

# A critical study of three textbooks for teaching Arabic to non-native speakers

Basma Ahmad Sedki Dajani <sup>a</sup> 1, Fatima Mohammad Amin Omari <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Associate professor, University of Jordan, Amman, 11183, Jordan

<sup>b</sup>Assistant Professor, University of Jordan, Amman 11183, Jordan

---

## Abstract

Teaching Arabic to speakers of other languages has become a wide field that attracts students from all over the world. Many books have appeared recently for this purpose. These books vary in terms of their curricula and methods of presentation. So it became incumbent on researchers in this field to review and critique such books and explain how Arabic is portrayed in them. This paper aims at reviewing three textbooks which were published by the University of Jordan, and are currently used for teaching. It studies their curriculum and indicates the positive or negative aspects from the experience of teaching these books for over a decade and from students' feedback.

© 2013 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

*Keywords:* Teaching, Arabic, Language, textbooks;

---

## 1. Introduction

Interest in learning Arabic as a foreign language is noticeably increasing. There is also an interest in discovering the vast Arab countries. The learner of Arabic as a second language usually has the desire to use the language in real life situations and not just study it formally concentrating on the four skills and the learning of phonemes. So having Arabic language curriculum for non-speakers is a must. These text-books teach Arabic in a way that helps students reach their specific purposes and they present Arabic at the phonemic, linguistic, syntactic and structural levels in a way that makes it achievable.

After the appearance of several textbooks to serve the purpose of teaching Arabic to non- native speakers, there became a need to criticize them. It is useful to show the general tendencies of these books, their methods of presentation and how they present Arab culture through Arabic language.

This research discusses the curriculum of the University of Jordan, how it addresses each skill and evaluates it based on the experience of teaching it and students' feedback.

## 2. University of Jordan Arabic curriculum for non-native speakers

Since the beginning of the second millennium, the Language Center at the University of Jordan has set its' curriculum for teaching Arabic as a foreign language at three levels; beginner, intermediate and advanced. These

levels have been implemented in six books; two for each level. This curriculum has provided students with an introduction to Arabic Language, culture and civilization. It has succeeded in helping students with learning the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. They contain what the authors have agreed on as important subjects which introduce students to daily life situations, within the Arab culture. It also familiarizes them with the history and geography of the area presenting them with immortal and contemporary figures of Islamic and Arabic culture. The University of Jordan Arabic course is a rigorous program meant to provide students with communication skills.

### **2.1. First book**

The first text-book paved the way for the learners to be familiar with the basics of Arabic. In its second edition the book begins with the alphabet through pictorial vocabulary. So students focus on writing along with listening and speaking for two weeks.

As the learner absorbs what the instructor pronounces, he /she repeats it daily in an attempt to identify sounds, the articulation points, and to recognize prominent differences vocally between Arabic and other languages. Through memorization, the student matches the picture (signified) and the sound (signifier). The book starts with the easier letters in pronunciation like: (s, d, l, m, b, n), then reaches the more difficult letters in pronunciation like: (gh, q, h', kh', dh, a', th', and e') and not with the ordinary alphabetical order (a,b,c,d...). The letters were distributed into four groups and shown according to the place of the letter in the word and every letter has its own vocabulary words. Taking into consideration the remarks of the students in each semester on the curriculum, the second edition was modified and many unnecessary vocabulary words were deleted.

In one of the students' opinion, "the textbook used in Level One Arabic has been sufficient for the concepts taught and discussed. The layout of the book makes sense, starting with the introduction of each letter accompanied by vocabulary that utilizes the letters being taught then moving into more advanced ideas and finally ending with additional vocabulary grouped by category. I think the introduction of four vocabulary words with each letter is an effective way of rapidly growing our vocabulary early on to ensure that by the time we get to verbs we are able to construct sentences (can't build sentences without words!).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Justus White, an American student at level one at the Language Center of the University of Jordan.

