



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

Prof. Nizar Qpilat¹, Hassan Alhosani²

¹Mohamed bin Zayed University for Humanities, UAE

²Mohamed bin Zayed University for Humanities, UAE

Abstract

The teaching of Arabic as a foreign language (AFL) has expanded significantly in recent decades, driven by globalization, academic mobility, and growing interest in Arabic as a language of research and scientific communication. Despite this expansion, a persistent gap remains between the stated objectives of AFL programs and their actual learning outcomes, particularly at advanced levels. This study argues that the core of this gap lies in insufficient teacher professional development that fails to integrate linguistic excellence with pedagogical, scientific, and cultural competencies.

The paper examines the role of the Arabic language teacher as a central agent in bridging the divide between theoretical linguistic knowledge and effective classroom practice, with particular attention to Arabic for Academic and Scientific Purposes. It highlights the limitations of traditional, grammar-centered instruction and underscores the need for communicative, task-based, and content-based approaches aligned with learners' academic goals. Special emphasis is placed on teaching Arabic for the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, and biology), where precision, terminological density, and logical discourse structures are essential.

Through textbook analysis—using Al-'Arabiyyah Bayna Yadayk as a case study—the study reveals a notable lack of scientifically grounded reading texts, even at advanced levels. It further demonstrates how cultural and pragmatic differences affect learners' engagement with academic and scientific content. The paper concludes that sustainable improvement in AFL outcomes requires continuous, practice-based professional development focused on scientific literacy, cultural mediation, and integrative pedagogy. Investing in teacher development is ultimately presented as an investment in Arabic's capacity to function as a global language of knowledge and research.

Keywords: *Teacher professional development; Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL); Arabic for Academic Purposes; Scientific Arabic; Academic literacy; Pedagogical competence*

Introduction

Foreign language education has undergone significant transformations in recent decades due to the diversification of learners' motivations and the expansion of specific purposes for learning languages. Arabic, in particular, is no longer learned solely for tourism, religious purposes, or everyday communication; research-oriented and academic purposes have become increasingly prominent.

Globalization has, for decades, imposed an open, borderless mode of communication, giving rise to transnational cultures alongside intensified academic mobility and expanding economic exchange among societies. Within this context, the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language has emerged as a dynamic and rapidly growing field, especially in light of the increasing cultural, political, and economic interest in the Arab world. However, this quantitative expansion of Arabic language programs has not always been accompanied by a parallel qualitative development in the linguistic and pedagogical competencies of teachers. Many programs have continued to focus narrowly on language instruction while neglecting several essential dimensions, including:

- Diversifying the content of reading texts
- Integrating receptive and productive skills (the four language skills)



- Teaching culture not merely as general knowledge, but as a system of scientific, semantic, and lexical fields

This imbalance has resulted in a clear gap between the stated objectives of Arabic language programs and their actual learning outcomes. Consequently, even advanced learners often acquire a formulaic, non-academic variety of Arabic, lacking the cognitive depth and specialized lexical resources required for scientific disciplines such as physics, biology, and computer science.

Teacher competence constitutes the cornerstone of any successful educational process. Equally crucial is the teacher's scientific knowledge and ability to understand learners' needs and to develop their academic literacy through Arabic. Effective language learning cannot occur without a teacher who possesses deep awareness of linguistic structure, scientific knowledge, pedagogical methodologies, classroom realities, and learners' diverse cultural backgrounds. A single classroom may include students from different cultures whose responses to the same content—such as attitudes toward keeping pets at home—may vary significantly.

Moreover, teaching Arabic to non-native speakers is a multifaceted field due to the language's morphological, syntactic, and semantic complexity, the wide range of dialects, the phenomenon of diglossia (Modern Standard Arabic vs. colloquial varieties), and its profound cultural and civilizational dimensions.

This raises a critical question: What kind of teacher professional development is required to bridge the gap between theoretical linguistic knowledge and actual classroom practice, and between traditional teaching competencies and the modern competencies demanded by communicative, constructivist, and integrative approaches to language education?

Professional development is no longer limited to isolated training courses; it has become a continuous, cumulative process grounded in reflective practice, action research, and lifelong learning within specialized domains. Preparatory learners—before entering academic departments—must acquire lexical competence, academic vocabulary, dialogic contexts, and research skills related to specialized fields. Yet many instructional textbooks continue to privilege general, daily, and cultural topics while largely neglecting scientific domains. The researcher has examined textbooks that offer no purely scientific content within their reading texts.

