In Conversation with Dr. Hanada Taha Thomure

Isra Brifkani

INTRODUCTION

Hanada Taha Thomure is the Director of the Zayed Arabic Language Research Center and the Endowed Professor of Arabic Language Education at Zayed University, UAE. Previously, she served as associate dean and acting dean at Bahrain Teachers' College. Dr. Taha is renowned for developing the first system for leveling Arabic texts, which has been adopted by regional and international publishers and has leveled over 11,000 children's books. Currently, she is collaborating with NYU Abu Dhabi on Barec Corpus, which will use AI for text leveling. Dr. Taha also formulated Arabic language arts standards, benefiting more than 200,000 students, and co-authored the BilArabi K-9 curriculum. Her advisory roles span influential institutions such as the Queen Rania Foundation, Scholastic, USAID, UNICEF, the UAE Prime Minister's Office, and the World Bank. Dr. Taha's internationally published research focuses on Arabic language teaching, oral reading fluency, Arabic children's literature, and curriculum design. She has authored numerous policy reports, articles, and book chapters addressing critical issues in Arabic education. Her creative literary works include children's books and prose, reflecting her commitment to advancing Arabic literacy and cultural understanding. Dr. Taha's contributions have been recognized through awards and nominations, highlighting her impact on educational reform and literacy promotion across the MENA region.

Isra Brifkani: *Your educational background and academic profile demonstrate diversity, including Arabic language instruction, curriculum development, and educational psychology. Please elaborate for our readers on your academic journey and how these fields intersect and contribute to your overarching research and contributions to advancing Arabic language instruction.*

Hanada Taha Thomure: A background marked by diversity can only make us better and more able to see with more clarity. Having studied for my first

Brifkani, I. (2024). In Conversation with Dr. Hanada Taha Thomure. *Journal of Education in Muslim Societies, 6*(1), 158–167.
DOI 10.2979/jems.00024 •

13 years of primary schooling in an all-girls Islamic school gave me a solid foundation in the Arabic language and Islamic civilization. The journey then took me to American universities to study psychology, education, educational psychology, curriculum, and instruction. My doctoral dissertation studied various educational concepts within the Islamic and Arab traditions. That gave me a bird's eye view into the schools of thought, learning theories, and cultural traditions surrounding Arabic language education.

Moreover, having had the good fortune of closely observing hundreds of Arabic language teachers in classrooms in various countries around the world gave me a worm's eye view into the intricacies of the classroom. I have frequently leaned on this diverse body of knowledge and experiences throughout my career. I do believe that educators especially need to be specialized in their subject matter and, at the same time, have some profound multi-disciplinary experiences. When I started designing Arabic language curricula, for example, my knowledge of child development and my experience as an early years Arabic language teacher came in handy when working on texts that would capture the imagination of that age group. I would advise any young educator to diversify their reading lists to include topics from disciplines they might think are unrelated to their work. Economics, politics, AI, sports, poetry, and history are all excellent fields that can ignite our intellect and imagination and, in turn, might help us inspire one of our students someday.

IB: *Your work and research in Arabic language instruction have been innovative and inspiring, particularly in developing standards and performance indicators for K–12 Arabic language instruction. Please share your inspiration behind these initiatives and their impact on Arabic language instruction.*

HTT: Commencing my career as an Arabic classroom teacher and department head across diverse K–12 schools in several MENA countries gave me firsthand insight into the complex challenges confronting Arabic language education. During my initial decade in K–12 education, I gained a profound understanding of the multifaceted obstacles hindering our students' mastery of Arabic, with pedagogical challenges emerging as the most pressing concern. Transitioning from teaching to pursue further studies in curriculum and instruction while tending to my young family, I remained driven by the persistent need to address these challenges comprehensively.

The development of Arabic language arts standards stemmed from my experiences and was informed by the principles of standards-based education prevalent in the United States during the 1990s. This initiative aimed

to rectify the inherent dependency on textbooks and teachers in shaping the Arabic curriculum, ensuring a more equitable educational framework for students. Introduced in 2000, these standards have since been adopted by numerous schools across the MENA region, prompting ministries of education to integrate and adapt them into national educational policies. Implementing these standards has catalyzed the development of curricula like the BilArabi curriculum, alongside assessments and teacher training programs aligned with modern pedagogical practices. While acknowledging ongoing challenges, this initiative marks a significant step toward regionalizing Arabic language education standards, underscoring a commitment to continuous improvement and equitable learning outcomes. For an in-depth discussion, refer to AlHashmi, M; **Taha-Thomure, H;** Al Mazroui, K. (2022). Arabic language teachers' perceptions of standards-based educational reform. *Gulf Education and Social Policy Review 2 (2),* 91–114 https://doi.org/10.18502/gespr.v2i1.10044

