schools would devise an informational tool to inform incoming parents of the goals and pedagogical philosophy underlying their Arabic program so that parents would at least be made aware of the school’s expectations. With a clearer view of the different perspectives regarding the goal of Arabic education in Muslim private schools, steps could be made towards creating more targeted Arabic language programs at Muslim schools.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include a small sample size as well as non-comparable sample sizes of parents and teachers. In the parent survey we did not ask about parents’ socio-economic status or their level of education, which are often viewed in education research as a strong indicator of parents’ overall academic expectations and goals for their children. This was because we were not looking to explore the deeper underlying factors as to why opinions differ on the goals of Arabic education, but rather to do a first step at seeing how they differ primarily in relation to their backgrounds as well as their experiences and knowledge of Arabic language. In the teacher survey, we did not ask how many years of experience the teachers had in teaching in general. The teachers of Arabic were asked for how many years they taught, but teachers of other subjects were not asked about their years of teaching experience. Although this could have made our explanations richer, for the time being again, our focus was on language and ethnic background and its relation to language ideology/attitude towards Arabic education as opposed to the relationship between teachers’ professional experience and their views on

Arabic education. Refinement of the survey instrument would need to be carried out should an expanded version of the study be done.

Future directions for research in this area would be to survey a larger sample of teachers and administrators as well as to investigate the relationship between students' views and their parents' and teachers' views in order to understand the learning outcomes of Arabic language education.

Acknowledgements:

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