

# WHAT DO PARENTS EXPECT FROM THE TEACHING OF ARABIC?

By Salah Ayari  
Al-Amal School, Minneapolis, MN  
Salah\_ayari@hotmail.com

## Introduction

No matter how hard they try, teachers of Arabic in Islamic schools are continuously faced with criticism from parents who are not satisfied with their children's performance in Arabic. What is it exactly that those parents are concerned about and what more can the teachers of Arabic do to improve student achievement? This presentation shares the results of a survey conducted with parents at Al-Amal School in Minnesota, and the subsequent steps taken to improve the teaching of Arabic.

In order to better understand the survey results, a brief description about the school, the parents and the students is given below.

## About Al-Amal School

Al-Amal School is PreKindergarten-12 accredited school which was established in 1995. It has over 350 students all of whom take Arabic as part of their prescribed course work. Kindergarten students take Arabic twice a week while first grade students take it three times a week. Starting from second grade, Arabic is offered every day. There are four full time teachers of Arabic, and one part time teacher who also serves as the program coordinator. The textbook used is *At'allamu Al-Arabiyya*, which has been used by the school for five years.

Students attending Al-Amal School are very diverse, representing a wide variety of ethnic groups. Below is student distribution by language spoken at home for the school year 2005/2006:

- Somali: 37%
- Arabic: 30%
- English: 11%
- Urdu: 10%
- Other languages: 12%

## Listening to the parents

Several parents have repeatedly voiced concerns that their children are not making adequate progress in learning Arabic despite the fact that they have been with the school for several years. In response to those growing concerns and in an effort to learn more about the attitudes, expectations and level of satisfaction of the parents regarding the teaching of Arabic, the Principal designed and distributed a parent survey, consisting of 17 questions (see appendix). 65 parents filled out and returned the survey. The responses were tallied and turned into percentages which were used to draw conclusions about the

level of [parents' satisfaction. It should be noted that it was not within the scope of this survey to run a statistical analysis.

### **Survey results**

Survey results show that 46% of the respondents indicated that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the Arabic program, 31% indicated that they were somewhat satisfied, while 23% indicated that they were not satisfied. With respect to their level of satisfaction with the teachers of Arabic, 60% of the parents who participated in the survey indicated that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the teachers. 27% indicated that they were somewhat satisfied, while only 13% indicated that they were not satisfied.

When it comes to the question of what parents want their children to improve at, 70% of the respondents gave priority to speaking, 48% gave priority to comprehension, 43% gave priority to reading, while 29% gave priority to writing. In response to the question of what is the most important reason for wanting their children to learn Arabic, reading Quran ranked number one, understanding Quran ranked number two, speaking Arabic ranked number three, while writing Arabic ranked number four.

With respect to the question of how their children are doing in Arabic, 68% indicated that their children are doing either well or very well, while 28% indicated that their children are doing poorly in Arabic.

When it comes to the level of satisfaction with the textbook, 58% of the respondents are either satisfied or very satisfied with the textbook, 22% are somewhat satisfied, while 20% are not satisfied.

The above findings reveal that approximately 2/3 of the parent respondents are pleased with the Arabic program. It appears that parents' satisfaction with their children's teachers and the textbook is contributing to their overall satisfaction with the Arabic program.

The findings also reveal that while most parents view the ability to read and understand Quran as their number one priority, they do value other language skills. In fact, 70% of the respondents want the school to put more emphasis on speaking, demonstrating how much parents value high proficiency in all language skills.

### **A Focus Group**

After the survey data was collected, parents were invited to join a focus group to share their perspectives, expectations and concerns. The teachers of Arabic were also present during the discussion in order to share their perspectives, clarify their practices and listen to parents' concerns. The discussion confirms what the survey data revealed, namely that most parents are satisfied with the Arabic program, with their children's overall performance, with the textbook and with the teachers of Arabic. However, their main concern was their children's lack of ability to speak Arabic. One parent noted that after many years of learning Arabic, his son is still reluctant to "utter even a sentence". There

was a consensus among the parents in the discussion group that the children need to be challenged more to encouraged to use the language.

### **Steps Taken To Improve the Teaching of Arabic**

While the survey findings reassured the teachers that most parents are satisfied with their job (contrary to the impression they we had prior to conducting the survey), those results highlighted a deficiency in their teaching, and that is the lack of emphasis on speaking, leaving students unable to use Arabic beyond simple phrases. In order to rectify this deficiency, teachers realized that they need to collaborate and explore news ways in their instructional practices.

#### Working as a team

The first step towards improving the teaching of Arabic is teamwork. For the last several years, teachers used to meet occasionally to work on projects and discuss testing and curriculum, but their work was not well coordinated and their meetings were not regular. During this school year, four teachers of Arabic and the Principal decided that they would meet regularly (twice a week) to discuss issues related to communication with parents, instructional strategies, textbook, material development, projects. Teachers share ideas, discuss practices that worked for them, and address concerns in order to find effective solutions. The Arabic coordinator is responsible to follow up on teachers' requests, such as developing instructional material, designing projects, competitions, etc. For instance teachers decided to start a monthly intramural Arabic contest, where students from different grade levels compete against each other to answer questions in Arabic and gain more confidence in their speaking skills.

