

Strategies, New Directions and Resources for Teaching Colloquial Arabic as a Foreign Language

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Abstract: The spoken and written language known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the idiom that links almost three hundred million Arabic speakers from Iraq in the East to Morocco in the West, and it is this form of Arabic that is used in broadcast media and newspapers, and also for speeches and addresses on formal occasions. For obvious reasons, it is Modern Standard Arabic which is for the most part taught to students of Arabic as a foreign language in universities and private institutes. However, for someone to claim that they really “know” Arabic, it is also necessary to master one or more of the many colloquial Arabic languages spoken throughout the Arab world. In contrast to MSA, Arabic colloquial languages are relegated to an inferior position in the classroom where they are most often added as an afterthought to the MSA course (although some separate colloquial language courses are taught in university continuing education courses and private institutes). At least part of the difficulty in teaching colloquial Arabic is because these languages are, for the most part, not written or standardized and thus are only mastered through listening or speaking. Arabic colloquial languages were strengthened by Georgetown University’s important series of colloquial language text-books and grammars first published in the nineteen sixties; however, today, with the advent of the Internet and other electronic resources, this series can be supplemented or superseded using Web 2.0 technologies such as YouTube and podcasting as well as popular songs and cinema. In addition, many Arabic literary authors have also written text in colloquial dialects. This paper highlights strategies and assesses resources for teaching colloquial Arabic as a foreign language.

Keywords: Arabic as a foreign language, colloquial Arabic

Introduction

As an international language, Arabic is certainly one of the most important and influential. With a total population of almost three hundred million native speakers (Prochazka, 2006) who speak Arabic as a first language, Arabic can claim to be the fourth most widely spoken language in the world. The Arabic script, which is written from right to left, is the second most widely used written script in the world and has been adopted and modified by other languages such as Urdu, Farsi, and Pashto. Arabic has also given many loan words to other languages such as Turkish, Urdu, Farsi, Spanish and Portuguese.

Arabic has always had its share of foreign language students. Perhaps the most important of these until the present day are those who learn classical Arabic in order to study the Quran, Islam’s holy book. Other foreign-language students embark on an academic study of the language in order to study the history, literature, or politics of the Middle East, while others study the language in order to live, work, or travel in the region.

Students of Arabic as a foreign language at some point, however, must learn two languages because Arabic is a “diglossic” language in which literate speakers use one form of Arabic as the written language but another for use in daily life. Thus, a student studying classical Arabic in order to read the Quran will discover that Saudi Arabians do not communicate using this language. Similarly, a student who has studied the modern variant of classical Arabic known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), also known as literary or standard Arabic, will find that upon landing in an Arab country his or her attempts to speak MSA will be met with quizzical looks—or worse, laughter.

Most major universities teaching Arabic as a foreign language concentrate on teaching MSA as it is this form of Arabic which unites Arabs over a wide geographic area ranging from Iraq in the East to Morocco in the West. Enormous resources have been poured into learning how to read, speak, write and listen to the standard form of Arabic used in radio and television broadcasts, newspapers, political speeches, and today in Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs and Twitter. Much less attention has been paid to teaching the many colloquial Arabic dialects which, if offered at all in universities, were only taught as an addendum to the main standard Arabic course. Although some universities have now instituted colloquial Arabic language courses into the curriculum (mostly teaching Egyptian colloquial), the teaching of colloquial Arabic language courses is still

sometimes left to non-credit university continuing education programs or to private institutes both inside and outside the Arabic-speaking world.

The preference for teaching MSA is understandable. As the form of Arabic which unites Arabs, learning MSA is absolutely essential for students wishing to study the history, politics, and literature of the Middle East. Teaching colloquial languages, on the other hand, involves choosing one or more colloquial languages which, unlike MSA, have not been standardized and, for the most part, are not written and therefore must be learned through listening and speaking.

