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Language variation on Arabic undergraduate degree courses in England: students' perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Despite recognition of Arabic as a diglossic language with multiple regional varieties (RVs) and studies acknowledging the flexible nature of the language continuum, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) continues to be prioritised in undergraduate degree courses. For the measurability of learning development, second language (L2) classes have traditionally focused on the standard variety. However, the field of applied linguistics acknowledges that language variation is an aspect of all languages that needs to be considered when learning and teaching L2s. This study investigates how students at eight of the nine higher education institutions in England offering undergraduate degree courses with a major component in Arabic perceive and experience language variation. It takes a mixed-methods explanatory approach, comprising 122 student questionnaires and 15 student interviews. This study finds that undergraduate degree students are not prepared fully for the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage, leading to concerns and frustrations when coming into contact with authentic language use. More needs to be done to raise awareness of how Arabic is used in practice from the beginning of courses. This would improve students' experiences when communicating in Arabic, whilst also providing them with a theoretical knowledge of how the language operates.

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Introduction

In English higher education (HE), a majority of higher education institutions (HEIs) prioritise teaching Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which means that the teaching of Arabic as a diglossic language is not prevalent, and regional varieties (RVs) are not given priority (Dickins and Watson 2006; The British Academy 2018). The sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage and the existence of multiple RVs is a vital aspect of learning about the language. This study investigates students' perceptions of language variation, drawing on their personal experiences of learning and using the language.

Linguistic context

Ferguson (1959: 244–5) described thus the linguistic situation of four diglossic languages:

In addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large

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and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.

Ferguson (1959) points out that diglossic language situations are to be distinguished from the alternate use of a standard language and an RV, emphasising that diglossia refers to the use of two varieties of the same language, not to that of distantly related or totally unrelated languages. The superposed variety is referred to as the high variety and the dialect as the low variety. 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 (see Table 1). Classical Arabic (CLA) is the variety in which the Quran was revealed and is still used for religious scripture and ritual. First language (L1) speakers generally do not distinguish between CLA and MSA (Bassiouney 2009; Zughoul 1980), and CLA and MSA are both referred to as ‘fusha’ in Arabic. MSA is morphologically and grammatically identical to the form of Arabic described by the late 8th-century grammarian Sibawaih, though much has changed lexically and stylistically (Owens 2013). Despite not having been spoken as an L1 for centuries, MSA is the official language of 26 countries and is the variety taught in schools (Kamusella 2017; Resto 2013). RVs, the low varieties, referred to as ‘ammiyyah’ in Arabic, are used for everyday interactions (see Table 1); there are numerous RVs that can be very different from one another in vocabulary and syntax, and each RV differs to varying degrees from MSA (e.g. Egyptian, Levantine, Iraqi, Moroccan, to name a few; Al Masaeed 2020; Kamusella 2017). Writing in the RVs was traditionally confined to informal letters and some dialogues in modern novels; however, with the rise of social media, writing in the RVs has proliferated, making it evermore necessary for Arabic language learners to master them (Khalil 2019; Kindt and Kebede 2017).

Ferguson (1959) has had a great impact on the analysis of language situations classified as diglossic and has paved the way for a more detailed analysis of speech communities. Different ‘levels’ of Arabic have been identified between the high and low varieties (Meiseles 1980; Mitchell 1990; Wahba 2006; Badawi in Hary 1996), providing evidence that the situation goes beyond a high-low dichotomy. More than two or three varieties were identified by analysing the speech of L1 speakers, so the situation has also been referred to as triglossic, multiglossic and polyglossic (Badawi 1973 in Hary 1996; Kamusella 2017). However, perspectives of a binary distinction between CLA/ MSA and the RVs have since shifted, with the borders between the two being seen as porous. Therefore, researchers suggested that CLA/ MSA and the RVs were placed on separate sides of a continuum (Ferguson 1996; Hary 1996; Williams 1990), which has the advantage of a seamless transition rather than a distinct and rigid switch from one variety to another.

When L1 speakers select a suitable point on the continuum, they use a communicative strategy known as code-switching (Abu-Melhim 2014; Albirini 2011, 2016; Bassiouney 2009; S’hiri 2013b), which Abu-Melhim (2014) defines as the alternating use of two varieties at the word, phrase, clause and sentence levels. When communicating across borders, speakers code-switch, adopting MSA for important details that need to be understood, ESA when the RV is unintelligible and CLA

Table 1. Arabic varieties (adapted from Ramezanzadeh, 2021).

Arabic varieties (adapted from Wahba 2006)			
Standard Arabic/ ‘fusha’			
Variety	Classical Arabic (CLA)	MSA	RVs/ ‘ammiyyah’
Oral contexts	Reading sacred/ liturgical texts; sermons	Scripted speech such as news broadcasts, political speeches, official announcements (Holes 2004)	Day-to-day interactions both inside and outside of the home (e.g. shopping, dining; Al Masaeed 2020)
Written contexts	Classical literature; classical poetry; idiomatic expressions	Media; modern literature; academic texts	Poetry; personal letters; some dialogues in modern novels; social media (Khalil 2019)
Mode of acquisition	Learnt through religious education/ in religious institutions	Taught through education (in schools/ universities)	Acquired as an L1 through natural interactions (Holes 2004)

for religious references with additional utterances made in RVs (Abu-Melhim 2014). These strategies are referred to as diglossic code-switching and linguistic accommodation. Rather than using a lingua franca, L1 Arabic speakers adopt these strategies for intranational communication. Others (Chakrani 2015; Hachimi 2013; S'hiri 2013b) found that accommodation strategies are most commonly used by North African speakers when communicating with speakers of other RVs, as their RVs are perceived to be the furthest from MSA and other RVs. Soliman (2014) stated that, when communicating informally, Arabic speakers remain largely in their own RVs, apart from those who use North African varieties. When discussion becomes more formal, a whole sentence may be rendered in MSA (Soliman 2014). This suggests that an understanding of the multidialectal, polyglossic nature of Arabic not only provides a deeper understanding of the language, but is crucial for communication.

Valdés (2020: 132) discusses a new perspective which argues that separating language into 'discrete "codes" with stable boundaries', seen in code-switching, is inadequate for describing the practices of multilinguals. As a result, the notion of 'translanguaging' has been proposed as both a theory of language use in the everyday interactions of multilinguals (see Wei 2018), and as a pedagogical approach that draws on all language resources, including the L1, to aid language learning and acquisition (see Lewis, Jones, and Baker 2012). The translanguaging theory is, however, still developing, and debates and disagreements about it are ongoing (Leung and Valdés 2019; Valdés 2020). The theory states that bi/multilinguals deploy their entire language repertoire in speech instead of adhering to the boundaries of named languages or varieties (García, Johnson, and Seltzer 2016; Otheguy, García, and Reid 2015). Wei (2018) states that, although translanguaging does challenge the 'code view of language', it does not replace code-switching, nor does it deny the existence of named languages, but views them as 'historically, politically, and ideologically defined entities'. MacSwan (2017: 191) presents a 'multilingual perspective on translanguaging' by which code-switching can be viewed as 'an instance of translanguaging, alongside other bilingual phenomena such as translation, borrowing, and additional processes'. It is outside of the scope of this study to explore translanguaging in any depth; however, it is considered briefly here as an important advancement in the direction of combatting monolingual language policies in education (see García, Johnson, and Seltzer 2016; Otheguy, García, and Reid 2015; Valdés 2020; Wei 2018 for further discussion).

Teaching Arabic as a second language (TASL)

Traditionally, Arabic was studied by a minority of learners in the same way that classical languages would be, focusing on reading and writing skills in CLA (Eisele 2013; Versteegh 2014). Due to the political and economic importance of the region, following Arabic-speaking countries regaining their independence towards the second half of the twentieth century, western countries needed specialists who could communicate in the language (Versteegh 2006). Therefore, most HEIs shifted their focus to MSA, and learners acquired reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in MSA (Ryding 2006; Versteegh 2006). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there was a surge in student numbers in both the US and the UK, for which HEIs were not prepared (Abdalla and Al-Batal 2012; Dickins and Watson 2006). The events of 9/11 2001 can be seen as marking the start of the Arab world being at the forefront of world affairs, which could explain the increased student numbers (Dickins and Watson 2006; Husseinali 2006). Since then, media interest in the region has continued due to, to name a few, the so-called Arab Spring, social unrest in Arabic-speaking countries and, most recently, the intensified violence in Palestine and Israel. This does not mean that all of these new learners have political motivations; there is a growing Muslim community within England and the number of speakers of Arabic as a heritage language has increased in the last decade (UK Census 2021). However, the increased interest in Arabic has brought with it a diversified student cohort. Belnap (1987) found that only 29.2% of students were learning Arabic to communicate with Arabic speakers while 36.6% wanted to travel to Arabic-speaking countries; when the same study was conducted in 2006, 78.6% wanted to travel to the Arab world while 87.8% wanted to interact with Arabic speakers. The MSA approach has therefore been criticised (e.g. Al-Batal 2018; Ryding 2013; Wahba 2006; Wilmsen 2006) because, due to

the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage, it has a very serious shortcoming: students are taught to speak a variety that is not used for everyday communication. Therefore, other approaches to teaching the varieties of Arabic have been advocated. This includes the Colloquial Approach (e.g. Woidich 2007), the Integrated Approach (IA) (e.g. Al-Batal 2018; Younes 2015), and the simultaneous approach (e.g. S'hiri and Joukhadar 2018; Wahba 2006). For the purposes of this study, the MSA approach has been split into the MSA-only approach, the MSA-first approach, and the MSA-plus RV abroad: Table 2 gives a definition of these and highlights their advantages and disadvantages.

