

A Multimedia Arabic Course

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Abstract

This paper¹ reports on a multi-media web-based CALL program designed to teach Arabic to foreign learners. It discusses several important theoretical and practical issues related to language pedagogy, such as the variety of Arabic to teach, the problem of the, types of text, and the representation of Arabic. It also discusses the issue of incorporating a concordancer and corpus into a teaching environment.

An important and unique feature of the program is that it is designed and implemented by linguists with many years of experience in teaching linguistics and Arabic as a foreign language, and takes into account the latest methodological and pedagogical advances in the field rather than merely transferring existing materials into the electronic format.

1. Introduction

The work described here began as a Part 1 (undergraduate) course at Lancaster University, with the aim of introducing linguistics students to a language distinctly different in its structure from English. The course was originally concerned with the linguistic description of Arabic, including the syntax, morphology and phonology. Building on growing interest in the development of language teaching materials using modern technology, we have developed a web-based course in an interactive multimedia environment for teaching foreign learners simple spoken Arabic and the writing system. The original linguistics-oriented materials have now been converted into a resource which can be accessed by more advanced students who have completed a less technical introduction. In this way we have sought to solve the long-standing problem of combining the communicative approach with a knowledge-based approach to the target language.

2. Purpose of the project

The aim is to improve on the unsatisfactory materials currently available for teaching Arabic. In the first place there is a huge variety in what course providers think the Arabic language is. There is a confusion between spoken and written Arabic (for speaking, listening, reading and writing), different notions of Standard Arabic, and a general lack of treatment of geographical varieties. Secondly, there are different methods of delivery, including conventional books, sometimes accompanied by tapes, and multimedia courses of various kinds. The latter tend not to be pedagogically well-

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founded, and in some cases are linguistically unsophisticated and uninspired in terms of their multimedia implementation and interactivity.

Books and tapes

There is a wide variety of courses available on the market. For example, Abboud *et al.* (1976) focus on Standard Arabic. Harvey (1980) chooses the dialect spoken in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. Holes (1984) investigates the colloquial Arabic of the Gulf and Saudi Arabia. El-Ghobashy & Wise (1985) provide a short course for teaching Egyptian Arabic. Wightwick & Gaafar (1990) base their course on Egyptian Arabic and focus on Standard Arabic for writing and reading. This variety can be confusing for the learner who is presented with a family of languages instead of just one. Presentations of al-fusha routinely confuse written and spoken Arabic, or at least spoken Arabic and written Arabic read aloud. It is impossible, for example, to use Standard Arabic for a conversation for buying bananas or ordering a meal, or even greeting someone. Presentations of colloquial varieties are valuable for spoken language in the chosen area, but do not give the learner the necessary introduction to Arabic except perhaps as a tourist.

Multimedia programs

Tapes accompanying conventional books are now giving way to multimedia presentations of Arabic. Some are available as CD-ROMs. The Sakhr Microsoft Company, for example, offers *Learn Arabic*, a course for beginners, and *Letters and Numbers* for children. There are also some short courses which are available on the internet. *Arabic Now! 8.0* by Transparent Language is basically designed to teach Standard Arabic. *Learn Arabic in Two Hours* is a short course teaching vocabulary through association, e.g. to learn the Arabic words *baTTa* 'duck' and *samaka* 'fish', the learner has to associate them with the English words 'butter' and 'smack'. Another multimedia course is called *Fun with Arabic* by Naglaa Ghali, containing interactive lessons covering the alphabet, basic grammar, and short phrases. It focuses on Standard Arabic with occasional reference to Egyptian Arabic. There are also some free courses on the web such as [Babel: Arabic](http://i-cias.com/babel/arabic/index.htm)² which teaches simple communication and writing in Standard Arabic.

A common problem with these multimedia programs is that by focusing on either Standard Arabic or a specific dialect they reproduce the problem of conventional books. This represents a lost opportunity to take advantage of the multimedia environment. Secondly, many of these attempts lack a clearly defined goal, and consequently lack a clearly defined method of organisation, e.g. some teach only one aspect of the language such as a list of vocabulary, or the alphabet, or the numbers. It can be difficult to identify the pedagogical principles on which some of this work is based. At worst, some of it invites the jibe that it combines space-age technology with stone-age pedagogy.

