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Guidelines for Integrating Regional Dialectal Variation in the Arabic Classroom and Curriculum



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Contents

Introduction 5

 Scope and aims of the Guidelines 5

The Guidelines 5

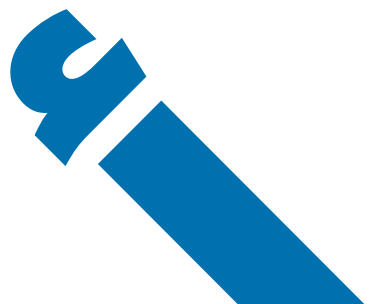
 What does ‘integrating regional variation’ in teaching Arabic mean? 5

 How to raise learners’ awareness of the presence of regional dialectal varieties in Arabic and their contexts? 5

 How to help learners understand as much as possible of the regional variations that they hear and read? 9

 What to do in the following situations? 13

Appendix: Resources on linguistic variation in Arabic 16





Introduction

Scope and aims of the Guidelines

These Guidelines are directed at Arabic language teachers in the school sector, at both mainstream and supplementary schools, for primary, secondary and A-level. It is further deemed useful for the wider Arabic teaching community in the UK and beyond who teach all types of Arabic learners regardless of their age or linguistic background.

There is a lack of guidance on how to approach language variation in teaching Arabic, especially for teachers who teach only in fuSHa for the purpose of passing formal examinations.¹ This document directly addresses that gap by providing information on how to raise awareness of variation, including practical examples. Previous research suggests that learners need to be able to communicate in Arabic and navigate the language situation.² However, there is evidence that certain barriers (specifically the 'how to') could be preventing the integration of language variation in a classroom. These Guidelines stemmed from research within the Arabic teaching community in UK schools, both mainstream and supplementary, which investigated teachers' beliefs around the integration of different varieties of Arabic in teaching. The research included one-to-one interviews with 17 schoolteachers and subsequent focus groups meetings.³

The Guidelines

What does 'integrating regional variation' in teaching Arabic mean?

The process of integrating RVs in teaching the Arabic language does not mean teaching one particular variety, nor does it mean teaching 20+ different varieties of Arabic with all their vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Instead, it means:

1. Raising awareness of the presence of regional dialectal varieties and helping learners to appreciate them and understand their contextual use.
2. Helping learners to understand 'as much as possible' of the varieties that they hear and read by:
 - c. Exposing them to variation in language use.
 - d. Encouraging them to listen to, recognize and comprehend variation.
 - e. Encouraging them to be independent and analytical when encountering variation.
 - f. Teaching them some common knowledge of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammatical differences and similarities across some of the main regional varieties.



¹ The term 'fuSHa' in this document refers to both Classical and Modern Standard Arabic, while the urban Arabic dialects are referred to as the 'Regional Varieties' (RVs).

² Please see: (Ramezanzadeh, 2021; Tinsley, 2015).

³ For details of the research methodology and findings, please see the research report document (forthcoming).

How to raise learners' awareness of the presence of regional dialectal varieties in Arabic and their contexts?

Utilize Learners' Knowledge

As a starting point, it is always crucial to have a conversation with your class about why they are learning Arabic, and to find out if they come from Arabic heritage or have been exposed to certain varieties of Arabic. This will guide your approach to integrating language variation into your teaching as it will vary from one class to another, depending on your learner population and the goals of the Arabic class.

For example, if most of your learners come from certain Arabic speaking backgrounds such as Levantine, then in addition to the generic awareness-raising listed in the following points, it will be sensible to refer to how Arabic is used in the Levant region and to encourage these learners to bring to class what their families use at home. However, if the majority of your class are non-heritage learners who are new to Arabic, then you can follow the suggestions below more widely without having to focus on a specific region.

