Towards a transformation of the Assessment Culture in Initial Arabic Teacher Teaching

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INTRODUCTION

In traditional teaching, assessment is an action that has an external characteristic, centered on the specific and final result of an action regarding an object that does not correspond to a mental program pre-established by the person using it, that is, it is beyond all internal learning process. It responds to an external manipulation of an internal process.

An assessment culture is generated in educational institutions that lay emphasis on products. It emphasizes as well the power of those who have the authority as sole responsible persons for the generation, implementation, and decision making; and in the absence of other actors as creative and participants in the assessment process.

The first explicitly stated Arabic curriculum for public schools in Egypt appeared in 1970 (Ministry of Education, 1970). It outlined a rationale for the teaching of Arabic in the Egypt and stated general and specific aims for teaching it. It described the theoretical framework and pedagogical practices by which these aims could be achieved and suggested ways for the evaluation of their achievement.

In 1990, a new revision of the curriculum of Arabic was adopted and new teaching materials were prepared to implement it. This currently-used curriculum has introduced various changes and delineated general and specific objectives of Arabic language teaching in Egypt in more realistic and functional terms.

A CRITICALLY REFLECTIVE DIDACTICS: ASSESSMENT.

The critical theory of education is oriented towards a social transformation enlightened by a emancipation interest in a democratic context. It aims the development of a communicative rationality and tries to move away from the instrumental rationality, keeping in mind the political nature of all social processes.

The critical theory of education is a curriculum theory that contains the reflection instruments necessary to awaken the consciousness of all participants in the educational process, considering the relativity of the curriculum premises. These premises depend on their historical and social context, and they let us understand and plan the pedagogical action as a set of situations that are continually revised and modified. Therefore, pedagogical action is understood as a process in permanent change.

Praxis is the constitutive element of critical didactics. It is developed as action and reflection in the actual world and not in the logical one. This reality where praxis takes place is the world of interaction: the social or cultural world, that presumes a process of social building of meanings.

Thus, the curriculum contents bring out its meaning not from predetermined objectives but from social reality and its permanent change, from the meditations of those who are involved in educational action where educational experience becomes the protagonist of teachers and students.

In the critical theory setting, assessment establishes itself in the interaction of participants who relate to each other horizontally, generating consensus regarding cooperative action within a symmetrical relations setting of authority and critical consciousness. In this sense, the learning and teaching processes are supported by group organizations committed to the building of their own knowledge

From this perspective, the main function of assessment is to gather information about the social practices of the classroom and the school. It configurates itself as an inquiring strategy that encourages dialogue, discussion, and that leads to a transforming action through consciousness of reality and the will to act.

This enables us to understand the values, beliefs, and meanings of all participants in the learning situations. It requires that everyone express his or her opinions, motives, and questions. The self interpretation of what has been accomplished and its narrative expression constitute qualitative assessment. This requires commitment from the students in the assessment process in which they are involved so that while reflecting on the tasks done, they can be encouraged to improve them.

Hence, assessment is interested in the interpretation and understanding of what goes on in the natural contexts, it focuses on processes more than on products, because it lays stress on the continuous development of capabilities recognizing what was the initial situation. It focuses on the students' progress instead of on predetermined standards and objectives.

As a process, it has a continuous and contextual characteristic. However, as methodology, it can be used both as summative and formative assessment. Therefore, it allows for the use of several data collection techniques, such as discourse strategies (interviews, oral exchange in the classroom, debates, assemblies, etc), narrative techniques (journals, stories, real life stories) and different sociometric instruments, of which the most used is observation in its various forms.

Therefore, in this setting, assessment is understood as a process of understanding and improvement of teacher education and it more oriented to the development of an educational culture that promotes self-commitment and to others, self-criticism, and a constant rebuilding of the same assessment processes.

