



# A Qualitative Investigation into the Impact of Diglossia on the Self-learning of an Arabic Spoken Dialect by Arabic as a Foreign Language Learners

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## ABSTRACT

In a diglossic language such as Arabic, two distinct varieties are used for different purposes. Literary Arabic (LA), also referred to as Modern standard Arabic (MSA) or Fusha, is used primarily for reading, writing, and in formal and educational contexts across the Arab world. In addition to LA, there is a spoken dialect used for everyday communication, which varies from one Arabic country to another. Diglossia raises many challenges in the context of teaching Arabic as a foreign language. While some researchers and educators believe that spoken dialects should be taught in addition to LA, others still believe in the traditional LA-only approach, particularly in Arabic-speaking countries where learners are exposed to the dialect outside the classroom. The current study aims to explore the self-learning experience of the spoken dialect by Arabic as a foreign language (AFL) learners in an LA-only institute in Saudi Arabia. Particularly, the study investigates (a) the difficulties faced by the learners and the solutions adopted, (b) their ability to utilize the linguistic knowledge, and especially the morphological knowledge, they developed in LA to assist their acquisition of the spoken dialect, even if not instructed to do so, and (c) their attitudes towards teaching dialects in addition to LA in language institutes in Arabic-speaking countries. Our results reveal that AFL learners living in an Arabic-speaking country still struggle with the acquisition of everyday spoken dialect. In addition, they were unable to utilize the linguistic knowledge developed in LA to assist their acquisition of the dialect even when they were aware of how LA and the dialect could be linguistically related, especially at the morphological level. The results also show that AFL learners have different attitudes about the importance of teaching spoken dialects in language institutes. Participants' opinions are shown to be dependent on several factors, including their motivation to learn the language, and the perceived difficulty of the task of acquiring LA and the dialect simultaneously. Future research recommendations and pedagogical implications are discussed accordingly.

**Keywords:** Arabic as a foreign language (AFL); Literary Arabic (LA); Dialect; Diglossia.



## Introduction

Arabic is a diglossic language (Ferguson, 1959) where two varieties are complementarily used for different purposes; literary Arabic (LA), also referred to as modern standard Arabic (MSA) or Fusha, is used for reading, writing, and in formal settings such as education and religious sermons. This variety is used along with a spoken dialect that is employed informally in daily communications (Ayari, 1996; Maamouri, 1998). In the context of Arabic diglossia, the acquisition of the spoken dialect starts from birth, while the acquisition of LA takes place primarily in school, alongside early exposure through the media. As such, it is argued that LA “is nobody’s mother tongue” (Maamouri, 1998, p. 33), and there have been claims that Arabic native speakers cognitively develop it as a second language (Ibrahim, 2006, 2009; Ibrahim & Aharon-Peretz, 2005). While these claims have been questioned and refuted (Abou-Ghazaleh, Khateb, & Nevat, 2018, 2020; Boudelaa & Marslen-Wilson, 2013), the reality is that LA and the spoken dialect still exhibit significant differences at the phonological, morpho-syntactic and lexical levels (Ferguson, 1959; Maamouri, 1998).

Diglossia poses a challenge for nonnative speakers of Arabic who study Arabic as a foreign language (AFL). While one of the major goals for learning a foreign language is to achieve communicative competence, AFL learners usually study LA in an educational setting, and often find using the spoken dialect to communicate in naturalistic settings to be very challenging. Hymes (1967, 1972) introduced the term “communicative competence” to suggest that the language learner needs to develop a sociolinguistic competence that ensures the appropriate use of language in context, combined with a formal linguistic competence that ensures the correct use of sounds and grammar. In this sense, communicative competence opposes Chomsky’s (1957, 1965) linguistic competence, which deems social factors as external to linguistics. Following Hymes, researchers have proposed myriad models of communicative competence, but they all share its focus on the ability to use language appropriately for communication (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 1995). The emergence of the theory of communicative competence and its models has greatly informed the development of the communicative approach to language teaching and assessment (Berns, 1990; Brown, 2000; Brumfit, 1984; Ellis, 1982; Nunan, 1991; Piepho, 1981; Richards, 2005; Savignon, 1972, 1991, 2007; Widdowson, 1978) which has received a warm welcome from language teachers and curriculum designers alike. However, the existence of diglossia has posed a challenge for Arabic curriculum designers, who had to decide which Arabic variety to offer (Alosh, 1997; Myhill, 2014; Palmer, 2008; Ryding, 2006).

