

The Arabic Language Continuum: At Which Point to Start?

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Complaints about an MSA-only Curriculum

“After one year, students still don’t understand the language spoken by native speakers.”

“They arrive in the country and they don’t know how to communicate with a taxi cab driver.”

These complaints are made with a tone of condemnation of current practice, and sometimes with surprise at the outcome, as though Arabic programs have a hidden agenda. It all boils down to the goal of Arabic instruction. Are we teaching Standard Arabic to build a foundation for dealing with written and oral texts or are we preparing students to interact with native speakers? If the latter, which native speakers: all, a specific dialect, for what purpose? These questions have not been addressed by the surveys given to learners of Arabic. Responses to specific questions are able to guide curriculum design. But a response like, “to interact with native speakers,” while tempting to the naïve survey taker, does not yield much to go on for the curriculum designer. It goes without saying that ultimately every language learner would like to develop this capability.

One of the arguments used to justify the need for Arabic instruction that combines Standard and Colloquial Arabic simultaneously is responding to learner needs, particularly after the September 11 events. Of course, applied linguists can deal with specific situations like this and produce courses known as “Language X for Specific Purposes.” Courses of this type would satisfy such needs. Another argument is the linguistic reality that exists all over the Arab world. This is true, and no one contests it. However, it is also the case in many languages, diglossic and less diglossic. German is a case in point, the language is defined as diglossic, but no professor of German or German linguist would teach Low German alongside High German or design a test to assess proficiency in Low German. As one noted German specialist put it:

“... we do not test for those, because Low German is actually more like a dialect spoken only in certain parts of the country. The same would apply to Swabian, Saxon, Bavarian, Franconian, etc. All of these local languages are quite different from High German in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, and idioms. We test only High German, the kind of German taught in schools and universities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland because that is the standard German heard on radio, TV, movies, etc. [...] It is true that the majority of Germans do not speak High German with one another, they use the local dialect or language of their region. However, when dealing with non-native speakers, most Germans try to use High German, although it is often tainted in terms of pronunciation and vocabulary and,

especially, idioms. We have simply made the decision to test only MSG (Modern Standard German).¹

The situation is quite similar to that of Arabic. German may have its own minute differences as compared to Arabic, but it gives us a starting point. One of the principles that any language course developer should abide by is awarding respect to the learners' culture as well as to the target culture. If Arabs choose to make MSA the language of instruction in schools and universities, why should we violate this principle and teach local dialects alongside MSA? Besides, the lofty goal of producing a student who is able to perform like Arabs (e.g., read a passage in MSA and discuss it in dialect) solely through classroom instruction may be beyond our reach. This ability can be developed as learners gain fluency in a dialect learned during study abroad, not during the few contact hours available in state-side programs.

Toward Achieving Consensus

I approach this controversy that does not seem to go away from three perspectives: curricular/programmatic, assessment, and language acquisition. These areas guide all our academic activities from designing the curriculum to selecting and developing language material, to evaluation, and finally to testing. I should add that most Arabic programs today are no longer insular programs because of the increasing number of Arabic study opportunities for students and consequently the increasing demand for using standardized tests. As many of you know, one aspect of tests is that they have what is known as the washback effect², where instruction is influenced by the goal, procedure, and content of a test. Keep in mind that the vast majority of standardized tests are in Standard Arabic, including the Oral Proficiency Interview. In addition, most programs have an overriding philosophical, generalized goal, which usually has to do with how the faculty views the object of study. In the case of Arabic, there arise questions like: Do we want to teach the visual skills only (i.e., reading and to a lesser degree writing)? Should we focus on the oral/aural skills, or should we teach all four skills? In addition, the question of whether or not to teach colloquial Arabic is sometimes addressed. However, the attendant question is which dialect? Do we want to impose one or should we allow our students to choose? And if we want to provide this service, do we have the means and wherewithal?