The continuous drive for quality education has led the Ministry of Education to launch in 2000 a multimillion Egyptian riyal project of comprehensive revision of its educational curricula and teaching materials at all levels: elementary, intermediate and secondary. As part of this major educational overhaul, a new Arabic curriculum has been introduced. Based on recent findings of psycholinguistic research, this new Arabic curriculum adopts a more learner-centered approach in teaching Arabic to Egyptian learners. It aspires to emphasize the explicit (general and specific) goals and the educational and sociolinguistic value of Arabic in the Egypt. It pays special attention to course content, recommends appropriate teaching techniques and suggests proper methods of evaluation.

OBJECTIVES:

This paper will investigate the amount and scope of involvement of Arabic language teachers and supervisors in this important educational reform and their perceptions of such reform vis-à-vis their awareness of the place that the Arabic language occupies in their country's ambitious plans for national development.

The paper will also seek the opinions of such teachers and supervisors on the feasibility of this latest development in light of the Ministry's plans to open a national forum on the ever-recurring question of the value of beginning Arabic language instruction in the country's public schools at an earlier stage, namely, the elementary school, and the effects that this measure would entail on the structure, sequence and content of the Arabic language curriculum, on teacher training and related matters.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

Specifically, this paper will answer the following questions:

1. How do Arabic teachers and supervisors evaluate the Arabic language curriculum currently employed in the Egyptian school system?
2. How much involvement do Arabic teachers and supervisors have in the announced reform of the Arabic language teaching curriculum in the Egyptian school system?

3. How do Arabic teachers and supervisors evaluate the adopted reform of the Arabic language curriculum in the Egyptian school system?

4. How do Arabic teachers and supervisors evaluate the introduction of Arabic language teaching at the elementary level in the Egyptian school system?

METHODOLOGY:

A twenty-two item questionnaire was developed to solicit responses of Arabic teachers and supervisors to the research problem. The questionnaire was divided into four major areas covering the four research questions mentioned above.

The questionnaire concludes with an open-ended question calling for additional comments about the current changes in Arabic language teaching in Egypt.

A total of 84 Arabic teachers and supervisors responded to the questionnaire (Table 1). All respondents came from the school districts of Fayoum in Egypt.

Table # 1
Distribution of Respondents to the Questionnaire

Type of Respondents	#	%
Arabic teachers	74	88.1
Arabic supervisors	10	11.9
Total	84	100

Percentile ranking method was used to evaluate responses to the questionnaire.

Each research question was evaluated separately since some respondents failed to respond to all 4 research questions. As a consequence, the total number of respondents for each research question varies.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

Research Question No. 1: How do EFL teachers and supervisors evaluate the Arabic language curriculum currently employed in the Egyptian school system?

Table # 2
Respondents' Rating of the Arabic Language Curriculum Employed in the Egyptian School System

Type of Respondents	Excellent		Very. Good		Good		Satisfactory		Weak		Don't know		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Teachers	3	4.1	12	16.2	22	29.7	26	35.1	11	14.9	-	-	74	100
Supervisors	-	-	1	10	2	20	3	30	4	40	-	-	10	100
Total	3	3.57	13	15.48	24	28.57	29	34.52	15	17.86	-	-	84	100

As shown in Table # 3, 26 teachers and 3 supervisors, or 34.52% of the population of the study, found the currently-employed Arabic language curriculum to be merely "satisfactory." On the other hand, 22 teachers and 2 supervisors, or 28.57%, found this curriculum to be "good" and 11 teachers and 4 supervisors, or 17.86%, rated it as "weak". Only 3 teachers considered it "excellent".

The above data show that the majority of the respondents (49 teachers and 5 supervisors, or 64.3%) rated the current curriculum for Arabic language between "satisfactory" and "good." When asked whether or not this curriculum was in need of change, the majority of respondents (58, or 60%) thought this was either essential or important. This opinion was supported by the majority of teachers (53 or 71.6%) and 5 (50%) of the supervisors. This conclusion would reflect the strong belief among the population of the study, teachers in particular, in the importance of change to the present Arabic language curriculum, and hence supports the plans of the Ministry of Education for effective change.

