Arabic Heritage Language Schools in the United States

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Arabic heritage schools started in the United States as an effort by Arab Americans to teach their children the Arabic language and cultural heritage. The effort was shared by non-Arab Muslim Americans who contributed to the establishment of heritage schools in order to teach their children how to read the Qur'an and fulfill the duties of the religion that required knowledge of the language. Today, most Arabic heritage language schools teach Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) that is not tied to religious studies. Modern Standard Arabic is the official language of Arab countries. Whether at home or on the street, no one speaks MSA for everyday communication; it is spoken in restricted speech events like formal lectures, interviews, speeches, and news broadcasts. Classical Arabic (CA) refers to the Arabic of pre-Islamic poetry as well as the Arabic of the Qur'an. Arabs refer to both MSA and CA as al-Fus-ha (the most eloquent Arabic language). The spoken varieties that differ from one Arab country to the other, and even within the same country, are referred to in Arabic as Al'amiyya (the language of the public).

Historical Overview

The first wave of Arab immigrants arrived in the United States in 1876 (Orfalea, 2006). Most of the early immigrants came from Mount Lebanon, which until 1917, was within the province of Syria and was under Ottoman rule. Until 1899, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service registered Arab immigrants as *Turks from Asia*. Early immigrants did not accept this designation and "among themselves, they talked about being 'wlad Arab' (Children of Arabs), a reference to the language they spoke" (Haddad, 2004, p.4).

Early Arab immigrants were overwhelmingly Christian; about 5-10% were Muslims. Around the turn of the century, Muslim Arab Americans started to arrive in the U.S. By 1900, more than half of the early immigrants lived in New York City, and significant numbers settled in Boston and Chicago (Orfalea, 2006).

The children of the early immigrants showed little interest in the culture and heritage of their parents. Attempts made by parents, clubs, and religious institutions "competed unsuccessfully with the Americanization process" (Abraham & Abraham, 1983). "Classes organized by churches and clubs to teach spoken Arabic were short-lived and virtually fruitless" (Naff, 1985, p. 4), and a shift away from Arabic took place in the second and third generations (Sawaie, 1992). In 1959, Elkholy studied two Arab Muslim communities in Toledo, Ohio, and Detroit, Michigan, and found that 21% of the first generation in both communities did not

speak English, while 20% of the second generation and 71% of the third generation did not speak Arabic (Elkholy, 1966).

Efforts to revive Arabic language instruction intensified with the advent of the third wave of Arab immigrants after 1967. This wave included professionals from Arab countries who brought with them ideas of nationalism and pan-Arabism. With a growing interest in ethnic and cultural revival, both recent immigrants and the descendants of early immigrants were motivated to transmit the cultural heritage and the language. The Arab American and American Muslim communities turned to weekend programs and private schools to ensure that their children learned the language.

Arabic Heritage Language Learners

There are two groups of heritage learners of Arabic at the K-12 level: those who live in homes where Arabic is spoken and are exposed to the language through one or both parents, and those who have a connection to the language for religious purposes and whose home exposure to the language is through religious practice. Belonging to the first group are descendants of Arab Americans, a population estimated to be 3.5 million in the U.S. (Arab American Institute, 2009-2011). Belonging to the second group are descendants of Muslim Americans with an estimated population of at least 7 million in the U.S. More than 94% of Arab Americans live in five metropolitan areas: Los Angeles, Detroit, New York/New Jersey, Chicago, and Washington D.C.

Ibrahim and Allam (2006) found four types of heritage students at the college level: students whose home language is Arabic and one or both parents speaks it, students who have one parent of Arab origin and do not hear it at home, non-Arab Muslims whose connection to the language is for religious purposes, and Arabs who lived in Arab countries but attended international institutions and had never had any classes in Modern Standard Arabic.

Arabic Heritage Language Schools

One of the ways that communities seek to transmit the language to their offspring is through community heritage schools. The ratio of religious institutions compared to other facilities that offer Arabic is three to one (Sawaie, 1992). Bagby, Perl, and Froehle (2001) surveyed a sample of mosques and found that out of 416 mosques, more than half offered Arabic on a regular basis, 21% had full-time schools, and 71% had weekend schools. Half of these weekend schools were for children only. Most of the full-time schools (two thirds) were elementary schools, 7% were only preschool or early elementary grades, and 13% included elementary and high school grades. About 31,700 children and teens attended full-time Islamic schools.

In the last ten years, there has been a surge in the number of students learning Arabic and in the number of public and private schools offering Arabic. The percentage of schools offering Arabic, although still low, increased at both the elementary and secondary school levels; Arabic is now offered at 1% of elementary schools and 0.6% of secondary schools (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009). According to a survey conducted by Greer and Johnson (2009), between 2007 and 2009, the number of students studying Arabic in grades K-12 increased from 24,407 to 47,594. The survey involved 313 schools offering Arabic to K-12 students. Most of these schools (70%) were private, and 30% were public. The states with the most schools offering Arabic include California, Michigan, and New York, homes to the three largest communities of Arab Americans. These schools offer 5 classes a week on average, with an average duration of 50 minutes per class. Most of the students studying Arabic are heritage learners, with Arabic as one of their home languages. Urdu speakers make up the second largest student group, indicating a high number of non-Arab Muslim American heritage learners. Most of these schools teach Modern Standard Arabic or Classical Arabic of the Qur'an. Very few schools teach the spoken varieties of Arabic, and when they teach speaking, the focus is usually on MSA.

The American Association of Teachers of Arabic (AATA) and the Arabic K-12 Teacher Network within the National Capital Language Resource Center are two organizations that aim to guide educators of Arabic and promote and facilitate communication among professionals in the field. The Arab American Institute (AAI) is another organization that "represents the policy and community interests of Arab Americans throughout the United States and strives to promote Arab American participation in the U.S. electoral system."

Conclusion

While efforts to preserve Arabic among the descendants of early Arab immigrants were minimally successful, Arabic teaching started to increase in the 1960s with the arrival of recent immigrants and renewed interest among Arab Americans in their language and cultural heritage. In the last two decades, there has been a surge in the number of students learning Arabic both as a heritage language and as a foreign language. However, the teaching of Arabic in heritage schools faces many challenges including the need for funding, well-planned curricula, and textbooks that can fulfill proficiency goals (Ayari, 2009; Greer & Johnson, 2009; Sehlaoui, 2008). In addition, there is a need for high-quality teacher preparation. Another challenge is how to address diglossia in schools. The diglossic situation is a result of the existence of more than one variety of Arabic; the variety usually referred to as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the spoken varieties of the language. Since there are different spoken varieties, the situation can be more accurately described as multiglossic (Wahba, 2006). MSA is the written form of the language, the language of the media, and a limited number of formal speech events (formal speeches and interviews). Native speakers use the spoken varieties for most of their daily functions that require verbal interaction. The difficulty in teaching Arabic arises from the unresolved issue of which variety of Arabic to teach. While there are no native Arabic speakers who use only MSA for speaking, the approach that is

most widespread in schools in the U.S. favors the teaching of the written variety of MSA (Wilmsen, 2006).

Since the number of students taking Arabic in private schools decreases at the middle and high school levels (Greer & Johnson, 2009), there is a need to develop more effective programs for students that motivate them to continue their Arabic learning. It might be a deterrent for students who take Arabic in high school that the hours they register for "often do not count toward the freshmen admission requirements at top-level colleges and universities" (Ayari, 2009). Coordination among community-based schools, public and private schools, and higher education institutions regarding credits and articulation might be a next step.

Search for Arabic heritage language programs in the Alliance Heritage Language Program Database.

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