IB: *In one of the recent podcasts in which you were a guest scholar, you mentioned that we are not getting Arabic teacher training right now and have yet to crack the code for teaching the language. In essence, we are stuck in the past! How do you envision an effective Arabic teacher education program?*

HTT: There are immense opportunities to improve or rather revolutionize Arabic language teacher education. Currently, there are only a handful of programs preparing Arabic language teachers. Most of those programs are pretty dated because they have not kept up with new developments in literacy, early reading, children's literature, the science of reading, cognitive psychology, computational linguistics, and AI. Most Arabic teacher preparation programs are steeped in classical literature and ways of learning management that are more fit for generations past. Effective teacher education today needs to be fit for the new generations. Not only do we need teacher education content that can inspire young teachers and give them a sense of purpose in a world that is becoming more oblivious of the teaching profession and its unreplaceable role in the development of societies, but we also need programs that use modern day tools and strategies that have been proven effective and efficient in teaching an increasingly disengaged generation. An effective Arabic teaching education program will capitalize on extensive opportunities for field practice, being in the schools as of first year, taking public speaking classes, engaging with Arabic children's literature authors, early literacy, assessment of and for learning classes, and classes where they learn how to engage in action research, arts, and

culture to teach Arabic better. Moreover, I find it essential to ensure that Arabic teachers are bilingual to access internationally published research in their field.

Please refer to Taha Thomure, H. (2023) for an in-depth discussion. "Arabic language teacher training in the Arabian Peninsula: Great teachers do not grow on trees." In Coelho, D. & Steinhagen, T. (Eds.), *Transformed and Empowered: Plurilingual pedagogy in the Arabian Peninsula*. Routledge. ISBN 9781032326467.

IB: *As a seasoned educator and researcher, you have had the opportunity to train thousands of Arabic language teachers and leaders globally. What are some common threads in the challenges Arabic language instructors face in public and private schools?*

HTT: In a 2019 published chapter, I spoke about the seven impediments to Arabic language education. Those impediments resulted from years of being in the classroom, hundreds of classroom observations, and conclusions from the limited research on the topic. Those can be summarized as follows:

1) Time Allocated to the Arabic Language: Time spent learning Arabic in most public and private schools threatens the language. Most private schools, for example, treat Arabic as a "special subject," meaning it is not the language of instruction, and the time allocated to it usually does not exceed 45 minutes a day, which is way below the OECD average of 240 hours of first language instruction.

2) Rigor: The second challenge to the Arabic language in private and public schools is that insufficient rigor is given to teaching Arabic due to the lack of teacher expertise and suitable curricula (Bell, 2016). Teachers need in-depth training on what and how to teach non-native learners and how to carefully design learning and linguistic experiences that build on students' learning year after year. Parents often say that their children study Arabic in schools for years, yet they do not learn much and cannot speak, read, or comprehend Modern Standard Arabic fluently.

3) Uninformed Leadership: The challenge in learning Arabic in the region includes private schools led by Western experts who lack Arabic proficiency and a deep understanding of its diglossic nature, posing difficulties in implementing effective teaching methods. Consequently, they often lack guidance on best practices for teaching Arabic. In public schools, leadership is typically bureaucratic, with principals less involved in educational matters, which hampers effective academic leadership and oversight.

4) Arabic across the School: A fourth challenge is that few private schools, for example, do not encourage learning Arabic music or using Arabic in newsletters, talent shows, theater, announcements, or general student work. This limits the presence of the Arabic language in the classroom and often sends the message to teachers, parents, and students that Arabic is not an essential or accepted language in its land.

5) Teacher Quality: As discussed earlier in this piece, the region's Arabic language teacher preparation programs have not coped with the needs of an ever-changing world and schools' need for well-trained Arabic teachers.

6) Curriculum Quality: The quality of Arabic language curricula in private and public schools is a significant concern. Current textbooks do not utilize what we know today about teaching reading and writing and are not adequately aligned with 21st-century skills or with other subjects. Additionally, there is a lack of high-quality digital resources in Arabic. While there has been recent growth in Arabic children's literature, its potential as a valuable language-learning tool in classrooms remains largely untapped.

7) Professional Development: Arabic language professional development in schools faces challenges in both private and public sectors. Private schools struggle to provide relevant and practical training for Arabic language teachers, often resorting to English-language sessions on unrelated topics or inadequate levels of training. Public schools lack a cohesive training plan, offering general sessions where teachers choose topics unrelated to subject relevance or grade level. There is minimal follow-up and coaching to ensure that training transfers into classroom practices.