Data derived from the study also show that most of the teachers (67, or 90.5%) found curriculum design and textbooks as the most problematic areas needing change. Their opinion regarding areas such as goals, methods of teaching and audiovisual aids was not as strong. This opinion was supported by all of the supervisors (100%). The general and strong agreement among respondents would indicate the urgent need for change of the present curriculum and supports such change.

Research Question No. 2: How much involvement do Arabic teachers and supervisors have in the announced reform of the Arabic language teaching curriculum in the Egyptian school system?

Table # 3
Respondents' Awareness of the Announced Reform of the Arabic Language Teaching Curriculum in Egypt

Type of Respondents	Yes		No		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Arabic Teachers	31	49.2	32	50.8	63	100
Arabic Supervisors	3	37.5	5	62.5	8	100
Total	34	47.9	37	52.1	71	100

Table # 3 displays respondents' awareness of the Ministry of Education's announced reform of the Arabic curriculum. As the table shows, only 31 of the teachers, or about 42%, expressed their awareness of the intended change in the curriculum, while almost 60% of them (43, or 58.1%) indicated their lack of awareness of the proposed change. On the other hand, only 3 supervisors, or 30%, indicated their awareness of the reform, while the majority, i.e., 70%, expressed that they were unaware of it.

The above figures show beyond any doubt that the majority of respondents (50, or 59.52%) were not involved in bringing about the required changes to the current Arabic curriculum and were not sought out for help of any kind in this endeavor.

This result, however, does not reflect the belief of the respondents regarding who should be involved in carrying out the intended reform. The majority of the teachers, 58, or 78.4%, thought that Arabic teachers and supervisors should be given priority in helping to carry out the required reform, with teachers given more importance in this task: 36, or 48.6%, for teachers and 22, or 29.7% for supervisors. Six supervisors, or 60%, supported this opinion and believed that teachers should play the most important role in this change. When asked whether this role should be assigned to university Arabic language staff, only 17 teachers (23%) and 2 supervisors (20%) supported their involvement in this task. Educational administrators' involvement was supported by 12 teachers (19%) and 2 supervisors (25%), while pupils were not seen to be important players in this respect and received the support of only 7 teachers (9.5%) and 3 supervisors (30%).

Research Question No. 3: How do Arabic teachers and supervisors evaluate the adopted reform of the Arabic language curriculum in the Egyptian school system?

Table # 4
Respondents Who Had Read in Detail about the Reform

Type of Respondents	Yes		No		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Teachers	30	44.1	38	55.9	68	100
Supervisors	3	33.3	6	66.7	9	100
Total	33	42.9	44	57.1	77	100

Table # 4 shows that only 30 teachers, or 44.1%, had read in detail about this reform, while 38 teachers, or 55.96%, had not done so. On the other hand, even less supervisors, 3, or 33.3%, had read in detail about this prepared reform, while 6, or 66.7% had not.

Table # 5
Evaluation of the Proposed Reform by Respondents Who Had Read about It in Detail

Type of Respondents	Excellent		Very Good		Good		Satisfactory		Weak		Don't Know		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Arabic Teachers	7	21.88	5	15.6	8	25	8	25	1	3.12	3	9.4	32	100
Arabic Supervisors	1	16.7	5	83.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	100
Total	8	21.1	10	26.3	8	21.1	8	21.1	1	2.6	3	7.8	38	100

As the table indicates, only 32 of the teachers were able to evaluate the reform since they had read about it in detail. However a high number of these gave a positive response: 7, or 21.9% rated it as "excellent", 5 or 15.6%, as "very good" and 8, or 25%, as "good". Therefore, 20, or 62.5%, rated it between "good" to "excellent". For supervisors, on the other hand, all of them rated it at the very top of the scale: "very good", 5, or 83.3% or "excellent", 1, or 16.7%.

