



Arabic language tutors' beliefs on including regional varieties in undergraduate degree courses in England

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Higher education
Language ideology
Language variation
Tutor beliefs
Teaching Arabic as a second language (TASL)

ABSTRACT

Despite the recognition of Arabic as a diglossic language with multiple regional varieties (RVs), Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) continues to be prioritised by educators in England. This study investigates tutors' perceptions on including RVs in their courses through 12 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with tutors from eight of the nine Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England offering undergraduate degree courses with a major component in Arabic. The findings reveal that tutors' beliefs are often shaped by dominant language ideologies. However, there is growing evidence of change, with some HEIs embracing Arabic's diglossic, multidialectal nature by teaching both MSA and RVs, and tutors increasingly raising awareness of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic use. Yet, as this is not always a formal part of the curriculum, not all learners benefit. These findings highlight the need for professional development to support tutors in aligning course content with the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic.

1. Introduction

The sociolinguistic reality of Arabic diglossia and the existence of multiple regional varieties (RVs) is an essential part of how Arabic differs from many other second languages (L2s). However, in undergraduate degree courses with a major component in Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is prioritised, and the teaching of Arabic as a diglossic language, a vital component of learning about the language, is not widespread (Dickins & Watson, 2006; The British Academy, 2018). Understanding how language educators approach this complexity, particularly in the context of L2 Arabic teaching in England, is crucial to developing effective teaching approaches that reflect the linguistic diversity of Arabic. This study investigates how tutors in English Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) say they approach Arabic variation in their classes, the reasoning behind their approaches and any challenges they face when integrating RVs into their teaching.

2. Literature review

This literature review explores three areas relevant to the current study: Arabic diglossia's implications for L2 teaching, language ideologies, and the impact of these beliefs on pedagogical practices. It highlights gaps in understanding how tutors perceive and implement regional variation in Arabic classes, pointing to the need for this study to

address them to enhance the efficacy of teaching Arabic as a second language (TASL).

2.1. Arabic diglossia

Ferguson (1959) classified Arabic as a diglossic language, whereby two varieties of the same language, the high and low varieties, are used in different contexts. In the case of Arabic, MSA is the modern form of the high variety, and is used throughout the Arabic-speaking world for formal writing and scripted speech (Holes, 2004). In Arabic, FusHa is the term used for both MSA and Classical Arabic; L1 speakers do not distinguish between the two despite their linguistic differences (Bassiouny, 2009). The RVs are the low varieties and are primarily used for everyday interactions. Although this dichotomy between MSA and RVs was once considered fixed, more recent research suggests that Arabic operates on a continuum (Hary, 1996; Ferguson, 1996). Speakers select a point on the continuum based on context and subject matter, with considerable overlap between MSA and RVs depending on the situation (see Fig. 1). This linguistic diversity poses a significant challenge for educators in L2 settings, where selecting which variety to teach, MSA, RVs, or both, raises pedagogical questions.

Traditionally, when teaching an L2, the standard variety has been favoured as the variety of instruction (Horner & Weber, 2018; e.g., Standard British English, High German, or Standard Arabic). This

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2025.101427>

Received 21 October 2024; Received in revised form 3 March 2025; Accepted 17 April 2025

Available online 25 April 2025

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preference stems from the standard's perceived linguistic prestige and its measurability in language learning assessments. For Arabic, MSA is often associated with 'formality' and 'correctness,' whereas RVs are linked to 'informal', everyday use (Amara, 2018; Moustou, 2018). However, prestige in Arabic varieties operates on multiple levels (Al Masa'ed, 2022a). Research in Arabic sociolinguistics in the 1980s and 1990s revealed that speakers tend to switch to non-standard yet locally prestigious varieties (Al Masa'ed, 2022a; Holes, 2008; 1986; Walters, 2003; Abdel-Jawad, 1986; Abu-Haidar, 1989; Ibrahim, 1986). Within individual Arabic-speaking countries, prestigious local varieties emerged based on the speech of major urban centres such as Cairo, Damascus, Jerusalem, Baghdad and Tunis (Ibrahim, 1986). According to Al Masa'ed (2022a: 359), in the Arabic-speaking world, 'dialectal prestige aligns more closely with power and wealth than with ideological language hierarchy or standard language.' Furthermore, across the Arab world, certain RVs are considered more prestigious than others (see Section 2.2.). Egyptian Arabic, particularly the Cairene variety, is perceived as being the most widely understood dialect in the Arabic-speaking world, dominating the film industry, soap operas and theatre productions (Al-Wer, 2008; Hachimi, 2013; Chakrani, 2015; Zaidan & Callison-Burch, 2014). Egyptian Arabic's cultural dominance now faces competition from other Eastern varieties, particularly Levantine, which is often perceived as lexically closest to MSA (Younes, 2006). To a lesser extent, Gulf Arabic is also gaining cultural prominence, evidenced through the growing popularity of Gulf music, and Dubai emerging as a cultural centre for performing arts (Hachimi, 2013). Conversely, North African varieties are often perceived as 'less Arab,' a view shaped by sociopolitical and ideological factors, including the legacy of French colonialism, which influenced language policy and identity (Hachimi, 2013; Zaidan & Callison-Burch, 2014). The influence of French and Berber has contributed to their marginalization in the Arab world. Unlike standardized varieties, North African varieties do not conform to the purist ideology that resists lexical borrowing, a feature often perceived negatively by speakers from other regions (Walters, 2008a). While comprehensibility is cited as a reason for their exclusion from cross-dialectal contexts, this argument is ideological rather than linguistic, as exposure shapes mutual intelligibility. As a result, North African varieties have limited cultural presence across the Arabic-speaking world, unlike Levantine, Gulf, and Egyptian varieties (see Section 2.2.).

The 'social turn' in applied linguistics has begun to challenge the assumption that standard varieties should be prioritised in education (Block, 2003; Hall & Cook, 2012: 278). Increasingly, L2 educators recognise that language variation, including the use of RVs, must be incorporated into language teaching to reflect authentic communication (Wernicke, 2020; Chapelle, 2020; Ruck, 2020; Criser & Knott, 2019; Kiczowskiak & Lowe, 2019; Mohr et al., 2019). When investigating the approaches taken for Spanish as a Heritage Language (SHL), Beaudrie (2015) commends advancements made in the direction of contemporary approaches that take language variation into account, but finds that SHL educators are still reinforcing the standard language ideology (SLI) by prioritising a monolingual, educated variety of Spanish. This prioritisation of a single 'standard' variety in language education not only marginalises speakers of other varieties, as seen in SHL (Leeman, 2018; Beaudrie et al., 2021) and non-standard English varieties (Alim, 2010; Clark et al., 1990), but also in Arabic, where RVs, especially those from

regions like North Africa, are omitted from curricula. This exclusion not only distances learners from Arabic's linguistic diversity but also reinforces broader sociopolitical inequities that silence certain communities (Leeman, 2018).

Al Masa'ed (2022a) discusses the impact of Arabic diglossia on TASL, highlighting the importance of sociolinguistic concepts in L2 learning, such as communicative competence, diglossia, and language ideology. Despite the centrality of these concepts to L2 learning, MSA remains prioritised in TASL. He emphasises the importance of overcoming SLI in TASL to support L2 Arabic learners' communicative competence. It is therefore essential to critically examine the language ideologies reinforcing the preference for MSA in English HEIs.

2.2. Language ideologies

This study identifies key language ideologies relevant to Arabic, that are crucial for examining how tutors approach language variation in their classes. One prominent language ideology is the 'hierarchy of languages,' which ranks 'languages' as superior to 'dialects' (Horner & Weber, 2018). This hierarchy extends to Arabic varieties, with RVs from North Africa often considered inferior to those from the Eastern Arab world, largely due to perceptions of comprehensibility and prestige (Chakrani, 2015; Hachimi, 2013; 2015; S'hiri, 2013b; Aboezez, 2018; Al-Mohsen, 2016; Zaidan & Callison-Burch, 2014). North African speakers frequently bear the burden of adjusting their speech for cross-dialectal communication, reinforcing the idea that Eastern varieties hold more prestige (Chakrani, 2015; Hachimi, 2013; Aboezez, 2018). Hachimi (2013) terms this bias the Maghreb-Mashreq language ideology, reflecting sociopolitical factors that shape perceptions of Arabic.

