

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM Arabic Immersion Programs IN THE U.S.

BY CARINE ALLAF



Since 2009, Qatar Foundation International (QFI) has engaged a global community of diverse learners and educators, fostering global competency and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills through the exploration of the Arabic language and the Arab world. QFI focuses on student-centered learning environments and partners with primary and secondary schools, universities, multilateral entities, and other philanthropic organizations to ensure that their programs advance critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and cross-cultural communication.

*Arabic immersion student*

According to a study done by the Pew Research Center in 2016, Arabic is now the seventh most commonly spoken non-English language in U.S. households. An estimated 1.1 million people age five and older speak Arabic at home, an increase of 29% between 2010 and 2014. Arabic is also the fastest growing language in the United States and is the fifth-most spoken language in the world, not only in the Middle East and North Africa, but all over the globe. More than one billion people with different beliefs and from many cultures speak Arabic. The societies and cultures of the Arab world are all part of a rich human tapestry that stretches from Morocco to Iraq, Syria to Oman.

Yet the mention of Arabic and the Arab world often conjures up negative stereotypes that can become barriers to real understanding. So, language learning and learning about other societies at the primary and secondary levels is essential, not just for today but also for the future.

Not surprisingly, around the same time as the increase in Arabic as a home language in the U.S. was taking place, Qatar Foundation International (QFI) was approached by the then Office of English Language Learners (OELL) and PS/IS 30, the Mary White Ovington School in Brooklyn, NY, as they began to develop and open an Arabic dual language immersion (DLI) program.

In September 2013, the first class of kindergartners began their Arabic DLI journey at PS/IS 30. In 2020, those students are now sixth graders still continuing their journey. There are now three additional public school programs that offer Arabic dual language immersion in Baltimore, MD; Houston, TX; Los Angeles, CA; and several other cities are beginning to develop their own Arabic DLI programs. This article describes each program and discusses some key takeaways that will be helpful to any school thinking of starting an Arabic immersion program.

## PS/IS 30

Located in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn, NY, where the community of families from Yemen, Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria continues to grow, At PS/IS 30, Arabic speakers learn with their English-proficient peers so that their English skills improve while their peers learn Arabic. The principal was very enthusiastic about offering Arabic dual language immersion at the school, viewing it as an asset for all students.

PS/IS 30 is an example of a school that has tweaked its program over the years to ensure that it continued to meet the needs of its students. In 2013, its first year, one kindergarten teacher worked with the students, teaching

half of the day in Arabic and half in English. As the program grew each year to include the next grade level, it was decided that it made more sense to have one set of teachers teach only in Arabic, and another to teach only in English, in a “side-by-side model” in which students have one teacher for the Arabic portion of the day and another for the English portion of the day. Currently, the kindergarten program has one teacher who teaches in both languages, but the other grades use the side-by-side teacher model. The school now offers kindergarten through sixth grade and plans to continue to grow to the eighth grade.

PS/IS 30 is technically a two-way immersion program: one language group, in this case Arabic speakers, makes up half and

no more than two-thirds of each classroom population, with the remaining students being English speakers. However, this is far from clear-cut as teachers argue that, even though the students came from Arabic backgrounds, they are not always fully proficient in either Arabic or English. Technically, half of the students in the Arabic DLI program are English language learners and the other half are English-proficient students. Many students from Arabic-speaking homes can be classified as heritage speakers who can speak to their parents and understand Arabic in their home environment yet are illiterate and do not have a grasp of Arabic beyond the dialect used in their home and community. This same student group may also understand English but not have sufficient grasp of the grammar and mechanics of English to be able to write fluently, have strong reading comprehension, or understand content areas that utilize more complex forms of the English language. The dual language immersion classrooms teach math, science, and Arabic language arts in Arabic.

Because of its location and student population, PS/IS 30 incorporates cultural elements in its daily schedule to provide opportunities for students from specific backgrounds to share about their own cultural group. Arabic-specific evenings and a big annual Arabic celebration are held to recognize the accomplishments of Arabic DLI students. PS/IS 30 follows New York City admissions policies that permit students from a specific attendance area to gain priority admission to the program.



ABOVE: An immersion classroom at AIMS

BELOW: Arabic immersion teachers at the annual summer institute



## Arabic Immersion Magnet School

The Arabic Immersion Magnet School (AIMS) in Houston, TX, opened its doors in fall 2015. The first all-school Arabic immersion public school in the country, the Arabic DLI model is used throughout the school which recently received approval to go from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade. At the time of publication, the school goes to the fourth grade.

