

THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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Language and Literacy

The constitution of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) states that the country's official language is Arabic, which also is the language of instruction in public schools. English is taught as a second language, and other languages of instruction are used in international schools across the UAE.

Overview of the Education System

Since the formation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1971, education has been a top priority in the country. The UAE offers all of its citizens a comprehensive, free public education from kindergarten through university. Approximately 36 percent of the UAE population attends public schools. Private education also is offered at different levels and is divided into three types: national private schools, foreign private schools, and foreign community schools. National private schools implement the Ministry of Education curriculum and textbooks, while the other types of private schools have their own curricula and textbooks approved by the Ministry.

A key component of government strategy has been the decentralization of educational authority from the Ministry of Education to local education bodies in each emirate. Three major bodies are working to improve the education sector: the Ministry of Education, which has full jurisdiction over the public schools and private schools (except in Abu Dhabi); the Abu Dhabi Education Council, which oversees public and private schools in Abu Dhabi; and Dubai's Knowledge and Human Development Authority, which regulates private schools in Dubai. Under this structure, the relationship among educational committees and councils in each emirate is clearly defined.

In the UAE, kindergarten is free and noncompulsory for children ages 3 to 5. The basic stage of education is compulsory and comprises two cycles: Cycle 1, covering Grades 1 to 5 (ages 6 to 10), and Cycle 2, covering Grades 6 to 9 (ages 11 to 14). The secondary stage offers education in general schools, religious schools, and through the Institute of Applied Technology. General and religious schools include Grades 10 to 12 (ages 14 to 17). Students in general schools who complete Grade 10 may choose between a public track and an advanced track for the remainder of their time in the secondary stage of education. Upon completion of Grade 12, students receive a Secondary School Leaving Certificate.

The Institute of Applied Technology is based in Abu Dhabi and has 20 campuses (14 schools, four colleges for the Fatima College of Health Sciences, and two colleges for Abu Dhabi Polytechnic) located throughout the UAE in Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, the Western Region, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-



Quwain, Ras al-Khaimah, and Al Fujairah. The UAE's educational philosophy has been a strong initiative in its educational programs and calls for encouraging, educating, and preparing youth to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics-related fields. The Institute was founded in 2005 through royal decree of His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, president of the UAE and ruler of Abu Dhabi, as a corporate body with full financial and administrative independence. Upon completion of Grade 12, students at the institute receive a Secondary Certificate in Applied Technology, which is fully accredited by the local Ministry of Education.

In 2009, the federal Ministry of Education began integrating students from special needs centers into public schools. These students are assessed according to the specifications of Individual Educational Plans, and are promoted automatically to the next grade at the end of each academic year.

Language/Reading Curriculum in the Fourth Grade

Reading Policy

Reading is part of the national language curriculum for students in Grade 4. The new curriculum, adopted in 2013–2014, reflects the skills and objectives outlined in the PIRLS framework.

The UAE Ministry of Education national charter of Arabic language outlines the national literacy standards and expectations for all grades starting from kindergarten, including expectations regarding educational standards. The charter includes skills levels, distributions of curricular standards, and assessment criteria. It also provides teachers with guidance regarding teaching strategies and the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in teaching Arabic language.

The educational policy in the UAE establishes principles and guidelines to keep pace with the modern age; it enables students to interact positively with the variables of life and modern demands through the development of new formulas for learning in response to the ambitious aspirations set by UAE educational specialists. General standards have been derived for teaching Arabic according to three main themes:¹

- Language skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing
- Concepts and linguistic knowledge, including grammar, spelling and punctuation, handwriting, and rhetoric and parody
- Concepts and literary knowledge, including history of literature, literary arts, and literary criticism

Students also are expected to apply a variety of reading skills, such as using contextual clues, prediction, previous knowledge, and vocabulary strategies to achieve the highest level of understanding. Through conscious reading, students can acquire an understanding and appreciation of the written language as an effective means of communication and self-expression.

Reading is a complex process through which students can construct meaning and communicate feelings and attitudes with other people in different situations. The reading process requires connecting the psychomotor skills of correct pronunciation and sound reading with the mental skills related to



understanding, analysis, and criticism of materials. Making these connections, students then are required to link previous knowledge and personal experience to texts, and respond to reading material aesthetically and critically. Students also are required to understand words in their various contexts, use a variety of reading strategies to adapt to different levels of reading texts, and eventually develop lifelong intellectual reading habits.

Summary of National Curriculum

The national curriculum states that by the end of Grade 4, students should be able to read text aloud, demonstrate their understanding of the text in writing, and analyze literary and informational texts.

