



On June 29, 2021, the World Bank's report on [Advancing Arabic Language Teaching and Learning: A Path to Reducing Learning Poverty in MENA](#) was launched at an [event](#) hosted by the [Queen Rania Foundation](#). The report identifies and explores the factors related to high learning poverty rates across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, in which more than half of children cannot read and understand an age-appropriate text by age 10. The report also proposes a path to assist MENA countries in their efforts to reduce [learning poverty](#).

In the first of a series of conversations on advancing Arabic language teaching and learning to reduce learning poverty in MENA, the science of learning to read in Arabic, and aspects of the Arabic language that need to be considered in education policy and practice, will be explored. This note summarizes the report's findings and recommendations related to these aspects.

## Findings

The Arabic language can be considered a continuum of forms, from the formal, such as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), to dialects and colloquial Arabic. The "linguistic difference" can create additional challenges for children learning MSA, which is the language of instruction for most MENA children, due to the more complex grammatical system and richer vocabulary, among other differences. Despite limited early exposure to MSA, children are presented with a set of rigid rules to acquire once they start school and are not encouraged to freely use and innovate in MSA, as those learning in other languages are able to do. Often, children receive written instruction in MSA but oral instruction in colloquial forms.

These issues of diglossia are not insurmountable. There is passive exposure to MSA in daily life, including through mass media, parents and caregivers reading to children, and children's entertainment. Greater exposure to MSA in the early years helps the transition to MSA in school. In addition, despite clear differences, there is significant overlap between colloquial forms of Arabic and MSA, not only in terms of exact word matches but also in terms of words that have the same root or similar origin (cognates). While more research is needed, these similarities can be harnessed to support children's learning of MSA through appropriately targeted and sequenced curricula.

The removal of diacritics in around grade 4 or 5 can make it difficult for children to differentiate words that look alike, and the lack of removal can slow a competent reader down. However, not every child in a grade 4 or 5 class would be ready for unvowelized text or would be able to cope with it in all contexts (such as in longer or more difficult texts). Having the move based on skill instead of grade or age, and the option of vowelized text, supports the principals of evidence-based effective instructional practices such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL).

## Recommendations



Define and harness common features and vocabulary between MSA and colloquial forms of Arabic to build a bridge between children's knowledge of colloquial Arabic and learning of MSA.



Explicitly teach links between colloquial and formal Arabic using targeted materials, recognizing the extent of overlap and using this to support children's learning. This includes starting with simple words that are used in MSA and dialects, highlighting common patterns, and explicitly teaching phonemes that exist in MSA.



Expand children's early exposure to MSA, especially vocabulary and syntax, in engaging ways in school and at home. This includes encouraging parents to increase their children's exposure to MSA and to read to their children in MSA from an early age.



In school, explicitly teach sounds, vocabulary, and syntax from MSA that are not found in local colloquial Arabic.



Inside and outside of school, increase children's access to engaging children's literature, cartoons, and children's television programs in MSA.



Implement strategies to bolster children's early oral language development and engagement with literacy activities in MSA, in and out of school.



Enhance comprehension skills (especially higher-order thinking skills) through direct and explicit instructional strategies; for example, daily reading aloud of children's literature in class, more freedom to use "less formal" MSA words, and classroom environments rich in children's literature that appeals to boys and girls.



Delay the move to unvowelized text until developmentally appropriate for each child and give choice across the grades in which children are transitioning. For those who need more support, continue to provide vowelized text.



More research is needed on the degree of overlap between dialects and MSA in each country, and on the implications of these differences for teaching and learning. In addition, more research is needed on appropriate curriculum and pedagogical strategies to support all children to transition to unvowelized text in efforts to move beyond a "one-size-fits-all" response.