### **2.1.1. Grammar**

The book presents some basic regular verbs such as: (write, read, study, eat, drink, enter, leave, ask, know, take, open, play and dress). Students learn to conjugate them directly with the most used pronouns (I, you, we, he, she and they). The dual is left to the teacher to explain and not mentioned in the book. “Students are expected to be able to conjugate verbs in the past, the present, the future, and the imperative tenses, as well as to form gerunds, which enables use of the past and future continuous tenses, as well as conjugated-infinitive forms. Students will have learned all ten morphological forms of verbs, and the root of all words will be readily recognizable”<sup>3</sup>. The conjugating of verbs needs almost two weeks of continuous explanations of the verbal sentence and noun sentence. The irregular verbs are introduced through the teacher and not mentioned in the book. “I like how they had some verbs. It would have been better I think to have a couple of pages of 4 letter, 5 letter, 6 letter, regular and irregular verbs and their conjugations along with the verbs already there.”<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile students learn how to distinguish between masculine and feminine objects. Then students recognize the two singular demonstrative pronouns; singular detached pronouns, possessive pronouns, adverbs of place and prepositions. After that the adjunct and the governed nouns will be identified. Then, feminine and masculine human being plurals and few objects plurals are introduced.

### **2.1.2. Overall look**

The first book ends its’ lessons with a text of simple acquaintance with presenting four interrogative particles, and a lesson of the principles of using the dictionary. Students will have learned upwards of 550 vocabularies in the book and around the same number from the teacher which is enough to render the student fluent to an intermediate degree.

The use of definite and indefinite cases, possessive and reflexive cases, active and passive voice and grammar are all thoroughly discussed. “Each of the ideas introduced throughout the book is covered in sufficient detail and plenty of exercises are provided to give us an opportunity to practice what we’re learning. Coupled with solid classroom instruction from the professor, the text-book provides a firm foundation for a beginning Arabic student.”<sup>5</sup> It paves the way for the learners to be familiar with the basics of Arabic.

Level one students finish the course with the ability to read and write lengthy paragraphs, and they communicate predominantly in modern standard Arabic, although some colloquial Arabic is taught to enable students to understand the language as it is spoken by the majority of people. “While studying Arabic has been a challenge it is also rewarding when understanding is achieved. Studying colloquial and modern standard Arabic concurrently is also a challenge but one that will have benefits in the future. Both the study of Arabic and the differences between colloquial and MSA can be overcome with time and effort.”<sup>6</sup>

## **3. Second book**

The second book of the University of Jordan’s program for Teaching Arabic to non-native speakers introduces fifteen texts where students are gradually absorbing more of daily life lessons. Through the basic lingual structures and functional syntactic rules, students can build up on what they have learned before. The material of the book was chosen according to students’ needs to deal with some social aspects in the Arabic environment. The lessons are in a dialogue form, which has a positive effect on students as they want to represent attitudes and reflect it.

---

<sup>3</sup> A student of the program states the objectives of level one.

<sup>4</sup> Amanda Hinton, an American student at level one.

<sup>5</sup> Justus White.

<sup>6</sup> Chad Hinton, an American student at the program.

"In the Classroom" is the first lesson, based on a simple dialogue easy to read and to understand. The second text is "Looking for a Residence" as most of the students come from abroad and need to choose a place to stay in. This lesson helps to use the suitable vocabulary in such situations, and to relate the abstract conversation to the real life. The third text talks about the procedures to get a "Residence Permit" for foreigners in the host country, which is a standard procedure in many countries, and most of students, have to do it themselves. It clarifies the steps that visitors have to follow. They go through relevant important vocabulary used in formal agencies. "In a restaurant" is a simple lesson where some traditional Arabic meals are introduced over a nice and friendly lunch. "In a clinic", a conversation takes place between a sick student, a nurse, and a doctor, where some general medical information is declared as it usually happens as a result of changing the accustomed place or the environment.

"In a shopping center", students learn useful vocabulary and get good information of purchasing groceries. "In a bank", is a helpful text on the procedure and requirements of opening a bank account and of receiving a money transfer. "Visiting a friend" is a social dialogue where students get more of linguistic communication skills. All lessons deal with life situations which students need to deal with.

There are texts such as "The downtown", "The library of greater Amman municipality", "A trip to Aqaba", "A tour at the university of Jordan", "A traditional wedding", and "Jordan", all together present geographical identification of the place and social situations of a specific Arab country. Although they have a spatial specification, they present an image of common Arabic traditions and thoughts. Through these local texts, students learn what unites the Arab nations, and benefits them in their movements around the neighboring countries during their residency or their visits. All the texts are motivational, which attempt to encourage students to know more about the place that they live in, beginning with reading about popular breakfast dishes, traditional wedding ceremonies and moving to educational readings about places and their prominent symbols from the university to the beach and finally, downtown.

