

Teaching Philosophy

Arabic for Business and Policy Leadership

Introduction

It is the daily challenge and measure of a teacher to maintain the interest of their students. In the Arabic classroom, I find that students naturally tend to favor either the linguistic side or the cultural side of the experience. It delights me to ignite a fire for the cultural aspects in the student who only cares about the linguistic side, and to make the linguistic side friendly and approachable for the student who is only motivated by the cultural aspects. It has been my experience that, at least initially, more students are drawn to the study of a language through early cultural connections, whether they come from fields of the artistic, gourmet, cinematography, business, political or tourism. Therefore, I emphasize **teaching Arabic language through cultural elements**. Not only does this serve to capture the interest of students at the beginning of their language learning journey, but also keeps them motivated and captivated by the language in the long term.

In my experience, students who are willing to study the Arabic language at the college level are already highly oriented to the world of international politics and international business. They have been almost without exception already very oriented to the cultural geography of the region, and are seeking to understand these cultural aspects as much as the language. Notwithstanding the field of linguistics, the learning of foreign languages is not an island. Students seeking to speak a foreign language can be assisted in their quest by linguistic tools, but **the real goal of the average Arabic language student is not the tongue but to use the tongue to speak the culture more fully.**

Reflections on Past Experiences

As a teacher, I have had the good fortune to be able to explore multiple teaching styles to reach students with **different learning styles**. I tutored students for the Arabic Flagship program at the University of Oklahoma. All twelve of my tutees were eager to learn the Egyptian dialect and Egyptian culture, which I find particularly rewarding due to my pride in Egyptian history. I did find it to be extremely difficult and time-consuming (but rewarding) to **design custom learning experiences for each student**. I also found it difficult to constrain myself to the limited time in a classroom, so I carefully opened social network channels to compensate for limited classroom time, and was again gratified when most of the students took advantage of this extra offering.

In particular, my experience taught me the **value of planned and interactive teaching** decisions. I saw firsthand how taking into consideration my learners' beliefs about learning language in general and learning the target language in particular as well as their goals kept the students engaged and progressing rapidly. One student was not interested in anything but obtaining fluent communication skills in order to get hired at a giant oil company in Dubai. I taught her, in addition to the formal Modern Standard Arabic, how the principles of Arabic business differed from the Western approach. I also gave her advice on how to market herself successfully to businesses in the Middle East. Two of my students planned to join the diplomatic service. Thus, we focused not only on Modern Standard Arabic but also the elite dialects and social norms. One student was preparing to join a NGO in North Africa. I exposed her to the problems and dangers she might face, and taught her about how to prevent the problems she could face. Another student was in the military. I explained to him not only slang to develop a

rapport with the natives, but I also worked with him on the different Arabic dialects spoken within the same target country.

My study of foreign language teaching has also helped me to obtain more ideas from my time as a student myself. For example, I know I must **avoid excessive repetition** because that can quickly kill any student's interest. I also see how important it is to **use classroom time to help people to research external resources**. Finally, it has reinforced for me **the importance of teaching learning strategies via Task-Based Language Teaching**. Allowing the students to practice with me in such a way produced my personal best experiences as an instructor.

Current Beliefs & Practices

I am thankful for my experience to date in the Master of Arts in Foreign Language Teaching (MAFLT) program at Michigan State University, as it has opened new doors of language theory to me and forced me to examine deeply my previous approaches to language teaching – and learning. In studying for the MAFLT program, several new approaches and theories have appealed to me. **I now see the value in moving students to thinking in the target language instead of just translating into their native language.**

I intend to accomplish this aim by assigning tasks inside and outside the classroom. Inside the classroom, I will minimize their use of the L1 and provide time-limited activities, such as extemporaneous speaking, that will not allow them enough time to translate into the L1 and break the habit. Outside the classroom, I will assign outside opportunities to be involved with the Arabic-speaking community and encourage consistent usage of the Arabic language media. All of these activities will contribute to the development of a subconscious pattern for the Arabic language, to be recalled as needed. This approach will bring them as quickly as possible to the

triumphant stage where they feel they are able to communicate their ideas, since "... learners focus on meaning, not on form" (Gass & Selinker, 1994, p. 145). It will also serve to get the students excited about their command of the language through an **early emphasis on fluency**, and to **keep their motivation levels high**.

To achieve these objectives, it is also **important to use Communicative Language Teaching in teaching specific communication tasks in Arabic**. My syllabus will focus on real-world communication, with most of the grammar to be learned implicitly. I will dedicate several class sessions to how my tutees should behave in the Middle Eastern restaurant outside the campus, and culminate with a group trip. In the past, I have done this with my tutees, and they always came away from the experience with a renewed passion for their study of the language.