Roughly 20% of the school population self-reports as coming from an Arabic speaking background. AIMS has experimented with

## PROGRAMS MUST BE PREPARED TO ANSWER THE QUESTION: WHY ARABIC?

the best way to teach content areas in Arabic. Currently, social studies and English language arts are taught in English while science, math, and Arabic language arts are taught in Arabic.

In pre-kindergarten to second grade, a side-by-side teacher model is used. In third and fourth grades, a more departmentalized approach is employed. One teacher teaches English language arts in English, a second teacher teaches Arabic language arts and science in Arabic, and a third teacher teaches math in Arabic. Students also learn a traditional Arab folk dance called Dabke as part of their physical education class, and percussion in their music class. As a magnet school, admission to AIMS is lottery-based.

### Elizabeth Learning Center

Elizabeth Learning Center in Cudahy, CA, opened its dual language program in 2016 with one kindergarten class. It now goes up to the third grade and has plans to expand through the fifth grade.

Like the program at PS/IS 30, enrollment follows Los Angeles United School District attendance policies which give admission priority to students who live within the school's attendance boundaries. This program is designed for English learners (ELs) as well as English speakers, which includes English only (EO), initial fluent English proficient (IFEP), and reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP).

Elizabeth Learning Center does not offer separate cultural enrichments, although all three teachers incorporate various cultural elements into the teaching day. The program does not currently have any Arabic-speaking children; most of the students are from Spanish-speaking homes. As such, it is considered a one-way model, but the goal is to eventually be a two-way program. ELC's model is 70% Arabic and 30% English in kindergarten and first grade; 60% Arabic and 40% English in second grade; and then 50% Arabic and 50% English from third to fifth grade. In addition

to Arabic language arts, the students also take science, social studies, math, and PE in Arabic.

### Baltimore International Academy

QFI also works closely with Baltimore International Academy which offers Arabic as one immersion language of several; also offered are Spanish, Chinese, Russian, and French. More than 95% of BIA students speak only English at home, which means that the majority of students do not have any background in the target language.

In kindergarten and first grade, BIA students learn to read and write in the target language only. In second grade, English language arts (ELA) is introduced as a formal subject for one hour a day. Students go to a separate teacher who specializes in ELA through the eighth grade.

BIA just opened a second school, called BIA West. Admission is via application and is lottery-based. Cultural elements are also incorporated throughout the curriculum.

### Support for Arabic Immersion

Since Arabic immersion programs are relatively new in the U.S., very few (if any) teachers entering public and public charter school programs have taught Arabic in a DLI setting. QFI responded to this by supporting professional development.

An entire network of Arabic immersion teachers now have the opportunity to meet with their counterparts twice a year. Although simply bringing teachers together is an important endeavor in building community and sharing resources organically, the time is designed based on feedback from the teachers and administrators and from external evaluators (who are DLI experts) of the immersion programs, and it builds on what is focused on from training to training.

The teachers convene twice annually—once at a summer institute and a second time in the winter, as well as biennially at the

International Conference on Immersion and Dual Language Education.

The first summer institute for Arabic immersion teachers in the summer of 2013 was focused on Arabic literacy training; there were two teachers. Attendees included some Arabic language teachers, some elementary school teachers by training who were native speakers of Arabic, and some who had never taught at all, let alone in Arabic or in an immersion setting.

By the 2019 summer institute, more than 30 teachers from the four QFI-supported programs were invited to attend.

Working closely with dual language experts such as Myriam Met and Dawn Samples, one constant in all trainings is the reinforcement of the principles of immersion programs and consistently ensuring that we are clearly defining what makes a program dual language immersion. Drawing and learning from other language immersion programs, we continually heard Arabic-specific questions being raised and comments such as “But Arabic is different.”

We quickly realized that teachers in our community needed more Arabic-specific training, so that has been an additional focus of the professional and curriculum development over the past few years. For example, since 2017 we have been working closely with teachers to develop Arabic-specific Can-Do Statements and proficiency guidelines aligned with the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines.

Teachers also shared that they struggle to have enough time in the day to not only adapt their content areas into Arabic, but to also think about the Arabic language and how to tie it into the content areas while also ensuring that students are progressing in the target language. Providing teachers with the time and space to work on Can-Do Statements has proven to be quite an important contribution, albeit a starting point, not only for existing programs, but also for schools that are thinking about starting or developing programs.

## Lessons Learned

We have made some observations and gained some key insights over the past seven years that others considering opening an Arabic immersion program may find helpful.