There is a belief that certain varieties are more comprehensible due to a perceived similarity with MSA; however, there is limited empirical research supporting such claims. Abouzahr and Abouzahr (2024) used the Living Arabic Project's database, an online dictionary that includes MSA and RVs, to assess the lexical overlap between varieties of Arabic. As shown in Table 1, RVs like Maghrebi (North African) exhibit a comparable level of lexical overlap with MSA, challenging the notion that it diverges from the standard more than other RVs. These percentages also illustrate how no variety shows overwhelming proximity to MSA, suggesting that perceptions of similarity are likely shaped by social and linguistic ideologies rather than measurable linguistic distance.

Closely related to this is the SLI, which is defined as a bias towards an abstract, idealised version of a language (Lippi-Green, 1997). A variety that has thus been chosen over other varieties undergoes a process of standardisation. Which variety becomes the standard is not due to any inherent superiority but is mostly due to sociopolitical developments, directly connected to the politics of state-making (Ricento, 2006; Horner & Weber, 2018). For Arabic, Aboezez (2018) notes that the Arabisation policies of many Arab states, establishing MSA as the official language, led to the adoption of SLI across the region. Walters (2008b: 655) argues that 'diglossia of the sort found in Arabic represents the most complete instantiation of standard language ideology'.

Purism is closely intertwined with the SLI, one nation-one language and mother tongue ideologies; it stipulates what constitutes 'good' or 'proper' language (Horner & Weber, 2018). The notion of preserving the



Fig. 1. The Arabic continuum, adapted from Ramzezadeh in Towler, 2024.

Table 1

Taken from [Abouzahr & Abouzahr, 2024](#).

Table 2 Percent of lexical overlap between any two dictionaries in The Living Arabic Project's dataset.

	CA	Egyptian	Gulf	Iraqi	Levantine	Maghrebi	Sudanese	Yemeni
CA	100.0 %	54.6 %	70.6 %	60.6 %	49.7 %	45.0 %	73.5 %	75.1 %
Egyptian	36.0 %	100.0 %	63.8 %	54.0 %	43.6 %	38.4 %	76.6 %	69.7 %
Gulf	18.7 %	25.7 %	100.0 %	42.6 %	26.8 %	25.7 %	65.8 %	64.7 %
Iraqi	26.5 %	35.9 %	70.4 %	100.0 %	36.1 %	31.9 %	69.1 %	66.8 %
Levantine	29.0 %	38.5 %	58.9 %	48.0 %	100.0 %	32.6 %	66.7 %	63.6 %
Maghrebi	23.0 %	29.8 %	49.6 %	37.3 %	28.6 %	100.0 %	62.0 %	59.3 %
Sudanese	3.3 %	5.2 %	11.2 %	7.1 %	5.2 %	5.5 %	100.0 %	24.6 %
Yemeni	5.4 %	7.6 %	17.5 %	10.9 %	7.8 %	8.3 %	39.0 %	100.0 %

language in its 'pure' form is widespread in the Arab world ([Haeri, 2009](#); [Alhazmi, 2021](#)). Whilst it is most notably the educational system which is used to preserve the language ([Bourdieu, 1991](#)), the sociopolitical status of FusHa as a symbol of pan-Arabism and its religious significance as the language of the Quran, contribute towards preserving the language ([Al Masaeed, 2022a](#)). Furthermore, several language academies were established across the Arab world as part of the Arabic *nahda* (renaissance) of the 19th Century, for example, in Syria (1918–1919), Egypt (1932) and Iraq (1947) ([Aboelezz, 2018](#)). [Brustad \(2017\)](#) notes that these institutions aim to preserve the 'purity' of the language by guarding it from 'corruption and decay' while simultaneously modernising it, emphasising their role in maintaining SLI.

[Alhazmi \(2021\)](#) found that such beliefs contribute to negative attitudes toward code-switching, despite the fact that RVs are integral to the daily lives of Arabic speakers. [AlShehri and AlShabeb \(2024\)](#) highlight the social pressure L1 Arabic speakers experience to speak Arabic with 'correct pronunciation', indirectly framing non-standard pronunciation as 'incorrect'. RVs are often considered inferior to MSA, described as 'the language of illiterates' ([Amara, 2018](#): 554) and 'commodities of lesser value' ([Moustaoui, 2018](#): 534), reflecting broader associations between non-standard varieties, lower educational attainment, and lower socio-economic status. Despite being used by all segments of society for everyday communication, such varieties are often stigmatized. Furthermore, by categorizing MSA as the 'correct' and 'perfect' variety, [Alshehri and Alshabeb \(2024\)](#) reflect the very ideologies they aim to address, evidencing the influence of purism on speakers' perceptions of what constitutes 'proper' Arabic. This further demonstrates how deeply ingrained such attitudes are within the Arabic-speaking community.

Language ideologies are often rooted in 'ill-informed assumptions' that oversimplify complex linguistic realities ([Horner & Weber, 2018](#)). In language teaching, understanding these belief systems is crucial, as they shape teachers' approaches and can be passed down to learners as a confirmation bias ([Towler, 2024](#); [Grammon, 2022](#)). Despite the increasing use of RVs for cross-dialectal communication ([Soliman, 2014](#)), the belief in the importance of preserving MSA remains widespread, as reflected in the studies cited above.

2.3. Teachers' beliefs

Investigating teachers' beliefs is crucial for understanding how their approaches shape classroom practices and curriculum development ([Breen et al., 2001](#)). These beliefs, influenced by personal language-learning experiences, teaching practices, and broader ideological forces ([Hall & Cook, 2012](#)), are particularly relevant in TASL, given the language's sociolinguistic complexity.

Research on other L2s highlights the need to challenge monolingual policies that overlook linguistic diversity ([Wernicke, 2020](#); [Ruck, 2020](#)). For example, L2 Spanish teachers often view linguistic diversity as a barrier ([Rodríguez-Izquierdo et al., 2020](#)), while French teachers in Canada can hold native-speaker ideologies ([Wernicke, 2020](#)). Similarly, [Ruck \(2020\)](#) connects the exclusion of RVs in L2 German teaching to political agendas and SLI. These cases illustrate how L2 teaching is influenced by prevailing linguistic ideologies. In TASL, similar

challenges arise, as MSA is frequently prioritised over RVs due to its historical and political prestige ([Aboelezz, 2018](#); [Mizher & Al-Haq, 2014](#)).

As [Lortie's \(1975\)](#) concept of the 'apprenticeship of observation' suggests, teachers often replicate the teaching methods they experienced, limiting openness to new approaches ([Oleson & Hora, 2014](#); [Crowe & McGarr, 2022](#)). This is an important consideration for Arabic tutors, as many of them were taught solely in MSA, the inclusion of RVs may feel unnatural ([Featherstone, 2018](#)).

[Alim \(2010\)](#) sheds light on how even well-meaning teachers may hold covert biases and how the treatment of non-standard varieties in classrooms reinforces linguistic supremacy. Similarly, [Leeman \(2018: 350\)](#) elaborates on how such courses 'send subtle messages' that certain varieties are more important for 'things that really matter, such as for public speaking, doing school work or getting a job'. [Grammon \(2022\)](#) evidences how covert ideologies held by teachers can be passed on to learners and the crucial role of critical language awareness (CLA) pedagogy in reconciling teacher perceptions with the reality of language use (see [Section 2.4.2.](#)). These studies further highlight the importance of investigating teachers' beliefs.

Despite the immense benefits of investigating teachers' beliefs on language variation, research in this area for Arabic remains limited (e.g., [Al-Mohsen, 2016](#); [Zakhir & O'Brien, 2019](#); [Kawafha & Al Masaeed, 2023](#)). [Al-Mohsen \(2016\)](#) identified the existence of SLIs among Arabic teachers, influencing their receptivity to change TASL. [Soliman and Towler \(2023\)](#) found that, while UK schoolteachers have become more open to RVs, underlying prejudices persist, with many still viewing MSA as the 'proper' variety. [Kawafha and Al Masaeed \(2023\)](#) explored teachers' beliefs and practices regarding multilingual and multidialectal practices in L2 Arabic. They emphasise the need for greater teacher awareness of SLI and strategic engagement with multilingual and multidialectal practices. These studies suggest that language ideologies, such as the hierarchy of languages, linguistic purism, and SLI, are multifaceted issues that affect teachers' openness to change. Research in other contexts has shown that ideologies can significantly influence instructional choices (e.g., [Basturkmen, 2012](#); [Borg, 2011](#)). Given the limited research on Arabic teachers' beliefs and the strong influence of language ideologies, this study seeks to investigate further how these beliefs shape the teaching of MSA and RVs in English HEIs.