² <http://i-cias.com/babel/arabic/index.htm>

Design of the project materials

In designing materials on this project we have kept in mind the following aims:

1. to produce interactive instructional materials which are natural-sounding and realistic. That is, we aim to present foreign learners with expressions they can use to communicate effectively even if it is on a basic level rather than something they are never likely to find useful in practice.
2. to provide foreign learners with the training they need to become communicatively competent in all aspects of the language, as well as more technical information for those interested in studying the linguistic aspects of the language.
3. to make imaginative use of the new technology and offer the learner a fresh and innovative approach to language learning in general.

3. Target variety of Arabic

In order to define a suitable target we have to start not with what teachers want to teach but with what students need to learn for proficiency in Arabic. Nor should we assume that one variety is appropriate in all circumstances, and we have to consider separately the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking).

Reading and writing

For teaching these skills there is only one variety to teach, and that is al-fusha, or Standard Arabic. This variety is essentially written Arabic, and its spoken equivalent - heard on the radio and on formal occasions - can largely be described as written Arabic read aloud. There is much confusion in Arabic teaching between read speech and spontaneous speech, and there appears to be a widespread belief that al-fusha read aloud can appropriately be taught to foreign learners as a model for spontaneous speech. This view does not take into account the fact that Arab speakers speak and write different varieties of the language.

An interesting example of the inappropriateness use of al-fusha as a model for speech was inadvertently provided by a teacher who was successfully teaching the Harakaat, and included the example *kayfa Haluka?* (how are you?). This surprised another Arabic speaker who happened to hear the students practicing. The point is that nobody naturally says this. Something as prototypically conversational as a greeting requires a model taken not from the written language but the language of conversation.

Listening

In the case of teaching listening skills this depends on the type of learner. A lot of foreign learners have specific needs, such as tourists and foreign employees working in Arabic countries. They usually want to learn the dialect of the country they are going to travel to or work in. For example, some might prefer to study the Moroccan dialect while others might prefer to study the Gulf dialect. However, there are the general learners who want to study Arabic and have an idea about its different forms.

These learners need to listen to a wide range of colloquial varieties, of which Egyptian Arabic and the form of Standard Arabic read aloud are two examples.

Speaking

In the case of speaking (language production), the problem is most acute: what target variety should we teach so that learners will be clearly understood everywhere? There is a need to identify one form of Arabic which can be understood by all native speakers of Arabic. There is no ready-made solution, and this is a research problem which is under investigation (Knowles and Al-Sulaiti, in preparation a). The learner needs “general” Arabic forms which are not strongly associated with any particular region. Arabic speakers may modify their speech and adopt less regionally marked forms when interacting with someone from a different regions or of a higher social status. Ferguson (1959) referred to ‘al-luGa al-wusTa’, characterized by the avoidance of markedly dialectal features and the complications of Standard Arabic: this is an important idea that remains to be adequately described and defined.

The forms used on this course are broadly consistent with what we understand as ‘al-luGa al-wusTa’. We select where possible forms common to several different regions, e.g. ‘how are you’ rather than the dialectal ‘shloonak’ which is associated with Iraq and the Gulf. We select the general pronunciation /j/ in the verb ‘I came’ rather than /y/ which is common in the Gulf region. We avoid written forms which are not normally used in spontaneous speech, including the question word and ‘what’.

Representing Arabic

In order to facilitate the learning of Arabic we have to represent written and spoken Arabic using the Roman alphabet. Most of the sounds can be consistently represented using familiar Roman letters. There is a wide variation in practice and a lack of consistency in representing sounds for which no obvious letters are available. Some writers use IPA symbols while others use combinations of Roman letters. To take an example, can be represented by either /ħ/, <ħ> /h/, or <H>, can be represented by either <kh> or /χ/, and can be represented by /ġ / or <gh>.³ In other cases some use the same symbol to represent different sounds. For example, <dh> is used in some works to represent ذ and to represent د in other works. This is a problem for learners as they have no consistent system to follow if they are using several different books.

A quite distinct problem is that there are also different approaches to the representation of words, including **transcription** and **transliteration**. Transcription uses a phonetic alphabet to represent the actual pronunciation of Arabic forms, while transliteration uses Roman letters to represent Arabic written forms. For example, the Arabic form ‘a big engineer’ is properly transliterated *mhnds kbyr* with one Roman letter substituting for one Arabic letter. But if the Arabic form is vowelled, e.g. مُهَنْدِسٌ كَبِيرٌ, it is properly transliterated *muhandis kabiyr*. In the case of transcription we represent the word as we hear it regardless of how it is written. So

³ In this paper, IPA symbols representing specific sounds are put between slashes “/ /” and symbols meant to be read literally (as shown) are put between angled brackets.

when we transcribe a word said by two speakers we might have two different representations, e.g. may be pronounced /qahwa/ in the Gulf and /ʔahwa/ in Egypt.

