Research Statement

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Most children in Algeria speak one variety of Arabic at home and learn to read in another. Algerian Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic share many words, but they differ in vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, so a child meeting a word on the page may have to work out both its letters and an unfamiliar form at once. My research asks how this gap shapes the way children learn to read, and how teachers can turn the overlap between the two varieties into a bridge rather than an obstacle. The question reaches beyond Algeria: many children around the world learn to read in a standard language that is not the one they speak.

My MA thesis at the University of Algiers 2 tested one part of this question. I measured the reading fluency of 84 second-grade pupils in three schools in Blida, using word lists matched for length and letter frequency. Pupils read words that exist in both varieties 31% faster than words found only in Modern Standard Arabic, and the gap was largest among the weakest readers. The result suggests that the overlap between home and school language is a resource that reading instruction rarely uses. I presented these findings at a national conference on language teaching in 2025.

The question first came from my classroom. For three years I taught Arabic in a primary school in Blida, and I noticed that my pupils read some words fluently long before others of the same length. I began collecting the words they recognised easily and, by the end of my second year, had a list of 60 "bridge words" that I used to introduce new letters. The list was informal, but it showed me how much a teacher can do with knowledge of which words a child already owns.

In a PhD I would like to pursue three directions. The first is a longitudinal study following around 150 pupils from the first to the third grade, to test whether knowing which words overlap predicts their growth in reading; the first step would be to build a systematic overlap list from the grade 1 textbooks. The second is a classroom trial of a short teaching unit built on bridge words, in six classrooms compared with usual teaching. The third is an open version of the word list, designed so that researchers working on other Arabic dialects could build their own. These are plans rather than results, and I expect their design to change with supervision and with what the first study shows.

The UCL Institute of Education is where I would most like to do this work, because of its research on early reading and on teaching in multilingual classrooms. Working among researchers who study many languages would help me frame my findings so that they speak to diglossia more widely, not only to Arabic.

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