Context, Context, Context

As early as possible, tell learners that Arabic has different varieties: the old Classical Arabic, the Modern Standard Arabic (both referred to as fuSHa) and the many RVs that Arabic speakers use in their day-to-day lives. This is in addition to the fact that Arabic speakers often mix between these different varieties depending on the context. And in fact, varieties differ within a region. For example, not everyone across Lebanon speaks the same Levantine dialect and people can pick up the nuances in language that can place them to be from the north or the south of the country. The same happens across the Arab world. This is also not unique to Arabic. Tell learners that variation exists in all languages.

As an example of a classroom activity, ask your learners if they know which variety of Arabic they expect to hear in the following situations – feel free to add to the table. Get them to tick the variety/ies that is likely to be used in each context, and they can tick more than one. This can be introduced in different ways, for example, as a quiz. It's important here to also inform learners that these choices are not set in stone and that there is no wrong or right – that is the point! They can be variable depending on the contexts and the individuals.



	Classical Arabic (fuSHa)	Modern Standard Arabic (fuSHa)	A regional variety	A mix between different varieties	A mix between fuSHa and a regional variety
An Imam reading a 'khutba' for Friday prayer	✓				✓
The news presented on Al-Jazeera Arabic channel		✓			
A parent telling children to finish their food and go to bed			✓		
Two Arab neighbors (from different Arab countries) chatting outside their houses			✓	✓	✓
Someone is giving directions to the taxi driver			✓		
Someone in the street is being interviewed by a TV presenter		✓	✓	✓	✓
Someone is reciting Arabic poetry	✓	✓	✓		
Someone is greeting the shopkeeper			✓		
Someone is chatting on WhatsApp with a friend			✓		
Someone is writing a CV		✓			
A journalist is writing a report		✓			
A parent is joking with children			✓		
A job interview		✓	✓	✓	✓
Someone is giving a presentation at work		✓	✓	✓	✓
A post on Facebook about politics		✓	✓		✓
Two friends chatting about the weather			✓	✓	

Table 1: Examples of the different varieties of Arabic used according to contexts.

Engagement in Learning

Engage learners in finding out about the different varieties of Arabic. Ask them to speak to their Arab friends, neighbors and relatives about how they say certain phrases in their varieties. Ask them to watch and listen to different varieties and share with you and everyone what they learn. Make sure that such discussions are part of the routine of classes without necessarily taking much time from the lessons.

For example, if you had a lesson on present verbs talking about daily routine in fuSHa or in any other RV, ask learners to find out how certain verbs are used in different Arab regions, i.e. the verb 'to go' يذهب - يروح - يمشي. This can be part of their homework. Even if they are non-heritage learners, encourage them to search online. They can then share what they find out at the beginning of subsequent classes.

We Cannot Know Everything

You must clarify to learners that they are NOT expected to know every single word in every single variety, but that throughout their Arabic learning, we are just familiarizing ourselves with what they are expected to hear around them and on the internet. Also clarify to them which varieties of Arabic you yourself speak and know, and that no single person (including teachers) knows everything. The way that variation is explored in class is a fun learning journey for all – including teachers and learners. It's never meant to be an extra cognitive burden.

If you are asked how to say a certain word/phrase in a certain variety that you do not know, tell your learners openly that you do not know that one and encourage them to find out the answer themselves while you also seek to find an answer. In a subsequent class, you can all share what you learnt. Make sure you always praise learners for sharing something with you and remind them that it is great and fun learning from our students.

All Arabic, All Beautiful and All Correct

Ensure learners understand that ALL Arabic varieties are beautiful and correct but each one has its own context of use. All have some unique vocabulary, grammatical structures and pronunciation. Have an open discussion with learners about some biased/uniformed perceptions they may hear outside class. They will love these discussions!



How to help learners understand as much as possible of the regional variations that they hear and read?

Exposure, Exposure, Exposure

Dedicate some time in every class to explore some elements from RVs. This does not have to take too much time away from lessons. In fact, it could take five-to-ten minutes only to explore a specific aspect of language.

For example, get learners to read and listen to how Arabic speakers greet each other in different RVs, how numbers are pronounced in the RVs, how people say 'yes/no' in the RVs, the equivalents of certain words in different RVs. etc. Rely on different resources such as YouTube videos, comparative lists and, of course, your own knowledge.