Nonetheless, the teacher of colloquial Arabic languages need not despair for many text-books on various colloquial languages have been published and continue to be published. Furthermore, the rise of the World Wide Web has been a boon for teachers of colloquial Arabic for, in addition to online courses in colloquial Arabic, the web offers an enormous number of resources for learning and teaching colloquial Arabic including music, television, and film videos. Meanwhile technologies such as Skype and MSN Messenger offer unprecedented possibilities for teaching listening and speaking in colloquial Arabic. Furthermore, the enterprising teacher of colloquial Arabic will find that many Arabic writers have employed colloquial Arabic in their written dialogues. Still other written sources of colloquial Arabic include cartoons, proverbs, and social networking sites.

Methods and Aims of the Study

This paper is a critical survey of the resources available for studying colloquial Arabic languages as a foreign-language. It first details the difficulties in learning “diglossic” languages such as Arabic and then surveys various text-books (including online), grammars, and dictionaries available for studying a number of colloquial Arabic and evaluates their strengths and weaknesses. After commenting on the curricula of colloquial Arabic courses offered in North American universities and at private institutes throughout the world, it then surveys the resources available for studying colloquial Arabic as a foreign language on the Internet, especially Web 2.0 technologies such as YouTube videos, social networking sites, and interactive messaging services such as Skype and MSN Messenger. It then examines colloquial Arabic resources found in Arabic proverbs and in the works of Arabic-language writers and cartoonists. Throughout the paper, the author suggests effective strategies for teaching colloquial Arabic. It is hoped that the discussion of the strategies and resources available for teaching and studying colloquial Arabic will lead to innovative methods for teaching this important component of the Arabic language which has often been neglected.

Findings and Discussion

Arabic as a “Diglossic” Language

In a now classic paper written in 1959 on the subject of “diglossia” in languages, Professor Charles A Ferguson of Harvard University defined this linguistic phenomena as a state in which two varieties of language exist side by side in a language community. As Ferguson defines diglossia, it is: a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language which may include a standard or regional standards, there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body or written literature...which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation (Ferguson, 1959: 336).

In his paper, Ferguson identified four languages existing in a state of “diglossia”: Arabic, Modern Greek, Swiss German and Haitian Creole (he also briefly discusses Chinese).

In the Arabic language, the two varieties of Arabic which exist side by side are the standard written Arabic language known as classical Arabic or “al-fuṣḥa” (الْفُصْحَى) which is the language of the Quran, pre-Islamic poetry, and medieval writings. Classical Arabic has morphed into what is termed as Modern Standard Arabic (or MSA) which includes more contemporary vocabulary, usages, and styles of expression. MSA today is used in the mass media in written form in newspapers and magazines, is spoken on television news broadcasts and documentaries and is used for speeches and formal occasions. Furthermore, classical Arabic has a long history of grammatical rules and vocabulary laid down by classical grammarians.

However, existing side by side the standard language is colloquial Arabic which consists of any number of dialects constituting the everyday spoken language. In contrast to standard Arabic, colloquial languages are

mostly unwritten and have not been subject to study by grammarians. Besides being spoken in daily life, the colloquial variety of Arabic is used in informal media such as television drama, soap operas and talk shows, and is also used in cinema. Although these languages are mostly spoken, some Arabic-language writers have written colloquial poems, drama, and dialogue in Arabic script although it is important to note that colloquial script has never been standardized.

The difficulties of teaching MSA to native speakers of colloquial Arabic has been the subject of much research including those concerning the level of functional illiteracy in the Arab world which some attribute to the divergence between spoken Arabic and literary Arabic (Ayari, 1996: 243). Another study, researching illiterate adult Egyptian women learning modern literary Arabic also concludes that the mismatch between colloquial Arabic and standard Arabic is indeed an obstacle to literacy in standard Arabic with many adult learners wishing to write in the colloquial form (Khahchan, 2009: 656). Indeed, in order to minimize the gap between colloquial and standard Arabic, in 1954 the Egyptian Ministry of Education strove to develop teaching materials in colloquial Arabic for use in the first three years of primary schooling. No doubt this was a response to the fact that at the time between a quarter and a half of the total time in elementary school was spent on obtaining a bare mastery of standard Arabic (Bateson, 1967: 112). Indeed, it should be pointed out that the correct pronunciation of Arabic letters (which sometimes changes in the colloquial) is not always mastered even by educated Arabs (Greis, 2000: 6).