The last text of the second book "The return journey" is longer and uses more advanced expressive diction. Students indeed feel the ability to comprehend and master the four skills in a high degree at this stage. The dialogue presents the situation of the students' return to their homes as the reader imagines himself/herself in the same position of the one in the story. Then students retrieve memories of learning Arabic language and how they become familiar with it within this level.

### **3.1. Grammar**

The second text-book presents more interrogative particles and broken plural forms. Students get an ample of grammatical exercises within each lesson. They practice reading, writing and speaking as they should take each text as if it represents them in real life communication. The lessons train students on spontaneous conversational expressions. So, after that cumulative quantity of knowledge and general grammatical rules which students have comprehended in the first book, they enjoy these simple texts. With the second book students will be able to express themselves more clearly.

#### **3.1.1 Overall look**

It is worth mentioning that the second book sometimes looks more attractive compared to the first book because of the dialogues, multi exercises and the increase in structure lessons. But although it has been reprinted twice it is not yet free of the confusing printing mistakes. No doubt – it is such a serious problem for a second language learner. Also, the second text-book contains some childish graphics which may cast negative shadows on learners and limit their enthusiasm.

This book is a complement to the first book, so beginner students study it consecutively. This helps students to feel some improvement in the four skills in a gradually effective way. It can as well be used directly with beginners who have primary knowledge in Arabic.

#### **4. Third book**

Through sixteen lessons, students' knowledge of Arabic as a second language and of the Islamic Arabic Culture develops. The affinity between students and the language increases as they examine texts which depend on a lingual dictionary that emerged from the first and the second text-books and developed with what makes it promotes in its lingual level. The experience of using this textbook with a big sample of students during several semesters shows the mental affection of students with these selected texts which respond to the actual needs of foreign students to know more about traditions, literary stories, and symbols of Arabic heritage.

It includes variety of texts; "Back to the Classroom" which emerged from the idea of a total revision of the content of the first and second books from the same series. Free time and activities present varied vocabularies, sports, hobbies. The culture of a local place exemplified with Wadi Rum which carries a Jordanian local content since it talks about the place nature and relief. A folkloric tale is not part of the Arabic heritage but it talks about a popular story regarding a wife's wisdom with her husband. Also students will recognize through the relevant listening lessons the comic character of Joha from the Arabic heritage, and will know something about the Islamic occasions and feasts which are relevant to students' experiences in living in an Arab society.

"Sports" is another text quenches many students' thirst to this field. "A Journey to Egypt" in which the book gets through the wide Arabic horizon, it talks interestingly about Egypt and its spatial details and historical heritage. The student visits the pyramids on the book pages. The most famous Arabic writers and authors, the horizon expands for learners to visit some of the most popular cities in the south of Spain, and gets an idea of the Islamic and Arabic culture's atmosphere in Andalusia. These lessons are produced through simple and easy dialogues, and their heroes are almost – Arabic characters, who know the place and time very well, with some foreign characters who want to learn the language – and this is a good sign which goes on the approach of other books of this type because it always puts the student in learning language atmosphere.

Ibn Batuta, the traveler, Ibn Khaldoun, Um Kulthoum, is a biography of a figure's birth, growing up and contribution in the Arabic renaissance and intelligence. In the listening lessons students recognize the character of the Poet Prince Ahmad Shawqi, and the Arabic and eastern singer star Fairouz. A text about Taj Mahal, the Mogul famous palace in India. Although this text isn't connected to the Arab World but it moves the book to a wider circle out the geographical borders of the Arabic nation to the old Islamic world. Moreover the book contains a sample of the most famous Arabic love stories Qais and Laila, it differs in exceeding the personal borders of the owner of the biography to the narration of a love story which attracts different kinds of people to follow the details – this is from one side, and in the other side it gives a real idea about a period of the Arabic history and its traditions which still affects the Arabic society until this day regarding the relationships between women and men, and related issues.

The book produced two texts about Arabic press; the first one reviews its history, emergence and development. The second one produces a study of a newspaper, and shows news details of newspapers' sections.