Recent educational studies indicate that while many teachers of Arabic as a foreign language possess solid linguistic knowledge, they often lack specialized pedagogical competence and scientific literacy. This includes curriculum design aligned with international standards, interactive teaching strategies, authentic communicative activities, timely assessment practices, and the integration of technology into language teaching. Such deficiencies lead to ineffective overemphasis on grammar, memorization, or translation at the expense of developing genuine oral and written academic communication skills.

Another equally significant gap lies in cultural and pragmatic awareness. Language cannot be separated from its cultural and social contexts. Teachers lacking sufficient cultural competence may fail to convey the authentic meanings of Arabic texts or to guide learners in using language appropriately in academic and research-oriented contexts. Professional development thus becomes a vital means of enhancing cultural awareness and linking language to culture beyond superficial or stereotypical treatments.

In the context of rapid digital transformation, new challenges have emerged for teachers of Arabic as a foreign language, including the use of online learning platforms, digital resource design, virtual classroom management, and the application of artificial intelligence in language learning. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed significant disparities in teachers' digital readiness, reaffirming professional development as a necessity rather than an option, in addition to the persistent issue of insufficient scientific preparation for learners of Arabic as a second language.

Bridging the gap between linguistic excellence and pedagogical excellence necessitates rethinking teacher preparation programs and professional development models. This requires a shift from transmissive models toward participatory, practice-based, experimental, and continuously evaluated frameworks. It also demands the establishment of clear professional competency frameworks



grounded in international standards while accounting for the specificities of Arabic and its teaching contexts.¹

Accordingly, this study is founded on the conviction that investing in the professional and cognitive development of teachers of Arabic as a foreign language is an investment in educational quality itself, in the global image of Arabic, and in its capacity to function as a language of knowledge, culture, and communication. The study emphasizes the integration of linguistic and pedagogical-cognitive dimensions as the primary pathway toward effective and sustainable Arabic language education in non-Arabic-speaking contexts.

The Teacher between Teaching Competence and Understanding Learners' Purposes: The Academic Purpose in Particular

The teacher is the central pillar in the success of Arabic-as-a-second-language programs. The quality of language learning depends largely on the teacher's professional and cognitive competence, particularly in teaching methodologies, scientific content delivery, and understanding learners' motivations and objectives. Language teaching is no longer a neutral or generalized activity; it is closely tied to contexts of use and learning goals. This necessitates a teacher with advanced pedagogical awareness and the ability to align instructional practices with learners' needs—especially those learning Arabic for academic or research purposes.²

Teaching competence first manifests in mastery of modern language-teaching approaches and a shift away from traditional, lecture-based, grammar-centered instruction toward interactive, communicative models that place learners at the center of the educational process. Competent teachers employ communicative approaches, task-based learning³, and content-based instruction, enabling learners to use Arabic in authentic contexts that simulate academic and research environments. This competence also entails the ability to diversify instructional strategies, accommodate individual differences, and create collaborative learning environments that foster critical thinking and precise academic expression.

Effective teaching competence also requires lesson planning and curriculum design based on clear objectives and measurable outcomes. In Arabic for Academic Purposes (AAP), instruction should be grounded in learners' linguistic needs, such as academic reading comprehension, scientific writing, specialized terminology, and participation in academic discussions and research seminars. This requires teachers to understand principles of needs analysis and translate them into language activities that integrate the four skills within authentic scientific contexts.

Understanding learners' purposes is equally critical. Academic and research-oriented learners differ fundamentally from those studying Arabic for general or daily communication. Academic learners seek advanced competencies enabling them to read Arabic scholarly sources, write research papers, produce abstracts, participate in conferences, and comprehend scientific discourse across registers. Recognizing these purposes is essential for content selection, text type determination, and assessment design.

Here, the teacher's pragmatic and discourse competence becomes indispensable. Teaching vocabulary and grammar in isolation is insufficient. Competent teachers guide learners to understand the structure of Arabic academic texts, features of scientific style, argumentative patterns, citation conventions, and distinctions between descriptive, analytical, and critical language. They also train

¹ Taima, Rushdi Ahmad. (2004). Teaching Arabic to non-native speakers: Its curricula and methods. Cairo: Dar Al-Fikr Al-Arabi.