The gap today is further exacerbated by the prominence given to French and English in many Arabic-speaking countries. A recent BBC report, for example, documents students in Lebanon who can no longer even speak colloquial Arabic well, much less be proficient in standard Arabic because their parents send them to English- or French-language schools. The BBC reports that the problem is evident in many parts of the Arab world where foreign schools are common including the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Egypt, and North African states (Shawish, 2010).

Nonetheless, despite the variance between MSA and colloquial, Arabic has not developed along the lines envisaged by Ferguson in which he saw the development of several standardized languages each based on a colloquial variety with a heavy admixture of MSA vocabulary. Instead, with the rise of Arab satellite TV and other modern technological advances such as the Internet, MSA still appears to be on a firm footing.

Difficulties for Students of Colloquial Arabic as a Foreign Language

Students of Arabic as a foreign language, meanwhile, are likely to approach the divergence between colloquial and MSA from a difficult angle as most foreign students are likely to become acquainted with standard Arabic first and only then will learn a colloquial dialect. According to a rather dated 1972 study, this chain of events might be rather unfortunate because it was the author's experience that students who learned colloquial Arabic first had an easier time mastering the acquisition of standard Arabic (Qafisheh, 1972: 6). Qafisheh discovered a far higher dropout rate for students studying standard Arabic with no knowledge of colloquial compared to students who had an acquaintance with a colloquial dialect. Moreover, he found those acquainted with colloquial to be more highly motivated and better in listening and speaking ability. Other researchers, however, think that learning standard Arabic first makes it easier to learn colloquial dialects (Rowland, 198?).

Students recently graduated from the study of MSA, itself a difficult language, might indeed be awed to discover they must learn yet another one, although the colloquial languages are derived from classical Arabic and share a good deal of vocabulary with it. It is also true that an educated Arab will incorporate standard Arabic to some degree in his or her speech. Nonetheless, students travelling to different parts of the Arab world must be prepared to be familiar with different vocabulary items (many of them loan words depending on what part of the Arab world they are travelling in—for example, Levantine Arabic contains many Turkish loan words while Iraqi Arabic contains many Persian loan words), different grammatical structures, and widely different pronunciations and intonations (Rowland, 198?). In some cases, vocabulary items used in one dialect area are completely different from another region. Fortunately, however, colloquial Arabic is much less complicated than MSA (for instance, there is no dual and the system of nominal inflection for cases and verbal inflection for modes is completely abandoned in colloquial Arabic (Bateson, 1967: 97-98)) so in some ways it is like learning a simplified version of MSA.

Nonetheless, it is safe to say that some of the Arabic colloquial dialects differ so completely that it would be better to classify them as separate languages rather than a dialect. While speakers of Egyptian, Levantine, and Gulf Arabic might find their dialects mutually intelligible, the same cannot be said of the Maghrebi Arabic of North Africa and the Mesopotamian Arabic of Iraq.

Most North American universities have now realized the importance of studying one form of colloquial Arabic. Some offer credit courses (mostly in colloquial Egyptian which is the most widely-used and influential) while others offer certificate courses in continuing studies departments. The prestigious Middlebury College in Vermont, for example, offers five daily contact hours of Modern Standard Arabic and optional sessions in Moroccan, Syrian, or Egyptian colloquial, while Georgetown University, a training ground for diplomats, offers summer sessions in Levantine Arabic. Meanwhile, Arabic-language institutes in the Arab world offer colloquial language programs of the language in which the institutes are situated. For instance, the American University of Cairo offers summer courses in Egyptian colloquial while Arabic Language Institute in Fes, Morocco offers courses in Moroccan colloquial. Certainly, it would appear that colloquial Arabic is no longer overlooked.