Please refer to Taha, H. (2019) for an in-depth discussion. "Arabic Language Education in the UAE: Choosing the right drivers." In: Gallagher, K. (Ed.), *Education in the UAE: Innovation and Transformation*. Springer. Doi:10.1007/978-981-13-7736-5_5.

IB: *Some researchers are expressing concern that, as a diglossic language, Arabic faces challenges in artificial intelligence language model capabilities. How do you see the future of Arabic language education evolving, particularly in light of advancing technologies, including artificial intelligence, and what opportunities do you foresee for innovation in this field?*

HTT: With all the challenges facing Arabic language education, I see great opportunities and potential for it to emerge as a super-language if we converge talents from various disciplines, including AI and computational

linguistics. I am currently involved in an exciting, innovative project called BAREC, led by Prof. Nizar Habash of New York University, Abu Dhabi, and funded by the Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Center, where we are developing the first balanced Arabic corpus, including 10 million words, and that will be to level Arabic text using AI eventually. The database will be open source so that other researchers in the field can build on the work done. The importance of nationally funded projects like BAREC is that they provide the necessary infrastructure for building curricula and other learning resources in Arabic. The playing field is currently semi-empty, and the opportunities for ambitious and innovative Arabic language enthusiasts are just waiting to be created.

IB: *With the rise of globalism, the acquisition of Arabic as a primary language has declined in Arab nations. You advocate for not introducing dual language instruction until the third-grade level so that the mother language, in this case Arabic, gains dominance. How did you reach this conclusion, and how has this idea been received in Arab-speaking circles?*

HTT: The infatuation with the English language as the language of the job market has wreaked havoc on education in this region and has become something of a popular myth. Parents and many communities feel that without proficiency in the English language, their kids will have no prospects for a bright future, and no good jobs will be offered to graduates with no mastery of the English language. Once embedded into societies, those ideas can become deeply ingrained and are governed by fear of the future and the fact that their children will not be able to make a living. This made a large percentage of Arab parents across the region rush to enroll their children in English medium schools without any scrutiny of the school culture or the potential dangers to identity that it poses. In addition, there is the challenge of diglossia, where the dialect spoken at home differs from the MSA they learn at school. Given both reasons, Arabic diglossia and Arabic culture and identity, I am a proponent of exclusive Arabic-medium schools until third or fourth grade, after which other languages can be introduced. We want children to learn as many languages as possible, but their first language comes first. They should be solid and fluent before another competing language of a different language family (Arabic is Semitic, while English, for example, is Indo-European) is introduced.

IB: *You advocate for the approachability and accessibility of the Arabic language in educational settings. How can this be achieved, and what are the gaps preventing the achievement of this objective?*

HTT: Another one of those popular myths that have been, in my opinion, imported and later circulated around Arabic is that it is a "difficult" language. The question is who started this, why, and for whom it is difficult. This is the language of the sacred text (Holy Qur'an), the language of revered Hadiths, the language of the most distinguished verse, and the language in which 1.9 billion Muslims pray five times every day. Saying that Arabic is difficult and unapproachable honestly borders on mythical thinking. Arabic is a language like any other world language. It has 28 letters and is shallow primarily (1 to 1 correspondence between the letter and its sound), especially when vowelized (when it has diacritics), making it a phonetic language par excellence and thus relatively easy to read and write. The issues, I would argue, lay in the pedagogical paradigms used in teaching Arabic. Instead of using higher-level vocabulary for novice or intermediate-level students, we can use common words between MSA and dialects. We can do so much to simplify the content and methods of teaching Arabic. Having better-prepared teachers who have mastery of MSA themselves, utilizing public speaking, project, and inquiry-based instruction, and better resources, in addition to having more time in the language, can prove to be just the solutions everyone has been looking for. Another way to help learners see that MSA Arabic is accessible and approachable is to structure the learning frameworks in a way that allows enough time to train children on acquiring enough MSA vocabulary through interactive listening and speaking, storytelling, extensive read-alouds of well-written and leveled children's literature. Here, AI can be used to know, for example, the 2,000 or 3,000 most frequently used words in the language. This will help educators focus on the priority vocabulary needed to scaffold learning and give children or learners, in general, the needed knowledge threshold in the language they need to succeed.

