Abstract

While more professional development opportunities for teachers of Arabic exist today than in the past, a shortage of training for Arabic-language teachers persists. Further, the field does not have a complete picture of what Arabic teachers feel they need in terms of professional development of knowledge and skills. This study examines professional development opportunities by reviewing program curricula from STARTALK Arabic-teacher training programs. It also explores Arabic teachers’ views on their own training needs using a survey questionnaire. Findings suggest that programs tend to emphasize pedagogical knowledge and skills over content knowledge and that some Arabic teachers approach professional development with the principal goal of gaining knowledge and skills rather than earning a degree or certification.

Introduction

To date, fewer than a half dozen colleges and universities provide training and preparation opportunities for Arabic-language teachers. This situation exists in spite of numerous studies over the past decade reporting that Arabic-language education in the United States has experienced a marked growth at both K–12 and postsecondary levels (Allen
The rapid increase of Arabic enrollments over the past dozen years has highlighted the continuing and growing need for more well-trained Arabic teachers. However, as the number of programs and enrollments in Arabic courses continue to increase, the scarcity of qualified Arabic teachers becomes more apparent. The United States simply lacks the number of skilled teachers of less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) it requires (Ingold and Wang 2010), and Arabic is probably the clearest example of the shortage.

Over the past five years, however, institutions have made efforts to increase professional development opportunities for teachers of some LCTLs, including Arabic. In particular, the STARTALK program has for the past five years served as a unique resource to train teachers of critical languages such as Arabic. Many of STARTALK's programs lead to or facilitate participants' progress toward certification; all programs are designed to ensure high-quality teacher training aligned with field-supported educational best practices. However, while the intensive training programs offered through STARTALK provide an avenue otherwise unavailable to teachers, many STARTALK programs focus on generic principles of language teaching with instruction delivered in English to teachers who are native speakers of a language other than English, in this case, usually Arabic.

The aim of this study is to illustrate the current status of professional development activities within the LCTL teacher community, looking specifically at the professional development experiences of Arabic teachers during the past four years of STARTALK teacher-training programs. While STARTALK has been in implementation for five years and is now entering its sixth year, we examine only the four years between 2008 and 2011, excluding 2007 because data collection procedures on program curricula were under development during that year.

The study asks the following questions:

- What professional development opportunities have STARTALK programs provided?
- What gaps exist?
- What are the perspectives of participants in STARTALK teacher workshops regarding their professional development experiences and needs?
- What implications for improving professional development and training can be drawn from the answers to these questions?

A survey of about twenty-seven teachers of Arabic enrolled in two of the STARTALK programs offered in 2011 addresses the third question.

**LCTL Teachers and Arabic-Language Teachers**

An area of concern in training Arabic teachers and LCTL teachers in general is providing appropriate professional development opportunities that address distinct language-learning needs. LCTL teachers face greater challenges than teachers of more commonly taught languages because LCTLs typically have less in common with English than languages like French, Spanish, and Italian. Early in the history of world language education,
experts identified basic principles for teaching LCTLS. They recognized that the broad-
est challenge facing LCTL teachers is to enable learners "to interact in and with the cul-
ture being studied" (McGinnis 1994; Walker and McGinnis 1995). Scarce resources,
primarily the human resource of qualified instructors, however, remain a key obstacle in
overcoming this challenge. Teachers who are not equipped with adequate professional
training may fall short of the mission of enabling learners to become active participants
in a very different culture. STARTALK, a federally funded initiative established in 2006
designed to increase the nation's capacity in LCTLS, particularly critical languages such as
Arabic and Chinese, seeks to address this challenge head-on. By providing funding for
teacher-training programs and student programs, STARTALK builds and develops the
professional knowledge of LCTL teachers in order to move them from novice to expert
teachers.

Rather than recruiting language teachers from abroad, a strategy that some people
have posed as a potential solution (Van Houten 2009), experts increasingly view training
teachers here in the United States as a more sustainable way to build the supply of
qualified LCTL teachers. Training LCTL teachers includes a combination of theory and
practice that is both language specific and aligned with general principles of effective
teaching (Brecht and Walton 1994; Walker and McGinnis 1995). Effective training
results in teachers who feel that the training has transformed their approach to teaching
and who can apply what they have learned in a variety of contexts (Walker and McGin-
nis 1995; Oleksak 2009). This is particularly true for teachers of LCTLS such as Arabic,
which has been designated as a category IV language by the Defense Language Institute
and a category III language by the Foreign Service Institute. These categories indicate
how difficult a language is and how long it takes for a native speaker of American English
to learn it.