Research into teachers' perceptions of integrating RVs (Al-Mohsen 2016; Featherstone 2018; Soliman and Towler 2023) suggests that the dismissal of RVs is a problematic position held by some language teachers. Teachers often state that utilising RVs in their classrooms would either be too confusing, or raise the dilemma of which variety to teach (Featherstone 2018; Soliman and Towler 2023). The argument that teaching RVs would cause too much confusion may stem from their own confusion about how to teach them, because RVs are not formally taught in the Arabic-

Table 2. Approaches to TASL.

Approach	Applications	Definition	Advantages	Disadvantages
MSA Approach	MSA-only	Learn only MSA for reading, writing, listening and speaking.	MSA is understood easily across the whole Arab world. Access to the Arab media.	Speaking in MSA is not authentic in certain contexts (Al-Batal 2018; Younes 2015).
	MSA-first	Learn MSA first then integrate an RV at more advanced levels, supported throughout the remainder of studies.	Developing skills in the same variety advances all skills at the same time (Alosh 1992; Eisele 2006; Jaradat and Al-Khawaldeh 2015).	
	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.	Arabic acquired in the same way as L1 speakers. Learning both varieties means the appropriate one can be selected for each context. More advanced speaking and listening skills in practice (Edwards 2015; Woidich 2007).	Two varieties could confuse students (Parkinson 1985). Some important aspects of MSA, such as the root system, may be neglected (Woidich 2007). Raises the dilemma of which variety to teach (Jaradat and Al-Khawaldeh 2015).
Integrated Approach		Learning both MSA and an RV as one language in the same classroom: to speak and listen in an RV and to read and write in MSA.	Learning to speak in a variety that is more authentic than MSA. Students are not duplicating learning as words and phrases are assigned to certain contexts (Al-Batal 2018; Younes 2015).	Learning to read and write in one variety and speak and listen in another contradicts some SLA concepts (Eisele 2006; Soliman 2018) and could be confusing for students (Parkinson 1985). In practice, there is a cross-over between the domains of speaking and writing (Najour 2018).
Simultaneous Approach		Learn both MSA and RVs simultaneously from day one as separate language systems in separate classrooms.	Separating the two varieties could provide students with a clearer distinction of which variety they are using. The two main varieties needed for authentic communication are studied (Wahba 2006).	It could result in interference between similar expressions and, so be more difficult to learn. Students may feel little motivation for learning to say the same thing in different ways (Macalister and Nation 2010).

speaking world, nor are teachers trained to teach them (Featherstone 2018; Soliman and Towler 2023). Furthermore, the question of which variety to teach should not be used as an argument to exclude them; research suggests that learning any RV is useful for learners and assists in the comprehension and acquisition of another (Al-Batal and Glakas 2018; S'hiri 2013a; Trentman 2011). The minimal research conducted into Arabic teachers' beliefs suggests that, for some, RVs hold a stigma (Al-Mohsen 2016; Soliman and Towler 2023; Zakhir and O'Brien 2019), which needs to be investigated in greater depth. It is outside of the scope of this research to explore tutors' beliefs; however, it must be noted that these perceptions can impact the approach taken to TASL.

HE context

Discussions on standard vs non-standard language use and which variety should be included in second language (L2) courses take place in all language departments, including, to name a few, French (Chapelle 2020; Wernicke 2020), German (Criser and Knott 2019; Ruck 2020) and English as a lingua franca (Mısır and Gürbüz 2021; Mohr et al. 2019), due to the need for learners to acquire authentic language. To reflect this development in the UK HE context, the *Subject Benchmark Statement for Languages, Cultures and Societies* (Quality Assurance Agency 2023) now explicitly states that courses need to include the development of communication strategies, including the sociolinguistic contexts of language use, and an awareness of different language varieties. It further reads that 'courses may include content on sociolinguistics which affords deep insight into real acts of communication' (Quality Assurance Agency 2023: 8). In the current paper, I suggest that, in the specific case of Arabic, given its unusual language situation, sociolinguistics should form a crucial element of the curriculum. At the undergraduate degree level, students require a theoretical understanding of the L2 in which they are specialising; 'undergraduate education involves exposing students for a while to the experience of enquiry into something in particular, but enquiry which has no external goal other than improving the understanding of that subject-matter' (Collini 2012: 56). When discussing L2s, Collini (2012) states that this differentiates a university degree from a course at a language centre, where learners focus primarily on acquiring practical L2 skills. A broader understanding of language use is particularly important for Arabic, given the complexity of its linguistic context.

Dickins and Watson (2006) identified only one UK HEI implementing the IA, while the other HEIs were solely teaching MSA. The situation has changed somewhat since then; the British Academy's *Language Pilot Project: Arabic Language Provision in the UK* (2018) found that three of the nine English HEIs offering degree courses with a major component in Arabic include RVs as part of their curriculum, which could suggest that more has been done to incorporate language diversity into the Arabic classroom. These studies, however, do not explore in detail the extent to which language variation is perceived and understood by students.

Related studies

To ensure that courses are responding to a genuine need, it is worth considering students' perspectives, even if this is not the sole determining factor in the approach taken – HEIs have to meet the requirements of what is expected from a degree-level course rather than deferring solely to student expectation. However, learners' experiences need to be considered alongside academic research to help future students to achieve their aims. There is, to date, minimal research on students' experiences of learning Arabic in the UK context. US studies have conducted quantitative surveys on the reasons for which students are learning Arabic, and a clear majority want to use the L2 to interact with speakers and travel to the Arab world (see Belnap 2006; Husseinali 2006; Palmer 2007). Further research (Al-Mamari 2011; Hashem-Aramouni 2011) supports the notion that students want RVs to play a larger role in their Arabic language courses. Studies with a majority of US respondents have moved away from the question of *why* students are learning Arabic to whether and when RVs should be introduced

on courses; that research shows support from students for RVs to be included in the university syllabus from the beginning of courses (Al-Batal and Glakas 2018; Isleem 2018; Zaki and Palmer 2018).

More recently, studies have demonstrated the ability of learners to develop the conversation strategies used by L1 speakers when they acquire an RV in addition to MSA (Nassif and Al Masaeed 2022; Nassif and Basheer 2022; Trentman 2017b; Trentman and Shiri 2020). For example, Nassif and Basheer (2022) analysed oral and written productions of advanced learners of Arabic who received multidialectal training at some point in their courses to assess their sociolinguistic competence. They found that MSA was the predominant variety used in written production and formal speech, and that all participants showed sociolinguistic awareness of the most appropriate variety for informal contexts. Nassif and Basheer's study (2022) also adds to the growing body of literature in the wider field of second language acquisition (SLA) that recognises the importance of explicit classroom instruction to enable learners to develop sociolinguistic competence in other L2s, including English as a lingua franca (Taguchi and Ishihara 2018), Spanish (Sarrio 2019), and French (French and Beaulieu 2016, 2020; van Compernelle 2019; van Compernelle and Williams 2012, 2013).

Al Masaeed (2020) investigates multidialectal and multilingual practices from the perspective of translanguaging in conversations between L2 Arabic learners and their L1 Arabic conversation partners during a study abroad programme in Morocco. Al Masaeed (2020) found that, despite the monodialectal and monolingual language policy at their HEI, participants did practise multidialectal and multilingual translanguaging when interacting with L1 Arabic speakers. While MSA is the main variety spoken, translanguaging is the sociolinguistic norm, with alternations between MSA and the RV being more frequent than those between Arabic and English. This reflects L1 Arabic speakers' conversation strategies and adds to the body of research showing that L2 learners can acquire diglossic language skills (Nassif and Al Masaeed 2022; Nassif and Basheer 2022; Trentman 2017b; Trentman and Shiri 2020).

Studies in the UK context

Research into TASL in England is minimal. Soliman (2014) conducted a needs analysis at the University of Manchester to investigate the reasons why students were learning Arabic and whether they valued acquiring RVs. Her results showed, similar to US studies (e.g. Belnap 2006; Husseinali 2006; Palmer 2007), that speaking and understanding Arabic was the highest priority for students, who expressed a strong interest in interacting with L1 speakers and understanding culture and media. Further research is needed to investigate how students perceive the language situation and how they benefit from courses.

