

Introducing Arabic: Meeting the Challenges

Elizabeth M. Bergman
Miami University of Ohio

Abstract

This article addresses two issues that concern new as well as expanding programs in Arabic language. They are myths about (teaching and learning) Arabic and advice for new or expanding programs. Myths about (teaching and learning) Arabic describe Arabic as impossible or at least extraordinarily difficult to learn. Unless these are countered with factual information from the outset, they can impair the effectiveness of even the most well planned Arabic language program. Advice for new or expanding begins with a brief discussion of facts about Arabic, in particular Arabic diglossia and its impact on curriculum planning and the trajectory of student progress. It continues with a list of strategies for planning and assessing programs, and hiring instructors. Finally, resources list some of the national organizations and websites to which program administrators can turn for sound advice.

Introducing Arabic: Meeting the Challenges

This article addresses two issues that concern new as well as expanding programs in Arabic language. They are myths about (teaching and learning) Arabic and advice for new or expanding programs, which discusses Arabic diglossia and provides some strategies and resources for new or expanding programs. These are drawn from the author's professional and personal experience.¹ Dr. Elizabeth M. Bergman teaches Arabic at Miami University of Ohio and has been Executive Director of the American Association of Teachers of Arabic since 2007.

¹ I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Karin C. Ryding, Georgetown University, to the final version of this article. Her presentation (2008a), together with her generous advice and sage counsel, prompted me to develop a presentation on a similar topic (Bergman, 2007) into its present form.

Introduction

The importance of the study of Arabic has increased enormously in recent years. Resources for studying and teaching Arabic, however, have not kept up with increasing demand. High-quality teaching materials are scarce or difficult to find. The same is true of information about establishing programs, hiring and training instructors, planning and developing curricula, and evaluating progress in individual learners and in programs as a whole. When program directors and Arabic language instructors do not know where to turn for sound advice, they can only rely on received wisdom and word-of-mouth communication.

The demand for the most necessary resources and the dearth of available resources are the inevitable results of rapid expansion. Arabic language study in the US has grown explosively in a short time. The MLA's "Foreign Language Enrollments in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2002," which ended in first full academic year following the events of September 11, 2001 indicates that Arabic language enrollments nearly doubled (from approximately 5,000 to 10,000) between 1998 and 2002 (Welles, 2004). According to the next MLA survey, Arabic enrollments increased dramatically again between 2002 and 2006, this time by 126.5% (Furman, Goldberg, & and Lusin, 2007). In other words, Arabic enrollments more than quadrupled in fewer than eight years.

Growth in the study and teaching of Arabic shows no sign of leveling off. There are, however, indications of a shift in responses to that growth. Since 2001, the profession has faced an emergency situation as an entire field struggled to catch up with world events. More recently, as we work to meet national needs in programs that integrate Arabic language study into existing programs of study, the focus has shifted to longer-term plans.

The shift to the long view is extremely important. As Ryding (2008b) points out, there are no short-term solutions to the issue of rapidly expanding program development in critical languages -- there are only short-term measures (p. 215). Such measures are at best partial and at worst ineffective. In order to develop real and effective solutions, new and expanding programs must begin with good pro-

fessional advice, realistic goals, thoughtfully designed curricula, and sophisticated instructors.

Myths about (learning and teaching) Arabic²

New and expanding programs of Arabic language must begin with high energy and high expectations. They must oppose the old myth about the impossibility of learning Arabic. This myth is not only untrue, it is counter-productive. It distracts administrators and discourages students and instructors. Unless new programs confront this myth down from the outset, they will be dragged down by it. The myth takes various forms, promulgated both by first-language speakers of Arabic and learners of Arabic. Because the forms deal with different aspects of the language, they are treated below individually, as different but related myths.

In its most general form, the myth states that Arabic is impossible or, at the very least, extremely difficult to learn. Arabic is, however, a language spoken by an estimated 200 million people worldwide. A gross misuse of statistics might claim that this figure makes Arabic only slightly less difficult to learn than Mandarin Chinese, English, and Spanish, the three world languages with more speakers than Arabic (Gordon, 2005). Another, perhaps more helpful, measure of the difficulty of Arabic lists the number of classroom hours that it takes students of the Foreign Service Institute to get to ILR Levels 0 – 3 (ACTFL Novice to Superior). To summarize, it takes students of Arabic (as well as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) approximately twice as long to reach the same levels of proficiency as it takes students of French or Spanish (Liskin-Gasparro, 1982, p. 28). These time requirements are a fact, as is the growing number of language learners who, in spite of the time requirements, achieve high levels of proficiency in Arabic. They allow us, then, to redefine Arabic. Arabic is not inherently difficult; it is simply time-consuming. The myth of the impossibility of learning Arabic, how-

² The phrase “myths about Arabic” is, of course, borrowed from Ferguson (1959), whose overview of attitudes and beliefs about Arabic prompted me to consider myths that affect the teaching and learning of Arabic.

ever, persists inside Arabic language classrooms, in the media, and elsewhere.