Text-Books, Grammars, and Dictionaries in Colloquial Arabic

Early on, many researchers attempted to gain a grasp of the many colloquial Arabic languages that could not be learned by simply learning standard Arabic. Beginning in 1900, many European researchers, whose countries were engaged in a colonial occupation of the region, began to publish grammars dealing with colloquial Arabic in the region. For example, the book *Rudiments of the Arabic-vulgar of Morocco: with numerous exercises and examples of its theory and practice* by Joseph Lerchundi (translated and adapted to English from the second Spanish edition) was published in Tangier, Morocco in 1900. Looking at this book, which is at once a grammar and vocabulary list is interesting in that it uses both Roman and Arabic script to spell out pronunciations of the colloquial (later European works tend to use only Roman script to render the colloquial). Other books in various colloquial languages from this time through to the 1950s include works on Egyptian, Lebanese, Syrian, Omani, Libyan, Sudanese and Saudi Arabian Arabic. Taken together, these works form a valuable historical record of attempts to record, render and impart Arabic colloquial languages. Moreover, many of the books published before 1923 are no longer subject to copyright law and are now available as full-text open access retrieval in academic library catalogues.

Because it represented a systematic attempt to study regional Arabic colloquial languages, a great advance in English-language text-books dealing with Arabic colloquial languages occurred in 1960 when the Arabic Research program was established as a contract between Georgetown University and the United States Office of Education. The series proceeded under the auspices of Richard Harrell, who died tragically in a car accident while conducting research for an Egyptian reference grammar. Unfortunately, considering that Egyptian colloquial is the most widely-taught colloquial Arabic, this work has still not been completed. Still, Dr. Harrell, who was chair of Georgetown's Arabic department, and his assistants managed to produce a series of grammars, dictionaries, and basic text-books that really have not been matched in stature even until the present day. In the end, the series included those dealing with Moroccan, Egyptian, Syrian and Iraqi colloquial. Dr. Harrell's death saw the loss of several other projects in the projected series including a Syrian-English dictionary and a basic course in Syrian Arabic. An Egyptian-English dictionary began by Dr. Harrell and his team of assistants was completed and published by the American University of Cairo in 1986 (Nydell, 2003: xvii).

Dr. Harrell's text-books consisted of a text, grammatical notes, exercises and vocabulary (Harrell, 2003). Importantly, the text-books included a series of audiotapes (now replicated as CDs) which repeated in oral form the written texts in the book. As the texts were meant for beginning students, they did not use Arabic script but instead used a Roman transliteration scheme. The Department of Arabic Language, Literature and Linguistics at Georgetown University has attempted to continue production of colloquial Arabic materials and has branched out to producing audiovisual materials such as Margaret Nydell's *Syrian Language Course*.

Georgetown University's colloquial Arabic text-books and reference grammars were left with some obvious gaps, most notably that of Gulf Arabic. This gap has been filled by the Colloquial Series (which produces text-books and grammars for a number of languages throughout the world) with Clive Holes' *Colloquial Arabic of the Gulf and Saudi Arabia* published in 1984. It essentially replicates Harrell's pattern of text, grammatical notes, exercises and vocabulary and it also has an accompanying audio compact disc. A wealth of materials published on various forms of colloquial Arabic has been published since the Georgetown series including the colloquial of many other forms of Arabic. In addition, online Arabic colloquial courses available through the Internet offer even more opportunities for the enterprising teacher or student.

Web 2.0 and Teaching Colloquial Arabic as a Foreign Language Listening and Speaking Skills

While the plethora of text-books available for studying colloquial Arabic is indeed a major resource, the text-book has its limitations. Although many students have a positive attitude to text-books, these books have certain limitations such as becoming dated. Furthermore, they can lock both the student and teacher into using the text-book content as the only material to be taken into the classroom (Harmer, 1998: 117). Most importantly, they can limit student autonomy in which students do not control their own learning and choices for study.