The problem in the literature is that there is confusion between transliteration and transcription, and both of these are confused with **phonetic spelling**. In phonetic spelling we use a single representation for each word, irrespective of how it is written or pronounced on any given occasion. So <qahwa> is a good spelling for vowelised and unvowelised written forms, and for pronunciations with /g/ or /ʔ/. What the foreign learner needs most, of course, is phonetic spelling. What we see in books is basically a spelling, but practice wanders inconsistently into transcription and transliteration. If we relate these approaches to representation it becomes clear that different approaches are required for different skills. To read Arabic the learner needs to understand transliteration, while transcription is linked to listening skills. Phonetic spelling provides the learner with a model for speaking skills. There is an important theoretical issue to be investigated here in order to come up with a consistent and agreed system (Knowles & Al-Sulaiti, in preparation). It is extremely difficult to be totally consistent in this area, but we are hoping to come up with an acceptable solution.

Harakaat

The Harakaat are important for the recognition of the pronunciation of words especially at earlier stage of learning. When Arab children learn the language at school, they are presented with texts marked with the Harakaat. But at a later stage of learning, they are assumed to have acquired the system and there is no need for the Harakaat to be represented any more. That is why newspapers and magazines texts are written without the Harakaat. The level of the foreign learner is in some ways similar to that of children, and therefore they need to see the Harakaat to recognize the words. What we are particularly concerned about, however, are the Harakaat that occur at the ends of words. Learning these Harakaat is difficult, even for native speakers. Whether the word ends with *u* or *a* depends on its position in the sentence and its grammatical category. Word-final Harakaat are used mainly in the Qur'an and in formal speeches, but not in everyday, informal situations. Therefore, for this course we decided not to use the Harakaat at the ends of words.

4. The project

The multimedia Arabic course consists of three sections:

- a. Reading Arabic
- b. Arabic linguistics
- c. Arabic conversations

The first section deals with the alphabet. The letters are divided into groups based on their shapes, and explanations of their pronunciation and how to write them are given in words and then illustrated via sound recordings and animations of the letters being written. Learners are given the opportunity of reading as well as practising writing the alphabet. The second section deals with some aspects of grammar and morphology. It covers simple rules (for beginners) as well as complicated and more detailed rules (for intermediate and advanced levels). In these sections the focus is on Standard Arabic.

The third section deals with everyday communication in the spoken language. It contains a number of audio and video conversations which are based on selected topics. There are 12 different topics, such as greetings, telephone conversations, shopping, business, asking for directions, food and drink, illustrated by a total of forty four recorded conversations which cover a wide range of interests. Users can choose a topic to listen to and hear the recorded conversation or videotaped event by clicking a button.

The main form of Arabic adopted for this section is colloquial Arabic. One of the decisions we had to face was choosing the variety to use from the many which are available. We decided that the best thing was to expose the foreign learner to a number of colloquial dialects. The foreign learner would hear a number of varieties and the salient features distinguishing among these varieties would be pointed out.

A typical conversation in this section is divided into the following sub-sections:

The text

It involves conversation between two people: male and female or two of the same sex. The conversation is designed to be short and simple and is translated into English and also given in phonemic transcription.

Speakers

The speakers are from different parts of the Arab world and they use their own dialects. For example, the conversation could be between a Sudanese speaker and a Qatari or Omani speaker.

Vocabulary

New vocabulary items in the conversation are listed, along with their meanings in English and their pronunciation (in phonemic transcription). They are arranged according to the order in which they occur in the conversation. Additional vocabulary items related to the topic are included in this section with a generous use of pictures (see screenshot in Figure 1 below). The learning environment is kept as free of clutter as possible through the use of buttons which alternately turn on or off the display of material which the learner chooses.

Grammar

New grammatical structures in the conversation are explained and illustrated. For each structure, there are two levels of explanation: a basic description, with examples and associated sound files, and a more detailed description which advanced learners (e.g. university students of linguistics) can choose to view by clicking a button or following a hyperlink. This way, the course pages are kept simple and uncluttered, and customisable for different levels of learners.

