



## **Trials and Tribulations of Sla Framework in Designing Arabic Courses for Speakers of Other Languages**

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### **Abstract**

There is a consensus among language teachers and researchers that language course design is always a work in progress. This is influenced by variables such as the type of language being taught and whether the teaching of this language has been researched. Arabic is one of the languages that have created a perennial debate among its teachers about the anticipated challenges pointing principally to three reasons. The first reason refers to the dichotomy that exists between MSA and Colloquial Arabic, which will have a direct impact on teaching the macro-skill of 'speaking'. The second reason deals with the complexity of MSA in terms of grammar. The final reason discusses the theoretical aspects of language teaching and learning and its implications to the design of the Arabic program. This paper discusses these problems stemming from the recent empirical pilot study of teaching Arabic for a specific purposes (ASP). The study exposes some of the problems mentioned above and suggests solutions to improve the teaching of Arabic in the light of theories of SLA and language teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** Arabic for specific purposes, Arabic course design, Diglossia, Blended learning, SLA, Online learning.



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## 1. Introduction

Unlike the teaching of other languages such as Romance languages, the teaching of MSA presents many challenges. The first problem that has a direct implication to teaching is the diglossic nature of Arabic. [Ferguson \(1959\)](#) defines diglossia as:

A relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language, there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by means of formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.”

Besides [Ferguson \(1968; 1959\)](#), many writers including [Mansoor \(1959\)](#), [Badawi \(1985\)](#), [Al-Batal \(1992\)](#) and [Palmer \(2008\)](#) have also discussed diglossia in detail. [Al-Batal \(1992\)](#) believes that the term diglossia is too simple to be applied to Arabic, and he recommends, as an alternative, the term triglossia or multiglossia. This stems from the fact that diglossia is not a clear cut dichotomy between the High Variety and the Low Variety of Arabic but rather a continuum, shaped and affected by socio-political, and religious factors. According to [Al-Batal \(1992\)](#) “discussion on diglossia and its relevance to the teaching of Arabic are often sensitive and can be highly charged, as can be seen in the professional meetings of the American Association of the Teachers of Arabic whenever this matter is brought up.” This sets forth arguments about how to teach Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) without ignoring the wide gulf that exists between MSA and Colloquial Arabic. Arabic (MSA) or in the Foreign Language context as noted in the literature can also be referred to as a ‘community language’. [Clyne \(1991\)](#) in a discussion about Australian languages introduces the long established (since 1975) term ‘community languages’ as an alternative to using the terms ‘foreign’, ‘migrant’ and ‘ethnic’ (each found to be discriminatory, inadequate or exclusionary) with reference to languages used by the diverse communities in Australia. He asserts that the term ‘community languages’ has now attained fairly universal currency in Australia and has also been adopted in other English-speaking countries.’ [Clyne \(2005\)](#) contends that the book on Australia’s language potential ‘emphasizes inclusivity and empowerment for all Australians and that Australians ‘disadvantage [themselves] in the belief ‘that one language is sufficient’.

With reference to the arguments out forth in favor of one or the other approaches, if one particular dialect were to be chosen alongside the teaching of MSA, there would evidently be a dispute about which variety should be the chosen one. This is confirmed by [Al-Batal \(1992\)](#) who asserts “what also contributes to the difficulty of this problem is the fact that speakers of the different Arabic dialects believe their own dialect is the closest to MSA and therefore should be the one taught to students.”

To propose a solution to this diglossic dilemma, [Al-Batal \(1992\)](#) suggests ‘the Alternative Approach’ which is similar to the Simultaneous Approach in many ways where both MSA and an Arabic dialect are taught at the same time<sup>1</sup>. [Al-Batal \(1992\)](#) emphasizes an important point which is that the classroom should reflect diglossia where MSA is used for writing and in formal settings and the dialect is used for daily life communications. In other words, this represents a true reflection of what occurs in the Arab world. It is fundamental to equip students of AFL with both MSA and dialectal language skills. This will equip the students to use the particular language variety appropriately. Lacking the appropriate use of language could have an impact on the students’ self-esteem and continuing their studies if, for instance, his/her spoken MSA language is perceived to be ‘awkwardly’ used by the native speakers of Arabic.<sup>2</sup>

This is bolstered by [Ryding \(1995\)](#) asserting that students of Arabic could feel discouraged if they feel incapable of communicating in Spoken Arabic.

Hence, [Al-Batal \(1992\)](#) suggests three important points. Firstly, that future resources and programs should incorporate both MSA and dialectal language skills in order to enhance language proficiency in an authentic manner. Secondly, emphasis should be placed on improving communicative skills. Thirdly, enhancing and encouraging skills in the dialect form could be used as key to access the culture of the Arab world. This could be substantiated by a plethora of examples related to the arts in general in the Arab world such as folklore music, cinema and theatre. An interesting recent research study by [Palmer \(2008\)](#) found that most of the surveyed students see the importance of learning colloquial Arabic because they feel more easily integrated into the Arabic culture and more trusted when conversing with the local Arabic speaking community. However, the students disagree about the way MSA and Colloquial Arabic are taught. For instance, the survey results were split 50-50 when asked if the two varieties of Arabic are taught separately. Despite Palmer’s findings, the classical problem remains: which dialect should be chosen among the diverse range of Arabic, for example Maghribi Arabic, Gulf Arabic, Levantine Arabic or Egyptian Arabic.