The recent technological revolution of the Internet and Web 2.0 innovations has important implications for the study of Arabic as a colloquial language. Since colloquial Arabic is, for the most part, not written but rather learned through listening and speaking, the number of colloquial Arabic listening opportunities available on applications such as YouTube, the video-sharing website on which users can upload, share and view videos, and podcasting offer many opportunities for “non-reciprocal” listening. Meanwhile, applications such as Skype and MSN Messenger offer many opportunities for both “reciprocal” and “non-reciprocal” listening. Listening provided by text-books can be problematic because, as one researcher notes, “listening activities...as much as possible [should be] controlled by the students rather than the teacher, since this increase in student autonomy is...one of the keys to successful learning (White 2008: 215).” In contrast, these new technologies make it easier for students to decide how and when they learn, how they manage their learning and even what and where they learn (Cotterall 1008: 111).

One of the most useful materials for teaching colloquial Arabic is the many music videos sung in colloquial Arabic that exist on YouTube. In general, songs are useful in introducing the rhythm of a language, which in turn benefits memorization. Learning a language through songs is said to aid in vocabulary and grammar acquisition and develops all four productive language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Medina 2002). Many Arabic singers, including the famous Lebanese singer Fayrouz, sing in colloquial Arabic, and their songs are readily available on YouTube. Other singers whose “story songs” (rather than simple popular love songs) could be used to further classroom activities include Egyptian singer Mohammed Mounir and the various Algerian “rai” (opinion) singers who often switch to French when speaking of subjects that might be controversial in Arabic (Betahila, 2002: 192). Various activities that could be generated listening to colloquial songs include completing a true or false quiz or a gap fill exercise of missing words.

Other important video sources of colloquial Arabic listening materials readily found on the Internet and YouTube are television news clips; television soap operas; sitcoms and serious drama; Arabic cinema; television and radio advertisements; prank shows; candid camera; and animated cartoons. Class room activities using these sources can easily be used in focused listening activities and can provide a springboard for interaction in pair and group work for more “interactive” listening activities (McKay, 2008:4). For instance, a television news item about a political demonstration might have beginning students asked to make out the chants while more advanced students could listen to the protestors’ demands. This, in turn, could lead to students pretending they were protestors who must present their demands in colloquial Arabic.

Another Web 2.0 tool that provides a useful tool for learning “reciprocal” or interactive listening and speaking are video chat tools such as Skype, MSN Messenger, Yahoo Messenger and also the lesser-known Paltalk, CUWorld, and ICQ. All of these applications, which allow users to make free audio and visual calls over the Internet, can be used for language learners engaging with authentic communication with native speakers (Eroz-Tuga, 2009: 787). For example, Skype and other video chat applications allow foreign language learners to learn correct pronunciation and cadence (especially important for colloquial Arabic languages where variations are wide) and become acquainted with colloquial slang and idioms. Skype, through its language exchange program, allows foreign language learners to connect with other Skype users all around the world. If someone wants to learn Arabic, they can go into Skype and search the forums for someone who is a native (or at least fluent) Arabic speaker. Meanwhile, teachers can create a group for their class and can invite colloquial native speakers to join the group and create a community of language learners. Because of the mismatch between standard and colloquial Arabic, it is likely easier to find language exchange students willing to speak their colloquial language as many of them might find speaking standard Arabic artificial. Once again, it is also easy to see how these video chat technologies allow students to take charge of their own learning by making chat friends and contacting them during their free time.

