



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Consultation Report on the draft curriculum specification for Leaving Certificate Arabic

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Introduction

A draft specification for Leaving Certificate Arabic was made available for public consultation from 4th November to 16th December 2021. This report outlines the areas of feedback that emerged from the consultation process and the implications for the further development and implementation of the specification. The consultation process consisted of the following elements:

- an online questionnaire
- two focus group meetings with teachers and students
- bilateral meetings with parents, teachers and third level students
- a call for written submissions.

1.1 The online questionnaire

There were 69 responses to the online survey (Appendix 1). Of the respondents:

- 19 identified themselves as teachers, 12 of whom teach Arabic
- 46 identified themselves as parents/guardians
- 14 identified themselves as students (second and third level)
- 11 identified themselves as either teacher educators or third level lecturers.

The remainder identified themselves as principals post-primary or as “other”.

Awareness of the consultation was raised in several ways. An invitation was posted on the NCCA twitter account and an announcement was posted on the ncca.ie website. An invitation was sent via email to those who expressed interest in participating in the consultation, including teachers, third-level lecturers, a number of embassies/consulates who represent Arabic-speaking people and various other individuals/institutions. Members of the development group also assisted in raising awareness of the consultation via their stakeholder organisations and other professional contacts.

1.2 Focus group meetings

There were three main avenues for consultation feedback: via an online survey, through written submissions and through online focus group discussions which were facilitated to support the participation of students. In December 2021 two focus group meetings were held to consult with students on the draft specification. The first consisted of seven students in a mixed, rural school

with a high population of students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The students in the focus group had varying levels of Arabic as some were born and raised in Ireland, and had never lived in an Arabic-speaking country, while others had spent a number of years in an Arabic-speaking country before moving to Ireland. The second focus group meeting consisted of ten participants and was held with students in an all-boys' DEIS school in inner-city Dublin. These students were also from a variety of cultural backgrounds and had different levels of Arabic.

Participants in both focus groups were invited to express their views on the following questions.

To what extent

- do the aim and objectives address what is important for students to know, understand, value and be able to do having studied Arabic at Leaving Certificate?
- do the two strands address what is important for the students to know, understand, value and be able to do at the end of Leaving Certificate Arabic?
- do you think that the introduction of oral and aural assessment components will be effective in assessing students' learning in Leaving Certificate Arabic?
- do you think that it is appropriate that students may use dialectical or modern standard Arabic in the oral examination?
- do you support the introduction of a Portfolio in the Arabic specification?
- do you think that it is appropriate that students and their teachers will select the texts that they will study, as opposed to prescribing a set list of texts?

1.3 Bilateral Meetings

In the case of the bilateral meetings, online meetings were held with a number of Arabic teachers and parents and a third level student. Discussion centred around the questions cited above and allowed participants to give detailed feedback which was recorded.

1.4 Written Submissions

One written submission (Appendix 2) was received from two Arabic teachers in response to the invitation for written feedback on the draft specification.

Consultation feedback

This section of the report provides a summary and analysis of feedback received through the focus groups, online survey, bilateral meetings, and the written submission.

In the focus groups, online survey and bilateral meetings, participants were asked a number of questions about how well the various sections of the draft specification address students' knowledge, understanding, skills and values with regard to the assessment of Arabic. The themes arising from the discussions are set out below.

2.1 Clarity of the aims and strands of the specification

Of those who responded, the vast majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the aims were appropriate. Almost all participants/respondents reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that the communicative language competence strand is clearly articulated and represents essential learning for Arabic.

I was really amazed by the clarity of the content (Teacher Educator)

In relation to the communicative language competence strand, it was suggested that

This strand is very important to still [sic] keep it in our kids' brain (Parent)

With regard to the plurilingual and pluricultural competence strand, the vast majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the development of these competences is essential in the learning of Arabic.

*They can develop their skills if they have more than two languages,
especially in oral communication (Arabic teacher)*

One respondent expressed satisfaction with the learning outcomes relating to mediation in the specification, while another questioned the learning outcome relating to the use of dictionaries.

Nobody uses a dictionary in Arabic, except for Classical language e.g., in a poem or the Qur'an.