2.4. TASL

Given the unique sociolinguistic nature of Arabic and the influence of teachers' beliefs on instructional choices, exploring the pedagogical approaches developed that address diglossia is essential. The coexistence of MSA and multiple RVs poses significant pedagogical challenges, requiring decisions not only on how and when to include RVs in teaching, but also whether to include them at all. Several approaches have been developed in response, including the Colloquial Approach ([Woidich, 2007](#)), the Integrated Approach (IA) ([Al-Batal, 2018](#); [Younes, 2015](#)), and the simultaneous approach ([S'hiri & Joukhadar, 2018](#); [Wahba, 2006](#)). [Table 2](#) defines these approaches, including different applications of the MSA approach.

Table 2
Models for approaching Arabic diglossia, adapted from Towler, 2024.

Approach	Applications	Definition
Prioritising MSA	MSA-only	Learn only MSA for reading, writing, listening and speaking.
	MSA-first	Learn MSA integrating an RV at more advanced levels, supported throughout the remainder of studies.
	MSA-plus RV abroad	Learn all four skills in MSA, and an RV solely during or in preparation for the year abroad.
Colloquial Approach		Learn an RV first and MSA at more advanced levels.
Integrated Approach		Learn MSA for reading/ writing and an RV for speaking/ listening.
Simultaneous Approach		Learn MSA and RVs simultaneously from day one in separate classes.

In the US, the IA has gained popularity, but most HEIs in England still prioritise MSA (Towler, 2024). Dickins and Watson (2006) explored the approaches to language variation at UK universities, identifying only one HEI implementing the IA. The other HEIs were found to be teaching only MSA. The situation has changed somewhat since then; the British Academy (2018) found twelve of the 41 HEIs identified as offering Arabic courses, including those offered at language centres and undergraduate degree courses, now include instruction in the RVs.

2.4.1. Pragmatic competence

Pragmatic competence is an integral part of learners' development of authentic language use (Kasper, 1992; Thomas, 1983), and despite historically being neglected in TASL, there has recently been a growing emphasis on interactional and pragmatic competence for Arabic (e.g., Al Masa'eed, 2022b). When defining pragmatic competence, Al Masa'eed (2017: 808) states that 'in order to interact effectively and appropriately in a given context, speakers need to know the linguistic forms and their functions as well as the social rules that more clearly and appropriately convey the intended message.' His study found that advanced L1 American English learners of Arabic more closely resembled L1 Arabic speakers in their use of internal and external modifications, though 'verbosity' remained an issue, indicating gaps in pragmatic competence. Later, Al-Masa'eed (2022b) showed that L2 learners' pragmatic skills improved when bidialectal practices were integrated into an eight-week study abroad course, highlighting the importance of RVs in the curriculum for developing authentic language skills. However, studies suggest that in L2 Arabic classes, the focus is on lexical and grammatical knowledge at the expense of pragmatics (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998 as cited in McCombie & Al Masa'eed, 2025). Furthermore, some teachers state that pragmatics instruction is neglected in Arabic classes because they believe that it is relevant only to RVs, which is often viewed as a 'taboo' in the Arabic language classroom (McCombie & Al Masa'eed, 2025). This highlights that MSA-focused curricula lack pragmatics content (ibid) but also emphasises the need to examine these language ideologies held by Arabic teachers that hinder the inclusion of authentic communication in classes.

2.4.2. Metalinguistic awareness and critical language awareness

Trentman and Shiri (2020) propose a multidialectal approach to TASL that enhances learners' metalinguistic awareness, equipping them with the skills to decode all varieties of Arabic. Supporting this, Soliman (2014) found that training L2 learners in strategies used by L1 speakers to decode unfamiliar Arabic dialects improves their understanding. Research on closely related languages (Carvalho et al., 2010; Gooskens & Swarte, 2017; McCann et al., 2003) also shows the effectiveness of metalinguistic training. While they note that further research is necessary to identify the most effective metalinguistic awareness tasks, Trentman and Shiri (2020) demonstrate their role in supporting learners to understand unfamiliar varieties. By applying this approach to the

context of English HE, the linguistic and analytical strategies for introducing RVs not only address concerns about their academic validity but also equip learners to better navigate the authentic use of Arabic. Towler (2024) emphasises that, when studying towards a degree with a major component in Arabic, learners need to develop a theoretical understanding of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage.

Research into other languages, such as SHL (Leeman, 2018; Beaudrie et al., 2021; Beaudrie, 2015) and English (Alim, 2010; Clark et al., 1990) suggests that developing metalinguistic and sociolinguistic awareness alone is insufficient to legitimise varieties with perceived low social status (Leeman, 2018). Some of the first work on this issue was conducted by Clark et al. (1990: 260), who demonstrated that, although traditional language awareness approaches represent progress from those that ignore sociolinguistic variation, they still 'represent the linguistic practices which sustain social inequality as natural rather than naturalized.' To address this limitation, critical language awareness (CLA) was developed to integrate discussions of power dynamics into language and literacy education (Clark et al., 1990, 1991). CLA-based pedagogies 'encourage students to question taken-for-granted assumptions about language and analyse how such assumptions are tied to inequality and injustice, with the ultimate goal of promoting positive social change' (Leeman, 2018). In contrast, while traditional language awareness equips learners with tools to acquire the standard and counter prejudice, it does not examine the underlying social and political causes of linguistic hierarchies (Leeman, 2018; Fairclough, 1992).

Building on these theoretical foundations, various studies have explored how CLA can be effectively implemented in language education (e.g., Alim, 2010; Clark et al., 1990; Beaudrie et al., 2021). For example, Alim's (2010) research focuses on learners who speak marginalised varieties of English, such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE). He advocates for classroom practices that incorporate CLA through reflexive and ethnographic analyses and provides specific examples of its application. For example, learners analyse transcripts of 'Real Talk', document their speech in an ethnography notebook and interview relatives about their experiences of linguistic discrimination. Alim (2010: 214) clarifies that:

By learning about the full scope of their language use and how language can actually be used against them (Baugh, 2003; Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003 as cited in Alim, 2010), students become more conscious of their communicative behavior and the ways by which they can transform the conditions under which they live.

Similarly, Leeman (2018) suggests that students should analyse non-standard language data to identify, for example, aspects such as patterns, code-switching and translanguaging, as well as to critically examine language ideologies. This can be achieved through ethnographic activities that, for example, examine their own language histories or those of the community by 'documenting the different linguistic varieties styles used in different contexts and with whom' (see Leeman, 2018). Beaudrie et al. (2021) designed a CLA curriculum focusing on four thematic components identified in the literature: (1) language variation and linguistic diversity; (2) English hegemony, language ideologies, and linguistic prejudice; (3) Spanish in the United States, bilingualism, and code-switching; and (4) language policies, language maintenance, and shift. The post-test survey suggests that the experiment was effective in increasing students' CLA. It is important to view this within the context of Arabic in HE, discussed below.

2.5. HE context in England

In England, undergraduate degree-level courses typically last for three years, and one year equals 120 credits. Courses consist of both compulsory and optional modules, which are either 15 or 30 credits; this means that most courses consist of four to six modules per year. Most Arabic courses last for four years, with a year spent abroad in an Arabic-speaking country, which is not counted as an assessed part of the degree.

This study focuses on undergraduate degree courses with a major component in Arabic, with 60 or more credits being taken in Arabic. This includes both single honour and joint honour degree courses but excludes courses which offer a minor component in Arabic, such as those with the option to take electives in the language (see [the British Academy, 2018](#) for further discussion on UK Arabic courses in HE).