The second problem lies in the clear disconnection between SLA research and the Arabic syllabi, which include teaching materials and language methodology.

One must concede that recently there has been a surge in courses offered in the teaching of Arabic, especially in the online learning format. This change from the traditional to the online format is a step in the right direction. This is evident and reflected in the types of Arabic resources available today. For decades, most Arabic programs focus mainly on grammar believing that grammatical competence is important for literacy. According to [Funk \(2012\)](#), “less-taught and researched languages are still basically taught and learned with emphasis on grammar vs international languages and more researched languages such as English/German and French. ...in which the communicative approach emphasizes language production and a more implicit approach in the teaching of grammatical structures.” According to [Larsen-Freeman \(1986\)](#), the purpose of grammar-translation method is to read and appreciate foreign language literature; the focus is on the form.

<sup>1</sup> Other approaches namely: the MSA Approach, The Colloquial Approach and The Middle Language Approach. [Al-Batal \(1992\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> An anecdotal evidence that I use often with my students of Arabic is when buying a cup of coffee in the Arab world, I always emphasize that there is no need to use elaborate sentences for the request.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

Current Arabic course designers are trying to disengage from the traditional translation-method approach to embrace new technologies under the more appealing umbrella of Blended Learning (BL). However, BL still bears the characteristics of methodologies based on translation and grammar.

### **1.2. Questions of the Study**

The following questions have been posed in this study.

What were the main challenges in designing an Arabic program (namely ASP)?

What were the pitfalls in the design of the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language?

What strategies should one adopt to rectify the problem and suggest workable solutions?

### **1.3. Limitation of the Study**

This study would be more beneficial if one monitors the progress of the students enrolled in this course using a longitudinal study, over the duration of three years. The longitudinal study would ascertain the degree of its success.

## **2. Literature Review**

There is a wide and generic literature on language course design, this include the work of [Dubin and Olshtain \(1986\)](#), [Nunan \(1988\)](#), [Yalden \(1987\)](#) and [Graves \(2000\)](#), among many. Most of the researchers agree that there are many models at the teacher's disposal when designing a language course. In designing the course, the decision usually oscillates between theory of language teaching and practice. Researchers in the field of Applied Linguistics usually attempt to assist the teacher with the course development and design through theories such as the Processibility theory (PT), Teachability Theory (TT) and Comprehensible Input Theory (CI), which are briefly discussed in our theoretical work section.

[Dubin and Olshtain \(1986\)](#) and later [Graves \(2000\)](#) offer best practices when designing a language course. Probably the best observation made by [Graves \(2000\)](#) is that course design should be 'a work in progress'. It means that language course design should be dynamic, flexible, and open to change because it involves students and each individual is a 'learner' with a different need. In other words, striving to produce a program and offer it as a finished product with a set of goals and objectives before its implementation is not a wise practice. This is because teaching has a feature of unpredictability, and hence the course should be fluid and flexible. [Graves \(2000\)](#) identifies four stages when designing a course, namely:

Stage 1: Planning the course with an ongoing assessment and decision making

Stage 2: Teaching the course

Stage 3: Modifying/re-planning the course

Stage 4: Re-teaching the course

In our discussion of the current study, focus will be placed on stage 1 and stage 2 as these two stages coincide with the stages of the ASP pilot course. Stage 1 is dedicated to the investigation and the conceptualization of the program. It is the period during which the teacher/language designer conceptualizes about what he/she wants to teach (objectives, aims and methodology, content, materials, face-to-face, online only, blended learning).

[Graves \(2000\)](#) also stresses the importance of context of learning, in other words involving the students in decision making about their learning outcomes, in the stage of designing the course. In cases where a course has been taught, student feedback through student evaluation surveys is critical for enhancing course design. In this case, because this course was developed for the first time, the course development team had to survey student needs before the first iteration of the course. This is part of 'the fact-finding stage' where the course designer assesses the needs of the students ([Dubin and Olshtain, 1986](#)). For instance, in our ASP program design stage, our participants were asked beforehand about the aspects of the Arabic course that are of interest to them. For instance, the participants were asked whether they would like to learn literacy skills in Arabic or just conversational skills. [Graves \(2000\)](#) drew a striking analogical resemblance between a course designer and an architect. Incidentally, when an architect designs a house, before he attempts to draw a sketch, there are other variables that come first to mind, for instance:

"where is the site, how big is it? What are its particular features? How many people will live in this house?

What are their interests and needs that will affect how they will use the house, the kinds of rooms, and how the rooms relate to each other? What is the budget? What is the time line? What materials are available locally? And so on.