² Richards, J. C. (2017). Teaching English through English: Proficiency, Pedagogy and Performance. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ Abdel Rahman, Abdullah. (2018). Teaching Arabic to speakers of other languages: Theoretical and practical foundations. Amman: Dar Al-Masirah.



learners in research writing skills such as problem formulation, hypothesis construction, coherence, and textual cohesion.⁴

Academic and research purposes further require cultural and epistemological awareness of Arabic scholarly traditions and differences in academic conventions across cultures. Non-Arab learners may face challenges not only in language but also in modes of thinking, discourse organization, and academic norms. The teacher thus assumes the role of a cultural mediator, helping learners adapt without compromising their original academic identities.

Assessment competence is equally essential. In academic Arabic instruction, assessment should be diagnostic and formative, focusing on authentic tasks such as summarizing research articles, writing short papers, and delivering oral presentations. This requires the ability to design clear rubrics and provide constructive feedback that supports linguistic and research development.

Ultimately, the Arabic-as-a-second-language teacher must combine advanced teaching competence with deep awareness of learners' academic purposes. Only such integration can bridge the gap between learning Arabic as a linguistic system and learning it as a tool for knowledge production, research, and scholarly communication.

Teaching Arabic for the Natural Sciences: (Physics, Chemistry, Biology)

Teaching Arabic for scientific academic purposes involves addressing the needs of the scientific community, where language is not taught for its own sake but as a medium for transmitting empirical and theoretical knowledge. This need is particularly evident in the context of Arabization of science and the growing demand among researchers in Arab universities for a standardized Arabic capable of accommodating modern scientific terminology and instruction for non-native learners.⁵

Scientific Arabic differs from general Arabic in several key features:

- Precision and directness: avoidance of metaphorical and figurative language; reliance on concise declarative sentences
- Terminological density: exclusive reliance on precise scientific terminology (e.g., oxidation, gravity, enzymatic decomposition). Research indicates that one of the greatest challenges lies in terminological standardization across Arab language academies⁶, as illustrated by historical cases such as the Arabization of "car," where "sayyārah" originally meant "caravan."
- Logical connectors: frequent use of causal, consequential, comparative, and inferential markers

Key skills in teaching Arabic for scientific research purposes include:

- Scientific reading: interpreting graphs, tables, and equations embedded in Arabic texts
- Academic writing: formulating hypotheses, describing laboratory experiments, and writing abstracts in a rigorous scientific style
- Listening and speaking: comprehending scientific lectures and participating in specialized seminars and debates⁷

⁴ Teaching Arabic to Non-native Speakers for Special Purposes: The Purpose of Worship is a Model. Nizar Qpilat @ balsam alomari. Dirasat. volume 51.N,5.2024..p 492

⁵ Al-Ta'ani, Hasan. (2017). *Teaching Arabic for specific purposes: Vision and methodology*. Amman: Dar Al-Masirah for Publishing and Distribution, pp. 85–92.

⁶ Shehata, Hasan. (2018). *Teaching Arabic between theory and practice*. Cairo: The Egyptian Lebanese Publishing House, pp. 210–215.

⁷ Qasim, Muhammad. (2020). "Academic language in faculties of science: A study of the linguistic needs of physics and chemistry students." *Journal of Linguistic and Literary Studies*, p. 44.



However, Arabic for scientific purposes faces significant challenges, most notably terminological diglossia, as scientific disciplines are often taught in English or French in Arab universities. This has created a gap between the mother tongue and scientific content. The field thus seeks to bridge this gap through Arabized translation strategies and the development of specialized scientific lexicons.⁸

Al-‘Arabiyyah Bayna Yadayk Series as a Model

An examination of the Al-‘Arabiyyah Bayna Yadayk series reveals an absence of reading texts addressing scientific disciplines, though it includes some general references to illnesses, symptoms, professions, and crafts. These references rely on general vocabulary indicating pain or discomfort without providing precise scientific terminology.⁹ This may be justified at the beginner level, where units focus on everyday contexts such as work, the market, and greetings.

As for the **advanced level** of the same series, the index presents **thematic instructional units and general reading texts**, as follows:

Unit 1: Our Identity and Culture

- Self-identification
- Homeland and identity
- Social and cultural occasions

Unit 2: Science and Technology

- Education and scientific research
- The Internet and social media
- Innovation and discoveries

Unit 3: Health and Daily Life

- Food and nutrition
- Sports and physical activity
- Mental health

Unit 4: Society and Human Relationships

- Family and friends
- Values and ethics
- Cooperation and community

Unit 5: Media and the Arts

- Journalism and media
- Literature and the arts
- Cinema and theatre

Unit 6: Environment and Nature

- Climate change

⁸ Abdel Ati, Mahmoud. (2021). Problematics of Arabic scientific terminology in chemistry and biology. Damascus: Publications of the Arabic Language Academy, pp. 118–122.