The QAA subject benchmarks and programme specifications are the closest we have to an explicit formulation of the purposes of curricula in the UK ([Barnett & Coate, 2004](#)). Subject benchmarks have been described as a guide for curriculum designers, rather than giving details on content (*ibid.*). The statements outline the intended outcomes of degree programmes and the general competencies that graduates of each of the 46 subject areas should attain; the programme specifications indicate how curricula can be measured against the benchmarks. TASL is covered under the benchmark statement for bachelor's degrees with honours in languages, cultures and societies (see [QAA, 2023](#)). Within the statement, the development of communication strategies, an awareness of the sociolinguistic contexts of language use and different language varieties are all requirements for undergraduate degree courses.

However, despite the importance of addressing these linguistic complexities, to date, research has not specifically addressed how Arabic diglossia is approached by tutors in undergraduate degree courses in England. Research into students' perceptions suggests that they are not prepared fully for the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage (see [Towler, 2024](#)); the current study aims to explore tutors' perceptions. The following research questions (RQs) investigate how tutors' beliefs and practices align with the linguistic and pedagogical challenges of TASL in light of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage:

1. Do tutors believe that MSA is prioritised in undergraduate degree courses in England or not? Why?
2. How do tutors approach the question of which variety to teach within their classes?
3. What experiences can be shared by tutors who include regional Arabic varieties in their classes?
4. What obstacles or difficulties do tutors face while including regional Arabic varieties in their classes?

By addressing these RQs, this study aims to support tutors to better align teaching practices with the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic use.

3. Materials and methods

This study was part of a larger project investigating how Arabic is taught in undergraduate degree courses in England, drawing on both students' and university tutors' beliefs in addition to classroom practices. The current study solely focuses on the tutors' perspective of language variation and aims to investigate how RVs are approached in undergraduate degree courses with a major component in Arabic, including the beliefs of course tutors from eight of the nine HEIs offering such provision in England.

To collect data, twelve one-to-one interviews were conducted, each lasting for 30–60 min. The interviews provided a platform for tutors to share their individual perspectives on regional variation, offering deeper insight into their reasoning behind pedagogical choices. Semi-structured interviews were chosen due to their relatively informal style, fluid structure, and flexibility, which allowed for the exploration of complex beliefs and attitudes regarding language variation ([Mason, 2002](#)). This method also enabled the researcher to adapt questions and follow up on unexpected themes that emerged during the interview, such as the inclusion of RVs at HEIs that outwardly prioritise MSA.

Tutors were asked which varieties they focus on at their HEI, why these varieties are prioritised and how they approach teaching the varieties in their classes (RQ1; RQ2). Those who included regional variation by teaching an RV or raising awareness of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage were given the opportunity to share their experiences

and any obstacles or difficulties that they faced (RQ3; RQ4). Key themes for discussion were identified based on theory identified from the literature review (e.g., IA, language ideologies) and further refined during the interviews as new themes emerged. Interviews were conducted primarily in person, with some online to broaden the sample. Written notes were used to prompt thinking during the interviews. The interview prompt sheet is provided in Appendix A for further information.

3.1. Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into tutors' beliefs and practices regarding the teaching of MSA and RVs, it is limited by the small sample size, which warrants caution in generalising the findings. Additionally, the study uses one single source of data collection: qualitative interviews. Therefore, there is a lack of triangulation within the research design. However, it is hoped that it will inspire more studies on the topic, for example, conducting a quantitative questionnaire employing the indirect verbal guise technique, triangulating these findings with more direct methods and investigating overt vs. covert language attitudes (see [Section 5.2](#) for further discussion on future research directions). Additionally, as the sole researcher, the potential for researcher bias exists, which could influence the interpretation of the data.

3.2. Research positionality statement

As an L1 English speaker, L2 Arabic speaker, and researcher in TASL, my personal and professional experiences have shaped my perspective on the challenges of teaching diglossic languages. I am deeply grateful to my own Arabic university tutors, and the opportunities that learning MSA provided. However, my experiences of being excluded from workplace conversations due to my sole acquisition of MSA, and my initial lack of understanding of the sociolinguistic realities of Arabic, motivated me to pursue a PhD. My research, which explored how Arabic is taught from the perspectives of learners, tutors, and the purpose of a degree, led me to the conclusion that developing an awareness of sociolinguistic theory needs to be considered before teaching learners to communicate in a specific RV. Given these experiences, and as the sole researcher analysing qualitative interviews with university-level Arabic teachers, my analysis is shaped by these perspectives. Although I have worked to maintain objectivity, my positionality may influence how I interpret responses, particularly in relation to creating an inclusive curriculum for L2 Arabic.

Table 3
Research participants.

Institution	Participant	Position	L1	Transcript
HEI1	Mia	Senior Lecturer; Course Leader	English	T5
HEI2	Farrah	Senior Language Tutor	Arabic	T8
HEI3	Fatima	Associate Professor	Arabic	T3
	Jawaad	Lecturer	Arabic	T10
HEI4	Catherine	Associate Professor	English	T7
HEI5	Jessica	Lecturer	European	T12
	Zaineb	Senior Lecturer	Arabic	T11
HEI6	Sukayna	Subject Leader	Arabic	T6
	Hussain	Lecturer	Arabic	T9
HEI7	Ali	Senior Lecturer, Course Leader	Arabic	T4
HEI8	Boushra	Senior Teaching Associate	Arabic	T2
	Nada	Senior Teaching Associate	Arabic/ English	T1

3.3. Participants

Table 3 provides information about the research participants. All English HEIs identified as offering undergraduate degree courses with a major component in Arabic were identified through the British Academy's *Language Pilot Project: Arabic Language Provision in the UK* (2018) and internet searches. Nine HEIs were identified as fitting this category. The researcher recruited participants by emailing contacts identified from university websites, contacting gatekeepers where necessary to identify the appropriate individuals. Table 3 details the anonymised institutions and participants, who have been assigned pseudonyms.

3.4. Ethical considerations

Each respondent was asked for consent prior to participating, and provided with information sheets and consent forms detailing the research aims and the researcher's contact details. Data collection commenced only after receiving ethical approval from the Ethics Committee at the University of Winchester.

3.5. Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher to minimise inaccuracies and ensure consistency. Tesch's eight steps of coding (Creswell, 2009) were followed for the hand-coding process. Open-coding techniques allowed the researcher to identify key themes from the data. For example, major themes included "reasons to prioritise MSA," "approaching the question of which variety to teach," and "obstacles and difficulties in teaching RVs." This method was selected due to the limited research on Arabic language attitudes, allowing the data to inform the theory (Blair, 2015).

Axial coding was employed to establish relationships between initial codes, refining categories and subcategories for a more nuanced understanding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For example, the subcategories of "tutor education" and "examinations," initially coded separately for one HEI, were reallocated under the theme "obstacles and difficulties in teaching the RVs." Thematic analysis was conducted twice: once for the larger research project in 2021 and again for this study in 2024. The datasets were cross-checked, and inconsistencies were addressed by revisiting the transcripts.

There are limitations to interviews, including being dependent on participants' ability to verbalise, interact, conceptualise and remember (Mason, 2002). Data can be compromised by subjectivity and interviewer bias (Cohen et al., 2011); however, this was minimised through member-checking after data preparation. Additionally, while interviews provide in-depth insights into beliefs, they do not capture actual classroom practices or what students understand to be going on, which warrants further investigation in a separate study.

4. Results and discussion

This section presents the findings from the interviews, focusing on the tutors' beliefs about teaching MSA and RVs in undergraduate Arabic courses. Table 4 summarizes the backgrounds of the tutors included in this research and provides a short summary of their views.

4.1. Which Arabic varieties do tutors believe are prioritised in undergraduate degree courses in England? Why are these varieties prioritised?

To provide an appropriate background for this question, Table 5 details the inclusion of regional variation on undergraduate degree courses, with interviews and desk research used to verify the information. Only three HEIs teach RVs as part of credit-bearing modules, four run classes on RVs either during the year abroad or in preparation for it, while one HEI does not teach them at any point of the degree.

Table 4
Tutors' beliefs on how to teach the Arabic varieties.