IB: *It is argued that the value of the Arabic language has been reduced, perhaps intentionally, due to many factors, including colonialism, Islamophobia, and popular cultural influences. From your perspective and experience, how can this challenge be addressed?*

HTT: This challenge is as old as colonial thought, which many experts say started in the 1500s, but in my opinion, it started well before that with the first crusades in 1095. It has never gone away, and it persists today in many different shapes and forms, including what is happening in many Arab and Muslim countries where Arabic in "international" private schools is considered a "special subject." Parents who call for better and increased Arabic

language instruction are constantly reminded that "these are American or British schools." It is interesting when a school in your land becomes an "American school" rather than a private school that uses aspects of the American or British curriculum. Colonialism, Islamophobia, and the silencing of indigenous cultures and languages (AKA Arabic) are all present and alive in our own countries and schools. Circulating the notion that Arabic is a difficult language, for example, is a form of colonialism. How can anyone's first language be ever described as "difficult"? Edward W. Said, in his brilliant book Orientalism, says: "The Orient and Islam have a kind of extra-real, phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert. From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself. Evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist's work."

What needs to be done is a counter-campaign that brings research evidence to policymakers and the community that proficiency in the first language comes first. Raising children who are secure in their language and identities is a right. Any country's well-being depends on its people being rooted in their cultures and home languages. The solution has to be double-pronged. On the one side, we need to work with policymakers to ensure that strict language policies and planning are in place, and on the other side, we need to make sure that children are surrounded and immersed in the Arabic language at home, in the neighborhoods, and school. The foreign language (as it is rightly called) would come later, and children would be bilingual with some good pedagogical planning.

For more information, refer to Abdelkader Fassi Fehri's excellent 2013 book on language policy and planning in Arab countries.

IB: *What advice do you have for K–12 Islamic schools in the United States, Canada, and other Western contexts that teach Arabic as a second language?*

HTT: Islamic schools in the West have much work to do. First, the amount of time children spend in English outweighs what they spend in Arabic. Second, they will need the help of AI to determine, for example, the most essential 1,000 Arabic words, the most frequent words in the Arabic language, and the Qur'an. This will help curriculum designers and teachers focus on the core of teaching Arabic. Furthermore, I would advise ensuring that teachers are highly proficient in MSA, as Islamic schools are dependent on MSA and Classical Arabic much more than any of the

Arabic dialects due to the wide ethnic and linguistic diversity present in them. I recommend they focus on reading and vocabulary, especially since vocabulary knowledge and usage are among the biggest challenges in teaching Arabic. Having students do daily oral presentations (even for 1 minute each) can help them develop their language and vocabulary and acquire critical public speaking skills for their careers. Most importantly, please make sure learning Arabic is fun and meaningful and is celebrated for being a language of great value spiritually, aesthetically, and scientifically and that it is the language from which the word "algorithm" was coined.

IB: *Looking ahead, what are your current and future aspirations and research endeavors, and how do you hope to continue making a meaningful impact on Arabic language education? What final thoughts would you like to share with our readers?*

HTT: I am excited to see how the BAREC project I am involved in can help create focused and leveled lists of Arabic words that are most useful for young learners. I am also interested in the Smart Arabic Reading Diagnostic Tool (SARD) results that my colleague Haitham Taha and I created. Based on that diagnostic tool, we are currently developing intervention plans for early reading that can greatly benefit schools and ministries of education. Moreover, I have been involved in developing a literature and standards-based K–9 curriculum (*Bilarabi*) and am currently working on an Arabic phonics curriculum based on the science of reading. I am fascinated by bringing research results and knowledge to the classroom to ensure we utilize the best-known practices in Arabic language education. Above all, I want to see homegrown Arabic language education research that stems from our own struggles, understandings, worldviews, culture, and aspirations for our children. I would like to see Arabic language and culture centers on every campus worldwide, similar to the Confucius Institute, which has successfully taught Mandarin on hundreds of campuses and schools in many countries. I want to leave our readers with three thoughts that reiterate some of the ideas shared earlier in this interview:

a) The Arabic language is not "difficult." Our collective mission in the near future will be to dispel those myths by utilizing modern and effective teaching techniques to refresh Arabic education and provide more modern teaching and engagement methodologies. Although this is out of the scope of this interview, I would also argue that the same is needed for Islamic education.

b) Arabic language educators, researchers, and enthusiasts must start working on homegrown narratives that tell our stories in our own voices. Our worldviews are part of this humanity, and it is a worthy worldview to share. It is a world view of diversity, humanism, moderation, and peace.
c) The Arabic language is a mine of opportunities waiting to be turned into success stories. Opportunities exist for youth who can use Arabic and AI in education, linguistics, communication, comics, social media, show business, and gaming.

I am optimistic regarding the future of the Arabic language. The young generations are more informed than we ever were. The whole world is at their fingertips with all its negatives and positives. However, I'm optimistic that they will recognize the value of learning Arabic and investing in Arabic language industries and be the generation that takes it to the next level.