The drawback to this emphasis on Communicative Language Teaching (and Task-Based Language Teaching), however, is that this set of related approaches prioritizes fluency over accuracy, and therefore only appeals to certain types of learners. **To balance fluency with accuracy and prepare students for highly influential political and business careers, and to make the grammar accessible, as well as to develop a respect for the history and influences upon the Arabic language, it is important to occasionally include some principles from the Grammar-Translation method**, where appropriate, for balance. The Grammar-Translation method is **better for some types of learners**, especially those who prefer a more linear structure. It is very powerful, but is considered old-fashioned and can be seen by the students as boring, with a focus on rigid accuracy over flexible fluency. However, "... focusing student attention on grammatical form ... can have a positive effect, provided that such attention is brief and reactive in that it takes place when problems of grammatical inaccuracy arise" (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 151). In my classroom, I will switch to the Grammar-Translation modality

whenever an issue arises from the self-study, the quizzes, or the speech practice in the classroom.

The best use of Grammar-Translation is to complement the more fluid Communicative Language Teaching approach, and the best time to incorporate Grammar-Translation is when a point of confusion arises from the Task-Based, Communicative proceedings.

My driving goal is to bridge the gap between the Middle East and the West through the study of language. To give students the ability to communicate their ideas and to understand the ideas from native speakers in light of sociopolitical issues, **the Political Dimensions and the Participatory Approach must be used.** This will entail planning lessons with sensitivity to the political and sociocultural climate of the students and to give them more accurate information upon which to base their views of the target language and culture. Since “it is not the content of subject-matter texts, but rather [...] content that comes from issues of concern to students” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 170), my inclusion of this content will capture the interest of the students, both in sharing their concerns and in learning additional information related to their concerns. As an illustration, I was able to discuss the true climate of Egypt in great detail with an excellent student, whose father was a diplomat and had already provided him with a deep understanding of the region. As another example, I did discuss with my tutees an article by A.M. Jaffe in Foreign Policy magazine (2011) about the eventual shift in oil production from the Middle East to the Americas. They were concerned about what it would mean for Arabic speakers looking for jobs in the Persian Gulf.

I was surprised to find that the misguided concepts held by my students about the Middle Eastern/North African and Islamic cultures were both positively skewed and negatively skewed. Too much of the Western understanding of the Middle East is either negatively skewed by unflattering stereotypes and fear or positively skewed by political correctness to the point of

falsehoods and errors in judgment. It falls then my role, as their teacher, **to present an honest, balanced picture of the situation by being aware of the preconceived notions of the students and gently developing their understanding to a more mature level.** Providing them with multiple perspectives from which they can select to solidify their worldview frameworks is necessary for developing their communication skills, critical thinking skills and problem solving abilities, for "... culture underlies every part of communication ... [and] language learners need to have access to the sorts of cultural rules which are used in the sorts of interactions in which they are likely to engage" (Liddicoat & Crozet, 1997, p. 7)

Future Intentions for Developing as a Teacher

In the future, I will plan to change my teaching approach to focus on **developing fluency first, then accuracy.** Vocabulary is the first key to communication. Accuracy is not crucial to communication, on a basic level, so refining the accuracy through grammar should come later.

Based on my past experiences and confirmed by my MAFLT studies, I will continue to develop my approach based on the Task-Based Language Teaching and Communicative Language Teaching methods. To this end, I will challenge students to pick specific goals to prepare for. For the beginning level students, this will just serve as an introduction to each other and encourage them to give a response and consider their goals for Arabic. But in the higher levels, this will allow us to engage in more hands-on, real communication as we start to plan for the situations they might face.

The classroom time will be mostly used for the practice of communication, not for teaching the rules or vocabulary they should be studying in the book. Each student should prepare at least two hours outside the classroom, ahead of class, and two hours after class, for each hour of class.

This cycle will be built into the class and emphasized heavily. To ensure compliance, there will be a daily quiz at the start of class covering the topics assigned for the previous home study. This will serve to keep their engagement levels high.

Conclusion

Weaving the cultural connections throughout the language learning process will enrich their ability to communicate and will ensure they stay committed and are able to achieve proficiency in Arabic. The importance to the students is how this intertwined focus on language and culture will facilitate the process of their second language acquisition and the achievement of their career goals. This will give me the reward of the knowledge that I helped them to develop their framework for viewing the world and their capacity to interact with it according to their goals. I treasure the opportunity to provide my students with the communications and cultural skills which will ultimately enhance their capabilities to succeed as influential leaders.

References

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