HEI	Tutor	Educational Background	Teaching Experience	Summary of Views
HEI1	Mia	Undergraduate degree in Arabic; PGCE in teaching	Over 20 years	It is important for learners to acquire an RV, but not as part of the degree. Teaching RVs would be too confusing, and many learners with religious motivations are not interested in learning them.
HEI2	Farrah	PhD Translation	5 years	When studying Arabic for a degree, the focus should remain on MSA as the 'academic variety' suitable for 'formal' contexts.
HEI3	Fatima	PhD Applied Linguistics	Over 20 years	Learners should be exposed to Arabic variation (metalinguistics), but further research is needed to determine the most effective teaching approach.
HEI4	Jawaad	PhD Translation	10 years	RVs are only necessary when students study abroad in the Arab world.
HEI3	Catherine	PhD Arabic Linguistics	10 years	Degree-level learners need to develop a strong linguistic foundation in an L2. When learning an RV, this should be supported by a sociolinguistic understanding, including background knowledge of the relevant theory.
HEI5	Jessica	PhD Applied Linguistics	4 years	RVs need to be included as part of a university degree, but this change should come gradually due to the historical focus of HEIs on MSA.
HEI5	Zaineb	Undergraduate degree in Arabic	Over 15 years	Learning the RV is important as MSA is not spoken, but it should not be introduced in the first year to avoid confusion.
HEI6	Sukayna	PhD Translation studies	Over 10 years	Acquiring the RV is important for the year abroad, and she was surprised that not all HEIs include this in their curriculum.
HEI6	Hussain	PhD Translation Studies	Over 15 years	Acquiring the RV is crucial for the year abroad, but some HEIs do not adopt this approach due to the perceptions of L1 speakers.
HEI7	Ali	MSc	Over 35 years	Learning about multiple RVs and how speakers shift across the continuum is key to learning Arabic as a 'living language'.
HEI8	Boushra	Teaching Fellow of the HEA	Over 20 years	Is excited about using the IA and believes

(continued on next page)

Table 4 (continued)

HEI	Tutor	Educational Background	Teaching Experience	Summary of Views
				including the RVs is important but wants to assess how students progress through this approach before determining its effectiveness compared to others.
HEI8	Nada	MA in TASL	5 years	Is passionate about the IA but believes that L1 speakers' perceptions hinder the inclusion of RVs in most HEIs in England.

At the time of the interviews, many universities had stopped sending their learners to Egypt due to security concerns, which meant that most learners went to Morocco by default. However, two tutors whose HEIs offered other countries, such as Jordan, emphasised to learners that it is 'better' to travel to Jordan, because their RV is 'closer to FusHa' (T8); one stated that they stopped offering Morocco as a year-abroad destination as the RV is 'too different to FusHa' (T11), suggesting that their views have been influenced by the ideology discussed above that certain varieties are somewhat closer to MSA (see Section 2.2). Whilst it is understandable that L1 Arabic speakers may find North African varieties more challenging due to less exposure, expressing such views to L2 learners risks passing them down as a confirmation bias (Towler, 2024). It could also be argued that, as North African speakers tend to employ accommodation strategies more than other Arabic speakers in cross-dialectal communication (S'hiri, 2013b), they would be more adept at utilising these strategies when communicating with L2 speakers, this claim requires further research in a separate study.

During the interviews, tutors gave various reasons for prioritising the varieties taught through their courses, discussed below. The headings are taken directly from the emergent codes in the codebook that are relevant to RQ1.

4.1.1. RVs 'only needed' for the year abroad

Four tutors suggested that students only need an RV when they travel abroad and should learn the RV of that country only when they go. For example, when Jawaad was asked if the RVs should have a place on the undergraduate curriculum, he responded, 'Dialect would have a place if you were going to send the students abroad' (T10). However, this was cited as a reason for including the RVs at HEI6: to prepare students for their studies in the Arab world. Sukayna, Subject Leader for Arabic, who was surprised that not all HEIs offering degree courses in Arabic teach

Table 5 Regional variation inclusion in undergraduate degree courses in England.

HEI	Approach	Inclusion of RVs	Year abroad	Year-abroad destination	Arabic Sociolinguistics
HEI1	MSA-only	None	Optional in 3rd year	Morocco/ Jordan	Brief introduction; not for credit
HEI2	MSA-plus RV abroad	Year abroad	Compulsory in 3rd year	Morocco/ Jordan	Brief introduction; not for credit
HEI3	MSA-plus RV abroad	Year abroad	Compulsory in 2nd year	Morocco	Brief introduction; not for credit
HEI4	MSA-plus RV abroad	Year abroad, RV module discontinued	Compulsory in 2nd year	Jordan, Morocco, Lebanon, Oman	Module in 4th year. Brief introduction; not for credit
HEI5	MSA-plus RV abroad	Year abroad	Compulsory in 2nd year	Jordan	Brief introduction; not for credit
HEI6	MSA-plus RV abroad	RV module in 2nd year	Optional in 3rd year	Students may choose any Arab country	Brief introduction; not for credit
HEI7	MSA-first	RVs included from 2nd year	Compulsory in 3rd year	Students may choose any Arab country	Module in 4th year; introduction as part of Arabic as a diglossic language
HEI8	IA	Taught both structures from the beginning	Compulsory in 3rd year	Students may choose any Arab country	Introduction as part of Arabic as a diglossic language

RVs, outlined the reasoning for including the module:

When they go to the Middle East for their period abroad [...], not every Arab can speak Modern Standard Arabic and if they speak in the dialect then, if the students had never heard the dialect before, they would struggle (T6).

Sukayna emphasised the importance of equipping students with the appropriate skills for communication when they travel abroad (T6). This is treated separately from MSA as, in MSA classes, tutors and students speak MSA. There are separate examinations in MSA, and students are advised not to code-switch, a skill used by L1 speakers (see Soliman, 2012; 2014). While it is a positive step that the RVs are being introduced to learners, this approach is inauthentic, as Arabic is not recognised as a diglossic language. Arabic speakers generally remain in their RVs for cross-dialectal communication (Soliman, 2012; 2014) and on the internet (Khalil, 2019; Kindt & Kebede, 2017), and numerous Arab communities exist in the UK (Caabu, 2020), so authentic communication is not something that learners solely require for the year abroad. Furthermore, it reinforces dominant language ideologies by prioritising MSA as the variety of education. As Leeman (2018: 350) notes, this sends 'subtle messages' to learners that certain varieties are 'better' than others.

4.1.2. Confusion

Another significant reason why some tutors hesitate to include RVs as part of the curriculum is the concern over potential confusion among students:

- Exposing a student to both varieties can be terribly confusing [...]. If they'd been entirely different it would have been more manageable, but they are close enough to confuse (T5, Mia).
- I don't think they should study dialect from year one because it could confuse them (T10, Jawaad).

The suggestion that simultaneously learning more than one variety of Arabic would confuse the learner has already been widely countered in the literature (e.g., Al-Batal, 2018; Younes, 2015), with studies showing that exposure to multiple RVs can enhance linguistic flexibility and adaptability among learners. Recent studies support the ability of L2 learners to acquire diglossic language skills (e.g., Trentman & S'hiri, 2020; Nassif & Al Masaeed, 2020; Al Masaeed, 2020), enhanced pragmatic skills as a result of bidialectal practices (Al Masaeed, 2022b), and the metasociolinguistic awareness of MSA and RV use (see Nassif & Basheer, 2022; Nassif & Shapiro, 2023). In support of those findings, in this study, none of the three HEIs that include RVs as part of their curriculum view confusion as a drawback. For example, Nada, HEI8, stated:

The feedback has been incredibly positive: the students really appreciate the approach. They think it's important to learn both. At

the very beginning of the year, you did get lots of comments about, oh FusHa and *ammiyyah* [RV] but I think now they're so used to it [...] feedback in the second term is definitely a lot more positive and they are a lot more relaxed about the whole FusHa and *ammiyyah* [RV] approach than they were in the first term (T1).

This comment supports previous research that confusion does not cause long-term setbacks (e.g., S'hiri, 2013a; Younes, 2015). However, four tutors still hold the view that introducing students to more than one Arabic variety would be too challenging. Featherstone (2018) suggests that this confusion stems from their own confusion about how to teach the RVs, as they are not taught in the Arab world. The four tutors who support the argument that learning the RVs is too confusing have not focused their research on teaching Arabic as a diglossic language, and learning the RVs was not part of their own education. It is therefore understandable that they may hold such beliefs.