Soliman and Towler (2023) investigated UK teachers' perceptions of utilising RVs in the classroom. The study resulted in a set of guidelines to help teachers to raise awareness of the sociolinguistic nature of the L2 in addition to familiarising learners with the differences and similarities among the RVs; it emphasises the importance of introducing language variation to learners. Investigating how this can be achieved in the HE context is crucial.

The minimal research conducted to date highlights the fact that L2 Arabic learners need to be made aware of the MSA-RV continuum and multidialectal practices (Al Masaeed 2020, 2022; Al Masaeed, Taguchi, and Tamimi 2020) in order to communicate competently in varied contexts (e.g. Nassif and Basheer 2022; Trentman and Shiri 2020). Whilst previous research suggests that students can develop diglossic communication strategies (e.g. Nassif and Al Masaeed 2022; Nassif and Basheer 2022; Trentman and Shiri 2020), this study adds a different perspective, by asking how students perceive the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage. The extent of their sociolinguistic awareness needs to be investigated to identify whether they are developing a theoretical understanding of this reality.

Materials and methods

This study was part of a larger project investigating how Arabic is taught at undergraduate degree level, drawing on students' and tutors' beliefs in addition to tutors' classroom practices (Towler

2021). The current study focuses solely on students’ perspectives of language variation through the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1 How do students perceive the integration of Arabic regional varieties into undergraduate degree courses?
- RQ2 How are students experiencing using the variety/ies currently acquired on their undergraduate degree courses in practice?
- RQ3 From students’ perspectives, are undergraduate degree courses preparing them for the socio-linguistic reality of Arabic usage?

As mentioned above, it has been found that in the case of Arabic courses at most HEIs in England, RVs have not been incorporated into the curriculum. Given the complex language situation, it is important to analyse students’ views in greater depth to ensure that they are being provided with an understanding of the sociolinguistic nature of authentic Arabic usage. For the current study, an explanatory mixed-methods design has been adopted to investigate students’ perspectives over two phases of data collection. The first phase comprised an online questionnaire and, as in an explanatory design, after analysing the data from the questionnaires, student interviews were conducted to help explain and increase the validity of results (see Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). RQ1 and RQ3 draw on the quantitative and qualitative datasets, but RQ2 solely utilises the qualitative data, because it was deemed the most suitable way to investigate participants’ individual experiences of learning Arabic.

Research context and participants.

The current study targeted the nine universities in England offering undergraduate degree courses with a major Arabic component (see Table 3).

An email was sent to gatekeepers at each university to request participation. Eight responded favourably and the link to the online questionnaire was sent to 513 Arabic language students with a follow-up email sent out during the following week. As shown in Table 4, the survey was completed by 122 respondents from those HEIs spread across all years of study (Years 1 to 4) – a response rate of 23.8%.

In the questionnaire, students were asked to provide their email addresses if they agreed to participate in the follow-up interviews; 44 participants responded favourably to this and provided their contact details. After analysing the results of the survey, these students were sent an email request to be interviewed through Skype. As in a mixed-methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011), the datasets were linked through sampling, so that the interview participants were selected from those who responded to the questionnaire. It was hoped to interview two final-year students from each university in order to benefit from the experience of their entire degree course. However, an insufficient number of final-year students were identified from the data; 21.3% (26) of respondents were in their final year of study, and only ten of them expressed interest in a follow-up study. Therefore, 15 respondents from all levels of university study were interviewed about their experiences of Arabic language variation at university (see Table 5).

Table 3. The nine English HEIs identified as offering undergraduate degree courses with a major component of Arabic.

HEIs	
University of Cambridge	University of Central Lancashire
University of Durham	University of Exeter
University of Leeds	SOAS, University of London
University of Manchester	University of Oxford
University of Westminster	

Table 4. Survey respondents.

HEI	Number of survey respondents	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Non-Arab	Of Arab origin (parents)	Of Arab origin (not including parents)	Arab	Muslim	Non-Muslim	Prefer not to say
HEI1	17	12	5		8	3	6	3	12	4		1	9	8	
HEI2	7	1	6		3	4			6	1			2	5	
HEI3	15	10	5		3	2	4	6	13	2			7	8	
HEI4	21	15	6		11	7		3	20		1		1	19	1
HEI5	13	11	2		3	1	5	4	12	1			2	11	
HEI6	6	2	4		3	2	1		5		1		2	4	
HEI7	20	15	4	1	6	5	1	5	17	1		2	5	14	1
HEI8	13	10	3		6	5	1	1	12	1			1	12	
HEI not disclosed	10	6	4			4	2	4	9	1			5	4	1
Total participants	122	82	39	1	43	33	20	26	106	11	2	3	34	85	3

Table 5. Interview participants.

Interview participant	HEI	Gender	Year of study	Year abroad destinations	Travel	Background	Religion	Prior exposure	Transcript number
Beatrice	HEI1	Female	Four	Morocco		Non-Arab	Non-Muslim	No	T1
Louisa	HEI1	Female	Two	n/a		Non-Arab	Non-Muslim	No	T13
Elizabeth	HEI2	Female	Three	Morocco		Non-Arab	Muslim	Through religion	T6
Anne	HEI3	Female	Four	Morocco	Egypt	Non-Arab	Muslim convert	Through Egyptian husband	T5
Henrietta	HEI3	Female	Four	Morocco		Non-Arab	Non-Muslim	No	T12
Diana	HEI4	Female	Four	Oman		Non-Arab	Non-Muslim	No	T3
Charles	HEI4	Male	Four	Morocco	Jordan & Egypt	Non-Arab	Non-Muslim	No	T4
Sophia	HEI4	Female	Two	No	Palestine	Non-Arab	Non-Muslim	No	T8
Eugenie	HEI5	Female	Four	Jordan	Morocco & Egypt	Non-Arab	Non-Muslim	No	T9
James	HEI5	Male	Four	Jordan	Oman, Palestine, Egypt & Morocco	Non-Arab	Non-Muslim	No	T15
George	HEI6	Male	Three	Jordan	Morocco, Oman, Palestine & Egypt	Non-Arab	Non-Muslim	No	T11
Amelia	HEI7	Female	Four	Morocco	Palestine	Non-Arab	Non-Muslim	No	T7
Victoria	HEI7	Female	Two	n/a	Egypt & Tunisia	Non-Arab	Non-Muslim	No	T10
Alexandra	HEI7	Female	Four	Palestine		Non-Arab	Non-Muslim	No	T14
Phillip	HEI8	Male	Four	Morocco	Jordan, Tunisia & Lebanon	Non-Arab	Non-Muslim	No	T2

Ethical considerations

Each respondent was asked for consent prior to their participation, 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 (2015).

Questionnaire procedures

For the first phase, an online questionnaire was developed and used to collect responses from student participants. The questionnaire covered the reasons why participants decided to learn Arabic and their experiences in speaking the language, both within the academic institution and in practice (see Appendix), and consisted principally of multiple-choice questions to facilitate data collection and analysis. A five-point Likert scale was used for consistency with existing research in the field (Belnap 2006; S'hiri 2013a). There was also the option to provide further comments and some open-ended questions which gave participants the opportunity to provide more detail. The survey was based on similar questionnaires (Belnap 2006; Husseinali 2006; S'hiri 2013a), and its large scope was intended to complement the little research that has been conducted in England (i.e. Soliman 2014). The questionnaire was piloted to enhance quality and validity by being sent to a HEI outside of England, as well as to former Arabic language students known personally to the researcher. After piloting the questionnaire, the researcher made amendments to a few of the questions which could have confused participants, and the online link was distributed to the gatekeepers cited above.

Interview procedures

Semi-structured interviews were chosen due to their relatively informal style, fluid and flexible structure, and because knowledge is constructed as opposed to being simply excavated (see Mason 2002). Semi-structured interviews are appropriate for this research because knowledge was sought of participants' individual experiences in learning Arabic. Despite seeming to be a conversation with purpose to the interviewee, interviews were planned, and the key themes for discussion

established from the theory and analysis of the survey data, so that relevant data could be generated (Mason 2002). Written notes were referred to during the interviews to prompt questions.

Data analysis

Due to utilising mixed-methods research, analytical techniques were applied to both the quantitative and qualitative data, as well as mixing the two forms of data to answer the mixed-methods questions. The raw data from questionnaires was initially converted by scoring each response and creating variables, and the descriptive statistics for these variables were examined. The qualitative sections of the questionnaire were coded, divided into small units, assigned a label and grouped into themes. The themes were grouped into larger dimensions and related or compared. After analysing the data from the questionnaires, the student interviews were conducted to help explain and increase the validity of the results, as is usual in an explanatory design. Thematic analysis was conducted through Tesch's eight steps of coding (see Creswell 2009). A codebook was developed using open coding techniques to include a concrete definition and example quotation from the data to ensure consistency (Creswell 2014); data were continually compared with the codes to ensure definitions remained consistent. Due to resource constraints, it was not possible to obtain a second researcher to establish inter-rater reliability. Therefore, a sole researcher pursued multiple stages of cross-data checking, and the thematic analysis was conducted twice. This was done by coding emergent themes as part of the larger research project and, following the completion of that project (2021), the transcriptions were coded separately for the purposes of this study (2023). These two data sets were then crosschecked to ensure that the findings were as accurate as possible, and any inconsistencies were eliminated by revisiting the transcripts.