Teaching Colloquial Arabic as a Foreign Language Reading and Writing Skills

Because writing in colloquial Arabic languages has never been standardized, it is difficult to teach and learn colloquial Arabic through reading and writing. Nonetheless, many Arabic writers have transcribed colloquial Arabic into Arabic script, while Western writers have transcribed it into Roman script. Today, for example, there exists a wide body of literature in Egyptian colloquial that includes drama, poetry, stories, songs, and newspaper or magazine cartoons. Moreover, the separation between standard and colloquial Arabic in written Arabic in newspapers and literary writing is not always so clear as modern literary Arabic is interspersed with colloquial and foreign terms. For instance, in his book *Midaq Alley* (خان الخليلي) Nobel prize-winning author Naguib Mahfouz vacillates between the literary and colloquial in his dialogues. Other Egyptian dramatists have written plays in the colloquial, for example, Rashad Rashdi's *The Butterfly* (الفراشة) (Greis, 2000: 13-14). Other noted writers who have written in the colloquial include Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih, whose dialogues in *Wedding of Zein* are written in Sudanese colloquial, and Iraqi poet Saadi Yousuf who has written poetry in the Iraqi dialect. Yet another rich source of writing in various colloquial Arabic languages is the many books of proverbs not written in standard Arabic. Proverbs can reveal a good deal about a colloquial language; for example, Egyptian proverbs combine ancient Egyptian, Coptic, Islamic and foreign elements (Greis, 2000: 31)—all rich fodder for the foreign language classroom.

Modern Web 2.0 technologies also offer opportunities for practicing reading and writing skills. While most blogs and Twitter feeds, for example, are written in standard Arabic, native speakers commenting on online news stories or posting updates and status reports on social networking sites such as Facebook tend to write in colloquial Arabic. In addition, most native speakers chatting using the keyboard on chat applications such as MSN Messenger as well as other technologies such as instant messaging and mobile phone text messaging, will do so in colloquial Arabic, either in modified Arabic script or in a modified Roman script which has come to be known as the “Arabic Chat Alphabet.” In Arabic chat (developed at a time when it was only possible to communicate using Roman script), the letter ع is represented as a 3, the د by a d and its emphatic counterpart ض as a D. Yet another technology known as “IM Arabic” allows users to communicate using chat technologies by transliterating Latin script. Thus, in the classroom it is possible for students to write group posts for the teacher to review and comment upon either using Arabic script or perhaps “Chat Arabic”.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Most students studying Arabic as a foreign-language study standardized Arabic, either in the form of classical or Modern Standard Arabic. However, in order to know Arabic, they soon find that their knowledge of the standard language is not sufficient for understanding the language spoken in daily life. Instead, they discover that native speakers themselves learn standard Arabic almost as if it were another dialect.

While hardly as well advanced as the resources devoted to standard Arabic, there is a wide network of resources devoted to colloquial Arabic ranging from early grammars and dictionaries published by European colonial era scholars to the impressive text-books, dictionaries and reference grammars produced by Georgetown University. Other published resources for colloquial Arabic include Arabic literature and proverbs from which both colloquial Arabic language teachers and students can strategize and design lessons.

The more recent advances in the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies have also greatly expanded the resources available for students and teachers, not the least of which is the vast number of videos using various forms of colloquial Arabic as well as technologies such as video chat which allow students to listen, speak, and even read and write in colloquial Arabic languages. Moreover, these technologies allow teachers to be more creative in designing their lessons and students to control their own learning, a key ingredient for successful language learning.

As this paper is for the most part a critical survey, it opens the door for further research such as whether studying colloquial Arabic makes it easier to study standard Arabic or whether the opposite is true. (Or, does it matter?) The paper might also serve as a springboard for studies in other “diglossic” languages such as Swiss German, Haitian Creole, Modern Greek and Chinese. It could also spur further research on teaching and studying other languages with much colloquial variation, for example, Brazilian Portuguese and the Portuguese of Portugal. Certainly, the relatively recent advances in foreign language learning involving the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies have engendered and will continue to engender research regarding their efficacy. For example, we might ask: how do they affect or improve foreign language acquisition? How do they enhance foreign language student autonomy?

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What this paper has attempted to make clear, however, is that there is no longer any reason for foreign language study of colloquial Arabic to stand in the shadow of Modern Standard Arabic. Instead, one can indeed enhance and complement the other.

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