4.1.3. Language ideologies

Five tutors interviewed linked prioritising MSA to the prevalence of SLI in the Arab world. Nada clearly stated this was a reason for English HEIs to prioritise MSA: 'We're seeing more and more native Arabic speakers teaching the language, and native Arabic speakers do have a bias towards FusHa; they see the *ammiyyah* [RV] as being slang' (T1). Four other tutors hinted that the MSA approach adopted in L2 classrooms is a result of the attitudes of L1 speakers:

- Ali, HEI7, linked the issue to some of its speakers wanting to preserve the religious use of the language (T4).
- Boushra, HEI8, stated: 'a lot of people are anti this approach as well [...] no, we shouldn't do that, it's لغة القرآن /layat Iqora:n/ (the language of the Quran), all my due respect to Holy Quran, this is nothing to do with the dialect [...] it's how people speak. I've attended a conference where people were really attacking [...] Mahmoud Al-Batal [...] guy that wrote *Al-Kitaab*, my God, they really attacked him in the conference, how come this is the approach? How come? Because the new *Al-Kitaab* is in three dialects' (T2).

Fatima related how she has personally been scolded at conferences for teaching cross-dialectal strategies:

I get really disappointed when I go to conferences and meet teachers who have been teaching Arabic for ages and, once they hear the word dialect, oh, not again this issue, I hate this issue the dialect. What is it exactly you hate, this is what you speak, man? (T3).

These comments suggest that many Arabic teachers have strong opinions against teaching the RVs, which follow logically from the prevalence of SLI in the Arab world (Aboejezz, 2018; Haeri, 2009). While SLI has played a role in maintaining linguistic unity and clarity in educational and official settings in the Arab world (Mizher & Al-Haq, 2014), Fatima explained that the issue is rooted in Arab society and emphasised the importance of raising awareness of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage so that linguistic knowledge can be passed on to students. In her comment, Fatima also suggests it is a generational issue. In contrast, this research identified links between the training a tutor had received and the beliefs they hold; tutors who view language variation as an important component of a degree in Arabic were those who had either specialised in sociolinguistics (four) or had received training to teach Arabic as a diglossic language (two). Eight tutors had been educated in the Arab world up to undergraduate degree level, and the three who had acquired Arabic as an L2 had been solely taught MSA in their undergraduate degree (see Table 4). This means that all tutors would have been exposed to SLI during their studies, but suggests that the 'social turn' in applied linguistics is playing a role in shaping attitudes and practices (Hall & Cook, 2012; Block, 2003).

In the Arab world, RVs are acquired from birth, as L1s, so it is understandable that the belief exists that the RVs do not need to be

formally taught, Nada elaborated on this point:

I think native Arabic speakers have that prejudice again. They don't realise that *ammiyyah* [RV] is the spoken language, it's not slang, it can be slang, but it can also be used in academic settings, it's used in presidential speeches. There are levels of *ammiyyat* [RVs], and I think there's a stigma against *ammiyyah* [RV] and also, it's not taught in the Arab world. An Arabic teacher, in Egypt, Saudi or Morocco teaches FusHa, [but] nobody teaches *ammiyyah* [RV]. The concept is unheard of unless they're teaching Arabic as a foreign language possibly. So, the concept is perhaps alien. Arabic teachers teach FusHa, that's what they do, and the stigma around it (T1).

Nada's comment expands on the stigma against the RVs among many L1 speakers; many L1 Arabic speakers educated in the Arab world have been inculcated with a set of ideologies that opposes teaching RVs, which is why they will not include them in their classes. These ideologies are then passed onto learners as a confirmation bias (see Towler, 2024). Catherine touched upon how this poses a challenge when RVs are taught by Arabic speakers who do not have a linguistic understanding of them:

They [Arabic tutors] basically make the assumption that the dialect has come from FusHa and is, therefore, an inferior variety of Arabic [...] And when the layperson's assumption in Arabic is that in the dialect there's no grammar [...], then that really drives the approach to teaching the dialect and very often it's not actually taught (T7).

This reinforces the need to raise awareness of RVs as language systems before RVs are introduced in courses. The argument that learning an RV is not academic is linguistically void; RVs, like all languages, have language systems and structures. But, as seen in previous studies (Al-Mohsen, 2016; Soliman & Towler, 2023; AlShehri & AlShabeb, 2024), certain ideologies can affect the openness to change when teaching the L2, such as the SLI and purism, that emphasises the prestige of MSA as the language of education and as the 'pure', and 'correct' variety, and the RVs as 'grammarless' (see Section 2.2).

Similarly to Soliman and Towler's (2023) findings, within some comments, a hidden stigma against teaching the RVs was identified. For example, although Farrah stated that she utilises her RV during teaching, she still refers to MSA as the 'proper' variety, adding that learners 'would be penalised' for using the RV in examinations because they need to use 'proper grammar and syntax' (T8). Furthermore, although Husain teaches a module on the RV, he stated that learners are not allowed to use the RV in MSA classes because 'they have to take grammar into consideration' (T9). In other comments, MSA was referred to as the 'formal' and 'academic' variety (T6; T10). Such comments follow logically from the SLI, viewing the RVs as grammarless and inferior to MSA, and point to a need for professional development to ensure that courses recognise the linguistic and cultural value of RVs.

4.1.4. Which variety

Another argument against teaching RVs that has also been addressed in the literature is the difficulty of deciding which variety to teach (Soliman & Towler, 2023; Featherstone, 2018). When discussing the IA, Al-Batal & Glakas (2018) argue that which variety is taught does not matter; every variety is important, and all share a symbolic relationship with MSA. However, in this study, the issue was raised in two tutor interviews:

- You are in a very tricky situation because which *ammiyyah* [RV] are you going to use? (T8, Farrah).
- If they're going to three different countries, well, are you going to teach them Egyptian? Are you going to teach them Moroccan as well? (T5, Mia, HEI1).

It has been shown that, in fact, this does not pose an issue for learners, as acquiring one RV aids the acquisition of another (Trentman, 2011; S'hiri, 2013a). Furthermore, the spread of the internet and global

movement suggests that even lesser-known varieties are now more widely understood, as evidenced by platforms like YouTube and various media outlets (Towler, 2021; Khalil, 2019). In light of these developments, metalinguistic awareness training (see Trentman & S'hiri, 2020) and developing pragmatic competence through bidialectal practices (Al Masa'eed, 2022b; 2017) have been proposed as a suitable solution, pointing to a need for professional development to support its application in classes. However, as is the case with attitudes to different languages (Ricento, 2006), Arabic varieties are not viewed of equal standing or represent equal symbolic capital, evidenced by the Maghreb-Mashreq language ideology (Hachimi, 2013). This is discussed further below, in relation to RQ2.

4.2. How do tutors approach the question of which variety to teach within their classes?

In deciding which RV to teach, the HEIs offering RVs stated that they selected the tutor's L1 and, when the tutor was not an L1 Arabic speaker, it was the L2 variety that they had acquired during their studies. At HEI8, before Nada and Boushra were there, the tutors taught their RV, the Levantine variety. When HEI8 students return from their year abroad, they may speak in the variety of their choice, provided they make appropriate modifications to their speech to aid comprehension, as is the case in cross-dialectal communication (see Soliman, 2014). This, in effect, is an added skill, and studies show that L2 speakers can acquire such skills (Trentman & S'hiri, 2020; Trentman, 2017; Nassif & Al Masa'eed, 2020; Al Masa'eed, 2020). At HEI6, the tutors are L1 speakers of the Syrian variety:

the Syrian dialect works across the whole Arab world because of the Syrian drama [television series]. So, even if you go to Oman, they use the dialect, they understand, and they're understood. (Sukayna, T6)

In the Arab world, Egyptian is perceived as the universally understood variety, due to its media influence and concurrent cultural capital (Al-Wer, 2008; Hachimi, 2013; Chakrani, 2015; Zaidan & Callison-Burch, 2014), and its educational influence (see Versteegh, 2014). Whilst the cultural significance of Egyptian Arabic is now facing competition from Levantine, Sukayna's comment suggests that she views the Syrian variety as occupying the place of the most widely understood variety. There is evidence that speakers of Eastern varieties, such as Levantine and Gulf, express preferences for their own varieties as it is the most familiar one to them (Cote, 2009). However, due to the spread of the internet and global movement, many Arabic varieties are now more widely understood. HEI7 decided to give students the option to be exposed to more than one variety of Arabic and has enough members of staff to cover the Levantine and Egyptian varieties in the second year, and Gulf varieties in the fourth. It is not compulsory to learn all of these varieties: learners can choose in the second year to study either Egyptian or Levantine, or both, and in the fourth year, the module on Gulf varieties is optional. While HEI7 offers several Arabic varieties, they are all Eastern varieties. Similar to the bias towards Eastern varieties discussed above regarding year-abroad choices, this shows that the bias towards Eastern Arabic varieties, the Maghreb-Mashreq language ideology, exists within HE in England.