After the data were analysed, merged data analysis strategies were utilised to answer the mixed-methods questions. Tables were utilised as joint displays by extracting scores from the quantitative data and integrating them with the relevant themes from the qualitative data to inform a side-by-side combination of the two databases (Creswell and Creswell 2023). This joint interpretation of the qualitative and quantitative results informed the meta-inferences, the conclusions drawn from the insight emerging from comparing the two datasets (Creswell and Creswell 2023). A side-by-side comparison for merged data analysis was used within the study by presenting the quantitative and qualitative findings together in a discussion for easy comparison.

Validity threats were minimised during data analysis by using appropriate merged data strategies, such as the joint display and side-by-side comparison mentioned above. Quotations from the qualitative data that match the statistical results were used so that comparisons were logical. Data transformation was kept straightforward, and procedures were used to enhance the validity of transformed scores, such as member-checking, the triangulation of data from several sources and reporting disconfirming evidence. Participant and institution names were anonymised to ensure that their contributions remained confidential; the interview participants were assigned pseudonyms and the survey respondents were numbered.

Results

Table 6 details the approaches taken to teaching Arabic language varieties at eight of the nine English HEIs offering undergraduate degrees with a major component in Arabic included in this research. At the majority of these HEIs, RVs are only included in preparation for or as part of the year abroad. Only two HEIs teach RVs as credit-bearing modules, and one does not include any instruction at all on RVs. The findings from data collection have been separated below into the three main themes identified to answer the RQs for this study: students' perceptions of the integration of RVs into undergraduate degree courses, students' experiences using the variety/ies currently acquired on their undergraduate degree courses, and students' perspectives on whether undergraduate degree courses are preparing them for the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage.

Table 6. The varieties included in undergraduate degree courses at each HEI.

HEI	Approach taken	When the RVs are introduced	Varieties taught	Year abroad	Year abroad destinations	RV use in courses
HEI1	MSA-only	n/a	n/a	Optional in 3rd year	Morocco/ Jordan	RVs may not be used in classes or examinations.
HEI2	MSA-plus RV abroad	RV is taught during the year abroad.	Moroccan/ Jordanian	Compulsory in 3rd year	Morocco/ Jordan	RVs may not be used in examinations at HEI in England.
HEI3	MSA-plus RV abroad	RV is taught during the year abroad.	Moroccan	Compulsory in 2nd year	Morocco	RVs may not be used in classes or examinations at HEI in England.
HEI4	MSA-plus RV abroad	Egyptian module was discontinued. RV is taught during the year abroad.	Jordanian	Compulsory in 2 nd year	Jordan, Morocco, Lebanon, Oman.	RVs may be used in classes but not in examinations..
HEI5	MSA-plus RV abroad	RV is taught during the year abroad.	Jordanian	Compulsory in 2nd year	Jordan	RVs may be used in classes and examinations at HEI in England.
HEI6	MSA-plus RV abroad	RV module in 2nd year in preparation for the year abroad.	Syrian	Optional in 3rd year	Students may choose any Arab country.	RVs may not be used in MSA classes at HEI in England.
HEI7	MSA-first	RV modules in second year.	Egyptian and Levantine are compulsory in 2nd year. Students may speak in any RV following the year abroad.	Compulsory in 3rd year	Students may choose any Arab country.	In 2nd year RVs are formally introduced and may be used throughout the course for speaking.
HEI8	IA	MSA and RVs taught side-by-side from day one.	Egyptian Arabic (prior to 2016 Levantine was the variety taught at the HEI).	Compulsory in 3rd year	Students may choose any Arab country.	From day one an RV is introduced for speaking and listening and students may speak in an RV throughout the course. Students choose the RV to speak in following the year abroad.

Students' perceptions of the integration of RVs into undergraduate degree courses

The importance of learning RVs

In the survey, students were asked how important it is to learn an RV. 85.1% viewed it as being important, with 47.1% rating it as extremely important and 38% as somewhat important (see Figure 1). This highlights how highly students value acquiring RVs and suggests that, in support of previous studies (Al-Batal and Glakas 2018; Al-Mamari 2011; Hashem-Aramouni 2011; Isleem 2018; Soliman 2014; Zaki and Palmer 2018), acquiring RVs is a popular aspect of learning the L2. The qualitative interviews sought to better understand the reasons for this, as discussed below.

All interview participants expressed a desire to acquire an RV, even if they believed it should not form a component of their courses. Two students stated they wanted to learn an RV after their degree due to the need to focus on MSA for the purposes of their examinations:

I was examined like that and we don't do dialect in [place of study] so I knew it's only for me anyway. When I'm done with Arabic, when I know that I have a nice high level anyway, I want to know at least one dialect (T1, Beatrice).

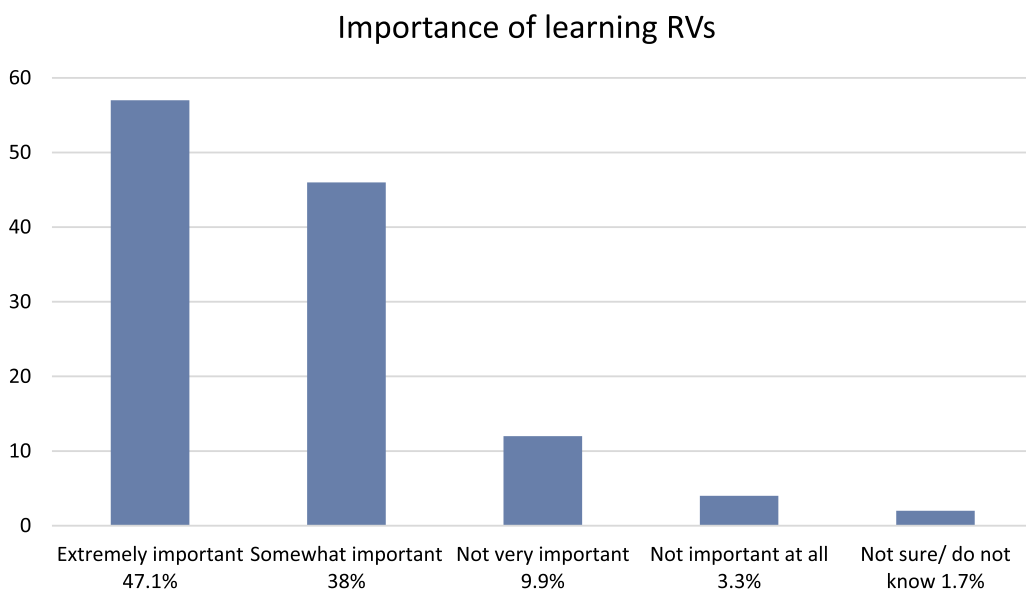


Figure 1. Responses to question 18, 'How important is it to you to learn a regional Arabic dialect?'.

This need to focus on MSA for the purposes of the degree course is reflected in other comments made by students studying at HEIs that do not support the use of the RV following the year abroad: two students, who had acquired an RV during the year abroad, felt the need to 'unlearn' it when they returned to their HEI in England, because they would be penalised for using it in their examinations (see [Table 7](#)). This can be considered a hinderance to their progress in developing authentic communication skills.

Seven respondents stated that it was their first-hand experiences in communication that highlighted to them the importance of acquiring an RV:

I think the very little limited experience I have had trying to speak to Arab speakers is that you know fusha is quite limiting [...] to be able to work and function in that environment you need to know the dialect (T8, Sophia).

Sophia, who has not yet been on her year abroad but has travelled to the Arabic-speaking world, stated that, due to her experience of using Arabic in practice, she believes that solely learning MSA is limiting; this was also stated by students in US studies (see [Huntley 2018](#); [Al-Batal and Glakas 2018](#); [S'hiri 2013a](#)). This further supports the importance of acquiring an RV for communication.

Not all learners' experiences abroad made them want to learn the RV of their host country: Anne was taught the Moroccan variety during the first month, but she felt it was 'a waste of time' because she would not use it (T5). Despite already speaking the Egyptian variety, some knowledge of the Moroccan variety would have helped her to understand the Moroccan variety during her year abroad and expand her knowledge of language diversity. However, because she speaks the Egyptian variety, her experiences reflect those of inter-Arab communication; Moroccan speakers use accommodation strategies when conversing with speakers of other RVs ([S'hiri 2013b](#)), so Anne's Egyptian variety can be viewed, at least potentially, as facilitating authentic communication.