Traditionally, teaching LA alone was the norm, as it was supposed that the acquisition of the spoken dialect should occur naturally through interacting with



native speakers (Al-Hamad, 1983). LA is viewed as the “real language” (Maamouri, 1998) and its teaching for AFL learners is viewed as more practical and necessary. Unlike Arabic dialects, which vary across Arab countries, LA is widely understood by educated Arabs across the Arab world. Although it serves educational and formal purposes, LA can still be used to communicate orally in Arab countries where the dialect is incomprehensible (Nahla, 2006; Ryding, 1995). However, the LA-only approach has its drawbacks. In day-to-day life, Arabs do not use LA to communicate (Alosh, 1997; Palmer, 2008; Ryding, 1995; Younes, 1995). As such, when AFL learners find that they cannot take part in actual daily communications or integrate into society, they are inevitably disappointed (Heath, 1990). This disappointment has been found to lead AFL learners to lose motivation and to terminate their journey of learning Arabic within a year of beginning (Al-Batal, 1992). In addition, studies have reported that a considerable number of AFL learners who have then travelled to an Arabic-speaking country felt socially isolated, and wished that they had had the chance to study the spoken dialect before they travelled (Palmer, 2008; Shiri, 2013).

As discussed earlier, the emergence of the communicative competence models caused a shift in the teaching of foreign languages, and Arabic—with all the complications of diglossia—was no exception. The need to find an alternative approach to the dominant LA-only approach to help AFL learners improve their communicative competence has been emphasized by many researchers (Al-Batal, 1992; Alosh, 1997; Wahba, 2006; Younes, 1995). However, the question of how to present the dialect has turned up differing answers. In one extreme approach, it has been argued that the shift from an LA-only approach should be to that of a dialect-only approach. One of the shortcomings of this proposal is that it ignores learners who wish to develop Arabic literacy skills (Al-Batal, 1994). In reality, many AFL learners aim to develop sufficient overall language proficiency in Arabic (Belnap, 1987) and a dialect-only program can only provide basic proficiency levels (Allen, 1987). As such, it is logical for AFL programs to teach LA in addition to a spoken dialect. However, there is still disagreement regarding how to present both varieties. While some have argued that learners should start with LA and then move to a dialect (Al-Hamad, 1983), others believe that learners should imitate Arabic native speakers, starting with a dialect before moving to LA (Nicola, 1990). However, imitating that which takes considerable time in real life in a time-limited program is difficult, if not impossible. Further, this could jeopardize the development of students’ literacy ability before they leave the program (Younes, 1995). Therefore, many researchers support teaching both varieties simultaneously (Al-Batal, 1992, 2018; Al Masaeed, 2020, 2022; Nassif & Al Masaeed, 2020; Shiri, 2013; Soliman, 2014; Trentman & Shiri, 2020; Younes, 1995).

Although this approach was found to increase students’ motivation (Agiùs, 1990), it has been argued that it could also confuse learners, especially beginners (Al-Hamad, 1983), and burden them with learning what in some sense resembles two



different languages (Stevens, 2006). However, empirical findings suggest that despite the apparent differences between LA and dialectal Arabic, they are still more cognitively related than expected. Arabic native speakers have been found to process complex words in both varieties with the same “obligatory morphological decomposition” mechanism, in which a word is decomposed into its basic morphemes—namely, the root responsible for carrying the general meaning, and the pattern that functions as a phonological template in which a root can be inserted to obtain a word with a specific meaning and grammatical function (Ryding, 2005). For example, in order to process a word such as /maktab/ (office), Arabic native speakers decompose it into its basic morphemes—the root /k.t.b/ and the pattern /mafʕal/. Therefore, presenting a word such as /muDa:XaLah/ (participation) facilitates the recognition of a word which shares the same root, such as /DuXu:L/ (entering), even if they are not semantically related. Similarly, presenting a word such as /TiJa:Rah/ (trade) facilitates the recognition of words that share the same pattern, such as /tiBa:ʕah/ (art of typography) (Boudelaa, 2014, p. 47 ; Boudelaa & Marslen-Wilson, 2013). Interestingly, nonnative speakers of Arabic were found to follow the same morphological decomposition mechanism to process complex LA words (Freynik, Gor, & O’Rourke, 2017) regardless of their proficiency level (Foote, Qasem, & Trentman, 2020). Derivational morphology of roots and patterns in Arabic has also been proven to help AFL learners improve intelligibility across different Arabic dialects. For example, Soliman (2014) recorded conversations between speakers of 12 Arabic dialects and interviewed them afterwards to gain insights about the strategies they employed to improve intelligibility across dialects. The reported listening strategies included relying on linguistic knowledge, and particularly knowledge of the root and word pattern system, to understand cognates (i.e., words which are similar in form and meaning), using context, and overlooking non-content words. Interestingly, when Soliman explicitly trained Arabic learners who had mastered LA to use these strategies, he found that their ability to comprehend cognate words in unfamiliar dialects significantly improved.