Given that this myth is so pervasive, let us consider the reasons behind it. Two sources promote the myth in its various forms. They are first-language speakers of Arabic and learners of Arabic.

First-language speakers of Arabic

For some speakers of Arabic, “knowing Arabic” equates with “knowing Arabic grammar.” Speakers of Arabic take pride in the complexities of Arabic grammar. It is a demanding academic discipline, rooted in a grammatical research tradition in Arabic that is over 1,000 years old. As students themselves, speakers of Arabic find the very idea of Arabic grammar daunting. Conventional classroom teaching in the Arab world emphasizes grammatical accuracy in spoken or written literary Arabic, which further intimidates students. The teaching and learning of Arabic grammar is intimately bound up with the Arabic literary and religious traditions, both of which in turn evoke the powerful imperial legacy of Arabic language and culture. No wonder that learning Arabic is considered difficult for speakers of Arabic and all but impossible for learners.

Arabic learners

For learners of Arabic, the myths about the impossibility of learning Arabic center on “difference.” At the start, they see the Arabic script as completely impenetrable. Arabic script is cursive and based on a small number of basic shapes. It is an ideal vehicle for the beauties and complexities of the Arabic calligraphic tradition. For all of its complexities, however, the Arabic alphabet consists of only 28 letters. Further, it has an excellent phonological fit with the language, so that most words are spelled as they sound.³ In university-level classes, students regularly learn the Arabic script and sound system in four to six weeks, where instructors use the Arabic script

³ Obvious exceptions to this statement include orthographic conventions such as the short or “dagger” *’alif* and the rules for writing the seat of the *hamza*. These are, however, minor irregularities when Arabic orthography is compared with, for example, that of English or French.

consistently and from the very first day. The result, the mastery of the Arabic script, unfailingly provides learners of Arabic with an extraordinary motivating factor. It gives them a sense of accomplishment and a tangible proof of their progress in the early stages of learning. These in turn pique students' interest in Arabic and boost their pride in their achievements.

The second myth is that non-Arabs cannot produce "all those guttural sounds." The fact is that most of the phonetic inventory of Arabic is familiar to speakers of American English. Arabic has two pharyngeal fricatives: a voiced pharyngeal fricative /ʕ/ and a voiceless pharyngeal fricative /ħ/. Arabic also has a voiceless uvular stop /q/. These take some time to learn to recognize and reproduce. They are hardly impossible when an instructor models them consistently for students and when instructors treat them as important, necessary, and achievable. Other sounds, such as the voiceless and voiced velar fricatives /x/ and /ɣ/, and the alveolar trill /r/, occur in many European languages, so they are not totally unfamiliar.

The third myth states that vocabulary is hard to learn because Arabic is not an Indo-European language and has no cognate vocabulary with English. As with many myths, the vocabulary myth is both true and untrue. The structure and functions of Arabic word derivation (morphology) are unlike those of English. They are, however, remarkably systematic. At the same time, Arabic uses many borrowings, especially from English, even if it lacks cognate vocabulary. Words such as *talfiẓyūn*, *kaamira*, *bank*, and *film* all are everyday items in Arabic. The number of English borrowings in Arabic is growing as technology expands at the global level.

This does not mean that I dismiss the very real complexities and delights of Semitic morphology, one of the initial attractions of Arabic and a continuing intellectual pursuit. Nor can I write off the substantial challenges that learners face in building a functional lexicon. Let us agree, however, that Arabic vocabulary is not a closed book. Experienced instructors can devise creative ways to open that book for students. One approach to Arabic vocabulary fronts the familiar by emphasizing contemporary borrowings. Borrowings, after all, come from fields and areas that are themselves most familiar to students. For example, our students rely on the *talfiẓyūn*, especially the

moobayil, and the *kumbiyuutir*, to conduct their social lives in ways that are completely foreign to many Arabic language instructors. Another approach calls students' attention to the word derivation system of Arabic from the earliest stages of learning and teaches it as a strategy that helps them learn new vocabulary. Nouns of place, to take one example, regularly derive from corresponding verbs. The *maxraj* 'exit' is where *naxruju* 'we go out', and the *madxal* 'entrance' is where *nadxulu* 'we go in'. By analogy, then, the *masba* 'swimming pool' is where *nasbaḥu* 'we swim'.