[Table 7](#) has been adapted from the joint display used during the data analysis. The results from both datasets highlight the fact that, whilst students' experiences using the RV in practice help them to appreciate the importance of learning RVs, this realisation is reinforced when they take it upon themselves to better understand the language situation (see 'Students' perspectives on whether undergraduate degree courses are preparing them for the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage').

Table 7. Joint display of the importance of learning RVs.

Theme	Quantitative scores	Qualitative follow-up themes	Metainferences
The importance of learning RVs	Extremely important 47.1%	Importance increases due to experiences in communication (T7; T3; T6; T15; T9; T12; T8). Importance increases when students research the language situation (T7; T2; T9; T14; T15).	Students who have first-hand experience using the L2 highly value learning the RVs; this increases when coupled with a deeper understanding of the L2.
	Somewhat important 38%	Important but not as part of degree course (T1; T13).	Because students are examined in MSA it is easier to focus on that variety (T1; T13); this is also evidenced through students feeling the need to 'unlearn' the RV following the year abroad (T12; T6).
	Not very important 9.9%	Already speak an RV (T5; T2).	Students may feel little motivation to acquire an additional RV.
	Not important at all 3.3%	Gaps in sociolinguistic knowledge (T4; T7; T11; T15; T1).	Certain misconceptions can influence how students view learning an RV.
	Not sure/ do not know 1.7%		Understanding the language situation does not form a compulsory part of courses.

When to acquire an RV?

In the questionnaire, when respondents were asked if they would like to be taught RVs prior to studying abroad, the majority selected 'yes' (63.6%) and only 12.3% 'no' (see [Figure 2](#)). Although this does not account for their awareness of any potential difficulty involved, similar to US studies (Al-Batal and Glakas 2018; Isleem 2018; Zaki and Palmer 2018), the quantitative data indicate support from a majority of students to be taught an RV from the early stages of their studies. Disagreement voiced in the questionnaires about learning an RV before the year abroad came from students at all HEIs, from varied year groups and approaches.

T-tests were conducted to investigate whether the experience of the year abroad affected the answers to question 19. The responses to this question were broken down into two groups of students, those who had been on the year abroad (Group A – 77 students) and those who had not (Group B – 44 students). The *p*-value of the *t*-test was 0.73, meaning that no statistically significant difference was found between these two groups. Therefore, they were further analysed based on groups of students who had travelled to the Arabic-speaking world, whether that was or was not part of their year abroad (Group 1–85 students), vs those who had not travelled to an Arabic-

Do you think students should be taught a regional Arabic dialect before the year abroad?

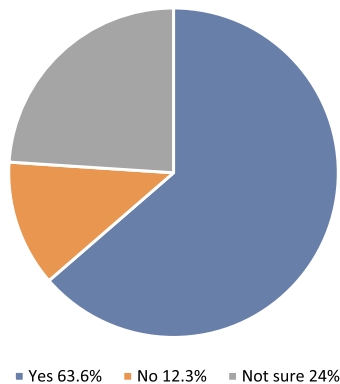


Figure 2. Answers to question 19, 'Do you think students should be taught a regional Arabic dialect before the year abroad?'.

speaking country at all (Group 2–36 students). The p -value of this test was 0.17, meaning that again, no statistically significant difference was found between these two groups. This supported the need for further investigation through the qualitative interviews.

Phillip stated in the questionnaire that he did not agree that students needed to learn an RV prior to travelling abroad. However, upon reflecting during the interview on his experience, it became clear that he was undecided. When asked why he thought students did not need to learn the RV first, he responded:

I said that? Maybe, I don't know, it's difficult. At [HEI8], we study the Levantine dialect so from that aspect it was harder for me because I had to start from the beginning again when I went to Morocco. But, at the same time, thanks to this experience, I got to know the Levantine variety, so I don't know (T2, Phillip).

This suggests that there is more to learn when the student is taught a different RV to their host country, but it is beneficial in the long run (see Table 8). During his year abroad, Phillip acquired Moroccan Arabic; as a less-widely understood variety, Moroccan speakers have to amend their speech for intra-Arabic communication more than speakers of other varieties (Chakrani 2015; Hachimi 2013; S'hiri 2013b). Phillip clarified that he understands the other varieties with ease and has a clearer distinction in his mind between MSA and RVs due to having to modify his speech more than those who studied in the Levant.

Some of the quantitative data showing reluctance to learn an RV prior to the year abroad could have come from heritage learners who can already speak an RV. However, no learners of Arab origin expressed an interest in a follow-up study, and only 10.7% of survey respondents were of Arab origin (see Table 4). Whilst it could be that they chose not to participate in the survey, it could also suggest that the majority of Arabic learners at UK HEIs are non-heritage, further supporting the importance of raising awareness of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage during courses.

A strong foundation in MSA

Recent studies show student support for RVs to be integrated into the university curriculum from the beginning of courses (Al-Batal and Glakas 2018; Isleem 2018; Zaki and Palmer 2018). In this study, similar to that of Hashem-Aramouni (2011), seven students supported building a strong foundation in MSA before moving on to learning an RV (see Table 8). The majority of participants in Al-Batal's (2018) volume were at HEIs utilising the IA, so they could be more comfortable with that approach – the stance of the HEI could influence students' views on when to introduce the RV. The two students interviewed from HEI1, the only HEI taking an MSA-only approach, did not view learning RVs as an important part of their studies. An additional five students interviewed, all of whom had learnt Arabic through the MSA-plus RV abroad approach, suggested that it is

Table 8. Joint display of when to acquire RVs.

Theme	Quantitative scores	Qualitative follow-up themes	Metainferences
When to acquire an RV	Prior to the year abroad (63.6%)	Sociolinguistic understanding (T7; T2; T9; T14; T15) Aids communication (T11; T7; T14; T4) Additional RV module (T6; T15; T9; T12; T8)	Many students who have first-hand experience using the L2 highly value learning the RVs. This increases when coupled with a deeper understanding of the L2. Many students would like the option to acquire an RV through an additional module prior to travelling abroad.
	Not prior to the year abroad (12.3%)	A strong foundation in MSA (T1; T7; T3; T4; T5; T6; T8) Duplicating learning (T2; T3)	Many students support developing a strong foundation in MSA prior to acquiring an RV. Students may feel little motivation to learn an RV which is different to the destination of their year abroad when they will also need acquire that variety.
	Undecided (24%)	Gaps in sociolinguistic knowledge (T4; T7; T11; T15; T1)	A lack of awareness of the sociolinguistic situation influences students' views on learning RVs.

important first to gain a solid grounding in MSA before moving on to learning an RV. Those five students recommended having an RV module in the second year, similar to that on offer at HEI6 and HEI7:

At the beginning of year two there should be an optional module for dialects [...]; this first introduces for everyone, and you tell them that you're gonna [*sic*] go to a module depending on what country you decide to go to. And then you tell them about the different dialects, you let them listen to it. So, they're introduced to whatever, then after that, you just start from the basics (T6, Elizabeth).

Elizabeth's point supports raising awareness of all Arabic varieties. Most HEIs offer a range of year abroad destinations (see Table 6), so it may not be practical to offer a different module for each variety. However, raising awareness of all varieties can help learners to understand authentic communication and hence the importance of speaking any variety of Arabic. Elizabeth's point also supports the importance of learning MSA first, as she believes the RV should be taught in the second year, after acquiring MSA in the first. Charles also expressed an opinion on why he believes MSA should be acquired first:

If we started with fusha, dialect is easier than fusha, but if we start with dialects then move to fusha, I think it would be harder to learn grammar. There are more difficulties with fusha than dialects so I'm happy we started with fusha. I think this has given me a good base to work from for the future so I can then pick up any dialect (T4, Charles).

Charles stated that he prefers to learn what he views as the more advanced aspects of the language towards the start of the course. But James views this as 'a backward way of teaching a language [...] they are trying to teach you a really high-level language before they have even taught you how to have basic dialogue' (T15), which is an argument quoted in favour of learning through the IA: it allows for a more natural acquisition process (Al-Batal 2018; Younes 2015).

Four students who had received RV instruction from their HEIs appreciated having the opportunity to learn them because it facilitated communication during the year abroad:

If I hadn't done that module in Syrian dialect, I think I would have been a lot more stuck when I got to Jordan than I was (T11, George).

Amelia was very grateful to have the in-depth knowledge of MSA received from her HEI and the opportunity to learn multiple RVs before going to the Arab world (T7). In addition to four students expressing the view that it is invaluable to be exposed to the RV prior to the year abroad, students also highly valued their MSA skills, discussed further below. Two students who learnt RVs during their studies in the Arabic-speaking world were disappointed that they lost the progress they had made in the RV once returning to the UK (see Table 7). As mentioned above, this brings into question the usefulness of acquiring an RV abroad when it may need to be 'unlearnt' for the purposes of a student's university course. Although these students could continue to practise RVs through self-study, other commitments might make this difficult, or they could find it difficult to access suitable material for their level.

Students' experiences using the variety/ies currently acquired on their undergraduate degree courses in practice.