Despite developments in the field of teaching Arabic as a foreign language, and studies reporting learners’ desire to study both LA and an Arabic spoken dialect (Palmer, 2008; Shiri, 2013; Trentman & Shiri, 2020), LA is still the only taught variety in some Arabic language institutes in Arabic-speaking countries. Although it could be assumed that in this context, learners can learn LA in the classroom, and the spoken dialect through interacting with the native speakers, such a learning experience may not be as smooth as it might seem; learners would be responsible for using the dialect and developing a sufficient communicative competence level without support. The current study aims to explore the self-learning experience of the spoken



dialect by AFL learners<sup>1</sup> in an LA-only institute in Saudi Arabia. Particularly, the study will investigate (a) the difficulties they face and the solutions they adopt, (b) their ability to utilize the linguistic knowledge, and particularly the morphological knowledge, they developed while learning LA to assist their acquisition of the spoken dialect, even if they were not instructed to do so, and (c) their attitudes towards incorporating the teaching of spoken dialects in language institutes in Arabic-speaking countries.

## Methods

### Participants

The participants in this study (N = 34; age range 22-29 years) were enrolled in a 2-year Arabic diploma program offered by the Institute of Teaching Arabic for Speakers of Other Languages at King Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia. Initially, an online questionnaire on demographic information was sent to the students enrolled in the program to select a homogenous sample. The selected participants had different mother tongues and came from different cultural backgrounds. However, they constitute a homogenous group as AFL learners: they all started with learning the formal variety of Arabic, i.e., LA, in an instructional setting in an Arabic speaking-country and had developed the ability to use it in oral and written communication after finishing at least one year of the diploma.

### Data collection

As the current study aims to explore and gain more insight into the dialect-self-learning experience of AFL learners, a qualitative methodology was adopted. A one-to-one semi-structured interview following the protocols described by Dörnyei (2007) was conducted with each participant. The interviews were held in LA and consisted of a series of open-ended questions. The first few questions aimed to familiarize the researcher and the participants with each other in order to help make the participants comfortable to open up about their experience. After the introductory questions, content questions about the topic under investigation followed, and probing questions were employed when needed to gain clarifications on certain issues. The final closing

<sup>1</sup> Some studies refer to learners who are studying a language that is spoken in the surrounding environment as second language (L2) learners, while they refer to learners who are studying a language that is not spoken in the surrounding environment as foreign language (FL) learners. However, participants in the current study are referred to as FL learners as, in the context of diglossia, they are studying a variety (i.e., LA) that is not spoken in the surrounding environment. More importantly, other variables related to the learners themselves rather than the status of the language they are learning—such as motivation, communicative strategy use, and learning outcomes—do not qualify them as L2 learners. See Ringbom (1980) for more information on the distinction between L2 and FL learning.





questions gave participants the chance to provide further reflections and insights on their Arabic learning experience. Each interview took approximately 25 minutes and was audio recorded. Consent was received from all participants.

### Data analysis

Interviews were manually transcribed and translated from Arabic to English. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the first stage, information that clustered together were coded and labelled as categories. In the second stage, similar categories were linked together to form a theme. After coding the entire data set, the consistency of the coding schemes was rechecked with the interview transcripts.

### Results and Discussion

#### Self-learning experience of the spoken dialect: challenges and solutions

The difficulties the learners faced in their self-learning experience of the spoken dialect stemmed from three major sources. The first was the psychological barrier. Participants reported that they might feel anxious and lack confidence when using the dialect with native speakers and that sometimes they wished they had more assurance. Actually, language anxiety is recognized as an important variable in foreign language learning (Dornyei, 2005; Horwitz, 1990; MacIntyre, 1999). This type of anxiety is not attributable to a personality trait that affects learners in general, but it is a specific type of anxiety learners experience when using a foreign language (Gardner, 1985; MacIntyre, 1999; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Such a psychological barrier is expected to be worse for learners of a diglossic language such as Arabic, as they do not receive support from their instructors to overcome it. Participant 3 indicated:

“Sometimes I feel embarrassed when I speak the dialect with the locals. Once I start, I feel I might make a mistake that would make people laugh at me, so I become anxious and uncomfortable. Do I pronounce the words correctly? Do I use the words in the right context? It is not easy to know, especially when you are already involved in the conversation. You still need someone to help you practice before you start talking with people. It is not like when I studied English. It is different.”