#### Improving communication with the parents

After many parents complained that they were not aware of what their children had been learning and poor communication with the teachers, teachers of Arabic met with Principal and put a plan of action to improve communication. Each teacher started a weekly Arabic newsletter explaining to the parents what has been taught during this week, what will be taught during next week, list of vocabulary items for the children to memorize, new grammatical rules, saying of the week (hikmatul-usbu'a), among other things.

The newsletter was written both in Arabic and English to reach out to more parents. It is to be signed by the parents and returned to ensure that parents are aware of what their children are learning and provide extra help at home if possible.

After they started receiving a regular newsletter from the teachers of Arabic, many parents came to praise this initiative and reported that they are now more aware of what their children are learning, which allowed them to provide extra help for their children as needed.

#### Seeking professional development

In addition to regular staff meetings attended by the Arabic teachers, on-site training that is geared to the needs of the Arabic teachers was provided more frequently. Experts on language teaching were brought to the school to give workshops on the teaching of reading, the recently developed Arabic standards and language teaching strategies. On-

site training is important because three of our teachers are female, and are not always able to go out of town and stay overnight for conferences. Teachers who are able and willing to attend professional conferences out of town were supported and recognized for actively seeking to hone their teaching skills through professional development activities.

#### Creating a rich language environment

The physical environment has a big impact on what the children can learn and remember. With that in mind, the teachers of Arabic at Al-Amal School decided to create a rich language environment to enhance students learning opportunities. They started decorating their classrooms and the hallways with attractive Arabic posters and teacher developed material that is age appropriate and help to reinforce the skills being taught. The teachers also started displaying students' work, including projects, on the walls of the classroom and in the hallways, making it not only a source of pride for the learners who produced it, but also a learning tool for other students in the school who are being exposed to it.

As a result, the textbook ceased to be the only or even the main source of information for the students, who are now exposed to carefully selected material that is more sensitive to their needs.

#### **Conclusion**

The teaching of Arabic in Islamic schools is a daunting task because parents tend to have different and sometimes conflicting expectations and because teachers have limited resources. However, as the results of the parent satisfaction survey show, teachers of Arabic are capable to meet the challenges by working together as a team and by exploring new and creative ways to address parents' concerns and improve student proficiency in Arabic.

## APPENDIX

### Al-Amal Arabic Language Survey (2005/2006)

Dear parents,

Assalamu Alaikum

The purpose of this survey is to learn more about parents' opinions and expectations from the teaching of Arabic at Al-Amal School. The information gathered will help us make improvements in our teaching methods, textbook selection, amount of homework and what language skills should be emphasized in Arabic (reading, writing, speaking, etc.). Please take a few moments to fill out this survey and return it to the office.

1. What language do you speak at home (your native language)? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is the grade level of your child(ren)? (circle all that apply)  
K - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10
3. What grades is your child getting in Arabic? (circle all that apply)  
Elementary: 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 Middle/high: A - B - C - D - F
4. In your opinion, how is your child doing in Arabic?  
Poorly [ ] Good [ ] Very good [ ]
5. What is your level of satisfaction with the Arabic program at Al-Amal School?  
Not satisfied [ ] Somewhat satisfied [ ] Satisfied [ ] Very satisfied [ ]
6. What is your level of satisfaction with the teacher of Arabic (who teaches your child)?  
Not satisfied [ ] Somewhat satisfied [ ] Satisfied [ ] Very satisfied [ ]
7. What is your level of satisfaction with the Arabic textbook (Ata'allamu Al-Arabiyya)?  
Not satisfied [ ] Somewhat satisfied [ ] Satisfied [ ] Very satisfied [ ]
8. In your opinion, what is the difficulty level of the Arabic material taught to your child?  
Too challenging [ ] Just fine [ ] Too easy [ ]
9. How do you feel about the amount of homework given to your children in Arabic?  
Too much [ ] Just fine [ ] Not enough [ ]

10. What do you think your children need to improve at?

Reading [ ] Writing [ ] Speaking [ ] Comprehension [ ]

11. On a scale of 1 – 5 (1 = most important, 5 = least important), please rank in order of importance the reason(s) you want your child to learn Arabic?

- Be able to read Quran ( )
- Be able to understand Quran ( )
- Be able to write in Arabic ( )
- Be able to understand Arabic ( )
- Be able to speak Arabic ( )
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

1. I want my child to begin learning Arabic starting from:

KG [ ] 1<sup>st</sup> grade [ ] 2<sup>nd</sup> grade [ ] 3<sup>rd</sup> grade [ ]

2. I (and/or my spouse) speak Arabic with my children at home:

Hardly [ ] Sometimes [ ] Most of the time [ ] Always [ ] NA [ ] = not a native speaker of Arabic

3. I help my child(ren) with Arabic homework:

Never [ ] Sometimes [ ] Most of the time [ ] Always [ ] NA [ ] = not a native speaker of Arabic

4. If we offer a summer program in Arabic, such as a camp, would you enroll your children in it?

Yes [ ] No [ ] If we offer any program in the summer and you want to be contacted, please write your phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

5. If you are a non-native speaker of Arabic, would you be willing to take an introductory class in Arabic to be able to help your child? Yes [ ] No [ ] NA [ ] (phone number: \_\_\_\_\_)

5. How do you think we can improve the teaching of Arabic at Al-Amal School?

---

---

6. Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

---