4.2.1. Change is underway

Two HEIs that openly prioritise MSA have been experimenting with finding ways to raise awareness of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage in classes, while insisting that learners first need to develop a strong foundation in MSA. At the time of the interview, HEI5 provided three weeks of RV instruction before sending students abroad, to prepare them for the first few days before they commenced their RV classes. This change had only been implemented in the preceding year, due to recognition of the need for students to be able to communicate in the RV when they arrive in the Arab world, evidencing a willingness to adapt and evolve teaching practices in response to student need. While this

change could be interpreted as similar to that of those who view RVs as only being important for the year abroad, when discussing it further with Jessica, a lecturer, it became apparent that it is evidence of different levels of change being underway. Jessica stated during our interview that the HEI is:

very much willing to explore new ways, in terms of a bit more experimental. They wouldn't want to start with *ammīyyah* [RV] but introducing *ammīyyah* [RV] from as early as possible. So, they are very much open to new suggestions, new materials or writing new things that can be tested in the years to come (T12).

Jessica conducted her PhD research on how to introduce RVs on undergraduate degree courses. She looked at this through the MSA approach, as she believes that most HEIs would not support the 'radical' approach of introducing both varieties side-by-side from day one, so change would need to be gradual, viewing the IA as 'radical' indicates how deeply ingrained prioritising MSA in English HEIs is. She added that the recent modifications to courses at HEI5 represent a big improvement in comparison to the situation three years prior to our interview, when the focus was solely on MSA, or MSA and English.

At HEI3, Fatima, who has a background in TASL research and sociolinguistics and is passionate about the subject, has been raising awareness of regional diversity in her classes. This is in line with current research on metalinguistic awareness (Soliman, 2014; Carvalho et al., 2010) that supports the importance of helping 'students develop a toolkit and mindset to use when encountering new varieties' (Trentman & Shiri, 2020: 129). Fatima explained that, at the start of the semester, she dedicated a lecture to raising awareness of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage, introducing what Arabic is and the place of language variation (T3). Throughout the course, she refers to the varieties through tasks exploring phrases used in various RVs. For example, one week they looked at 'how are you' and another, at the different interrogative words. She said that this is not an official part of the curriculum, and is not done every week, but she hopes that 'students graduate with the knowledge that there are dialects, and some of the differences are this and this and this. That's it, they won't know how to use it yet' (T3). However, as it is not part of the curriculum, those who are not taught by tutors with a knowledge or personal interest in the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage do not benefit; the other tutor interviewed at this HEI believes that RVs only need to be taught in preparation for the year abroad (see 4.2.1.). Although Fatima stated that she has the full support of her HEI for teaching cross-dialectal strategies, she mentioned that she has been scolded at TASL conferences for doing so.

This section highlights tutors' considerations when selecting varieties to teach and provides evidence of multidialectal strategies being used in practice, reflecting current research (e.g., Trentman & S'hiri, 2020). It is also essential to delve deeper into the experiences of tutors at HEIs that have formally integrated diglossic approaches, as discussed below.

4.3. What experiences can be shared by tutors who include regional variation in their classes?

In addition to the experiences of the tutors shared above who, although it is not a formal part of the curriculum, are raising awareness of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage, two HEIs have incorporated RVs as an official part of the curriculum to present Arabic to learners as a diglossic language. The headings in this section have been taken directly from the emergent codes in the codebook relevant to RQ3.

4.3.1. HEIs approaching Arabic as a diglossic language

At HEI7, despite the first year of studies focusing on gaining a strong foundation in MSA, from day one, they are taught to slightly modify their speech, introducing an awareness of Arabic diglossia and the language continuum (see Hary, 1996; Ferguson, 1996). Ali, Course Leader for Arabic, explained this in our interview:

From the very beginning they are aware [of language variation in Arabic]. Although we don't have a course called 'dialect', but we have three hours a week called 'speaking' [...]; the way we teach speaking is by showing the students that we have to adjust the level of reading and writing which we call FusHa. We have to adjust it to be spoken; we have to sort of ease the case endings, and ease the word order in the sentence [...] We deliberately chose two teachers for each group, one Levantine and one Egyptian so even when they are practicing this /ʕommi:jjot ilmotaʕal.limi:n/ they are hearing it in two dialects. You can choose to answer in any of the dialects, but it is awareness that in Arabic you don't speak the way you read and write (T4).

Ali stated that when he started teaching at HEI7 in 1985, the approach was different and purely focused on MSA. He added that Arabic is a 'living language', which means that the course recognises the need to present Arabic to learners as a diglossic language (see Al-Batal, 2018). So, the HEI decided to include RVs to reflect the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage. Ali mentioned 'awareness', suggesting that the course values developing a student's understanding of Arabic usage.

HEI8 has the same rationale as HEI7; Arabic is taught as a diglossic language, and students acquire skills that can be used for speaking in addition to reading and writing. These two HEIs differ in approach; both HEI7 and HEI8 teach the clear distinction between speaking and writing, but while HEI7 exposes students to different levels and varieties of Arabic, HEI8 instructs them to speak in Egyptian Arabic and read and write in MSA at the beginning of courses, with more variation later on. Students can use the RV for speaking in all of their classes at both of these HEIs and are exposed to authentic texts that mix varieties at advanced levels. HEI8 only teaches Egyptian Arabic to students in years one and two, but after they return from the year abroad, they may speak in the variety of their choice, making any relevant changes to aid comprehension. These HEIs differ in approach but the end result is similar: students are taught to code-switch and select the appropriate variety depending on the situation. This is reflective of cross-dialectal communication and the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage (see Soliman, 2014; Abu-Melhim, 2014). While many tutors and HEIs are making strides toward utilising regional variation in their teaching, it is equally important to examine the obstacles and challenges they face. Understanding these difficulties can inform professional development and provide the necessary support to enhance teaching efficacy.

4.4. What obstacles or difficulties do tutors face while including regional varieties in their classes?

While many HEIs are making commendable progress in including RVs in their curricula and classes, several challenges remain. Although HEI8 already taught its students to speak in an RV, since 2016, further steps have been taken to include a greater focus on the RV in the curriculum. Boushra explained that the IA is a new trend in TASL and, despite some academics opposing it (e.g., Al-Sobh et al., 2015; Jaradat & Al-Khawaldeh, 2015), it is gaining popularity, and the department leaders want to implement it (T2). She described how much effort she, as an L1 speaker of the Egyptian variety, had invested in understanding the language system of her RV:

The thing is that the more you get into the grammar, it's not identical. You know sometimes there are [sic] stuff that you don't use in the ECA [Egyptian], or the spoken. So, this is making me think, before I teach, I've been working on that all summer, to get the grammatical concepts, in ECA (Egyptian) and FusHa. And it took me a while to realise that there are [sic] some things that we don't say them that way, or if we want to say them, we'll say them in FusHa or we're not going to say them, which I find very interesting (T2).

Boushra indicated that to teach RVs you need to understand their linguistic systems. This highlights a challenge with teaching RVs; the

limited scholarship on their structure. There are few descriptive grammars of some RVs, in addition to a limited amount of pedagogical material geared toward L2 speakers. This can create additional challenges when teaching the RVs, and hence could deter tutors from integrating them.