Recognition and Comprehension Skills

Play some video or audio recordings for learners to listen to and practice recognition. YouTube has plenty of short videos from various RVs on basic topics such as introducing oneself, greeting people and asking simple questions.

Design listening comprehension activities highlighting how certain words/structures are said by speakers of different RVs. The same can be done with written language. Use authentic or design made-up chat bubbles like what is used on WhatsApp and other social media tools. Get learners to work together in pairs or groups to observe and infer differences and similarities between fuSHa and the RVs. They will have a great sense of achievement! The more you have these activities, the better they become in comprehending different varieties of Arabic.

Analytical Skills

Encourage learners to be independent and analytical when encountering variation whether in or outside class. Show them sentences/phrases in different varieties and ask them to guess their meanings utilizing whatever they know already in any variety of Arabic while stressing to them that they do not have to understand everything, but whatever they understand is of value. Ask them to look for the roots of words, think about their patterns, and look out for prefixes and suffixes as these are integral aspects of the Arabic language with all its varieties.

For example, show intermediate learners how a phrase like 'I want' is variable across the varieties of Arabic, ask them to recognize the roots, prefixes and suffixes to realize that, despite their obvious differences, they are not foreign but all stem out of different Arabic roots and structures. Discuss with them their linguistic analysis displayed in Table 2.

FuSHa	One of the meanings of the root of this verb [ر-و-د] is about 'seeking'	أريد
Iraqi	Same root as fuSHa with a slight pronunciation difference	أريد
Saudi	Similar to the root of أريد, the root [ب-غ-ي] is also about 'seeking/desiring'	أبغى
Gulf	The same as أبغى but the غ disappeared	أبي/آبي
Egyptian and Sudanese	Stems out of the root [ع-و-ز] which refers to 'needing' something, behaves like an adjective rather than a verb	عايز/عاوز
Levantine	Is a short form of يودّي 'wanting/liking' and literally 'to-my-liking,' therefore conjugated differently from other RVs' equivalents i.e. بدك، بدو، بدو	بدي
Moroccan	Stems out of the same root as the 'Saudi' equivalent but conjugated in the past tense.	بغيت

Table 2: Arabic variants of 'I want' and their analysis.

Teaching

Introduce as much as you can of the common knowledge of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammatical differences and similarities across different varieties of Arabic which most speakers of Arabic as a first language are aware of. These include:

Pronunciation

Out of all the sounds and the 28 Arabic letters, Table 3 on the following page shows the letters that have some considerable variations.⁴



⁴ More pronunciation details can be found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_phonology

Examples	Possible pronunciation	The letter/sound
Think about how the 'alif' in the word بناية is pronounced in different RVs.	Various long 'a' sounds close to the 'a' in English words like: 'arm', 'back', 'fat'	ا
ثلاثة - ثلاثة ثورة pronounced as 'sawra'	th as in the English 'think' t - s	ث
Think about how دجاج is pronounced as 'dadjaj' - 'djadj' - 'dyay' - 'dagag'	dj - j - g - y	ج
Think about how لذيذ can be pronounced as 'lazeez' ذهب - ذهب [gold]	th as in the English 'the' z - d	ذ
Think about how رضي can be pronounced as 'radi' or 'radhi' closer to ظ sound Think about how ضابط can be pronounced as ظابط	Emphatic d - Emphatic dh ظ - Emphatic z	ض
Think about how ظن can be pronounced as ظن	Emphatic dh - Emphatic z - Emphatic dh ض	ظ
Think about how قلب can be pronounced as 'qalb, galb, or alb'	Emphatic q - g - glottal stop ⁵	ق
Think about how يحيى can be pronounced as 'yiHki' or 'yiHchi'	k - ch	ك
Think about how لون can be pronounced as 'lawn,' 'loan' or loon'	A diphthong aw - Long o as in the English 'more'	و
Think about how بيت can be pronounced as 'beet' or 'bait'	A diphthong ay - Long ee as in the English 'bean' Close to the sound ai as in the English 'paid'	ي
Think about how سماء زرقاء can be pronounced and written as سما زرقا Think about how لا بأس and يأكل can be pronounced لا بأس - يأكل Think about how عائشة - جيت - مئة - هادي - لؤلؤ can be pronounced عايشة - جيت - مية - هادي - لولو	A glottal stop ⁵ , replaced by a vowel, or disappears altogether	ء