Finally, the fourth myth claims that Arabic grammar is difficult because of the inflected nature of Arabic morpho-syntax. True, Arabic is a highly inflected language. Nouns, adjectives, and pronouns inflect for number, gender, and definiteness, while verbs show person, number, tense or aspect, and voice. The inflectional systems of Arabic, however, are no more complex than those of Russian, Polish, or German, to name only a few examples. Arabic has two noun genders and three grammatical cases, with only two true (or morphological) verb tenses. It should be pointed out, however, that the inflectional system of Arabic carries a relatively low communicative load. Although the complexities of the system delight grammarians and intimidate first-language speakers of Arabic and Arabic learners alike, they are not absolutely necessary for everyday communication. Knowledge of the Arabic inflectional system only becomes truly critical at higher levels of proficiency. It is also necessary for reading sacred texts as well as classical literature.

Advice for new or expanding programs of Arabic language

Advice for new or expanding programs begins with facts about the language, in particular Arabic diglossia and its impact on curriculum planning and the trajectory of student progress. It continues with a list of strategies for planning and assessing programs, and hiring instructors. Finally, it lists other resources that may aid new and expanding programs. These are national organizations and websites to which programs can turn for sound advice.

Facts about Arabic

a) Arabic is extremely useful as a strategic, global language. It is one of the six official working languages of the United Nations, and the official language of over 20 Middle Eastern countries. Studying Arabic gives learners a distinct advantage if they plan to work in international relations in the private or public sectors.

b) As a humanities discipline, the study of secular and sacred Arabic texts has a long and distinguished tradition in the West as well as in the Arab world. Classical texts cover a wide range of subjects, from anatomy and other medical sciences to alchemy, astronomy, philosophy, theology, geography and travel annals, history, biography, and folk tales, as well as belles-lettres and poetry.

c) Most importantly, the fact of diglossia presents significant challenges at levels of administration and teaching. In establishing an Arabic program, in training Arabic teachers, in devising learning goals and curricular goals, deciding on methodologies, and choosing instructional materials, Arabic instructors and Arabic language program supervisors must keep the fact of diglossia constantly before them.

Diglossia refers to the fact that Arabs read and write one form of language. This is the so-called "high" form, also known as the "standard," "literary," or "classical" form (Ferguson, 1959a). The contemporary variety of the high form is conventionally known as "Modern Standard Arabic" (or "MSA"). For everyday spoken communication, however, Arabs speak language varieties (or vernaculars, dialects, or "slangs") that are substantially different from Modern Standard Arabic. These differences exist at every level of language: they are present in pronunciation, word derivation, grammar, and vocabulary. Moreover, the spoken varieties vary substantially from region to region in the Arab world. Some geographically close vernaculars are mutually intelligible, either because speakers of one vernacular are accustomed to communicating with speakers of another or because two vernaculars are linguistically similar. Vernaculars separated by great distances (such as, for example, Moroccan and Kuwaiti) are not normally mutually intelligible.

Spoken varieties of Arabic have evolved over more than a millennium to accommodate the needs of everyday existence. They

are vital, sophisticated, complex, living languages. They are not, however, considered suitable for written communication and therefore are not generally written. Arab folk wisdom considers the Arabic dialects inferior or sub-standard versions of literary or classical Arabic that “have no grammar.” As a result, the spoken varieties have been free to evolve and adapt in their vocabulary, grammar and style. In contrast, the grammatical rules for the literary or classical have remained largely stable since the seventh and eighth centuries CE, although vocabulary has changed over time. As a result, the gap between the literary or classical varieties and the spoken varieties is considerable.

Arabic language program coordinators, instructors, and students need to be aware of diglossia. They also must realize that most Arabic language textbooks do not teach naturally spoken language. They teach Modern Standard Arabic. Modern Standard Arabic is usually a written variety. In its spoken form, Modern Standard Arabic generally occurs in situations where language use is routinized or scripted, as in news broadcasts, university lectures, religious sermons, political speeches, etc. It is this functional split in varieties of Arabic that has put Arabic into the State Department’s level IV (now in their revised system, level III), the highest difficulty level in terms of length of time needed to achieve specific proficiency goals.

