Bridging the Divide: Teacher Professional Development for Linguistic and Pedagogical Excellence in Arabic as a Foreign Language

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CONTEXT

The Growing Importance of Arabic

Driven by Global Forces

- Academic mobility across borders
- Research collaboration demands
- Scientific communication needs
- Economic exchange growth

Arabic is no longer learned solely for tourism or religion—it has become essential for research and academic advancement.

CHALLENGE

The Persistent Gap

1

Program Objectives

Advanced academic proficiency

The Gap

Insufficient teacher development

3

Actual Outcomes

Formulaic, non-academic Arabic

Despite program expansion, learners often lack the cognitive depth and specialized vocabulary needed for fields like physics, biology, and computer science.

The Teacher as Central Agent

Linguistic Mastery

Deep understanding of Arabic structure, morphology, and syntax

Scientific Knowledge

Competence in specialized academic and scientific content

Pedagogical Expertise

Communicative, task-based, content-driven approaches

Cultural Mediation

Awareness of diverse learner backgrounds and pragmatic differences

FINDINGS

Textbook Analysis: Critical Gaps

Al-ʿArabiyyah Bayna Yadayk Series

Advanced level includes eight thematic units covering identity, technology, health, society, media, environment, travel, and specific purposes.

Notable absence: No purely scientific reading texts addressing physics, chemistry, or biology—even at the most advanced level.

What's Missing

- Scientific terminology in context
- Laboratory experiment descriptions
- Research methodology language
- Discipline-specific discourse structures

Learners gain general vocabulary but lack tools for academic research.

Teaching Arabic for Natural Sciences

Precision & Directness

Avoidance of metaphor; concise declarative sentences; logical structure

Terminological Density

Exclusive reliance on standardized scientific terms: oxidation, gravity, enzymatic decomposition

Logical Connectors

Causal, consequential, comparative, and inferential markers throughout

One of the greatest challenges: terminological standardization across Arab language academies—historical example: multiple Arabic terms proposed for "car"
Additional Challenge: Rhetorical Tradition

Arabic is historically a highly rhetorical and expressive language, rich in metaphor, imagery, and stylistic ornamentation. While this richness is a strength in literature and classical discourse, it may create challenges in scientific communication, which requires clarity, precision, and direct expression.

Teachers therefore face the challenge of helping learners move from figurative and rhetorical styles toward precise scientific language suitable for academic disciplines.

Cultural & Pragmatic Challenges

Ḥimya (Diet)

Arabic: weight loss focus
English: any dietary system

Salbī (Negative)

Arabic: negative connotation
Medical English: absence of disease (positive outcome)
Example: COVID-19 Testing

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the meaning became very clear:

• A negative test result means the person is healthy and does not have the virus. • A positive test result means the person has the virus.

This example shows how the same word may carry opposite emotional meanings across languages and contexts.

Ṭāqah (Power)

Arabic: physical energy
English: may denote influence or connections

KEY SKILLS

Essential Competencies for Academic Arabic

01

Scientific Reading

Interpret graphs, tables, equations embedded in Arabic texts

02

Academic Writing

Formulate hypotheses, describe experiments, write rigorous abstracts

03

Listening & Speaking

Comprehend lectures, participate in specialized seminars and debates

Beyond Vocabulary

Teachers must also act as cultural mediators. Language meaning is not only linguistic; it is also shaped by culture and emotional experience.

For example, the famous Arabic love story Layla and Majnun.

Majnun’s real name was Qays. According to the story, he loved Layla so deeply that he eventually died because of his love.

For many Arab learners, this story represents the ultimate form of devotion and tragic love.

However, students from other cultures may find the story unusual or unrealistic. In many Western narratives, lovers may suffer emotionally but they rarely die because of love.

As a result, such texts may not always generate the same emotional engagement among non-Arab learners.

Teachers therefore need to carefully select texts that connect with diverse cultural expectations.

From Traditional to Transformative

Grammar-Focused Teaching

Communicative Practice

Task-Based Learning

Content & Goal Alignment

Professional development must shift from transmissive models toward participatory, practice-based frameworks grounded in reflective practice, action research, and lifelong learning.

Needs Analysis

Understand learner purposes

Content Integration

Link language to scientific domains

Digital Readiness

Platforms, resources, AI tools

CONCLUSION

Investing in Excellence

Humanize Scientific Terminology

Teachers as cultural mediators linking terms to social and human usage

Enrich Scientific Reading Content

Urgent need for scientifically grounded texts at advanced levels

Continuous Professional Development

Shift toward content-based learning with prior scientific training

Address Cultural Variation

Select texts with shared human values sensitive to learners' backgrounds

> Investing in teacher development is ultimately an investment in Arabic's capacity to function as a global language of knowledge and research.