A funny story "Finally you are a Millionaire" talks about the dreams of a poor man to become rich. It describes his character and the changes in his attitude which emerged from these dreams. At last, beauty reveals the most popular Arabic points of view about the international beauty competitions. It presents in a listening lesson a good idea about Arab women and their roles in the society.

##### *4.1.1.1. Overall look*

The book varies in presenting cultural content. Then the book promotes with other lingual skills which are studied depending on reading and comprehension texts. This curriculum has been successful in helping students pass the primary level in the first and second books to reach the intermediate level in this book. In spite of this book's development, it still contains a lot of printing mistakes which confuse the students. Also many drawings were replaced with real pictures like Umm Kulthoum's. In addition, the book kept the same childish graphics of the former two books while using the same expensive papers which scatters. In spite of the quality advancement of this book's exercises but the repetition atmosphere of the book, since the same exercises are repeated in every lesson, they are multiple choice, comprehension questions, synonymy and antagonism, fill in the blanks, correct the verb, complete the blanks, reorder the words and reorder the sentences, all of this repetition takes the book's shine after five lessons, so the student starts complaining of sameness which is almost an educational routine. glides the book in it in every lesson. And a lot of reading texts in this book like "A trip to Wadi Rum" and "Ibn Khaldoun" had a clear confusing in the sentence structure level, since we find contrary sentences and other sentences which don't follow correct structure rules.

No doubt that revising works after finishing it is an important and definite thing which advances it. And it's worth mentioning that the curriculum of the University of Jordan is not supported with audio recordings for the lessons of the book neither the reading lessons nor the listening ones, with forgetting the lack of computer CDs which present the academic subjects, which is an important thing these days.

## Conclusion

“Learning Arabic, especially when compared to learning other languages, has been quite challenging so far. One of the challenges has been overcoming by natural desire to “force” Arabic into an English mold. It does not work to attempt to translate something in English directly, word-for-word into Arabic, and the opposite holds true as well. One must set the “rules” of the English language aside, and accept Arabic for what it is - its own, unique language. Just because something doesn't make sense in English, doesn't mean it doesn't make sense in Arabic. It is not uncommon to have a proper sentence with just one or two words in Arabic, while my tendency as a native English speaker is to add “filler” words that are completely unnecessary in this language. As I have now been learning Arabic full-time for more than two months, I can truthfully say that it is getting easier. I know that it will take a long time to feel completely comfortable with the language, but it is far from an impossible task. Arabic is a difficult language and it takes much hard work and effort to grasp, but most worthwhile things don't come easy!”<sup>7</sup>

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to the contributions of our students of the Arabic program for non-native speakers at the Language Center of the University of Jordan.

## References

- Van der Geer, J., Hanraads, J. A. J., & Lupton R. A. (2000). The art of writing a scientific article. *Journal of Scientific Communications*, 163, 51-59.
- Strunk, W., Jr., & White, E. B. (1979). *The elements of style*. (3rd ed.). New York: Macmillan, (Chapter 4).
- Mettam, G. R., & Adams, L. B. (1994). How to prepare an electronic version of your article. In B. S. Jones, & R. Z. Smith (Eds.), *Introduction to the electronic age* (pp. 281-304). New York: E-Publishing Inc.
- Van der Geer, J., Hanraads, J. A. J., & Lupton R. A. (2000). The art of writing a scientific article. *Journal of Scientific Communications*, 163, 51-59.
- Van der Geer, J., Hanraads, J. A. J., & Lupton R. A. (2000). The art of writing a scientific article. *Journal of Scientific Communications*, 163, 51-59.
- Strunk, W., Jr., & White, E. B. (1979). *The elements of style*. (3rd ed.). New York: Macmillan, (Chapter 4).

---

<sup>7</sup> Justus White.

- Mettam, G. R., & Adams, L. B. (1994). How to prepare an electronic version of your article. In B. S. Jones, & R. Z. Smith (Eds.), *Introduction to the electronic age* (pp. 281-304). New York: E-Publishing Inc.
- Van der Geer, J., Hanraads, J. A. J., & Lupton R. A. (2000). The art of writing a scientific article. *Journal of Scientific Communications*, 163, 51-59.