Students who come to Arabic with little or no background knowledge but who aspire to advanced proficiency goals will need intensive classroom instruction. Ideally, this means five to six hours per week at beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels of study. Study abroad in the Arab world is also a key component of a successful Arabic language program. Through study abroad, students gain first-hand knowledge of Arabic-speaking culture and develop the ability to calibrate their language use in spoken and standard Arabic, both crucial elements of advanced levels of proficiency. It is imperative for a successful study abroad experience in Arabic that students have at least some knowledge of spoken or vernacular Arabic. This can be taught in the US, before students embark on study abroad or be taught as an integral part of language study in-country. Students must understand that literary or standard Arabic is not the appropriate variety to use in everyday situations and they must learn another variety for those situations. Students as well as program administra-

tors must also be aware that there are no shortcuts to advanced proficiency in Arabic. Unlike European languages, Arabic does not have a lingua franca that is spoken and understood across the Arab world.

Strategies for new and expanding programs of Arabic language

First of all, consider program goals carefully: Why add Arabic to the curriculum? And how does Arabic fit into the institutional profile? Typically, Arabic programs flourish where other Middle East-related courses create a feedback effect on student and faculty interest in the program and on student enrollments. Not all institutions, however, want to or are able to wait for different departments to establish a critical mass of area studies courses. Whatever the environment of your institution, the rationale for establishing an Arabic language program will make other decisions easier. It will help in the decision about what kind of Arabic – spoken, written, or both – will be offered. Of course, a curriculum centered on Modern Standard Arabic is the simpler choice. Quality teaching materials are available for Modern Standard Arabic, and qualified instructors have more experience teaching that form of language. It may be, however, that a decision will be made to introduce a variety of spoken Arabic, such as Egyptian or Syrian dialect. These are complex choices, and program administrators may benefit from specialized advice.

Second, get sound advice. If Arabic is a new undertaking for your institution, seek out and consult with Arabic curriculum specialists. In some cases, these can be found at nearby institutions with established Arabic language programs. In other cases, you may need to look further a field. There is a small but growing number of organizations, websites, and list serves (see under “Resources” below) that can provide advice, contacts in your region, or to venues to announce job opportunities and new programs.

Third, cast a wide and deep net when hiring Arabic language instructors. The pool of qualified and experienced instructors in the US is small. Like undergraduate Arabic language programs, graduate programs in Arabic language and literature are expanding but are still unable to keep up with increasing demand. If a search yields only a few applications, extend the search. If the search still does not come

up with qualified candidates, declare a failed search and start again after a few months. A new or expanding Arabic language program is dependent on quality of instruction. Unless students and program administrators feel confident about the instructor, the program cannot succeed.

Fourth, evaluate a new program after one year and periodically throughout the first years. It is wise to provide guidance, observation, in-service training, and opportunities for professional development for all new instructors, especially inexperienced ones. Instructors are generally very receptive to these opportunities, and both they and students benefit. Students and instructors may also profit from ACTFL oral proficiency tests for students. These can be problematic. Students who learn Arabic only in its written form are not well prepared for the kind of oral performance that an oral proficiency test is designed to elicit. Proficiency testing, however, is an important element of testing and assessment. Given that many students will take proficiency tests to qualify for other Arabic language programs, for scholarships, and sometimes for jobs, they should experience proficiency testing at regular intervals.

Resources

Be aware that you and your new or expanding Arabic program are not alone. Outreach support and advice are available from organizations and individuals who will answer questions and help deal with problems. Following is a list that covers a range of organizations that have experience in developing Arabic programs and curricula; it does not address organizations or websites that provide language teaching materials or other teaching resources. Please note that this list is necessarily brief. As noted at the start of this article, there is a dearth of resources available to guide new and expanding programs in Arabic.

A list of resources for new and expanding Arabic language programs

- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Arabic Special Interest Group (Arabic SIG)

<http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3428>: The ACTFL Arabic SIG was formed in 2008 “serve as a network for and information sharing among Arabic language and culture instructors.” ACTFL members are welcome to join the ACTFL Arabic SIG. The ACTFL Arabic SIG Discussion Forum can be accessed at <http://www.actfl.org/i4a/bb/index.cfm?page=topic&topicID=117>.

