

Closing the loop in teaching Arabic as a second language

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Introduction

It is very encouraging to witness multiple efforts across the country, geared towards developing common standards for teaching Arabic as a second language, though we have yet to agree on what those should be. However, Arabic teachers still face a big challenge stemming from an absence of proper standardized assessment methods and tools to evaluate students' progress toward set achievement criteria. Lack of standardized assessments hinders the ability of Arabic teachers to make data-driven decisions about their teaching strategies, materials used and/or interventions needed. In this presentation we will present how Al-Arqam Islamic School addressed this challenge which closed the loop in Arabic teaching and enabled teachers to have this valuable feedback to “feed forward”.

Importance of Standardized tests

Standardized testing at Al-Arqam school has proven to be a catalyst for refining teaching and learning methods. The diversities in intellect and learning styles of teacher and student alike, present both great potential and great challenge. Reconciling between different or opposing teaching philosophies and curricular objectives can be simplified by developing an Arabic Standardize Test. At Al-Arqam, the importance of uniformed curriculum was recognized and applied by our own standard Scope and Sequence developed by the subject departments.. Students from grades kindergarten through tenth are tested based on standards, understood and

addressed by the instructor; thus allowing a valid documentation of a student's knowledge and a teacher's progress(Lipton 45). Creating a framework for instructors ensures a consistent progress through the student's academic career. Standardized tests provide inclusive feedback about which students are on track and which struggle. Pinpointing a student's weakness in a subject, whether it be the instruction, curriculum, or environment, makes it easier to make targeted, relevant modifications. The important feedback provided by a generalized test developed by independent source creates common ground between parents and school officials of what their child is expected to know and be able to do upon completing a course or grade level. Arabic standardized testing covers four crucial skills of second language acquisition: comprehension, reading, writing, and grammar. When developing standardized tests the questions should reflect what teachers believe their students are capable of. Yearly tests drives an ever evolving progression of teaching techniques for teachers. In the absence of national companies or organizations to proctor or score the exams, the Arabic Department establishes the process for fair proctoring of the exams, whereby individual teachers administer the exam for classes and levels of students whom he/she does not regularly teach. Another advantage of the standardized tests is that pushes the teacher to focus more on the standards not the textbook since these tests are developed based on the standards for that grade not the book used to teach that grade.

Process of Developing Standardized Tests:

1. Develop standards that fit your school

Before a school can be able to develop such standardized tests, a committee comprised of school leadership and subject department head and/or senior teachers, must define the standards on which to base the tests. Although this is a tedious task, it is a necessary one as it helps bring all stakeholders on the same page: school governance, administrators, teachers, and parents. Part of

developing these standards is based on school Board as well as parents' expectations for teaching Arabic at your school. A consensus should be reached as to the overarching mission of the Arabic program. The committee should be able to agree whether the ultimate goal of teaching Arabic is for the purpose reading Qur'an, interacting with modern texts, functional oral fluency or all of these (in which case, the list should be prioritized). At Al-Arqam Islamic school , curriculum standards for Arabic as a second language is driven by the requirements of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (which targets 11th and 12th grade students). The curriculum committee started with these standards as a frame of reference and worked backward to define standards at previous grade levels. The developed standards were also reconciled with other standards from other countries, like Malaysia, which also teach Arabic as second language.

2. Contract External Agency for Developing Tests

Consulting with the Arabic language department at universities throughout the Arab world, can lead to information about companies or organizations which can fulfill this need for the school.

3. Field Testing and Arriving at Final Version.

Due to cultural differences, it is important to develop these tests in stages. Also, best approach is to start with one grade and go through several review processes including:

- a. Soliciting teacher feedback for the first draft: Teachers should have the opportunity to provide feedback on the components, questions, format of the first draft submitted by the company. It is better to have school leadership screen this feedback.

Field testing: The revised copy should be field tested by proctoring that test for a specific grade.

Internal scoring of this test by teachers will reveal more other changes desired and necessary for

the later drafts of the test. Once the first test is completed, the company can start on the other tests in parallel since expectations are better calibrated by both parties.

Standardized Tests Components

These tests should be divided into four categories. Below are these suggested categories and their suggested weight in the test overall score.

Area	Listening & conversation	Comprehension & Writing	Reading Skills	Grammar Skills	Total
Points	25	30	30	15	100

It is important to design the test and its grade based on these different areas. That would help make test more effective in identifying areas of growth for students and school Arabic program in general.

Challenges in Adopting These Tests

1. Teachers' fears

Standardized testing is often mistaken as an evaluation of teacher performance and efficacy and/or as a determiner for continued employment. This assumption causes apprehension which could sometimes lead to sabotaging the tests. One of the many cases where teachers feel threatened by standardized test is one in Thermal, California at Westside School help students cheat by “correcting answers, gave students cues with facial expressions or displayed test material in the classroom” (Los Angeles Times). Teachers that do this out of fear do not realize that the purpose of a standardized test is for students, teachers, and administrators to come to a common understanding. The standardized test should not feel like a final judgment but an effort to ensure student progress and encourage new feedback and adjustments. Engaging teachers in

the development process of the standardized tests can be one way to get their buy-in for the tests and put their minds at ease.

2. Conflict of Interest

Due to lack of companies which can grade these tests, schools must rely on their own teachers to proctor and score them. This of course can present a conflict of interest where a teacher can assist students with clues for his/her class to have better results on these tests. One way to remedy that is to have different teacher proctor and grade these tests based on the standard key guide provided by developing company.

How to use the data

After tests are scored, final results should be rolled up in class-level totals as well as school-wide totals. Appendix I shows an example of such data.