Eight teachers, or 25%, rated the reform as "satisfactory" whereas only 1, or 3.12%, rated it as "weak" and 3, or 9.4% had no opinion.

These data indicate a very positive response to the reform by those who had read about it in detail.

Respondents identified particular strong or weak points of the reform. Coinciding with the positive response in general, the following points were given a high rating: the reform fulfils goals, it meets modern standards, it is easy to implement, and it improves on the previous curriculum.

Respondents also indicated which groups would best implement the proposed reform. The greatest number indicated that bodies within Egypt were preferable, especially the Ministry of Education and specialist organizations within Egypt. For the Ministry of Education, 22 teachers, or 29.7% and 2 supervisors, or 28.6%, expressed their preference, while for specialist organizations within Egypt, 20 teachers, or 27%, and 2 supervisors or 28.6% expressed this preference. Next in preference were specialist organizations from abroad with 16 teachers, or 21.6%, in favor and only 1 supervisor, or 14.3%, of this opinion. Of a similar level were the responses for individual specialists to be assigned for this task, with 15 teachers, or 20.3% and again 1 supervisor, or 14.3% of this opinion. Much lower was the preference for Egyptian universities and colleges, with 11 teachers, or 14.9%, and again only one supervisor, 14.3%, favoring this choice.

Research Question No. 4: How do Arabic teachers and supervisors evaluate the introduction of Arabic language teaching at the elementary level in the Egyptian school system?

Type of Respondents	Yes		No		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Teacher	50	76.9%	15	23.1%	65	100
Supervisors	6	100%	-	-	6	100
Total	56	78.9%	15	21.1	71	100

A high percentage of respondents showed an awareness of the intent of the Egyptian Ministry of Education to introduce the teaching of Arabic from the elementary level: teachers, 50, or 76.9% and supervisors; 6, or 100%.

Of those who were aware of this reform 28 of the teachers, or 63.3%, and 5 of the supervisors, or 83.3%, indicated that their opinion about this reform had been solicited. On the other hand, 37 of the teachers, or 71.2%, indicated their interest in helping to implement this reform. However, all 7 supervisors, or 100%, were interested in assisting in this task.

Respondents indicated a high preference for participating in the area of drawing up curriculum plans, developing teaching materials and training teaching staff. Much less interest was indicated for ascertaining goals and developing methodology.

When asked to indicate which groups would best carry out this change, the favored group both by teachers and supervisors was that of "teachers". Also, very highly recommended was the group of "supervisors", again supported by both teachers and supervisors. The choice of "university language staff" was indicated by a substantial number of respondents, but "pupils" and "educational administrators" received a very low level of support.

Regarding their agreement to the introduction of Arabic instruction at the elementary level, a high proportion of teachers, 35, or 58.3%, "strongly agreed"; whereas only 2 supervisors, or 28.6% were of this opinion However, 22 teachers, or 36.7% "agreed" and the remaining supervisors, 5, or 71.4% "agreed." So 95% of teachers either "agree" or "strongly agree" to this change and 100% of the supervisors shared this opinion. Consequently, only very few were not in agreement.

When asked about the effect of this introduction of Arabic language instruction at the elementary level, 98% of teachers responded affirmatively and 85.7% of supervisors saw this as having a positive effect.

The area of "curriculum" was identified as the most strongly-affected area, followed closely by "textbooks." "Goals and methods of teaching" were also considered important as areas affected by this change. "Audio-visual aids" were not seen to be so seriously affected.

Additional Open-Ended Question: What Additional Comments Would You Make about Arabic Language Teaching in Egypt?

Thirty teachers, or 40.5% and 8 supervisors, or 80%, have responded to this question by giving some general views on what they thought to be important considerations for the design of an effective curriculum of Arabic language in the concerned school stages: elementary, intermediate and secondary.