- American Association of Teachers of Arabic (AATA) <http://aataweb.org/>: AATA was formed in 1968 “to facilitate communication and cooperation between teachers of Arabic and to promote study, criticism, research and instruction in the field of Arabic language pedagogy, Arabic linguistics and Arabic literature.” AATA publishes a monthly newsletter and an annual refereed journal *Al-'Arabiyya*. Annual meetings take place in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association.
- Arabic-L <https://listserv.byu.edu/archives/arabic-l.html>: Arabic-L is the Arabic Language and Linguistics list serve, hosted by Brigham Young University. Its aim is “to provide a forum where academic linguists can discuss linguistic issues and exchange linguistic information.”
- National Capital Language Resource Center <http://www.nclrc.org/>: NCLRC is a joint project of Georgetown University, the George Washington University, and the Center for Applied Linguistics. NCLRC “has conducted activities in the areas of testing, learning strategies, materials development and methodology, technology, professional development, and dissemination of information on commonly and less commonly taught languages.” NCLRC also hosts the Arabic K – 12 Teachers Network <http://www.arabick12.org/index.html>.
- National Foreign Language Center <http://www.nflc.org/>: NFLC, a research institute of the University of Maryland, “is dedicated to promoting a language-competent America by developing and disseminating information that informs policy makers.” NFLC administers the Startalk program of the National Security Language Initiative <http://startalk.umd.edu/>.

- National Middle East Language Resource Center <http://www.nmelrc.org/>: NMELRC, headquartered at Brigham Young University, “the first Title VI Language Resource Center to focus solely on the languages of the Middle East.” Its website lists a variety of resources and opportunities for teachers and students.

Conclusion

The preceding addresses the main issues that face new and expanding programs in Arabic language. It is one attempt to bridge the gap that exists between the growing demand for high-quality Arabic language programs in US institutions and the need these programs have for resources to help them become established and to thrive. That gap is disheartening. We can, however, take comfort from the knowledge that colleagues at the organizations listed above and at institutions across the US are also working to bridge that gap in research, in classroom teaching, and in a variety of programs and projects.

References

- American Association of Teachers of Arabic Homepage*. Retrieved January 30, 2009 from <http://aataweb.org/>.
- National Middle East Language Resource Center Homepage*. Retrieved January 30, 2009 from <http://www.nmelrc.org/>.
- Ferguson, C. (1959a). "Diglossia." *Word* 15: 325-340.
- Ferguson, C. (1968). "Myths About Arabic." In J.A. Fishman (Ed.), *Readings in the Sociology of Language* (pp. 375 – 381). The Hague; Paris: Mouton. (Reprinted from *Languages and Linguistics Monograph Series, Georgetown University*, 12 (1959), pp. 75 – 82).
- Furman, N., Goldberg, D., & and Lusin, N. "Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2006." Retrieved May 14, 2008 from www.adfl.org/resources/enrollments.pdf
- Gordon, R. G., Jr. (ed.) (2005). *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Fifteenth edition. Dallas, Tex.: SIL International. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com/>. Retrieved December 18, 2008 from

- http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=arb
- Liskin-Gasparro, J.E. (1982). *ETS Oral Proficiency Testing Manual*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service. Cited in Omaggio Hadley, A. (1993). *Teaching Language in Context* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle.
- Ryding, K.C. (2008a, March) "Introducing Arabic: What You Need to Know." Paper presented at the annual Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, New York, NY.
- Ryding, K.C. (2008). "New Alignments, New Discourses." *Profession 2008*, 214-218.
- Bergman, E.M. (2007, November). "Meeting the Challenges: Teaching Arabic in a SILP Program." Paper presented at the annual conference of the National Association of Self-Instructional Language Programs, Arlington, VA.
- Special Interest Groups (SIGs): Membership*. Retrieved January 30, 2009 from <http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3428>.
- National Foreign Language Center Homepage*. Retrieved January 30, 2009 from <http://www.nflc.org/>.
- About NCLRC*. Retrieved January 30, 2009 from <http://nclrc.org/about.html>
- Arabic-L Linguist*. Retrieved January 30, 2009 from http://www.nmelrc.org/index.php?module=pagemaster&PAGE_user_op=view_page&PAGE_id=38&MMN_position=65:19.
- Welles, E.B. (2004). *ADFL Bulletin*. 35, nos. 2 – 3 (Winter – Spring), 7 – 26.