Cultural notes

Any expression which is specific to Arab culture is explained with examples, and pictures and video clips whenever possible. Again, these are mainly accessed via hyperlinks, so that learners control the quantity and pace of their own learning.

Exercises

Each conversation is followed up with interactive exercises so that learners can check how much they have learned. There are exercises that test vocabulary, pronunciation or grammar. Users can choose between getting immediate feedback on their answers after pressing the 'submit' button for each question or a total score for the entire exercise if they do it in test mode.

Figure 1 *Screenshot of a conversation with a vocabulary and grammar section ('Buying Vegetables')*

wa 'la kam kaylaw 'alT TamaaTim	'And how much is the kilo of the tomatoes?'	وكم كيلو الطماطم	Salah
sthat ryaaklat	'six Riyab'	ستة ريال	Overagreed
laTyyay kaylaw waasaf mima 'al xyaar min 'alBak	'Give me one kilo of cucumbers, please'	عطيني كيلو خيار من البقالة	Salah
wa 'asf kaylaw mima 'alT TamaaTim	'and half's kilo of tomatoes'	واحد كيلو الطماطم	Salah
kam 'al sibaab	'How much is it?'	كم الثمن	Salah
sa'laat ryaaklat	'seven Riyab'	سبعة ريال	Overagreed
sa'la'at	'Here you are'	هنا	Salah
shukran	'Thank you'	شكراً	Overagreed
sa'fwan	'You're welcome'	منصفاً	Salah

Summary of language points

click to hide again

click to hide again

Vegetables

Vegetables

		
baamya/ 'al 'alza'	ba' - 'tunup'	ba'Sal 'asamar/ 'ad onsoo'

Figure 2 *Sample of a three-way representation of conversations*

Situation: Salah is looking for the Pharmacy			
ʔas salaam ʔale:kum yaa ʔaxiy	'Peace be upon you, brother'	السَّلَامُ عَلَيْكُمْ يَا أَخِي	Salah
wa ʔale:kum ʔas salaam	'and upon you be the peace'	وَعَلَيْكُمْ السَّلَامُ	Man
ʔiS Se:daliy:a we:n yaa ʔaxiy	'Where is the pharmacy, please?'	الصِّدَالِيَّةُ وَين يَا أَخِي؟	Salah
ʔiS Se:daliy:a waraa ʔil maɣbaz	'the pharmacy is behind the bakery.'	الصِّدَالِيَّةُ وَرَا الْمَبْزِزِ	Man
ʔukran yaa ʔaxiy	'Thank you.'	شَكَرًا يَا أَخِي	Salah
ʔafwan	'Not at all.'	عَفْوًا	Man

5. Use of the program and its distinctive features

Initially this web-based program was designed for beginners. However, as we expanded and enriched the linguistic component of the course, we decided that it was a relatively trivial matter to extend the course to suit intermediate and advanced learners, so that people of different levels and interests can benefit from it. This program offers learners a choice of study modes by providing them with a menu from which they choose the area they want for practice. By clicking on a topic they are interested in, they can listen to a recorded conversation and repeat it as often as they like (and revisit the sections on grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary or exercises). For the advanced learners, there will be also the element of self-discovery, via the built-in concordancing facility which operates over a carefully selected and graded set of Arabic-English parallel texts.

This program can be used as an independent course or as supplementary material to help learners who are taking Arabic lessons in their own institutes or colleges. For example, learners might be studying only Standard Arabic or a particular form of colloquial Arabic, and therefore can use this program to supplement their course. This program also exposes students to real language as it is spoken in different parts of the Arabic-speaking world. At present most of the currently available programs available either focus on standard Arabic, which is essentially a written variety, or choose one particular regional variety of Arabic, which means that learners may not find other spoken varieties intelligible. By presenting the standard form for the writing and reading section and the different spoken varieties for the communicative section, we are giving the foreign learner an accurate and more complete picture of the language, as well as preparing them for real-life interactions in the Arabic-speaking world.

Autonomous learning

Learning within this program aims to enable learners to take responsibility for their own learning. They become more active in the learning process, and it is no longer the teacher who tells the students what to learn, but rather the learners themselves choose what they want to learn and accept responsibility for their learning.