The second reason is, surprisingly, limited practice opportunities. One would not think that this would be reported by participants who are learning a language in the country where it is spoken; however, participants indicated that they spent a considerable amount of time learning LA in the language institute, doing the assignment and communicating with other friends using LA, which in turn reduced the time they needed to practice the dialect. The third reason was the unavailability of learning resources such as books and websites. Participants reported that considering



the time limitations and the lack of support for improving their dialect, learning resources could be valuable, especially for beginners who need to gain a basic understanding of the major differences and similarities between LA and the dialect.

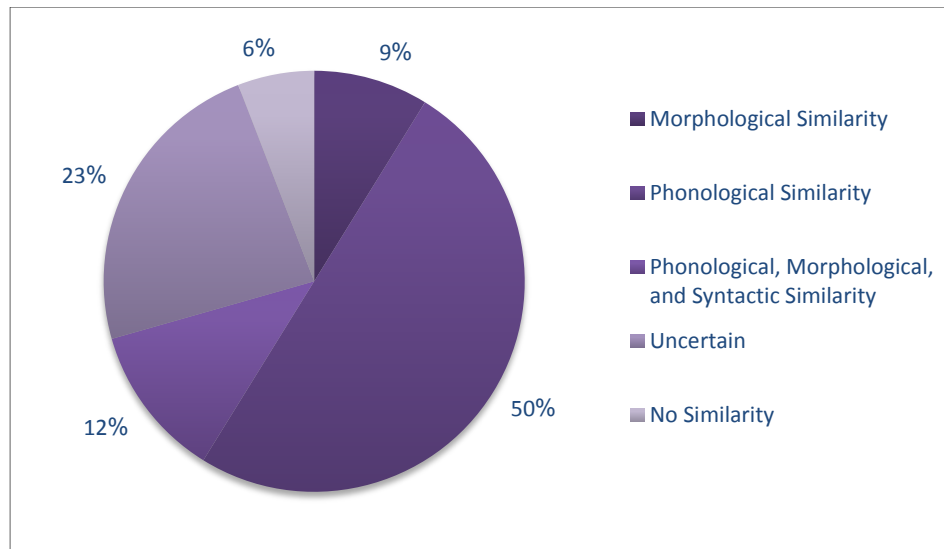
To overcome these challenges, learners resorted to available strategies, such as watching TV, listening to radio programs, using social media and trying to engage in conversation with locals as frequently as possible. However, it should be noted that such strategies were only reported by 12 participants. Three of the participants indicated that they did not face any problems while learning the dialect and that their experience of learning LA in class and the dialect outside the class was smooth and perfect. Participant 17 pointed out:

"I am lucky to study a language such as Arabic in an Arabic-speaking country. I am studying LA in the language institute. At the same time, I still have the chance to listen to the dialect every day and practice it with native speakers. It is an enriching experience. I think I would not enjoy the experience of learning both varieties if it was not in an Arabic-speaking country."

Nineteen participants indicated that they communicate with LA inside and outside the classroom. Those participants indicated that they were exposed to the dialect and were spontaneously learning some words and pronunciations. However, they did not exert much effort, as they had set a plan for themselves to first master LA and then move to the dialect.

### **The use of LA linguistic knowledge to assist the acquisition of the spoken dialect**

When asked whether they could use the linguistic knowledge they developed in LA to help them in their self-learning of the dialect, many participants indicated that although they find the dialect to be different from LA, they could still notice some linguistic similarities; however, when asked about the types of similarities, their responses varied. As seen in figure 1, half of the participants (n. 17) indicated that LA and the dialect are similar at the phonological level, as they noticed that a considerable number of sounds are used in both varieties. A few participants (n. 3) indicated that the two varieties are morphologically similar, as they have noticed that both varieties depend on derivational morphology, i.e., the root and pattern system, to produce words in general. Other participants (n. 4) indicated that they found LA and the dialect to be strongly related at the phonological, morphological and syntactic levels. However, there were still a considerable number of participants (n. 8) who were uncertain whether the varieties were related or not, while others (n.2) indicated that they could not notice any similarity at all.