Arabic-Language Education in the United States

Arabic has historically been taught in the United States mainly for scholarly rather than
everyday-life purposes. In the past ten years or more, however, Arabic has been increas-
ingly taught and studied for more functional and practical purposes, prompting a move
from more traditional pedagogical methods (grammar-based) to more communicative
approaches (Ryding 2006, 13–16). This shift calls for a different cadre of teachers pre-
pared to privilege and emphasize spoken Arabic (with its diglossic nature) alongside
Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Preparing teachers to use such a fundamentally dif-
ferent approach remains a challenge to the field since, as Ryding explains, most Arabic
teachers are taught to privilege written Arabic rather than the spoken varieties, which are
viewed as degenerate forms of the source, MSA (2006, 16).

STARTALK Arabic-Teacher Training Programs

STARTALK's core mission is to increase the foreign language capacity of US citizens via
intensive summer programs. These summer programs teach critical languages as well as
train teachers of these languages. From 2008 to 2011 there have been a total of thirty-three STARTALK workshops designed specifically for training Arabic-language teachers, and over 1,130 Arabic teachers across the United States have enrolled in these workshops. The teacher participants have come from K–12 private and public schools as well as undergraduate institutions. While several multilanguage STARTALK teacher-training programs have included Arabic teachers, this study focuses on programs designed for Arabic teachers only and tailored to their particular professional and pedagogical needs.

One of STARTALK's unique features is that it requires program grant awardees to align their program curricula with a set of field-recognized principles and best practices in language education. To that end, it endorses the following six principles that guide the selection of teacher-training workshop topics:

- Implement a standards-based and thematically organized curriculum
- Facilitate a learner-centered classroom
- Use the target language and provide comprehensible input for instruction
- Integrate culture, content, and language in a world language classroom
- Adapt and use age-appropriate authentic materials
- Conduct performance-based assessments

By design, teacher-training programs often provide participants with professional knowledge and experience in relation to these six principles in order to help teachers integrate them into practice. The following sections illustrate to what extent four years of STARTALK programs have addressed these principles in their training of Arabic-language teachers.

**Professional Development Topics**

The first two questions this study poses are the following: What professional development opportunities have STARTALK programs provided? What gaps exist? A close investigation of STARTALK curricular materials responds to these questions. The study includes only curricula for programs that were designed solely for Arabic teachers, and they served as the first source of data for this section.

Program protocols require every STARTALK teacher-training program to follow a template designed by STARTALK that details the components of a workshop curriculum. The template asks programs to describe what participants should know and be able to do by the end of the program. The template also requests a detailed outline of the topics to be addressed in the workshop. A content analysis of the curricula was conducted. Analysis shows that over the past four years, programs offered the following topics:

- National standards/standards-based teaching; the five Cs
- Curriculum design, lesson planning, backward design, thematic unit design
- Language, culture, and content
- Materials design and adaptation
- Second-language acquisition/theory
- Technology in the world-language classroom
- Assessment/oral proficiency interview (OPI)/language testing
- Pathways to certification/certification related
- Observation, practice, microteaching, mentorship
- Language-specific issues
- Instructional strategies and best practices (communicative or learner-centered approach)
- Maintenance of target language/comprehensible input
- Language proficiency/proficiency guidelines
- Other (including heritage-language education and leadership)

Programs are not required to state one topic, although some do. Programs often list multiple topics and themes within the same workshop’s curriculum even if the curriculum indicates that their program has one main topic. For example, a program may state that it focuses on incorporating technology in language teaching, but closer examination of the curriculum reveals that the program also addresses other topics, such as the national standards of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), using authentic materials, or lesson planning. This study looks at curricula for in-depth information about program content, not just a main topic or theme. Figure 1 shows the distribution of topics and their frequency of occurrence over the past four years in STARTALK Arabic-teacher training programs.