We don't advise people to look things up in a dictionary (Arabic teacher)

2.2 The role of texts in the Arabic classroom

The vast majority of survey respondents, focus group participants and those who attended bilateral meetings agreed or strongly agreed that it was appropriate that students will be exposed

to a range of literary and non-literary texts and that these should be selected by students and teachers. Most students articulated a strong preference to choose texts of their own interest.

I would much prefer to choose so that I can read things that interest me. (Student)

This is a much better way to learn if students can actually choose the texts they enjoy. (Student)

Many teachers and parents also agreed while one respondent expressed the view that it will take some time for students and teachers to get used to having a choice about what they study.

We are not used to student voice in the Arabic speaking culture. The teacher usually does all the work and students will then follow that. I think it's really good to give them the opportunity to choose. In the end we want them to understand the language. Based on teacher's advice, they could choose their own.

We can also support them by giving them access to authentic texts. (Teacher Educator)

A small number of survey participants and two teachers who made a written submission expressed a preference that a prescribed list of texts be made available.

A list of readings should be facilitated and teachers choose from them... A professional committee to choose the selections in light of the draft you shared and the concerns we expressed. (Written submission)

I'd rather know what is coming up in exam than walk in and not know. (Student)

Another respondent commented that, on reflection, they were open to this change.

I was originally slightly concerned about no list of literature but now I've thought about it, I'm fine with it. In our school, when we teach Arabic for 13/14 years but it goes with the ability of learning. We can suggest nice texts. (Second level teacher)

2.3 The introduction of a language portfolio

There was overwhelming support for the introduction of a language portfolio with the majority of respondents saying it would support students in the language learning journey.

*It gives them the chance to develop their language skills.
It makes them work on the Arabic and to improve.* (Teacher)

I think this is a good idea. It will help them to use the language. (Teacher)

I love the idea because I myself tried it with my students and I could see the difference. (Teacher)

2.4 Assessment

There was much discussion and commentary around the assessment of students' learning, both ongoing and summative as outlined below.

Overall feedback on assessment

The majority of respondents expressed the view that the assessment of Arabic outlined in the draft specification, when compared with the current assessment of Leaving Certificate Arabic, is fairer, balanced and more appropriate for the cohort of Arabic students in Ireland today.

The new proposal is good and better for Arabic speakers. (Student)

The introduction of oral and aural components in the final assessment

The majority of participants supported the focus on oracy with the introduction of an oral examination and aural assessments.

It's brilliant that there's a focus on oral and aural skills now. You really need to be able to understand the language – in a conversation or if you're watching something like the news. (Student)

Many students expressed the view that they would not be able to do the Arabic examination that currently exists as it is too difficult and suggested that the introduction of oral and aural components would result in more inclusive learning, teaching and assessment practices and thus in more students being able to access Arabic.

The oral/talking is good. I can't write in Arabic but would like to learn this to communicate to family. (Student)

Currently I can only read Arabic a little bit – I learned this at home. (Student)

The new exam proposed is better. Most Arabic speakers don't speak natively so this is good and oral/aural is good as you need more than just writing. (Student)

Most respondents welcomed the inclusion of plurilingualism and mediation skills in the oral assessment, whereby students may use Dialectical Arabic to aid communication. They also welcomed, in relation to the aural assessment, that stimulus materials will be culturally and linguistically inclusive of the diverse range of Arabic speakers.

It is so important that dialects are acknowledged because that's what is used in the real world. This means they can use independent learning because they'll be able to watch TV, listen to the radio, watch films etc. and not be reliant on learning from a book or CD. (Student)

This is good idea because it's not natural to speak only Modern Standard Arabic. (Teacher)

A small number of respondents suggested it would be better if Dialectical Arabic was not used in the oral examination.

In oral exams teachers should speak standard Arabic and students should be encouraged to do so. (Teacher)

The majority of respondents agreed that the weightings were appropriate, with one parent suggesting the oral component should be given a greater weighting, and another participant expressing the opposite view.

Maybe this is too much for an ora.l (Student)

The role of the Student Language Portfolio in Assessment

The Student Language Portfolio was discussed in each of the focus groups with a range of sub-themes emerging. The rationale for having a portfolio and the role it plays in the classroom and oral examination were discussed. Almost all participants in the focus group and online respondents agreed that, as a means of documenting and reflecting on their learning, the portfolio will help learners to develop awareness of the language learning process and strategies and to become more autonomous in their language learning.