**Figure 1:** AFL learners' perceived similarity between LA and the dialect

Previous research has shown that the nature of Arabic derivational morphology obliges Arabic speakers, whether they are native (Boudelaa, 2014; Boudelaa & Marslen-Wilson, 2013) or nonnative (Freynik et al., 2017; Foote et al., 2020), to go through the same morphological decomposition to process complex Arabic words. However, the current data suggests that Arabic learners could require explicit training to learn how to consciously utilize this knowledge to assist their acquisition of the dialect. Interestingly, being aware of the morphological similarity between LA and the spoken dialect did not necessarily mean that it was always efficiently used, as some of the participants indicated that they found LA and the dialect to be morphologically similar but that this similarity did not facilitate their learning experience of the dialect, which they described as difficult and challenging. Explicit training on such aspects has previously proven to be effective in helping AFL learners develop understanding even across different Arabic dialects (Soliman, 2014).

Learners' inability to effectively use the morphological knowledge they acquired in LA to facilitate their acquisition of the spoken dialect, even when they were aware of the morphological similarity between the two, could possibly be attributed to item-based learning. According to Logan's (1988) *instance theory of automaticity*, skill acquisition occurs through encoding and retrieving specific items from memory rather than generalizing rules and processes to aid in the acquisition of new items. In that sense, AFL learners would process complex LA words with the obligatory morphological decomposition mechanism (Freynik et al., 2017; Foote et al., 2020), and they could be aware of the rules of Arabic derivational morphology. However, their knowledge of specific roots and patterns, rather than the rules or the underlying cognitive processes, is what matters when they learn new words in the



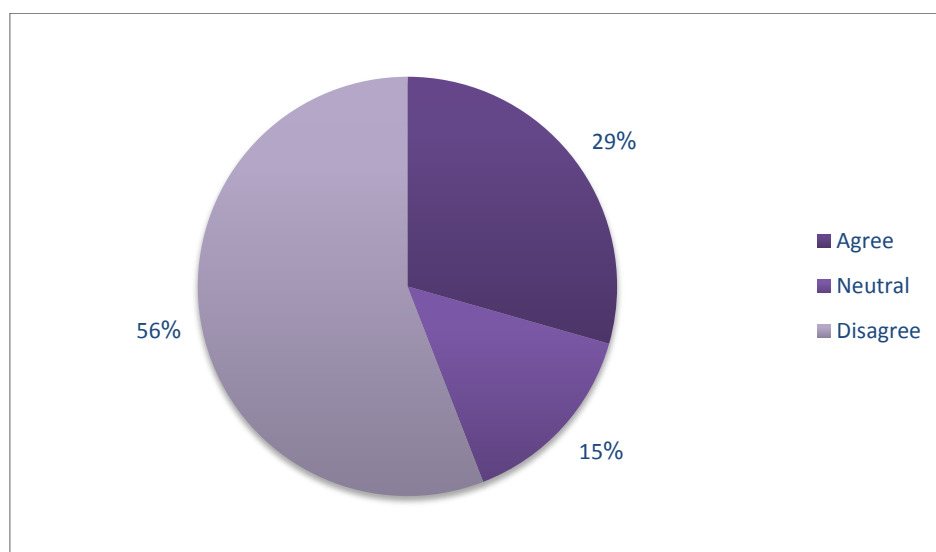


spoken dialect. For example, the root /k.t.b/ (writing-related) would facilitate learning other words, whether LA or dialectal, as long as they contain the same root. Hashem (2022) has recently used Logan's (1988) theory to explain how Arabic native speakers develop fluency in both varieties and how item-based learning may have been responsible for the previous classification of LA and the spoken dialect as two languages rather than varieties, although this is not the case. The explanation the theory could provide for how AFL learners acquire both varieties seems plausible but requires further experimental assessment.

### **AFL learners' attitudes towards incorporating teaching dialects in addition to LA in language institutes in Arabic-speaking countries**

Participants' responses to the questions regarding their satisfaction with the LA-only approach of teaching Arabic and whether they find their exposure to the dialect outside the classroom to be sufficient for its acquisition also varied. The responses were categorized into three groups. As seen in figure 2, 10 participants indicated that teaching the dialect should be incorporated along with teaching LA. Participant 4 pointed out:

"LA and the dialect are equally important. LA is important for reading and writing and can still be used across all the Arab world. However, when you study Arabic in an Arabic-speaking country, you need the dialect outside the classroom to communicate with friends and understand the culture. This is where you live. You do not want to feel lonely and isolated. I think teaching the dialect is also necessary. You need someone to help you especially if you are a beginner."