6. Future developments

In developing our teaching material, we are at this stage making expert guesses about the appropriate expressions and vocabulary to include. Our choices are based on our experience in teaching and on our intuitions. However, we need a more solid basis on which to build our choice of material so that the optimal amount can be learnt in the least amount of time. We need to use a corpus to identify the most frequent words in various genres of Arabic. More precisely, we need to identify the most frequent nouns and verbs as these are central to attaining a basic command of the language. Many learners complain that even though they study Arabic for several years they still find it hard to communicate effectively in it. To some extent this is due to the fact that lots of courses contain expressions and vocabulary which are not in common use. Therefore, we need a corpus and a concordancer to handle this problem.

A corpus of Arabic

At present we have access to an Arabic newspaper corpus of around 50,000 words tagged for part-of-speech. While this is far better than nothing, a corpus of this size is far too small and specialised. We really need to compile a corpus of at least a million words containing different types of texts, including transcriptions of spoken language events.⁴ We also anticipate the need to construct a small bilingual translation corpus of Arabic and English specially designed for pedagogical purposes. This will be of great assistance to learners during their concordancing activities (see below).

So far we have only completed lesson materials for the beginner and intermediate levels. Our future plans include integrating the use of a concordance program in our course (either via a web front-end to an existing concordance engine or via a custom-built program)

Concordancing for the advanced learner

We are looking into the feasibility and pedagogical usefulness of incorporating a concordancing element into our course design. Using a concordancer on an XML-marked-up and part-of-speech tagged sampler corpus of Arabic texts (both spoken (transcribed) and written) will allow students to see words or structures in context. These texts would ideally also have sentence-aligned translations in English, so that learners will not feel entirely lost in the midst of a mass of foreign language material.

⁴ By comparison, so-called ‘mega-corpora’ of many millions of words already exist for English and a few other European languages, and even these are considered not big enough for some purposes, especially lexicography/dictionary-building where the identification of word senses and collocations requires vast quantities of text.

The translation equivalents will also help advanced students discover for themselves how “the same thing” is said in the two different languages.

With a concordance program, users will be able to select words or grammatical patterns they wish to examine and get the program to generate concordances which will illustrate the words or patterns in context. They will be able to choose the types and levels of text they query as well (e.g. only newspapers, or only children’s books). For this purpose, we aim to roughly grade the level of difficulty of all the texts that will go into the corpus, in addition to coding them for channel (spoken/written), genre, provenance (regional variety), etc.

The usefulness of concordancers in the classroom has been the subject of many papers in the field of corpus linguistics in recent years, and it is generally agreed that it is advanced learners who will benefit most readily from an empirical, exploratory approach to language data. Learners who already have some knowledge about the language are in a position to benefit from looking at real, unedited data in order to work out their own hypotheses about the way particular words or structures work. In this way, they actively participate in and control their own learning, rather than having it controlled by a syllabus or teacher. (For more information of the uses of concordancers in language teaching, see the bibliography on the subject on Tim John’s web page⁵.)

For our multimedia web environment, we are still working out the technical details of the front-end interface, type and level of word-class tagging, size of the corpus, variety of genres to include, etc. We envisage, however, that even lower-level learners will ultimately benefit from the corpus-based approach we are taking to this whole project: our analysis of real Arabic corpus data will allow us to see which words or grammatical structures are most frequently used and therefore perhaps should be given particular emphasis in our course pages.

7. Conclusion

In this paper we have described a multimedia Arabic program currently under development. We have identified some elementary problems, such as what to do about the *harakaat*, and even the distinction between *harakaat* as morphological endings, and *harakaat* as vowel marks that are usually left unspecified in writing. *harakaat* are important for reading and writing, but they are best avoided in the teaching of speaking.

The best approach is one that reflects the diglossic realities of life in the Arab world: that is, to teach learners to use Standard Arabic for the purpose of reading and writing, a selection of colloquial forms for listening, and appropriate models for speaking.

We have argued that in order to help learners achieve a real mastery of the language, we have to use realistic materials. The program has not been completed yet, but we hope soon to complete pilot lessons which will be tested and evaluated in various language centres. To the best of our knowledge, current Arabic language courses do not demonstrate the expertise in linguistic analysis and language pedagogy required to

⁵ <http://web.bham.ac.uk/johnstf/biblio.htm>

take full advantage of the opportunities offered by multimedia technology. We are attempting to widen the range and scope of the primary source material be (covering a variety of dialects, genres and situation types) and increase opportunities for learner interactivity in the form of cloze tests, vocabulary quizzes and a concordancer which interfaces with a real language corpus. Many of the advancements mentioned in this paper have been available for the English language and many other European languages for some time already. It is time now for Arabic pedagogical language materials to catch up and move into the new millennium.

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