4.4.1. Discontinuing the RV module

HEI4 has taken a step back from teaching RVs; they introduced a module on the Egyptian variety, which was discontinued; staff felt it was not suitable for a credit-bearing course at university level. There were pedagogic issues, including an assessment that consisted of a 30-minute oral exam. Catherine, Associate Professor at HEI4, said that this meant that it was seen as an 'easy option' that did not fit with any of the other modules at the same level (T7). Catherine indicated that there were also issues with the way in which the RV was taught. She believes that an RV module should be managed by tutors with a background in TASL and who:

have an interest in Arabic and understanding of the relationship between the standard language and the dialect, and a historical awareness on top of an interest in the structure of the language itself. Because, otherwise, it's too easy to say, 'Let's listen to some videos off YouTube' then the whole thing just becomes a conversation club where they learn a bit of vocabulary: there's no systematic approach to it. And then there's no discussion of the sociolinguistics, which I think when you start teaching dialect, I very firmly believe that you can't at university level, and this is where it differs from night school or A-Level. At university level, what is needed is a more analytical approach to language and language structure along with some teaching of sociolinguistics (T7).

Catherine emphasised that, for RVs to be introduced in credit-bearing modules at university, they must be supported by a linguistic approach. This aligns with growing research on the importance of sociolinguistic instruction in L2 classrooms, seen in English as a Lingua Franca (Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018), Spanish (Pisabarro Sarrío, 2019), and French (French & Beaulieu, 2016; 2020; van Compernelle, 2019). Similarly, Trentman & S'hiri (2020) stress that a multidialectal approach requires more than just exposure to multiple varieties; teachers must actively guide students' attention to metalinguistic features, a point reinforced by Catherine. She further argued that this instruction should come from an expert in the language, not merely an L1 speaker of the RV, which, she noted, is often the case for those teaching both MSA and RVs. Although the HEI discontinued its module on Egyptian Arabic, it offers an optional course on Arabic linguistics and dialectology, led by Catherine. This suggests that, despite the shift away from teaching RVs, the HEI recognises their importance and the value of a linguistic understanding of Arabic. However, providing learners with this knowledge at the beginning of their courses would offer clearer guidance on the varieties they are learning.

The experiences of tutors have highlighted numerous challenges that need to be addressed, such as the limited scholarship on RVs and the necessity for tutors to possess a robust linguistic and metalinguistic understanding. Professional development workshops are crucial to enhance tutor efficacy, discussed further in the conclusions.

5. Conclusions

This research explores tutors' beliefs regarding the teaching of MSA and RVs in undergraduate degree courses in England. The findings reveal a range of beliefs, with some tutors prioritising MSA to avoid learner confusion and the difficulties of selecting a single variety to teach, while others advocate for integrating RVs to reflect the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic use. A key challenge is posed by the lack of scholarship in teaching the RVs, both reflected in tutor training and a limited number of resources geared towards teaching the RVs. In support of previous research (Al-Mohsen, 2016; Soliman & Towler, 2023),

language ideologies, such as SLI and linguistic purism, were also found to be affecting the openness to change, which prioritise MSA and undermine the inclusion of RVs in curricula.

However, the study finds two HEIs that are teaching Arabic as a diglossic language to develop learners' ability to select an appropriate point on the continuum for various contexts or to adapt their acquired RVs to enhance comprehension (see Section 4.3.1). Furthermore, two tutors were identified at HEIs that outwardly support MSA, who support the development of their students' metalinguistic awareness through classroom exercises (see Section 4.3.2). These tutors have backgrounds in applied linguistics and how to approach diglossia in TASL and their classroom practices evidence that the 'social turn' in applied linguistics is playing a role in shaping attitudes and practices (Hall & Cook, 2012). Instead of teaching a single RV, these tutors highlight the similarities and differences between the main RVs and raise awareness of the sociolinguistic reality of language use (as advocated by Soliman, 2014; Trentman & Shiri, 2020). However, these approaches are not yet widely adopted. The study highlights the need for a more formalised, multidialectal approach to teaching Arabic, as proposed by Trentman & Shiri (2020), to equip learners with the tools to understand and navigate all varieties of Arabic. This approach, which enhances learners' metalinguistic awareness, offers a potential solution to overcoming the challenges posed by teaching only MSA or MSA and a single RV (ibid.). As advocated by Towler (2024), this can be supported by a theoretical understanding of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage, as it provides the academic understanding of the language that an undergraduate degree course with a major component in Arabic should offer. However, studies that have focused on English language varieties (Alim, 2010; Clark et al., 1990) and SHL (Leeman, 2018; Beaudrie et al., 2021) suggest that language awareness alone is not enough to combat the deep-seated ideologies that prioritise standard varieties. CLA is proposed as an alternative, as discussed further in the following section. Otherwise, a covert bias towards certain varieties may persist.

5.1. Pedagogical implications

The pedagogical implications of this study highlight the need for curriculum development so that all learners can develop an understanding of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage. This shift aligns Arabic language education with the Subject Benchmark for Languages (QAA, 2023) by acknowledging diglossia and the existence of multiple RVs. Curriculum reform must equip students not only with MSA but also with tools to decode RVs, reflecting the full spectrum of Arabic as it is used in practice (Soliman, 2014). Furthermore, as advocated in CLA, the curriculum needs to go beyond solely raising awareness of different varieties by enabling learners to analyse the social meanings and political implications of language variation (Leeman, 2018).

A key aspect of this shift is professional development for tutors, who need both linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge of Arabic to integrate RVs effectively into their teaching. Furthermore, studies on English (e.g., Vettorel & Corrizato, 2016; Alim, 2010; Bacon, 2018) have demonstrated the benefits of incorporating discussions on sociolinguistics and language ideologies in teacher education. For example, Bacon (2018) highlights the importance of training teachers and teacher educators to critically examine their own language practices and the ideological foundations of linguistic discrimination. Similarly, Alim (2010) emphasises the importance of teachers in engaging with critical language pedagogies, through 'reflexive analyses of their own language behaviours and ideologies,' as such training helps them become aware of their own language ideologies and how to challenge them. Similar teacher development models are required for Arabic. Without such training in sociolinguistics, including the role of CLA in addressing language ideologies, dominant beliefs, such as SLI, purism, and the Maghreb-Mashreq language ideology, are likely to persist. This would not only prevent learners from developing a sociolinguistic understanding of Arabic but also reinforce both overt and covert

discrimination against non-standard varieties. While historically important for maintaining linguistic unity and clarity in educational and official contexts (Mizher & Al-Haq, 2014), these ideologies are not fully aligned with the needs of L2 learners. Learners require more comprehensive exposure to Arabic in its diverse forms and an understanding of the relevant sociolinguistic theory, as well as the historical and socio-political factors that have led to the development of certain language ideologies.

Professional development programmes should be designed to help tutors reconcile these ideologies with the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic, as demonstrated by the practices of tutors at HEIs that have integrated multidialectal practices into their classes. These tutors raise awareness of the differences and similarities among the main RVs, thereby enhancing learners' metalinguistic awareness (Trentman & Shiri, 2020; Soliman, 2014). For this approach to be adopted more widely, workshops and training sessions must aim to not only develop tutors' awareness of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic use but to understand and critically question dominant language ideologies as advocated for in CLA (Leeman, 2018; Alim, 2010). Furthermore, teachers need to be supported to develop the practical tools and resources required to implement this in their classrooms. Curriculum development should include pedagogical materials, which not only support this multidialectal framework but also combat stereotypes and prejudice, supporting non-standard varieties as being worthy of study (Leeman, 2018). Furthermore, by integrating metalinguistic awareness into everyday teaching practices, tutors can empower students to decode Arabic in its various forms more effectively, thus addressing the challenges learners face outside the classroom.

5.2. Future research directions

Larger-scale studies should be conducted to validate these findings and assess the prevalence of language ideologies through both indirect and direct approaches. Additionally, in support of Trentman & S'hiri's findings (2020), further research should evaluate the effectiveness of metalinguistic awareness tasks in improving student outcomes. Studies should also explore how professional development programmes affect the inclusion of RVs in teaching practices. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how Arabic language education can better reflect the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic use.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Melissa Anne Towler: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback and suggestions, including introducing me to the body of research on CLA, which has greatly benefited this study. I am also grateful to Alexis Gibbs, University of Winchester, for his comments on an earlier version of this study.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in

the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.linged.2025.101427.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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