Figure 1 captures the frequency with which certain topics were addressed in STARTALK Arabic-teacher training programs. The x-axis details the topics; the y-axis details the number of times programs addressed a particular topic. (There are far fewer indicators in 2010 because of an unexpected drop in the number of programs offering topics.) As the figure shows, the two most frequently addressed topics are pedagogical ones: the ACTFL national standards for teaching foreign languages; and curriculum, lesson design, and planning (linked to the standards). Less frequently addressed topics include assessment; observation, practice, and microteaching; and instructional strategies and best practices, which address communicative as well as learner-centered approaches in teaching languages. In stark contrast, certification is one of the least frequently addressed topics during the past four years. Recalling the six principles, we can see that the least frequently addressed principles are integrating cultural content and language, using the target language and providing comprehensible input for instruction, and adapting and using age-appropriate authentic materials. Of special interest as well is how often language-specific issues, or issues specific to teaching Arabic, are addressed. This topic apparently garnered a great deal of attention during the first two years of STARTALK Arabic-teacher training programs, but less during the most recent two years.

While explaining why certain professional development topics are so frequently covered may be possible (programs may believe these topics are required or that they constitute fundamental knowledge), addressing why the least frequently offered topics
are so rarely presented is more challenging. These findings as well as their implications are discussed in detail in a later section.

**STARTALK Arabic Teacher Trainees’ Perspectives**

A third question this study asks is, “What are the perspectives of teacher participants regarding their professional development experiences and needs?”

Examining professional development offerings provides us with a window into what experts and trainers believe teachers need. It does not, however, shed light on what Arabic teachers believe they need or what they feel they struggle with professionally. To explore these areas, a total of twenty-seven teachers from two 2011 STARTALK Arabic-teacher training programs participated in a brief survey that asked about their professional experiences, needs, challenges, and preferences. The survey, designed specifically for this study, serves as the second source of data.

We begin with demographic information about the teacher trainees who participated in the survey. All but one of the teachers are native speakers of Arabic, and all but two have immigrant backgrounds. Consistent with other studies (Wang 2009), the majority are women (female n=21; male n=6) and most hold bachelor’s degrees (n=14) and master’s degrees (n=10), with a few possessing only high school diplomas (n=2). One teacher holds an associate of arts degree (n=1), and none has an advanced graduate degree such as the Ph.D. The survey does not ask at what types of institutions participants teach, for example public schools, private schools, after-school programs, or colleges. Only two are certified. Data about how many are in the process of becoming certified were not collected, but participants came from two programs, one of which placed an emphasis on enrolling participants who are pursuing certification in accredited programs.

The majority of these teachers have taught Arabic for over five years in the United States (n=12). Seven of the teachers are new to the profession of teaching Arabic, having taught one year (n=6) or never having taught at all and listing themselves as prospective teachers (n=1). The rest of the teachers have between two and four years of experience teaching Arabic (n=7). One teacher did not respond to this question. Of the teachers surveyed, a dozen have taught Arabic overseas (n=12) and slightly more have not taught Arabic overseas (n=14). One teacher did not respond to this question.

The survey asks teachers to indicate all the grade levels they currently teach. Most provided multiple responses, indicating that they teach several different grade levels simultaneously. The vast majority (62%) teach across the various K–8 grade levels, 22% teach high school, 11% teach undergraduates, and nearly 5% teach students at the graduate level. Likewise, the survey asks teachers to indicate all of the levels of language proficiency they currently teach. Teachers’ responses cluster around the beginner/novice level (31%), intermediate level (29%), or all levels simultaneously (29%). Only a few teach strictly at the advanced level (11%).
Professional Development Goals of STARTALK Arabic Teacher Trainees

When asked what their main professional goals were for participating in STARTALK Arabic-teacher training programs, teachers overwhelmingly indicate that their goals were to increase their professional knowledge (31%) and to gain new skills (29%). Only 16% indicate a goal of becoming certified, and only 10% indicate that one of their main goals was to earn a master's degree. Some teachers also indicate that their goal was to network (7%), or to train for working in a future STARTALK student program (7%). Figure 2 shows the distribution of teacher responses.