The interviews provided participants with the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences using Arabic in practice. Table 9 has been adapted from the codebook and details the emerging codes related to students' experiences in communication.

Varieties used abroad

When asked which varieties they used during their time abroad, only Beatrice, HEI1, said she drew solely on MSA:

Table 9. Extract from the codebook on students' experiences in communication.

Sub-theme	Code	Code description	Evidenced in transcripts
Variety used abroad	MSA only	Students stating that they only used MSA during the year abroad.	T1
	Changed their minds	Students who intended to speak MSA only but changed their minds upon arrival to the Arab world.	T12; T6
	Code-switching	Students stating that they code-switched during their year abroad.	T12; T11; T7; T6; T14
	A different variety to host country	Students stating that they opted to use a different variety to their host country during their year abroad.	T4; T2; T11; T5
	Different varieties in different countries	Students stating that they used different varieties in different countries, e.g. MSA in one country and a dialect in another.	T4; T15; T11; (T9 – chose not to speak in Egypt & Morocco due to the RV)
	MSA for clarity	Students used MSA so L1 speakers would understand them.	T7
	Avoiding speaking Arabic	Students who decided not to speak Arabic during their year abroad because they were concerned about not understanding the RV.	T3; T9
Students' views on their skills	Strong base in MSA	Students stating that their strong base in MSA aided communication abroad.	T7; T15
	Comprehension difficulties	Students stating that they found it difficult to understand L1 Arabic speakers during their year abroad.	T6; T11; T9
	RV skills valued	Students stating that they were grateful to have acquired RV skills prior to the year abroad.	T11; T4; T7; T14
	Ashamed of code-switching	Students expressing shame at code-switching.	T1; T12; T11; T7; T6; T14
How language use was received by L1 speakers	Laughed at	Students stating that they were laughed at when they spoke in MSA during the year abroad.	T6; T4; T8; T9; T10; T14; T3
	Admiration	Students stating that L1 speakers complimented and admired their MSA skills.	T1; T9

I used a little bit of fusha, yeah actually mostly fusha. I tried not to get any /de.ɪdʒa/ [Moroccan] 'cause I was afraid I might mix it with fusha (T1, Beatrice).

Beatrice stated that, for the purposes of her degree course, she did not want to acquire any of the Moroccan RV as she did not want to 'mix it' with MSA, adding that it would negatively impact her grades. Two students stated that they intended to use MSA only, for the purposes of their degree, but changed their minds upon arrival, when they experienced the language situation first-hand:

When we got there, I tried to speak MSA because that's all I knew. But it was quite difficult [...] The majority do understand MSA [...], but they don't actually respond in that MSA. They will speak back to you in /de.ɪdʒa/ [Moroccan]. So, [...] a majority of the time like day-to-day life I tried to speak /de.ɪdʒa/ [Moroccan] with the locals and any Moroccans that I came across. But when you actually got to having a conversation with anyone it was a bit more difficult so it would go back to me speaking MSA and them responding in /de.ɪdʒa/ [Moroccan] (T12, Henrietta).

Six students seemed ashamed of code-switching (see Table 9), despite L1 Arabic speakers communicating that way themselves (Abu-Melhim 2014; Soliman 2014).

Four learners who had travelled to more than one Arabic-speaking country, noticed differences between how the varieties were received in each location:

My Arabic in Morocco, or because of my ammiyyah I had learnt was Levantine, I mean, it was pretty much redundant there. Because, I mean, if someone knew MSA they would speak to me in MSA [...] in Egypt maybe a little more MSA [than in Oman and Palestine] or sometimes for my understanding, I realised that they adjusted how they spoke, so it was more MSA. But yes, in general, I used the [Levantine] ammiyyah (T11, George).

Three additional students interviewed for this study stated they benefited from being able to speak an RV even when it was not their host country's variety:

In the beginning, I used the Levantine dialect to communicate with people, before I learnt the Moroccan variety. The Levantine variety is very well understood (T2, Phillip).

In Jordan, it was easier to speak with people [in the Egyptian variety] than in Morocco, because I think the Egyptian accent is closer to the Jordanian (T4, Charles).

Similar to how L1 Arabic speakers remain in their own RV as a base for intra-Arabic communication (Soliman 2012, 2014), this suggests that when they have the choice, L2 speakers opt for the RV. Charles' experience supports communicating in MSA being just as useful for the L2 speaker, as he had the option to use MSA when he deemed it more suitable. Charles further pointed out how the varieties he spoke were received in different locations, and, hence, the importance of having more than one variety at his disposal. For Charles (T4), MSA was the most useful variety in Morocco, and the RV in Jordan. Amelia clarified that in Morocco before she acquired their RV, it was more effective to draw upon MSA:

Moroccans do definitely understand Egyptian and they understand bits of /ja:mi:/ [Levantine], but it's quite easy for people to misunderstand you, just because [...] the same word would mean different things in different places [...] every now and then in the early days, I would slip into some parts of /ja:mi:/ [Levantine] and a couple of times [...] people really misunderstood me. So, I felt like it was safer just to use the fusha words [...] instead of using /ja:mi:/ [Levantine], because I felt it was easier for them to misunderstand me (T7).

Amelia felt that using MSA facilitated clearer communication. Phillip, HEI8, stated that he used the Levantine variety in Morocco before he acquired the Moroccan variety. This shows how experiences may differ from student to student, but having the choice to select a given variety is empowering.

Students' views on their skills

Similar to how L1 speakers use the MSA root system as a frame of reference for unfamiliar words (Soliman 2012, 2014), two participants emphasised the importance of being able to draw on their strong foundation in MSA:

Having that good base of MSA is definitely a kind of substitute for not having years and years of growing up in a country and learning a whole variety of words for things (T15, James).

This suggests that students view both varieties as useful for communication, with MSA as an important frame of reference when trying to understand Arabic spoken in practice. However, many students still experienced comprehension difficulties during their study abroad, which was raised in three interviews:

They understood what I said. That's always the problem, they understand what you're saying and then 'ba ba ba ba' back at me and you go, 'What? No, I'm sorry I didn't get that'. That's the problem just to make yourself understood. To understand is something completely different (T11, George).

I just remember like hating speaking to people 'cause I just didn't know what anyone was saying (T9, Eugenie).

Even when L1 speakers understand L2 speakers' MSA, they often respond in the RV. Students' responses suggest that their exposure to MSA only did not prepare them fully for the situations of authentic language use they faced abroad. Eugenie 'hating' communicating with Arabic speakers emphasises her frustrations. Two participants stated that they avoided speaking in Arabic during their year abroad because they were concerned that they would not be able to understand the RV.

How language use was received by L1 speakers

Seven students interviewed discussed the issue of Arabic speakers laughing at their Arabic:

Certainly, to begin with, people would laugh at us and be just like why are you speaking in fusha you sound weird or even just, no I don't understand you (T14, Alexandra).

You get one really nice taxi driver and then you get people who just laugh at you, it's really not what you need because they're probably not actually laughing at how crap you are, they're laughing at the fact that you're speaking fusha but you don't know the difference (T9, Eugenie).

L1 Arabic speakers laughing when an L2 learner speaks in MSA has been cited in the literature (S'hiri 2013a; Younes 2015) and discussed among L2 speakers themselves. Learners of other languages are often judged when conversing in an L2 with L1 speakers, and their non-native accents have been cited as a setback, for example, academically, for L2 English speakers (Cadman 2000; Halic, Greenberg, and Paulus 2009; Ridley 2004). The experiences of L2 Arabic learners suggest that they are laughed at for speaking MSA and, when speaking in the RV, this does not happen (Younes 2015). This can lead to learners losing confidence in speaking the L2 and feed their fear of being judged (see Halic, Greenberg, and Paulus 2009). Jaradat and Al-Khawaldeh (2015) state that L1 Arabic speakers admire the MSA of L2 learners; this is supported by two student interviews, which suggests that student experiences can vary depending on the person to whom they are speaking.

Students' perspectives on whether undergraduate degree courses are preparing them for the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage

In the questionnaire, students were asked 'Who or what shaped your opinions about learning a dialect (e.g. university instructors, Arab friends, etc.)?' 30.1% stated it was their tutors, 75.8% the reality of travelling to the Arabic-speaking world or conversing with L1 or L2 Arabic speakers and 8.4% from exposure through the media or their own personal interest (see Figure 3). This was an open-ended question so students could provide more than one answer. These results support findings from previous studies (Al-Mamari 2011; S'hiri 2013a) that a majority of students are unaware of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage until travelling to Arabic-speaking countries:

University professors did not consider it important, however, going to Palestine showed me that I could not speak fusha to people on the street, and I needed to start my learning basically from scratch (R109, 3rd year, HEI7).

Upon commencing my degree, I was under the impression that all Arabs speak and understand fusha, and during first year when I discovered that this was not the case, it was very frustrating to be restricted to only learning fusha (R20, 4th year, HEI3).