Table 3: Pronunciation differences across some of the regional varieties

⁵ A glottal stop is the sound of /hamza/ همزة



Introducing Variation in Pronunciation

From the very beginning of teaching Arabic letters and their sounds, make sure learners are aware of the variation in pronunciation. Give them examples of words that can be pronounced differently, starting with the simplest ones where there is only one sound that is obviously variable then move on to words with multiple pronunciation differences. Later, you can teach them combinations of pronunciation and structural variation. Remind them that they are not obliged to know and remember all variations. Remember to engage them in figuring out how words might be pronounced differently. As you continue to do this, the learners' ability and openness to hear/recognize pronunciation variation will develop and becomes solid rather than confusing (ultimately mimicking how variation among the RVs is used and understood by speakers of Arabic as a first language). All of this should be done gradually.

For example, when you teach ج, teach them how a word like 'جمال' is pronounced as 'djamal, jamal or gamal'; or a word like دجاج being pronounced as 'dadajaj, dajaj, dagag or dyay.' After they have developed more confidence with their basic knowledge of the alphabet, teach them examples that have a combination of pronunciation variation such as جائزة / جائزة and see if they would guess the different pronunciation possibilities 'djaa'iza, jaayza, gayza.' When they move on to learning more vocabulary and grammar, explore with them the combinations of pronunciation and structural variations as in teaching the verb 'he runs' يجري which can be pronounced as 'yadjri, yijri' or with additional present tense prefixes 'b' and 'k' in some RVs like 'b-yijri, b-yigri, k-yjri.'

Vocabulary

It is always best to start with what the learners may know already. It is impossible to teach all the vocabulary variants in all RVs, so the best thing to do is to always be selective and to engage learners in the process of selection. Choose to introduce the words variants in topics that they are interested in or that are very commonly used and encountered.

For example, if you are teaching young children who are interested in animals, do your research and provide them with some of the variations such as for 'a cat' قَطّ - قُطَّة - بَسَّة. But if you know that this topic is not a priority for your learners, then feel free to ignore it until they ask for it.

Teach the frequently used words slowly and gradually especially if they are very variable such as the interrogatives (إيه - إيش - شنو - شو - ما/ماذا). One by one, they will start to know them provided you highlight them enough whenever you get the chance. Other common words that you may consider introducing include common adjectives like 'good' جيد /كويس / مزيان / زين / طيب / تمام / منيح and common verbs that are quite variable like: 'to see' يشوف or 'to go' يمشي or 'to want' as listed in Table 2 above.⁶

⁶ A very good resource comparing vocabulary and phrases is the Arabic-versus-Arabic textbook which is listed in the recommended resources that accompany this document.

Grammar

The Arabic varieties have a lot in common when it comes to grammar. They all rely on the root and pattern system, they have very similar word order, the possessive structure is almost the same, verbs are conjugated, there are singulars, duals and plurals of nouns, the comparatives and the conditionals, etc., are used in all varieties. However, the following are some facts that teachers and, by extension, learners may want to be aware of:

- a. *Most of the RVs do not have case ending rules* إعراب
- b. *While fuSHa has 12 pronouns, most regional varieties have eight*
- c. *The possessive pronouns for 'your' is written the same but differs from fuSHa in pronunciation i.e. كتابك - كتابك become كتابك - كتابك*
- d. *The negation particle that is most common in the RVs is ما with a possible suffix ش as in 'he didn't eat' ما اكلش / ما اكل*
- e. *There is an extra prefix in the present tense verbs in many of the RVs. For example, 'he eats/ is eating' in fuSHa is يأكل but this in different regional varieties can be any of the following: بياكل - عمبياكل - كياكل*
- f. *The relative pronoun الذي with all its different conjugations become one word in most urban dialects اللي*

What to do in the following situations?