Not surprisingly, in this question teachers have shown more interest and willingness to offer varied and relevant comments and suggestions than supervisors. The following are ideas that received the highest attention by the respondents.

1. The Arabic curriculum must follow modern standards of curriculum design.
2. The Arabic curriculum must adopt communicative approaches to language teaching and learning.
3. The Arabic curriculum must pay special attention to the needs and interests of the learners.
4. The Arabic curriculum must provide interesting, enjoyable and more realistic materials to motivate pupil learning.
5. The Arabic curriculum must be graded in difficulty to suit learners' abilities.
6. The Arabic curriculum should give more attention to quality rather than quantity of instructional material.
7. The Arabic curriculum should reflect the culture and social values of the learners.
8. Provision for ample time and amount of language practice must be provided in the curriculum.
9. Speaking and writing skills must receive more attention in the new curriculum.
10. More audio-visual aids, especially video-taped materials and language laboratories, are needed.
11. Teachers must be made acquainted with the new curriculum before its implementation.

12. Teaching Arabic in the elementary stage must be clearly planned.
13. Specialists in child psychology should be involved in planning the Arabic curriculum at the elementary school level.
14. Special training and/or orientation must be provided for the elementary Arabic teachers.

CONCLUSION:

This action research project is progressing towards the joint building of a critical didactics that provides relevance to assessment as a natural process, of personal and professional professional training. The role of the teacher educatory in the different assessment processes is seen as being a mediator and co-participant. The role of the student is seen as that of an actor and protagonist, involved and responsible for the generation and development of the different assessment processes.

When we understand the professional preparation of teachers as a complex process of knowledge building and development of relationships within a specific sociological-cultural context, we need to consider the student in the center of this space. The student will be given the conditions so that he/she may assume a reflective and protagonist role in his/her education. Therefore, we recognize the need to set up agreements in working with strategies that place emphasis on partnerships between teacher educators and students. This way we can try to establish certain evaluative criteria to be used as a basis for responsible participation of the students in the decision making of their own teacher education process.

Finally, we believe this critical didactics approach should be applicable to all the curricular mesh, since the larger the development of social competence of the individual the better will be the conditions to gain access to multiple forms of learning and to cultural sources

The importance of the Arabic curriculum is derived from the position Arabic has in Egypt, for, as is well known, it is the Egypt's most important language. It is also the medium through which Egypt communicates with the non-Arabic speaking countries of the world and it helps the country promote relations, understanding and cooperation with such countries, and it is used by Egypt to explain and present itself to other nations.

Knowledge of Arabic by a sizeable sector of the Egypt community is vital to educational, economic and technological needs of the country. The development of an effective Arabic curriculum is, therefore, in harmony with general and overall educational and developmental plans of Egypt, and every effort needs to be made to guarantee such effectiveness.

The actual content of the Arabic course will be embodied in the textbooks and materials to be written and developed with this curriculum. And since all material writing involves an element of creativity, it may not be possible, or even desirable, to specify in advance the exact content of the textbooks to be produced. However, a well-prepared curriculum will provide materials designers and textbook writers with a set of important parameters to be observed and general guidelines of the course content which would include lists of functions, notions and structures that are recommended.

This paper has considered many aspects of the proposed changes to the Arabic curriculum in Egypt. In this study, two major questions were addressed: who should be involved in bringing about the required change in the Arabic curriculum in the Egyptian school system, and who can give the best answers to satisfy the needs of an effective change?

The paper has proven that the classroom teacher is the most qualified person for such task. Yet, investigation carried out in the study showed that classroom teachers did not play a major role in effecting the reform and were not sought out for help as might have been expected.

However, achievement of the objectives of the Arabic curriculum still depends upon the classroom teacher; as such achievement requires a qualified and competent teacher to realize it. This entails that the teacher training schemes should be integrated with the curricular requirements. The ultimate goal of such training programs is to equip the teacher with the necessary skills to implement the curricular activities effectively and economically through facilitating and enhancing pupil learning.

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