There is evidence that a sociolinguistic understanding of Arabic usage can be passed on to learners when their tutors are dedicated to conveying this understanding. One student elaborated in her comment on the questionnaire:

University tutor has a passion for understanding Arabic dialects and allows me to appreciate the linguistic differences in the Arab world (R42, 1st year, HEI3).

R42 is at a HEI taking the MSA-plus RV abroad approach without credit-bearing modules in the RV (see Table 6), but it can be observed from her comment that her tutor is raising awareness on language variation, despite it not being a formal part of the curriculum.

During the interviews, students were provided with the opportunity to elaborate on their sociolinguistic understanding of the language (see Table 10). Most respondents did not understand the term 'diglossia', or they believed it meant the extent of difference between MSA and the RVs. Four students stated 'formal' vs 'informal' language use was discussed in class: two of them were studying at HEI7 where multiple RVs can be acquired, and one said he had benefited from discussions on language variation during an RV course that had since been discontinued (T4, Charles). Even when students stated that it was their HEI raising awareness of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage, it did not mean that there was a specific place on courses to understand the sociolinguistic

Who or what shaped your opinions about learning an RV?

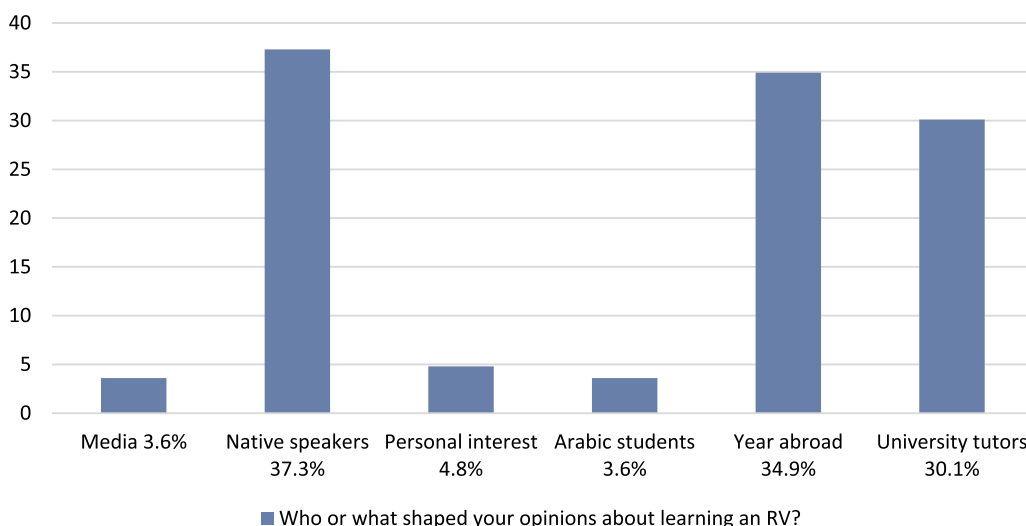


Figure 3. Responses to question 21, 'Who or what shaped your opinions about learning an RV?'.

reality of Arabic diglossia, the existence of multiple RVs and code-switching. One student stated that their tutor helped them to understand the distinction between 'formal and informal' Arabic (T9, Eugenie); another student from the same class stated that whilst it was discussed at the beginning, it was not enough (T15, James). These comments suggest that there is not a formal place on courses for understanding the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage. However, students at universities

Table 10. Joint display on sociolinguistic awareness.

Theme	Survey scores	Qualitative follow-up themes	Meta-inferences
Sociolinguistic awareness	Native speakers 37.3%; Arabic students 3.6%	Authentic speech (T6; T2; T8; T14; T9; T12)	Students' experiences in the Arab world have helped them to acquire an understanding of how Arabic is used in practice. Students code-switch during the year abroad but they do not understand that it is a communicative strategy used by L1 speakers (T12; T7; T6; T11; T14)
	Year abroad 34.9%	Knowledge of RVs	Students' experiences of travelling to multiple countries/ exposure to different RVs through self-study has helped them to identify different RVs (T9; T15; T11; T12; T8; T10). Students at universities including RVs as part of the curriculum obtain this awareness from their courses (T2; T7; T14; T11; T4).
	University tutors 30.1%	Diglossia (T4; T9; T7; T14)	Some tutors have helped their students to understand the H-L dichotomy, but their comments suggest it has not provided a sufficient understanding (T9; T15). Students learning RVs as an assessed part of their courses are more likely to develop a sociolinguistic understanding (T7; T2).
	Personal interest 4.8%	Researching the language situation themselves (T2; T7; T9; T14; T15; T11)	Students may develop unrealistic expectations of language use when a background understanding is not supported through courses (T11; T9).
	Media 3.6%	Common misconceptions (T4; T1; T5; T6; T12; T9)	Solely depending on first-hand exposure to the language situation/ limited coverage in class, has led to gaps in students' sociolinguistic understanding of Arabic usage.

including RVs as an assessed part of the curriculum develop a deeper understanding (i.e. at HEI8, HEI7 and HEI6).

The realisation of the existence of multiple RVs and that MSA is not used in day-to-day conversations came predominantly from travelling abroad (see [Table 10](#)). For six students the awareness developed through courses, or resulting from their first-hand experiences, prompted them to research the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage themselves. Although it did highlight the importance of acquiring RVs, it also meant that they had gaps in their knowledge, which led to further concerns:

It dawned on me at some point during the second year where you're like, God, even when I learned all Arabic, I'll be able to converse with Levantine people, but I might have more trouble with people from the Gulf nations. I have no chance with anyone from Morocco or Tunisia, just have no chance whatsoever. It's quite scary when you think about it because most languages you can learn it a year, two years whereas Arabic, if you really want to really know Arabic and all the branches of it, it's going to take you a very long time. It did dawn on me how big of a task it really is to learn the language because it's more of a group of languages than anything else. [The realisation came as a result of the RV class because] I started looking into it a bit more and then became a bit curious, so I listened to some Moroccan music and what are they saying? (T11, George).

This comment highlights the importance of RVs being supported with background knowledge of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage. Students themselves may not understand how Arabic is used until experiencing it first-hand. However, a sufficient understanding of the linguistic context cannot be developed without specific sessions and related reading allocated to it. Whilst some students demonstrated knowledge of classical diglossia and the existence of multiple RVs, none of them demonstrated an understanding that code-switching is a communicative strategy used by L1 speakers (Abu-Melhim 2014; Bassiouney 2009; S'hiri 2013b), and some were ashamed of code-switching themselves. Students may think that they need to acquire all varieties, a skill that is not achieved by the majority of L1 speakers who primarily remain in their own RVs for cross-dialectal communication (Soliman 2014, 2012). Obtaining only a small piece of the diglossic puzzle can fuel students' concerns and frustrations.

Common misconceptions

The minimal coverage of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage in courses, and a majority of students developing their understanding of the linguistic context as a result of first-hand experiences, can lead to students adopting common misconceptions from the Arabic-speaking world. In the questionnaire R6 stated:

Each dialect is a spoken language and can be easily picked up, unlike fusha which as a mainly written language requires laborious study to fully master. I can learn Gulf Arabic by living in Qatar but I could not learn fusha anywhere except in a university. My opinions were shaped purely by my understanding of the regional diglossia and by the advice of my tutor (R6, 4th year, HEI6).

The above ideas feed into the belief that RVs do not need to be explicitly taught, held among many L1 Arabic teachers (Featherstone 2018; Soliman and Towler 2023). RVs are acquired by L1 speakers as their mother tongues and are not taught as part of their formal education, so it is understandable that many would hold the view that RVs cannot be formally taught. This view was expressed in a further three interviews:

I think it's easier to talk Egyptian on the street because there isn't any 'grammar' (T4, Charles).

If you ask most Moroccans what they think about /de.ɪdʒa/ [Moroccan] they'll be like, 'There's no structure to it', like grammarless but obviously, it does have rules so I think like it's a bit of an interesting one and I feel like maybe our teachers, they weren't trained to teach dialect, they were trained to teach fusha (T7, Amelia).

Amelia further elaborated on this, saying that it was during her year abroad, when she was taught by a teacher with a linguistic understanding of the language, that she learnt to appreciate the RVs as varieties in their own right. This background understanding of the RVs prevented her from adopting the misconception that RVs are 'grammarless'.

Charles was asked about his views on learning to speak an RV from the beginning of a course, instead of MSA, as in the IA, to which he responded:

I'm against the approach of speaking one variety and writing the other. In the future, if those students wish to use their language in an official capacity, they would need to use MSA, as that is the official variety. It really depends on how we wish to use the language, but if someone is learning the language at a university such as [HEI] or [HEI], this points to them wanting to take an academic route. (T4).

The comment suggests that MSA is the 'academic variety', stating that students wishing to speak in MSA are favouring an academic route. James raised this point from the perspective of the HEI during his interview, stating when he said to the head of Arabic studies at his HEI that they wanted more opportunities to speak, they responded:

We are a university, this is an academic course, we are here to teach you read and write MSA and if this doesn't prepare you for life after university, well that is not really our problem (T15).

