

The Teaching of Arabic as a Foreign Language (TAFL) at Tertiary Level in the Twenty-First Century: Now Where Do We Go?

Leslie J. McLoughlin, University of Exeter, UK

It is a great pleasure to have the opportunity to discuss with experts in the field of TAFL the present state of affairs in this field. The question posed by our rapporteur, Dr. Rajaa Chouairi of the United States Military Academy, is: What, if anything, should we be doing differently, given the enormous importance to the United States of a good knowledge of Arabic and the Arab world amongst graduates of its universities and of other institutes of higher learning?

For me, it is a particular pleasure to be here as a British labourer in this field, since this year marks the 40th anniversary of my first appointment teaching Arabic in the United States. In 1969, at the Summer School of the University of Pennsylvania, I first made use of new and original materials: Abboud & McCarus. (1983). *Elementary Modern Standard Arabic*. Ann Arbor: Cambridge U.P.

The students were selected from all parts of the country, and for eight weeks' work they were able to gain credits for one year's study.

The experience was proof for me that a "can-do" spirit and motivated students and teachers could produce excellent results of lasting value. From that time, I tried out new ideas in my own teaching at tertiary level, and my distinguished colleagues in this panel have done likewise.

For up to 40 years, then, we have toiled away, trying to answer the basic questions:

1. The Arabic language: What's the problem?
2. How can we best teach a language which is not of our language family, i.e. not an Indo-European language?

We have been helped by the insights gained through knowledge of fields which hardly existed when I first learned Arabic in 1960. The linguisticians, with their many specializations have investigated, for Arab-world purposes, Sociolinguistics, Quantitative Linguistics, Psycholinguistics and the Diglossia situation, etc.

At the same time, many useful text books have been produced for the teaching of spoken and written Arabic which are infinitely better and more interesting than those available in 1960. The members of this panel have been among the leading writers of such materials. In addition, the technological achievements of the last forty years have meant that in 2009, we are able to make available to our students in class live transmissions from Arab satellite stations, not to mention such wonders as instantaneous translations at word level using personal computers, computer-generated graphics for teaching Arabic script, and the ability to call on whole libraries of DVD's showing language and culture in action.

The future is bright for our students of Arabic if, as seems perfectly possible, we can mobilize all these resources in the cause of livelier and more effective teaching in the classroom, in the language laboratory and at home (if the situation is one of distance learning).

And yet.....

This morning we have heard advocates of two quite different philosophies concerning the nature of the problem of teaching Arabic and in particular in relation to the question of DIGLOSSIA.

The two native speakers of Arabic offer two quite different approaches to the question:

Should we teach our students only to speak FUS-HA, i.e. Classical Arabic in a modern form (MSA)?

The two native speakers of English are equally divided. I should therefore like to summarize my position on this fundamental question.

A word on my background may be helpful in evaluating what I have to say.

I was taught Classical Arabic for one year in UK at the University of Durham, 1960-61. We were taught almost nothing about speaking Arabic, whether dialect or MSA. I then studied Arabic for a further six months in Lebanon at the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies (MECAS), a school run by the British Foreign Office. MECAS at that time taught on the basis of four months devoted only to MSA, but only in written form. The students then began to learn to speak using unpublished materials called *The Spoken Arabic of the Levant* (1959).

This material was, in effect, another dialect of Arabic, sometimes described as a dialect spoken only by MECAS students. However, the students did live in an Arabic-speaking environment and many, such as myself (1961-62) were able to become very familiar with Lebanese Arabic, as well as Syrian and Palestinian Arabic, in addition to hearing MSA on radio and television.

On leaving MECAS, I had developed competence in understanding MSA used in the media, in addition to using MSA actively in situations such as consecutive interpreting. I had also developed a good understanding of Levantine Arabic and a certain fluency in speaking it. This was in addition to benefiting from intensive practice in reading and writing Arabic of a variety of registers from Classical Arabic (poetry and prose) through modern literature to newspapers and magazines.

I then taught Arabic to the British military for two years in Aden, becoming familiar with Yemeni Arabic and the Arabic of the Gulf.

Thereafter I was Principal Instructor at MECAS and did much to develop the curriculum 1965-68 and 1970-75. At the end of that time, MECAS' curriculum gave much greater emphasis to spoken skills, with no decline from the previous high standards in written Arabic. This taught me the value to the student of being trained to operate in both spoken and written Arabic simultaneously, i.e. the value of an integrated approach to the teaching of Arabic.

In my own case – a very special one, admittedly, since I was living in the Arab world for many years and was engaged in TAFL – the result was that I became the inter-

preter for Her Majesty The Queen and Prime Ministers and translated into English a number of modern Arabic novels.

I would argue strongly that the great virtue of this approach is that it gives priority to taking into account the psychology of the foreign learner. The student exposed to TAFL is from the beginning exposed to a great deal of contradictory information and indeed to myths about Arabic. I have dealt with these myths principally in a paper presented to an international conference held in Abu Dhabi, January 21-22, 2008 at the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research on Arabic and Education.

As the only non-Arab to present a paper, I spoke on the prospects for TAFL in the twenty-first century and tried to show that the essential is to get rid of those myths which still impede the proper teaching of Arabic to non-native speakers.

If such students persevere, they may emerge with an ability to be understood, but under a system of teaching FUS-HA are extremely likely to be hampered through never having had the experience of exposure over a lengthy period to Arabic in a variety of registers. In addition, they are very likely to have faced the situation where the Arabic party to a conversation may show clearly that what he or she is hearing is not natural Arabic. This guarantees a certain constraint in the exchanges.

Psychologically what the student needs is to understand from Day 1 that Arabic is not uniquely difficult and that the intelligent foreigner can learn a great deal very quickly *if the language is taught in a way which exploits its intrinsic qualities*.

Written Arabic is extremely logical, and the language is the most programmable language imaginable.

Written Arabic is also extremely economical, and the finest proof of that is that the main points of the grammatical system can be stated on one sheet of A4 paper: all the rest follows logically from that page.

Spoken Arabic can be taught alongside Written Arabic since there is huge overlap between the two systems, in terms of

Vocabulary: studies have shown that 80% of the lexis of Lebanese Arabic, for example, is taken from Classical Arabic;

Grammar: much of sentence structure is common between Spoken and Written Arabic;

Morphology: much of Conjugation and Declension is in common. Morphologically, Spoken Arabic is very often a simplified form of that used in Written Arabic.

What the student gains from the integrated approach is impossible to overstate: he or she feels in contact with the whole of the language, spoken and written, from the first day, indeed from the first hour, which is absolutely crucial to determining the success of any course of TAFL. Such a student arriving in, say, Damascus or Cairo or Riyadh will be much better able to “hit the ground running” than someone who has learned only to speak MSA .

There are many points of detail to be discussed as to how such a programme would be implemented, how it would work in practice in the special situations of, say, university courses, but I look forward to debating these matters with members of the panel and members of the audience.