Teachers, Teacher Education, and Professional Development

Teacher Education Specific to Reading

The requirements to become a language teacher are a bachelor's degree in the subject area with a good average and good command of English (achieving at least 6 in the International English Language Testing System) along with at least two years of teaching experience. A diploma in education also is preferred.

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development

Professional development in the UAE is the responsibility of both individual teachers and the Ministry of Education. Once employed, teachers must continue to develop their subject area knowledge, professional skills, and cultural knowledge. Professional development programs for new and experienced teachers are organized by departments within the Ministry under the guidance of the Training and Development Directorate. These programs take into consideration teachers' cumulative records and are designed to meet the needs of teachers that have been identified during classroom visits and from teacher questionnaires.

Most professional development programs concentrate on developing competency in teaching the Arabic language and pedagogy for teachers who have not graduated from schools of education. The major topics addressed in professional development programs for Grade 4 Arabic language teachers include the following:

- Components of the UAE educational system
- Regulations governing the performance of teachers
- Assessment of student learning
- Modern teaching methods
- Effective classroom instruction
- The learning environment
- Integrating special needs students into the education process



Teacher performance is monitored through classroom visits by members of the support team of the Ministry of Education. Supervisors recommend suitable training programs and workshops for teachers as needed. The Ministry's Arabic language team also encourages new teachers to participate in exchange visits and programs focused on curriculum and assessment regulations.

Reading Instruction in the Primary Grades

Instructional Materials

Students use a variety of print and electronic resources while learning Arabic. These include textbooks and supplemental reading materials for enrichment. Most new Arabic language textbooks have an intensive focus on reading standards.

Use of Technology

Students in the UAE use online resources throughout their education. During Grade 4, students use the website of the Ministry of Education for additional training on released PIRLS test items. This package, supported both in Arabic and English, includes an overview of PIRLS and sample answers to assessment questions.

Role of Reading Specialists

The School Operations Directorate's support team members fulfill the role of reading specialists with a focus on meeting reading standards.

Second Language Instruction

A special curriculum is available for students who do not speak Arabic as their first language.

Accommodation Policies for Instruction and Testing

Special needs students in Grade 4 are merged in regular classes with other students. Special facilities are offered if called for in a student's Individual Educational Plan. Some special needs students are given extra time during tests, and others are given tests adapted to suit their needs. Some students are provided with special equipment like glasses and earpieces. In addition, there is a special needs teacher in class to help such students in Grades 1 through 3. When a child with autism can take tests in only one language, tests are adapted in the format of that language.

Students with Reading Difficulties

Diagnostic Testing

Students with conditions affecting learning (e.g., dyslexia, visual impairment, intellectual disabilities) undergo diagnostic testing. Schools base decisions regarding individual students' education plans on the results of this testing.



Instruction for Children with Reading Difficulties

Diagnostic testing allows schools to identify students with reading difficulties. Experts in the Ministry of Education offer help to these students on a case by case basis. For example, students with blindness use instructional materials that are translated into Braille. Students who have reading difficulties due to sight problems use textbooks with enlarged print, digital devices with closed captioning, and portable print enlarging devices.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Students' progress in reading is monitored through ongoing assessment, final examinations, classroom observations, the UAE National Assessment Program, and international assessments (e.g., PIRLS and the Programme for International Student Assessment).

Special Reading Initiatives

There are many reading initiatives in the UAE. Examples include the Arab Reading Challenge, Abu Dhabi Reads, and the Qutoof program. Students also may participate in book exhibitions (e.g., the Sharjah International Book Fair) and competitions designed to encourage them to read. Recognition also is given to initiatives that are most successful in lifting students' performance on international examinations.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

This is the second time the UAE is participating in PIRLS, and its first in the inaugural ePIRLS. Administering PIRLS 2016 and ePIRLS 2016 across the UAE will allow decision makers to measure student achievement in Arabic and English, and will enable international comparisons in reading achievement. Participation also will help schools identify contextual factors at school and home affecting student performance.

Experts in the assessment and examination department of the Ministry of Education have studied the UAE's results in English and Arabic from PIRLS 2011.² This has led to updates to the national curriculum including new teaching strategies and additional required skill areas.³ Additionally, new textbooks for use in Grade 4 emphasize analytical skills. Finally, teachers in the UAE have been using PIRLS released items, which have been uploaded to the Ministry of Education website, extensively in classrooms.

Suggested Readings

Ministry of Education. (n.d.). MOE Final Annual Report 2013-2014. Retrieved from <https://www.moe.gov.ae/Arabic/Docs/BannersDocs/MOE%20Final%20Annual%20Report%202013-2014.pdf>



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- ³ Ministry of Education. (2012). Building Knowledge in the UAE: Findings from TIMSS 2011 & PIRLS 2011. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2m0Rste>