1. You or a teacher in your school does not feel confident to speak about regional varieties that they do not speak, or they are not familiar with:

Be assured and reassure colleagues that this is the situation of every language teacher. No one knows all aspects of variation in any language. All they need to do is similar to planning a lesson that is fully in fuSHa. The same way they familiarize themselves with the rules of the language while planning lessons in advance of teaching, they just need to look up some regional variation in advance. For example, if you know that you will be teaching a lesson about names of animals, plan your lesson as you normally do ensuring sufficient activities for the children to practice the vocabulary in fuSHa (or the main variety you are teaching), then look up how some of the animal vocabulary is similar or different in some of the main spoken varieties. In class, and after learners have practiced the vocabulary enough, explore with them how the animals are referred to in different varieties. Ask them to share what they may already know from their family/friends, then tell them about a few of the variations you looked up. You will love hearing from the learners and enjoy learning about the regional variation that exists. If learners ask you which words to learn, tell them to learn the fuSHa ones (if that is the main variety you are teaching for an exam purpose), but also encourage them to learn any other varieties they like. Encourage them to be aware/familiar with the variations in case they hear them outside class.

2. You or a teacher in your school is keen to integrate variation in their teaching, but never knows how much to integrate without overloading learners with information:

This issue is exactly like the question of ‘how much to teach’ in any language lesson. Teachers usually experiment with the amount of information they include in their lessons until they develop the skill of sensing how much is sufficient for their learners to absorb without feeling overloaded with new knowledge. This also varies from one class to another across the different ages of learners. As a rule of thumb, it is important that learners develop some solid knowledge of each linguistic aspect before variation is introduced. For example, if you are teaching the letter ق to beginners, wait until they have practiced writing and pronouncing it well enough before you inform them of its different possible pronunciations. (This is similar to the ج and جمل example above). You may introduce the variation at the end of the lesson or even in the subsequent lesson, but do not delay this knowledge for too long.

3. A learner says a word/phrase that you do not know:

You think it might be in their regional varieties or might be just wrong: Before you make a judgment, ask the learners where did they learn/hear the phrase from? Is it used by parents? Or did they hear it in a video? Where were the speakers from? And after their answers, clarify that the phrase might be from a certain region and that it’s not wrong but just belongs to that variety. This will reassure the learner that they are praised and appreciated for all their attempts at language production. If you wish, you can double-check the word later on from resources.

4. A learner tells you that they only want to use their dialectal variety and they do not like fuSHa:

Deal with this according to the context of your teaching. If they are studying Arabic for the long-term purpose of writing and reading fuSHa (novels, newspapers, exams), encourage them to use their varieties as they wish but clarify to them the contexts of fuSHa and how it is needed and how it is not that different from their dialectal varieties. Praise them for when they use their variety, but always ask them to engage with the fuSHa equivalents of what they say/know. For example, if they insist on saying بدي for ‘I want,’ praise them for using it correctly and from time to time remind them about its equivalents in other parts of the Arab World and in fuSHa.



5. A learner tells you that they don't like the regional varieties, or their parents said that, or that they believe the regional varieties are 'wrong/bad' Arabic, and they don't want to learn anything about them:

Again, this goes back to your context of teaching. If the class is purely for Classical Arabic, then you may need to limit the variation in your teaching, as the purpose is not communicative. If the purpose is to pass exams, then tell the learners, that in addition to passing an exam, learning a language is about communication with its speakers and getting to know about their culture. Explain to them how the regional variation carries a lot of cultural and heritage-based knowledge and that learning about the variation across different varieties will help them understand more of what they hear around them now or in the future. It is also crucial to assure learners that exposure to regional variation does not jeopardize their fuSHa learning, but in fact, it enhances their fuSHa understanding, as all these varieties are well-linked together. Tell them that for their future, they will need fuSHa and a good use/understanding of Arabic varieties so that they can perform as many communicative tasks as possible such as the ones listed in the table above.