Rationale for an MSA-based Curriculum

First of all, lest the audience have the impression that I am a proponent of MSA-curriculum solely, I hasten to say that I am myself the author of three audio courses in Colloquial Arabic³ and an advanced-level textbook with audio and video.⁴ The point is not whether or not to teach Colloquial Arabic, but when, where, and for what purpose. In my opinion, before we ask the questions posed in the preceding section, we should have a close look at the curriculum, the mission statement of the department, the time available for minors and majors, and the estimated exit level of proficiency. The majority of Arabic programs are situated in academic institutions, many of them with graduate programs. In addition, there are many smaller one-year and two-

year programs at community colleges and other universities. Let's consider these elements one by one. In a manner consistent with how research is addressed and in the hope that colleagues may subject them to empirical investigation, I try to formulate them as questions.

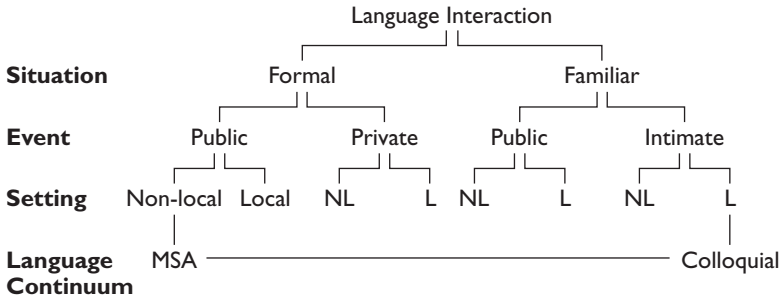
1. Academic mission: Does the field agree that Standard Arabic, the language of scholarship, modern literature, a vast body of classical literature, formal instruction, and formal transactions should be the goal of instruction?
2. Curriculum: Most language programs assign about 35 semester credits for majors, that is no more than 600 contact hours. What percentage of this time can we devote to dialect study and yet maintain a meaningful focus on proficiency, accuracy, and subject matter in Standard Arabic?
3. Exit level: Ideally, majors should be within the advanced range, but reality tells us otherwise.⁵ The majority of Arabic majors are within the intermediate range (intermediate high for many), a very untenable position in my opinion, hence, the need for more focus on Standard Arabic, rather than less.
4. Language acquisition: Most Arabic learners walk into the classroom with almost zero knowledge of Arabic and its culture, and if there is any, chances are it needs rectification. They have a great deal on their plates already with different sound and writing systems, and a very different language system. To the beginner, Standard and Colloquial Arabic are two different languages. We also know that the syntactic and morphological rules of Standard Arabic are pretty complex. I argue for a robust foundation in Standard Arabic for the first four semesters. These may be followed by teaching one or more courses in a given dialect. The transition would be smoother because applying rules of deletion is much easier than applying rules of addition.⁶
5. Over the past decade or so, the Arabic landscape has changed significantly. There has been unprecedented demand for Arabic coupled with the need to develop higher-level proficiency, much higher than the practice has been. This entails more intensive and extensive study, which is done through reading mostly, the realm of Standard Arabic.

A Model for Developing Standard and Colloquial Arabic

In the preceding section, I provide the reasons for focusing on the teaching of MSA in Arabic programs in the United States. In this section, I present my experience with the Flagship Program situated at Damascus University, where a language that spans the entire Arabic continuum was used in instruction and communication.

The cognitive framework representing the Arabic diglossic situation was described in an earlier article published in 1991.⁷ In a nutshell, it provides a model of Arabic oral interaction, claiming that oral performance integrates elements from two Arabic varieties, Standard Arabic and Colloquial Arabic, to varying degrees, depending on a host of socio-cultural and sociolinguistic variables. In addition to the variables presented below, other variables such as gender, age, economic status, level of education, and so forth, come into play to make the distinctions even finer.

A Model of the Standard-Colloquial Continuum⁸



The Flagship model has proven its success, and it can be replicated in regular Arabic programs if they have a study-abroad program. In short, it has two study components, state-side and overseas.

The Flagship Program: State-side

In the state-side one-year program, instruction is focused on MSA with one or more courses in Syrian Arabic (since the target country has been identified).⁹ The variety of topics in the courses offered allows learners to solidify their control of the structure and expand their vocabulary significantly (a must to attain the Advanced level). The level of proficiency of the Flagship fellows when they apply for the overseas component ranges from Intermediate High to Advanced.