⁹ Al-‘Arabiyyah Bayna Yadayk Series. Abdulrahman Al-Fawzan, Mukhtar Taher, & Muhammad Abdulkhaliq. Book One. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 2014.



- Natural resources
- Environmental protection

Unit 7: Travel and Cultures

- Travel and tourism
- Customs and traditions
- Intercultural communication

Unit 8: Arabic for Specific Purposes (Optional)

- Arabic for religious purposes
- Arabic for business
- Academic Arabic

Beyond vocabulary, cultural discrepancies affect content reception. A previous study by the researcher demonstrated differing student responses to the story of Layla and Majnun. While Arab learners empathized with Qays's emotional suffering, many non-Arab learners perceived the narrative as excessive, citing cultural expressions such as "there are plenty of fish in the sea." This lack of emotional engagement diminished their interest in the reading text and its linguistic content. Similar disengagement may occur with texts about pets, which are not universally considered family members across Arab societies.

Such cases underscore the necessity of selecting texts with shared human values aligned with learners' interests. Cultural pragmatics further complicate terminology use. For instance:

Himya (diet): in Arabic commonly associated with weight loss, whereas in English it refers broadly to dietary systems for both healthy and ill individuals

Salbī (negative): negative connotation in Arabic, yet in medical English indicates absence of disease (a positive outcome)

Ṭāqah (power): in English may denote influence or connections

These examples reveal how cultural context, usage, and lexicographic traditions generate divergent pragmatic meanings. Consequently, scientific reading texts must account for such disparities. Teacher preparation must therefore prioritize scientific conceptual training before pedagogical training, enabling teachers to humanize terminology by contextualizing its use within the target language community rather than relying solely on dictionary definitions.

Conclusion

Teaching Arabic to non-native speakers is no longer confined to facilitating everyday communication; it has become an academic and research necessity driven by globalization and scientific mobility. This study demonstrates that the gap between program objectives and learning outcomes stems primarily from insufficient pedagogical and scientific preparation of teachers, resulting in the production of a formulaic language lacking the depth required in fields such as physics, biology, and computer science.

The study highlights several key findings and recommendations:

1. Humanizing scientific terminology: Arabic scientific terms are deeply influenced by cultural and pragmatic contexts. Teachers must function as cultural mediators, linking the term's core meaning to its social and human usage.



2. Enhancing scientific reading content: Textbook analysis reveals an urgent need to enrich and refine scientific reading materials, particularly at advanced levels.

3. Continuous professional development: Professional development is imperative, requiring a shift toward content-based learning models and prior scientific conceptual training.

4. Addressing cultural variation: Successful instruction depends on selecting texts grounded in shared human values and sensitive to learners' cultural backgrounds.

Ultimately, investing in the linguistic and scientific preparation of teachers represents a true investment in the global status of Arabic as a sustainable language of knowledge, research, and contemporary scientific production.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abdel Ati, M. (2021). *Problematics of Arabic scientific terminology in chemistry and biology*. Damascus: Publications of the Arabic Language Academy, pp. 118–122.
- [2] Abdel Rahman, A. (2018). *Teaching Arabic to speakers of other languages: Theoretical and practical foundations*. Amman: Dar Al-Masirah.
- [3] Al-Fawzan, A., Taher, M., & Abdulkhaliq, M. (2014). *Al-'Arabiyyah Bayna Yadayk* (Book 1). Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
- [4] Al-Ta'ani, H. (2017). *Teaching Arabic for specific purposes: Vision and methodology*. Amman: Dar Al-Masirah for Publishing and Distribution, pp. 85–92.
- [5] Qasim, M. (2020). Academic language in faculties of science: A study of the linguistic needs of physics and chemistry students. *Journal of Linguistic and Literary Studies*, p. 44.
- [6] Shehata, H. (2018). *Teaching Arabic between theory and practice*. Cairo: The Egyptian Lebanese Publishing House, pp. 210–215.
- [7] Taima, R. A. (2004). *Teaching Arabic to non-native speakers: Its curricula and methods*. Cairo: Dar Al-Fikr Al-Arabi.