

Metrolife

GOT A STORY TO TELL? EMAIL FEATURES@7DAYS.AE

Learning the mother tongue

Worried that the Arabic language might be dying out, one Dubai mum makes sure it is well and truly brought to life

It's one of the oldest languages in the world and the central text of both religion and government here in Dubai.

Yet as they become exposed to more and more different cultures and learn new languages, children are increasingly losing the ability to speak Arabic.

The fact that there are very few educational tools to teach the Arabic language on the market doesn't help the situation either.

That's the opinion of Lamia Tabbaa-Bibi who, along with Jordan based business partner Rama Kayyali-Jardaneh, launched educational production company 'Al Mufakiroun Al Sighar' or 'Little Thinking Minds' back in 2004.

The company produces fun DVDs to teach Arabic to children.

"I was inspired by my son really," says Lamia, a Jordanian mum of two who lives in Dubai.

"We were living in London and he used to be mad about Baby Einstein (an interactive educational tool for English speaking children) and I just thought to myself there was nothing like this available for Arabic children.

"It is a language that people don't tend to use as much as they used to. Most Arabic children are bi and

trilingual nowadays and their Arabic language doesn't get used so often."

With DVDs about animals, colours and shapes, featuring bold images and footage of animals at play, children can learn while they watch.

They can even begin to learn before they speak as the films are aimed at children from birth age to four-years-old.

"The videos are created from a child's perspective - taking into consideration what is appropriate for the little ones. They include baby friendly images -

brightly coloured toys and funny puppet skits.

The music is original and parts are composed and arranged using traditional Arab instruments like the Oud, Qana, Rababa and Arabic Iqa'a.

"We use a lot of repetition in the films. Counting numbers again and again. We repeat things like 'strawberries are red' and eventually they start saying it."

Lamia, who speaks Arabic with her husband and two children at home, says she's of the generation that still uses

her first language in conversation. However, in Dubai's multicultural society, aside from in the home, she says children aren't exposed to Arabic in day to day life.

"A westerner could come to Dubai and live here for 15 years without picking up a single Arabic word.

"The language of instruction at school is English, unless you go to a local school and unless you're Emirati, you're unable to.

"That's why it's important that children learn Arabic because it's the native tongue, the mother tongue. Certainly with some children in the Gulf their Arabic language is dying out and it really is a shame.

"I struggle with my children daily to get them to speak Arabic. My son is becoming fluent and I'm sure my daughter will get there with a lot of perseverance, as they were born in London.

"Many mums and dads are struggling with the same problem." Lamia believes it's essential children learn Arabic from a young

age. She says it's 'not like other languages' which may be easier to learn.

"It's very difficult to learn when you're older," she says.

The DVDs can also be used by non Arab children and have already been introduced at some schools, including Lamia's five-year-old son Hameed's school.

Plans in the pipeline include books and discovery cards.

"At the moment in the UAE, it's becoming compulsory to teach Arabic four times a week so a lot of non Arabs will be learning Arabic and these DVDs will most definitely help them."

And it's not just for the kids either.

"My friends is in her thirties and she grew up in Geneva so her Arabic isn't very good. She asked me could I pass her a DVD and I burst out laughing and she said 'Seriously, I think it would help me'. She says it's really helped her improve her language skills just by reacquainting her with the basics."

The DVDs are available at Favourite Things in Palm Strip Mall, Blossom Mother and Child at Dubai Mall and from next week they'll be sold at Virgin Megastores. Lamia and her partner also plan to start selling on Amazon. For more information visit www.littlethinkingminds.com.