### — ONE —

It is important to not view Arabic as completely different from other DLI programs but to instead leverage insights from other languages, especially those that do not use the Roman alphabet, such as Mandarin or Russian. Although we hear over and over again “But Arabic is different,” it is critical to learn from other language immersion programs when making programmatic decisions and to consider how those language groups made the decisions they made. This is not to replicate these programs but rather to understand the reasoning behind those decisions and reflect on what they mean for an Arabic immersion program.

As programs have added grade levels and expanded their work, learning from other language groups has proven to be beneficial. One example of this is when PS/IS 30 was starting to think about opening its first sixth grade cohort, administrators and teachers found that visiting a middle school Mandarin program was quite helpful in identifying opportunities and challenges that they would need to think through.

### — TWO —

Each program must clearly decide what content areas it will teach in the target language, taking into consideration what state testing is done and in what grades. It is detrimental to a program to change the plan mid-stream to accommodate the pressures of state testing. Two of these programs did that and this is a normal growing pain. Yet both programs realized, and test results have demonstrated, that if they stay the course and stick to the initial program design, their students will outperform their non-immersion counterparts.

Although the Arabic immersion programs are still quite young, initial state test results seem to be falling in line with national trends in other target language DLI programs. And yet, if they do not from the beginning of the

program, it is essential that administrators make a strong commitment to the integrity of the program or else other district or state pressures, like testing, may cause some administrators to reduce their support for continuing the program.

### — THREE —

From the outset, programs must make an active decision to teach Arabic in a communicative way that supports the various modes of communication (Interpretive, Interpersonal, and Presentational) as well as Intercultural Communication. Classrooms must support 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and global competency, be interactive, student-centered, and encourage critical thinking. Arabic should be viewed as one language that encompasses all its varieties and focus should be placed on communication and pedagogies that are based on communicative teaching. This is especially important in classrooms with students from Arabic-speaking homes as it values their existing language skills and also mimics what these students may hear in their homes, communities, or home countries.

To realize this approach and allow students to develop their communication skills more fully, the teaching of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and an Arabic dialect together in the classroom is encouraged. Since Arabic speakers across the Arab world function in both MSA and a dialect, it is natural and authentic for Arabic learners to be exposed to and learn to use both varieties appropriately, reflecting the integration that happens naturally by native Arabic speakers. Teachers should keep in mind how communicative tasks and functions are performed in a real-world context and strive to introduce language that is appropriate for that context.

For example, speaking to a taxi driver is done in dialect, so role-playing that involves taking a taxi in an Arab country would be done in a dialect. Formal writing is typically in MSA, so a letter to the editor about an environmental issue could be composed in MSA. It is incumbent upon teachers to model both varieties of Arabic naturally to their students, as the use of both in the Arab world is natural and seamless. The teacher is a role model of how to use the language and as such, the teacher will best

serve students by emphasizing that both MSA and dialects constitute one language and actually have a great deal in common.

### — FOUR —

Programs must be prepared to answer the question: Why Arabic? Every school we work with has had to respond to this question in one way or another, and many have done so eloquently and articulately. Since it is the language of the Quran, the holy book of Islam, Arabic is often seen as synonymous with the religion.

Actually, a number of other religious groups also speak Arabic, including many Christians and Jews. In fact, the largest population of Muslims is in Indonesia, a country where Arabic is not spoken. Additionally, many Arabic speakers do not themselves value the language and are confused as to why their own children, let alone others, wish to learn the language. Languages are political, after all, perhaps Arabic even more so than most. Schools must be prepared to explain why they have chosen Arabic for their dual language immersion program. Each school profiled here has its own response to this frequently asked question.

More and more cities and schools are expressing interest in starting their own Arabic immersion programs. As schools begin to consider this, we hope that they build on the work that has already been done and take advantage of the lessons learned from these four schools over the past seven years. Qatar Foundation International is committed to supporting the growth and development of Arabic DLI programs in the U.S. and beyond, and to ensuring that Arabic DLI programs flourish. Its journey of learning about the needs of these communities from administrators, teachers, families, and students has bolstered its commitment to mainstreaming the learning of Arabic and increasing knowledge about the Arab world in ways that foster greater intercultural understanding, contribute to a bilingual future, and lead to a stronger world community that recognizes the power and potential of language and language speakers.

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ACTFL's professional development and career resources, events, networking opportunities, publications, research, assessment tools, support and promotion of standards, and advocacy elevate understanding and support for the value of language learning at all levels of instruction.

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