

Review Three

Integrating Literary and Spoken Arabic in the Classroom: A Review of ‘Arabiyyat al-Naas (Part One)

by

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Teachers and students of Arabic are presented with a conundrum very early in their Arabic education: Arabic, being a diglossic language has both a literary form and multiple vernacular dialects. Teaching only the former results in students being unable to engage in conversation about even the most basic topics in Arabic. Teaching the latter results in students being functionally illiterate in Arabic and incapable of approaching either literature or media in the language.

Munther Younes, Makda Weatherspoon, and Maha Saliba Foster, in their textbook series *‘Arabiyyat al-Naas* (Arabic of the People) provide one of the most recent attempts to resolve this problem in Arabic language pedagogy. Integrating both Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the Levantine dialect from the very start, students are exposed to both forms of Arabic without them being explicitly labeled in every case, with Levantine Arabic being presented in contexts where Levantine Arabic would be appropriate (such as listening and speaking exercises) and MSA in reading exercises that focus on more abstract topics.

In order to prevent students from being faced with the (sometimes drastic) differences between Levantine Arabic and MSA, the authors have chosen to begin with vocabulary that is both shared by the two forms of Arabic and that is frequently used, beginning with numbers, the alphabet, professions, colors, geography, and how to express time and dates. While the section on teaching the alphabet seemed scant to me at the outset, compared to the excellent *Alif Baa*

textbook in the *Al-Kitaab* Arabic textbook series, I have found that my students were all able to learn the alphabet satisfactorily solely with the material in the textbook.

After establishing this lexical base, the textbook focuses its lessons around the story of Emily Williams, an American student studying abroad in Jordan, with each lesson beginning with two or three short videos of her dealing with situations that a student studying abroad might encounter, such as going through customs, renting an apartment, or shopping for clothes. These videos are in the (Jordanian) Levantine dialect, and the characters that she interacts with employ the full range of sub-dialectical differences within that particular dialect of Arabic (*shu* and *'ash* are both used for “what,” though *'ash* is the first word learned, some characters hamzate *qaf*, some do not), allowing students to get used to differences in accent, word choice, and pronunciation. These videos are augmented by reading passages from “Emily’s Diary” which are written in MSA, with the MSA equivalents for Levantine vocabulary provided in the textbook. As students’ vocabulary develops, more abstract reading passages in MSA are provided in the text, allowing students to read on a wider range of topics. Grammatical concepts are also presented as they are encountered in the text and videos.

The organization of the textbook is excellent. Except for the first two units (which are each divided into ten lessons), each unit is divided sensibly into 5 lessons, with each lesson intended to be covered in one contact hour, making class preparation focused and easy. However, one issue that my students have frequently raised is that the vocabulary is spread throughout each of the units, and both the glossary and the final vocabulary list at the end of each of the units does not always contain all of the new vocabulary introduced in each unit, making it sometimes difficult for students to find a word that they may have forgotten or are learning.

The reading passages are appropriate for the grammar and the vocabulary level of the students; however there is a distinct absence of authentic materials both in the reading passages and in the listening passages. Additionally, students, because of the reliance of

the reading and listening passages solely on vocabulary that the students already know, have few opportunities to skim texts that are above their level in order to determine the overall meaning of the text. The early listening passages suffer from the opposite problem, frequently using vocabulary that students do not know and speaking at a very rapid pace for students that have only been in an Arabic classroom for under a month. The companion site as well could be improved by the inclusion of online exercises, rather than merely serving as a repository for videos, listening files, and worksheets.

Hamzas and *shaddas* are not consistently placed throughout the book – a typography problem that needs to be fixed in following editions. That being said, this textbook is a delight to teach from. The dialogues, while not “authentic,” reflect Arabic as it is spoken in real-life scenarios in the Levant that an American college student studying abroad might reasonably encounter. The vocabulary chosen is reasonable, and students find the path that the book takes through Arabic education logical and engaging. The grammar is clear and helpful without being overwhelming. I have adopted *‘Arabiyyat al-Naas* as my primary Arabic curriculum, and consider it to be one of the best Arabic textbooks for the college classroom available at this time.