This is another belief from the Arab world, that education is a field that falls within the domain of MSA (see Soliman and Towler 2023). Further research is needed into language attitudes about Arabic but, for the purposes of this study, it is important to understand how students perceive the language situation. Participant comments suggest that there is no specific place on courses for them to obtain a sociolinguistic understanding of Arabic usage. Students at HEIs that include RVs as a formal part of the curriculum are more likely to obtain this knowledge, in addition to those who are taught by tutors who specialise in sociolinguistics and take it upon themselves to provide learners with an understanding of the sociolinguistic nature of authentic Arabic usage. However, it is still clear from some comments that students have gaps in their knowledge, leading to concerns and frustrations.

Discussion

RQ1. What are students' perspectives on integrating Arabic RVs into undergraduate degree courses?

The quantitative data found that, in support of previous studies (Al-Mamari 2011; Hashem-Aramouni 2011; Soliman 2014), a majority of learners view acquiring RVs as important and believe they should be taught prior to the year abroad. The qualitative data showed that many students support including a module on an RV, which they believe should be introduced after gaining a solid foundation in MSA. This differs from opinions voiced in US studies approaching Arabic through the IA or simultaneous approach, where students are supported in acquiring an RV from the beginning of their studies (Al-Batal and Glakas 2018; Isleem 2018; Zaki and Palmer 2018). However, it is consistent with the views of learners on courses prioritising MSA (Hashem-Aramouni 2011), suggesting that the stance of the HEI can influence the views of students on when to introduce the RV.

The quantitative data suggest that the, albeit minimal, disagreement concerning acquiring RVs prior to the year abroad comes from all year groups and HEIs. However, the results from both datasets found a link between students not only viewing RVs as important following first-hand experience of using the language, but also that a deeper understanding of the L2 leads to a stronger desire to acquire an RV. This supports findings from previous research that during the year abroad learners realise the need to acquire an RV for communication (e.g. Soulaïmani 2019; S'hiri 2013a), but it also highlights the importance of raising awareness of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage (see RQ3).

RQ2. How are students experiencing using the variety/ies currently acquired on their undergraduate degree courses in practice?

Research suggests that the majority of undergraduate degree courses do not prepare students for practically acquiring the language because the variety used for communication, acquired as an L1

throughout the Arabic-speaking world, is not included (Al-Batal 2018; Dickins and Watson 2006; Ryding 2013). Previous studies have researched the development of learners' skills during the year abroad (e.g. Dewey, Belnap, and Hillstrom 2013; S'hiri 2015; Trentman 2017a, 2017b) or shifts in their opinions as a result of their first-hand experiences using the language (e.g. Soulaïmani 2019; S'hiri 2013a). The current study investigates students' views in greater depth and finds many reporting negative experiences of using the language, to the extent that some of them avoid communicating in Arabic during their time abroad. Students can feel confused and frustrated: L1 speakers may laugh at their MSA and, even when they can get their message across, it is challenging to understand L1 speakers' responses. In order to reap the full benefits of the year abroad experience (see Coleman 2013; Trentman 2017a), Arabic learners need to be better prepared for authentic communication.

Students who have received RV instruction skilfully choose the most appropriate variety for the context of language use, which may vary from country to country. These learners feel more confident as they have the option to select which variety to use. Students without RV skills try to acquire as much of the RV as possible during the year abroad to aid communication, some of whom are ashamed of the code-switching to which they resort, despite that being how L1 speakers communicate themselves (Abu-Melhim 2014; Bassiouney 2009). Raising awareness of code-switching would help to alleviate some of this emotional response among learners. Students' descriptions of their communication practices abroad support the findings of other studies (e.g. Nassif and Al Masaeed 2022; Trentman 2017b; Trentman and Shiri 2020), that L2 learners can acquire diglossic language skills. Al Masaeed (2020) found that despite the monolingual policy of their HEI, during their study abroad, L2 speakers frequently code-switch between an MSA and an RV. However, the current study points out that learners at HEIs that do not support RVs have to unlearn the RV upon their return to England and return to speaking in MSA so they are not penalised in examinations, meaning that their progress in developing diglossic language skills is lost. More needs to be done to support the development of students' communication skills when returning from the year abroad so they do not have to unlearn the authentic skills acquired. Prior to travelling abroad, students can be better prepared to improve their experiences so that they do not lose confidence when communicating in the L2 and are adequately equipped to reap the full benefits of the year abroad experience.

RQ3. From students' perspectives, are undergraduate degree courses preparing them for the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage?

In support of previous research (Al-Mamari 2011; S'hiri 2013a), the surveys found that a majority of students develop their views on the language situation through first-hand experience, whether that be during their year abroad or other interactions with L1 speakers. The qualitative interviews provided the opportunity to better understand their sociolinguistic knowledge and found that a majority of students had not developed an understanding of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage. Because it is not sufficiently covered in courses, many students take it upon themselves to research authentic communication, leading to unrealistic expectations about language use, and they develop code-switching skills during the year abroad of which they feel ashamed and which they unlearn for the purposes of their courses. Furthermore, they are at risk of adopting common misconceptions about language use that are not supported by sociolinguistic research. Studies on other L2s (e.g. French and Beaulieu 2016, 2020; Sarrio 2019; Taguchi and Ishihara 2018; van Compernelle 2019) suggest that developing sociolinguistic awareness needs to be addressed through explicit teaching. Due to the unique Arabic language situation, developing a sociolinguistic understanding of Arabic usage is a crucial aspect of learning about the L2. Equipping students with background knowledge of language use would better prepare them for the situations they face abroad, provide the theoretical knowledge required for an undergraduate degree course, and lead to greater transparency about the varieties taught in courses.

Conclusions

This research has revealed that in undergraduate degree courses with a major component in Arabic, students are not prepared fully for the authentic language use they face abroad. More needs to be done both to equip learners with the appropriate skills to deal with authentic language use and to raise their awareness of how the language is used in practice. This acts both to align courses more closely with the Benchmark Statement for Languages (Quality Assurance Agency 2023) and to ensure they reflect the reality of the unique Arabic language situation (see ‘Linguistic context’ above). Students at HEIs that include RVs as a formal part of the curriculum are more likely to obtain this knowledge. However, it is still clear from some comments that even those students have gaps in their knowledge leading to concerns and frustrations. Although the results of this study show that students value acquiring RVs, a greater concern is their lack of understanding of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage. Solely teaching an RV is not enough when understanding sociolinguistic theory is absent from courses. This knowledge should not be a by-product of learning an RV, because communicating in an RV and understanding its background practices are two separate but complementary skills. Furthermore, there is a growing body of research highlighting the importance of explicit instruction on sociolinguistics (e.g. French and Beaulieu 2016, 2020; Sarrio 2019; Taguchi and Ishihara 2018; van Compernelle 2019). Due to the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic diglossia, code-switching and the existence of multiple RVs, it is crucial that this knowledge is transmitted in courses.

TASL is, however, influenced by misconceptions from the Arab world. This can prevent students from gaining an understanding of the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage. Being more open and transparent about how Arabic is used in practice would help to diffuse student frustrations and concerns when coming into contact with authentic communication.

This study has highlighted what students need and deserve to know, drawing on the theory itself in addition to students’ own experiences with the L2. Further research needs to address how these gaps in students’ knowledge can be effectively reconciled with the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic usage in a way that complements and supports their learning of all Arabic varieties.

Limitations

This article covers solely the perspectives of students; for a fuller and fairer understanding of the situation, tutors’ views need to be investigated. The current study shows what students say they believe and their account of their experiences during courses; it could also be that course content is not being fully received or understood by students, which itself warrants deeper investigation in a separate study.

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Appendix. Questions from student questionnaire covered in this study

Part I: personal information

5. What is the name of your current university? (optional)
6. When did you commence your studies in Arabic at this university?
 - ☐ 2011
 - ☐ 2012
 - ☐ 2013
 - ☐ 2014
 - ☐ 2015
 - ☐ Other

Please specify:

7. Have you been to an Arabic-speaking country as part of your course?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No

If yes, please list them:

8. Have you travelled to an Arabic-speaking country independently of this course?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No

If yes, please list them:

9. How many years have you studied Arabic?
 - ☐ 1 year or less
 - ☐ 2–3 years
 - ☐ 4 years
 - ☐ More than 4 years

Part III: learning regional Arabic dialects

16. Can you speak a regional Arabic dialect?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, please state which one(s):

17. Have you learnt a regional Arabic dialect as part of your university course?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, please state which one(s):

18. How important is it to you to learn a regional Arabic dialect?

- ☐ Extremely important
- ☐ Somewhat important
- ☐ Not very important
- ☐ Not important at all
- ☐ Not sure/ do not know

19. Do you think students should be taught a regional Arabic dialect before the year abroad?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ n/a

20. Who or what shaped your opinions about learning a dialect (e.g. university instructors, Arab friends, etc.)?