6. A learner is making fun/mocking what another learner said in/about a regional variety:

Treat this as any other unacceptable behavior. Encourage tolerance and respect of all varieties of Arabic. Tell them that people's mother tongues are integral aspects of their identities that are to be respected and celebrated.

7. A learner comes with a certain perception about their own mother-tongue variety:

Encourage a positive perception. Tell them to be proud of their mother tongue while respecting differences. Teach them that the Arabs throughout history have always had different varieties that go back to pre-Islamic times and that neither is correct or wrong. These are differences to celebrate. Educate them that every variety has grammar, history, culture, poetry and beauty like any other variety of Arabic and in any other language.





Appendix: Resources on Linguistic Variation in Arabic

1. Arabic versus Arabic:

This is an excellent introductory book. You can take what you want from it. You may want to rely only on the written phrases or combine them with the audio recordings available. See a sample here: <https://lingualism.com/product/arabic-vs-arabic-a-dialect-sampler/>

2. The Defense Language Institute in the U.S:

The Defense Language Institute in the U.S has a website with loads of language resources including many Arabic varieties. Go to the main website: <https://fieldsupport.dliflc.edu/productList.aspx?v=lsk> and choose an Arabic variety, then click on 'Basic Language Guides' where you will find recorded phrases.

3. Playaling

The Playaling website has many videos in different varieties with transcript and translations. It is brilliant if you want short videos to help you expose your learners and teach them some dialectal aspects: <https://playaling.com/>

4. We Can Learn Arabic

We Can Learn Arabic is an excellent website with loads of resources in different varieties along with classroom/homework activities ready-made: <https://wecanlearnarabic.com/>

5. The Living Arabic Project

The Living Arabic Project offers a searchable database of words and phrases in different varieties of Arabic (fuSHa and RVs). <https://www.livingarabic.com/>

6. The MADAR Project

The MADAR project also allows you to search for words in different varieties of Arabic: <https://lookerstudio.google.com/reporting/56d429de-d4d3-4f3f-a91e-68f20cf4e560/page/4JfhB>

7. Jill Jadid Group

In addition to these websites, and if you are on Facebook, you may want to join Jiil Jadid Group which has many Arabic teaching experts who are always happy to answer your questions about different Arabic varieties.

8. Arabic-L Mailing List

Similarly, you may want to join the Arabic-L mailing list hosted by the University of Leeds to connect with a large number of teachers who can answer your questions. To subscribe to ARABIC-L, send a message to Arabic-l@lists.leeds.ac.uk.





9. Dictionaries and textbooks on different Arabic dialects:

If you have access to a library, the following is a list of dictionaries and textbooks on different Arabic dialects:

Resources on the North African dialects

Bergman, E. M. (2005). Spoken Algerian Arabic: Dunwoody Press.

Dickinson, E. (2004). Spoken Libyan Arabic: Dunwoody Press.

Chekayri, A. (2011). An introduction to Moroccan Arabic and culture. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Resources on Iraqi, Saudi and other Gulf dialects

Clarity, B. E. (2003). A Dictionary of Iraqi Arabic: Georgetown University Press.

Qafisheh, H. A. (1975). A basic course in Gulf Arabic: University of Arizona Press.

Rice, F. A., & Sa'id, M. F. (2005). Eastern Arabic with MP3 Files: Georgetown University Press.

Smart, J. R., & Altorfer, F. (2003). Gulf Arabic. London: Teach Yourself.

Resources on Levantine dialects

Cowell, M. W. (2005). A Reference Grammar of Syrian Arabic with Audio CD: (based on the Dialect of Damascus): Georgetown University Press.

McLoughlin, L. (2008). Colloquial Arabic (Levantine): Taylor & Francis.

Resources on the Egyptian dialects

Hinds, M., & Badawi, E.-S. M. (1986). A dictionary of Egyptian Arabic: Arabic-English.

Beirut: Librairie du Liban.



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