The portfolio does link to formative assessment. (Teacher)

Arabic grammar

One submission from two Arabic language teachers expressed a desire that expectations of Arabic grammar would be clearly outlined in the specification.

Since Arabic grammar is essential for speaking and writing Arabic, it should be outlined clearly in the curriculum. Also, what part of grammar should be covered is equally important. (Written submission)

2.5 Other feedback

The introduction of Arabic in Junior Cycle

Some respondents, teachers and parents in particular, expressed the view that it would be appropriate to have a short course or full course in Arabic at Junior Cycle, to provide students

with a foundation in the language earlier in their education and to support transition and continuity into Leaving Certificate:

A lot of Arabic students are afraid to take it even though they know it because it's meant to be very difficult. They often only take it up in 5th year and they find it very difficult. For that reason, we would like for it to be on the junior cycle in public schools not only as grinds. This would make it much easier for them to learn it later. (Teacher)

Availability and accreditation of Arabic teachers

A number of teachers expressed concern that, if they were to work in schools, they would need to be recognised by the Teaching Council. These teachers were seeking clarification about the qualifications necessary to get a Teaching Council number.

The level of reading and writing

One participant expressed concern for young refugees who may have had limited formal education.

One thing that would concern me though, is the reading and writing level that these learners would be expected to have at the outset of the LC course. In my experience, many young refugees have had limited formal education and it is common for them to have little or no literacy in Arabic. It would be a shame if LC Arabic were to be on offer but still exclude many of the young people who could benefit most from it. (Teacher)

The importance of CPD

Many participants commented on the importance of adequate and ongoing CPD supports.

How will we get CPD when many teachers do not have Teaching Council numbers and do not work in mainstream schools? (Teacher)

We know nothing about learning outcomes as we don't teach other subjects in schools. (Teacher)

Students who are learning the language at home

The challenges associated with learning a school subject at home were also discussed.

This is hard for students who are learning at home. They will need support. (Teacher)

Considerations and conclusions

It was evident from the consultation that, despite some concerns, the draft specification was welcomed by most participants. This section of the report addresses the issues raised.

Considerations

The consultation process provided considered feedback about particular sections of the specification. Addressing these concerns will be the immediate focus of the development group. The following are areas to be considered:

- To add references to home and background language users as not all Arabic speakers consider themselves to be heritage language speakers
- Whether it is appropriate to have a learning outcome about the use of dictionaries
- To further clarify the role of texts for learners and teachers
- Ideas to inform the development of guidelines which will give clarification on the various assessment components including the oral exam, the role of the portfolio, and ways that plurilingual and pluricultural elements can be assessed
- To review the learning outcomes relating to the learning and teaching of Arabic grammar.

The development group may also wish to offer suggestions in relation to a range of enactment considerations, such as resources, teacher CPD, supports for teachers of Arabic which reference how they can choose texts that are most appropriate for a given cohort, and ways to assist teachers to achieve clarity in relation to Teaching Council requirements for Arabic teachers to register to teach the subject in post-primary schools.

Conclusion

The consultation process was very informative and beneficial. Overall, it is heartening to see the extent of support for the draft specification for Leaving Certificate Arabic from teachers, students, parents and others. Their feedback will be considered by the development group as they finalise the specification, with a particular focus on the areas outlined above. The engagement of those who participated in the consultation is acknowledged and NCCA is grateful for the open, honest, committed, experience-based and expert feedback received. Consultation feedback indicates there are very positive views on the draft specification and suggests that provision of CPD, supports and resources have the potential to greatly support successful enactment of the specification.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Focus Group Meetings

Participants were invited to express their views on the following:

To what extent

- do the aim and objectives address what is important for students to know, understand, value and be able to do having studied Arabic at Leaving Cert?
- do the (two) strands address what is important for the students to know, understand, value and be able to do at the end of Leaving Certificate Arabic?
- do you think that the introduction of oral and aural the assessment components will be effective in assessing students' learning in Leaving Certificate Arabic?
- do you think that it is appropriate that students may use dialectical or modern standard Arabic in the oral examination
- do you support the introduction of a Portfolio in the Arabic specification
- do you think that it is appropriate that students and their teachers will select the texts that they will study, as opposed to prescribing a set list of texts?

Appendix 2: Written Submissions

The following written submission was received

- Mr. Ramdan Abughalia and Dr Ali Selim



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