The figure reveals that teachers seem to focus on the two practical goals of enriching their professional knowledge and gaining new skills. The third most frequently selected goal is earning certification. This may indicate that addressing teachers' needs regarding their current practice (for example, gaining professional knowledge or skills they can immediately use) may be much more pressing or important to teachers than future professional aspirations such as certification.

![Goal Distribution](image-url)

**Figure 2.** Arabic teachers' goals for professional development
Arabic Teachers’ Professional Development Needs

The survey asks teachers what they feel they need most in terms of professional development. Their responses are presented in figure 3.

The figure shows that teachers feel they most need professional development on the topic of differentiated instruction. Briefly, differentiated instruction is an approach in education that attempts to provide individual students with different ways to learn, thereby building on commonalities among students in a class while responding to their individual differences in prior knowledge and particular learning needs and styles (Tomlinson 2001). The number of responses indicating the need for professional development in differentiated instruction far exceeds other needs related to topics emphasized strongly in the STARTALK-endorsed principles, such as implementing a standards-based curriculum; using a learner-centered approach; or integrating culture, content, and language.

Figure 3. Topics in professional development that Arabic teachers feel they need most
Figure 4. What teachers find most challenging in teaching Arabic

What Arabic Teachers Find Most Challenging in Teaching Arabic

In an effort to compare what teachers feel they lack in terms of professional knowledge and skills with what they feel they struggle with in teaching Arabic, figure 4 indicates the teachers’ responses to the latter. Differentiated instruction is the most frequently selected challenge in teaching Arabic, which mirrors what teachers feel they need most in professional development. All other areas are selected much less frequently, although maintaining target language use seems to be the next most commonly reported challenge for some teachers.

Arabic Teachers’ Preferred Language for Professional Development

Pedagogical and professional concepts can be difficult to grasp even in one’s own native language. The survey asks teachers for their preferred language for professional development activities. Their answers are reflected in figure 5.
As the figure shows, a slightly higher number of teachers prefer to have their training in both Arabic and English. Others indicate that they prefer to have it only in Arabic. None of the teachers prefers professional development to be delivered only in English. Open-ended questions asking teachers to explain their rationale for their language preference reveal that teachers are eager to master professional knowledge in both languages. Teachers who say that they would prefer to have their professional development in both languages mainly indicate that it is useful for them to use and learn terminology related to teaching in both languages or to have concepts clarified in both languages. Teachers who select only Arabic as their preferred language of professional development indicate in their open-ended responses that they prefer Arabic because of frustration with translations, because of greater comfort with their native language, or because of the importance of proficiency in professional Arabic to their confidence as Arabic-language teachers. Many simply state that their preference is based on their professional identity: “Because I’m an Arabic teacher.”

Discussion and Implications

In a chapter from the *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century*, several experts discuss areas for Arabic teachers’ professional development (Alosh, ElKhafai, and Hammoud 2006; England 2006). While Alosh, ElKhafai, and
Hammoud detail a holistic set of dimensions including knowledge of cognitive theory, the teaching profession, Arabic-specific issues, culture, pedagogy, curriculum design, and assessment, England focuses on the content of a complete program for teaching Arabic as a foreign language. She discusses four main content areas: language and research competencies, knowledge and language skills pedagogy, professional development activities, and assessment criteria for Arabic teachers’ progress as professionals.

While experts have thoroughly explained ideal models for professional development for Arabic teachers, we have seen that immediate practical needs are what tend to concern teachers of Arabic (Alosh, ELKhafaifi, and Hammoud 2006, 414), for example, how to differentiate instruction for all the students in a class. We have also seen that professional development programs tend to focus on a rather narrow slice of experts’ recommendations. For example, most STARTALK teacher programs focus on standards (a guiding principle) and related methodology, such as designing curricula or lesson plans based on these standards, and devote little time to other recommended areas of professional growth that teachers may not immediately identify as needs. In fact, this point emerges somewhat indirectly in teachers’ responses about their professional needs and challenges.