1. Class-level Totals:

This data should be discussed by classroom teacher, department head, and principal to identify students' strengths and areas of growth. Such discussion can help identify possible changes in teacher's instruction and needed professional development for the teacher.

2. School-wide Totals:

This data can be discussed on Arabic department level. Such meeting will discuss general trends in students' performance. Potential correction actions which can result from this meeting can be adopting new school-wide teaching strategies for Arabic language, identifying gaps between grades, and tailoring professional development workshop(s) for all Arabic teachers.

References Cited

Lipton, G. 1995. Focus on FLES. Planning and Implementing FLES Programs (Foreign Language in Elementary Schools). Baltimore, MD: National FLES institute.

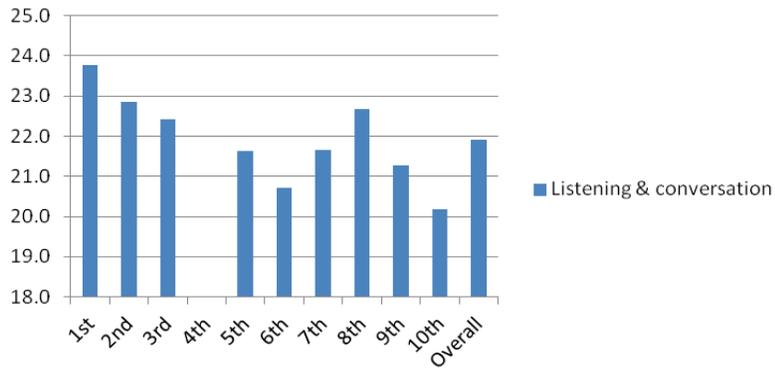
Howard Blume. *Latimes.com*. Los Angeles Times, October 2012. Online Article. December 11, 2012.

Appendix I

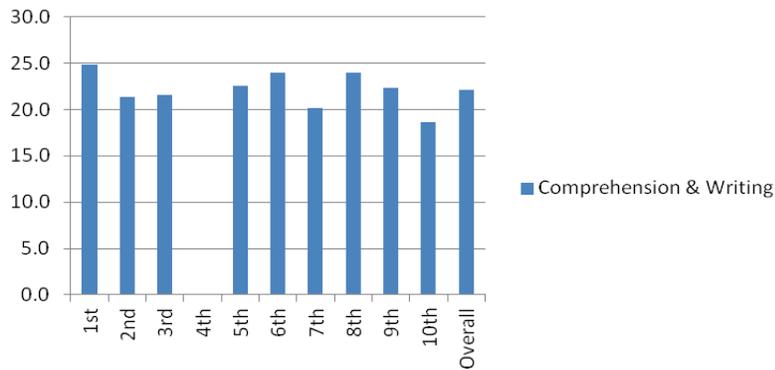
Standardized Arabic test results

	25	30	30	15	100
Grade	Listening & conversation (25)	Comprehension & Writing (30)	Reading Skills (30)	Grammar Skills (15)	Total (100)
1st	23.8	24.8	26.1	14.4	87.3
2nd	22.9	21.3	23.7	10.4	77.0
3rd	22.4	21.5	21.3	10.6	75.8
4th					
5th	21.6	22.6	25.6	11.2	81.0
6th	20.7	23.9	21.0	10.3	75.9
7th	21.7	20.2	23.3	11.1	76.3
8th	22.7	24.0	26.6	12.9	86.1
9th	21.3	22.4	22.2	9.7	75.5
10th	20.2	18.7	21.7	10.8	71.3
Overall	21.9	22.2	23.5	11.3	78.5

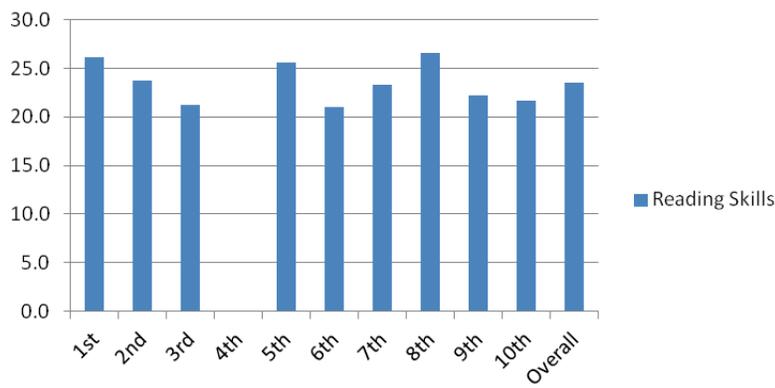
Listening & conversation



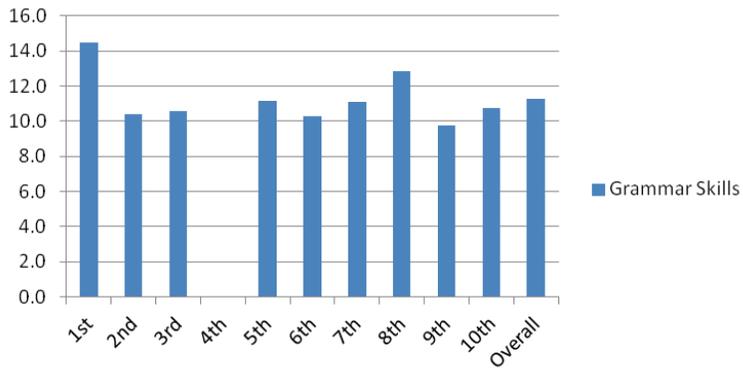
Comprehension & Writing



Reading Skills



Grammar Skills



Total