Overseas Program

The overseas program is a twelve-month course of study. The learners attend four class sessions daily in the morning and have free afternoons in order to explore the city and interact with the population. The fellows are encouraged to travel during the weekends for linguistic, cultural, and personal development. The program mandates home stay, one student per family. The Language Institute at Damascus University facilitates the process of identifying host families (both Christian and Muslim) by giving the students access to their database. This first step requires the learners to contact the families and negotiate the details, thus plunging the learner right into the culture and language.

There are four hours of classroom instruction daily for five days a week, one of them Syrian Arabic for the first semester only. Given the learners' level of proficiency in Arabic, learning Syrian Arabic in the U.S. previously and being immersed in the culture, there is no need for further formal study of this variety. The bulk of classroom activities is in MSA in all four skills. At this stage of the learners' language development, and given their participation in the target culture, they may tend to integrate colloquial terms into their speech while performing class activities. This is not discouraged, rather encouraged, because a speaker cannot be rated Superior if he or she does not provide evidence of the ability to function in dialect as well.

One of the hallmarks of any well-designed overseas program is the provision of opportunity for practice outside the classroom. The Flagship Program, having been designed to deliver Superior-level speakers, takes this task very seriously. The teacher serves as the coordinator for some of these activities by, for example, arranging for interviews with artists, intellectuals, officials, writers, spiritual leaders and the like. The learners embark on the completion of these tasks on their own. They return to the classroom to report on what transpired. For the most part, the language proficiency level used in performance of these tasks and in the classroom debriefing is no higher than Advanced. But since the goal of instruction is Superior, the instructor would first identify certain issues raised by the learner and then lead a discussion pegged to the Superior level by eliciting from students their own supported opinions, challenging those opinions, discussing the topics abstractly, and finally putting the learners in hypothetical situations. Repeating this type of activity often enough, using a variety of topics and arguments to perform tasks typical of the Superior level, would ultimately elicit attainment of a higher level of proficiency from the serious, dedicated learner.

Conclusion

To sum up, Arabic instruction in the United States should focus on building a solid foundation in MSA for at least the first four semesters. The field should not be concerned with the so-called “linguistic reality.” It is the situation that exists for the native speakers of the language and also for advanced non-native learners. For beginners and intermediate learners, the task should be the learning of the Standard code first. I would follow two guiding principles. The first one would be the attainment of a certain level of proficiency in Standard Arabic (say Intermediate Mid), by the end of the fourth semester. As teachers, we should focus on developing communicative skills although no dialect is involved. These skills are transferable and would be useful when the learners eventually had the opportunity to travel to one of the Arab countries and learn its specific dialect. We should not deceive ourselves by thinking that we can replicate the process of native-speaker linguistic development. The differences between a native speaker and a non-native learner are so numerous and significant that they defy any comparison. The other guiding principle is the manner in which all other languages treat their mainstream varieties (i.e., standard) and the many local varieties that exist (i.e., linguistic reality). NO English-language editor would accept any non-standard forms (what we think of as linguistic reality). I have yet to see a standardized test in any language that has items derived from local dialects such as Cockney, Appalachian, Patois, Low German, or Verlan. I leave the reader with two questions to ponder: Is Arabic so different from all the languages in the world that it warrants special treatment? Why should Arabic do what no other language is expected to do?

Citations

- 1 Otto, Karl. (2007). Personal communication.
- 2 Weir, C. J. (1990). *Communicative language testing*. New York: Prentice Hall International English Language Teaching

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- 4 Alos, M. (2006). *`ala `eni: Advanced Syrian Arabic*. The Flagship Program, Damascus University, Syria.
- 5 Shulz, R. A. (1988). Proficiency-based foreign language requirements: A plan for action. *ADFL Bulletin 19*, 2: 24-28.
- 6 Cadora
- 7 Alos, M. (1991). Arabic diglossia and its impact on teaching Arabic as a foreign language. In G. Ervin (Ed.) *International perspectives on foreign language teaching*. ACTFL Review of Foreign Language Education (pp. 121-137). Lincolnwood IL: National Textbook Company.
- 8 Alos, M. (1997). *Learner, text, and context in foreign language acquisition: An Arabic perspective*. Columbus OH: National Foreign Language Resource Center, The Ohio State University.
- 9 Currently, undergraduates go to the University of Alexandria, and thus they learn Egyptian Arabic, while graduate students go to Damascus University.