As we have seen, a large majority of teachers report that they feel they need professional development on differentiated instruction (an aspect of pedagogical knowledge) and that this is a particularly challenging area for them in teaching Arabic. We can interpret this finding in a number of ways; it may reflect underlying challenges related to the implementation of differentiated instruction. For instance, the finding may reflect a struggle with assessment and knowing how to implement effective placement tests. It may also reflect teachers’ need to understand strategies for teaching heritage and non-heritage speakers, who are often in the same classroom, or varieties of Arabic heritage speakers, which then implies a need to understand the different cultures of Arabic heritage students, their Arabic histories, their experiences with the Arabic language, and so on. Furthermore, the struggle with differentiated instruction could point to teachers’ need to understand ways of structuring lesson plans based on language proficiency. Yet another professional need revealed by this challenge is the issue of adjusting comprehensible input, which inevitably relates to needs for Arabic-language knowledge (also referred to as language-content knowledge).

The findings of this study show that most Arabic-language teachers surveyed from STARTALK programs are in-service teachers, taking workshops such as those offered by STARTALK programs because they feel a need to enrich themselves and to address specific challenges they face in their daily practice. The second largest group consists of novice teachers who are teaching Arabic largely for the first time, so the gap between the two groups’ professional experiences and needs is presumably quite large. The first group may have a great deal of experience in the classroom but insufficient pedagogical knowledge, whereas the second may lack both experience and knowledge. Experts in the field responsible for training would have to emphasize both basics (such as the ACTFL standards, lesson planning, etc.) and more nuanced and conceptual needs such as those related to differentiated instruction.

The findings, however, do not lead us to recognize the systemic professional development needs that continue to exist in the field of Arabic-language education. Even if the
field identifies all the areas of professional growth needed in teaching Arabic as a foreign language, we nevertheless face a shortage of institutions of higher education invested in rigorous training of these teachers, as Wang aptly points out (2009). Likewise, we face a shortage of qualified trainers who understand the issues and needs pertaining to specific communities of LCTL teachers, and who are able and equipped to address these needs in a language-specific manner. Therefore, tackling the issues of content and structure of professional development programs wins only half the battle of establishing sustainable and effective language-teacher training and professional development.

Closing Thoughts and Future Directions

We have seen that even a single reported challenge for language teachers can indicate a web of more intricate professional needs. Because the teachers surveyed are largely in-service, after gaining a set of basic professional and pedagogical principles and skills, they may realize their need for a more theoretical understanding of language learning that will, in turn, have an impact on instructional practices such as differentiated instruction. Also, although programs such as STARTALK and, more recently, the professional development programs of Qatar Foundation International, address key areas of pedagogical and professional development for Arabic teachers, programs clearly need to implement more strategic and consistent efforts to address issues that are specific to the Arabic language and to provide support for teachers’ ongoing professional growth. This is particularly true for the majority of teacher trainees who come from across the K–12 spectrum and who have traditionally been ignored because of experts’ focus on postsecondary instructors. While such a focus is understandable considering the rising enrollment rates in college-level Arabic courses, it is largely not teachers from these institutions who seek professional development opportunities. It is unclear what this means for the design and implementation of Arabic-teacher training programs.

Of equal concern is Arabic teachers’ relatively low interest in pursuing degree and certification options when compared to interest in increasing professional skills. Why is this the case and what can be done about it? While many programs offer credit toward certification, certification does not receive much emphasis in professional development programs. This may reflect what teachers seek from professional development, or it may be symptomatic of a more complex situation. Experts must devote serious attention to and deeper investigation of these questions. Additionally, programs offering professional development would do well to survey their incoming trainees in order to determine the gaps and areas of future growth that can be addressed. Investigation by both researchers and trainers is in order if the LCTL field and that of teaching Arabic as a foreign language are truly to make progress in overcoming the shortage of qualified Arabic-language instructors and in building the national capacity of people proficient in the Arabic language.

Limitations of this exploratory study are largely related to the small sample size for the survey. The field needs more incisive analyses of teachers’ responses regarding their challenges and professional development needs. Specifically, it would be helpful to know
which teachers of which backgrounds report facing challenges in differentiated instruction, and what their professional, linguistic, and pedagogical experiences are. A further limitation is that we did not investigate which of our teacher-survey participants are currently in the process of acquiring certification and how this may affect their professional development needs.

Future studies extending from this one would do well to include more contextual information about professional development workshops as well as more in-depth interviews with teachers. At present, however, this overview serves as a stepping-stone for future inquiry.

References