**Figure 2:** Learners' attitudes towards dialect teaching in Arabic-speaking countries



There was a small group of participants (n. 5) who remained neutral and indicated that it is acceptable to include or exclude dialect teaching in such a context. Unexpectedly, the highest number of the participants (n. 19) disagreed with teaching the dialect. However, not agreeing on teaching the dialect did not necessarily mean that the participants were aligned with the traditional view of Arabic teaching, which emphasizes that the dialect could be acquired through everyday interaction with native speakers (Al-Hamad, 1983). Probing the participants on why they think the LA-only approach is more effective, regardless of the difficulties faced when attempting to acquire the dialect, revealed that their decision stemmed from concerns about the question of which Arabic dialect to learn, as they were only temporarily living in Saudi Arabia and their exposure to the Saudi dialect would not be permanent. Some of the participants indicated that such reflections came to them because they were currently being taught LA by teachers from different Arab countries who were speaking different Arabic dialects. Participant 21 pointed out:

“Our teachers in the language institute are not only from Saudi Arabia. They are from different Arab countries such as Egypt and Sudan, and they speak different dialects. So, if teachers speak in their own dialects, I will be exposed to different dialects and that would be very difficult and confusing.”

The disagreement of some of the participants stemmed from their motivation to learn Arabic and from the perceived difficulty of learning both varieties simultaneously. Participant 32 indicated:

“Books are written in LA. All types of Arabic books, whether they are religious, historical, or scientific, are written in LA. This is why I prefer to focus on learning this variety. When I say I disagree with teaching the dialect in the language institute, it does not mean that I do not like it. I like the dialect but I think that LA is more important to read and write. Therefore, I am putting all my effort in studying LA. It would be difficult to study both of them together. I can take my time to learn the dialect but it is not a priority right now.”

Such results contradict the previous studies which reported that the majority of Arabic learners experience a shift in their learning attitude upon visiting Arabic-speaking countries, where they then favor the incorporation of dialect teaching (Palmer, 2008; Shiri, 2013). The current data shows that those who learned Arabic in Arabic-speaking countries could still opt for the LA-only approach regardless of the challenges they face when attempting to acquire the dialect. However, prioritizing learning LA first, then the dialect, which was reported by some participants in the current study, has also been reported by AFL learners in previous studies (Trentman & Shiri, 2020).



## Conclusions

This study set out to explore the self-learning experience of an Arabic spoken dialect by AFL learners in an LA-only institute in Saudi Arabia. The findings reveal that although the learners were living in an Arabic-speaking country, they still unexpectedly struggled with the acquisition of the dialect. In addition, it shows that the linguistic knowledge they developed in LA did not seem to assist the acquisition of the dialect. However, the results also show that AFL learners studying Arabic in an Arabic-speaking country have different opinions about the necessity of teaching the spoken dialect in language institutes. Some learners find that teaching the dialect is a necessity because it will help them integrate with the culture and society they are living in. Others disagree with teaching the dialect at the same time. Their reasons seemed to depend on: motivation to learn the language; the perceived—not necessarily a correct perception—difficulty of the task of acquiring LA and the dialect simultaneously; or the belief that the benefit of mastering the dialect could be restricted to the country where it is spoken, when they were not planning on living there permanently.

These results are significant in many aspects. Firstly, language institutes in Arabic-speaking countries could offer support for those who want to acquire the dialect in addition to LA; teaching the dialect could be offered through optional courses to tailor language learning programs to the learners' varied needs and motivations. Secondly, it is critical that Arabic learners, whether or not they are living in an Arabic-speaking country, should be guided to make informed decisions about whether or not to study the dialect. As we have seen, many learners were not aware of how LA and the dialect are related. In addition, their concerns about learning a dialect that can only be spoken in one country indicate that they are also unaware of the existence of strategies that can help improve their understanding across different Arabic dialects. However, as the current study is qualitative and exploratory in nature, future quantitative and experimental investigations could be carried out to enable making broad inferences and solid generalizations about the best practices of teaching AFL in Arabic-speaking countries.

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