Hence, there is a need to define the context, which involves length of course, students, curriculum and objectives. In [Graves'](#) words "defining one's context can also be viewed as part of pre-course needs assessment." She adds that "it is also based on my belief that there is not one way or "best way" to design a course. Rather, the course must work within the givens of the context and make use of the skills that the teacher brings to the class." ([Graves, 2000](#)). Furthermore, there is a paucity of research that focuses on assessing and evaluating the effectiveness of language programs in Arabic. The majority of research studies are related to the evaluation of resources that are used in the teaching of Arabic. These include the works of [Yosnan \(1996\)](#), [Alosh Muhammad \(1987\)](#), [Badawi \(1985\)](#); [Al-khabbas \(2010\)](#) and [Al Ali and Olaimat \(2012\)](#). There seems a consensus among these authors that the resources used in the teaching of Arabic suffer from several shortcomings, as suggested by [Bint Othman \(2005\)](#) and [Al-khabbas \(2010\)](#). According to [Bint Othman \(2005\)](#), the resources need to integrate better the four macro-skills and it is recommended that the vocabulary needs to be introduced gradually to students. As for [Al-khabbas \(2010\)](#), contends that in the design of the Arabic resources, the age of the learner is not considered, the grammatical concepts need to be introduced gradually, vary the types of exercises and that the methodology related to tasks should vary also.

More macro-skill research focus on Arabic was completed by [Haron \(2013\)](#) who sets forth arguments about the importance of attaining communicative skills in Arabic. In this article the author debunks some of the myths related

to the teaching of Arabic, for instance that emphasis on communicative competence will slow down the completion of the Arabic program. She adds that the subjects taught in Arabic do not serve communicative purposes because of the emphasis on memorization, reading and grammar-translation.

This brief literature review could only serve to demonstrate that research into language teaching has made giant leap in the last two twenty years. However, the bulk of this research remains too generic, as specialized research for specific languages such as Arabic is still a child's first steps. This is captured by Gass (2006) who states, "many would point out that SLA research is quite skewed in the direction of a few languages. Unfortunately, Arabic is not one of them, but the acquisition is a field awaiting exploration."

### 3. Methodology

Methodologically, we conducted a critical qualitative analysis of the design and implementation of the 8 weeks' pilot Arabic program termed 'Arabic for Specific Purposes' at Deakin University for the elementary level of Arabic (Stage 1).

Designing the program began in late 2013 and it has undergone many changes since its first inception.

This program had both online and weekly two hours of face-to-face (two hours per week) teaching modules. Sixteen mature aged students without prior knowledge of the Arabic language enrolled in this program. These students were surveyed (before and after the program) aiming at assessing the challenges they have faced in their learning experience.

The purpose of this paper is therefore threefold. First, we present a short critique to the current Arabic program at Deakin. Second, we examine the challenges we have faced as program designers of the (ASP) in the light of the current theoretical and empirical research on Arabic to the present and finally, we suggest some recommendations of how to improve this program for a better learning outcome.

### 4. Theoretical Framework

A critical review of the courses designed to teach Arabic in Australia suffer from three major problems. First, there is a misalignment between theory and practice, as Arabic course designers are not sufficiently informed about the theory of language teaching and learning. Second, the resources available to teach Arabic in Australia are predominantly designed overseas and hence the local Australian context is not considered in the use of the resources. Thirdly, the methodology used to teach Arabic is based predominantly on grammatical knowledge and translation that contradict the communicative approach to languages. Haron (2013) confirms this and states that Arabic is still taught in a traditional way where emphasis is placed on memorization, reading comprehension and translation. Haron (2013) has conveyed the students' frustration with this methodology by their desire to be able to communicate orally in Arabic. It is now proven that reliance on these methodologies do not establish communicative language acquisition. According to Long (2009) focus-on-form approach leads to preoccupation with correctness and grammatical knowledge. This is confirmed by Funk (2012) stating that "while much attention is being paid to reproductive exercises with focus on grammatical correctness, comparatively little classroom time is being devoted to oral skills-to listening and speaking."

Furthermore, Byrd (2005) points subtly to an important link between the knowledge of particular skills in grammar and the ability to communicate. Using the English language as an example, Byrd (2005) asserts "to learn to have a conversation in English is not to learn first about verb tenses and then about nouns and then about questions as separate entities only vaguely related to each other. In conversation, these forms are strongly related to each other." Hence, one must concede vehemently that teaching grammar is an important component of learning Arabic, but it should not be the sole focus of any program. Its implementation should aim to enhance communication. Furthermore, the language program should be guided with theories of language acquisition, teaching and learning. That is why theoretical knowledge is an integral part of the course design stage. Therefore, this present paper necessarily alludes in our discussion to some of the already established theories relating to Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Teachability Theory (TT), Processibility theory (PT) and Comprehensible Input (CI). One would include the works of Littlewood (1981), Larsen-Freeman (1986) and Pienemann (1998), among others.

Probably one of the most influential theories of SLA is the Pienemann's Processibility Theory. According to Pienemann (2008), PT is a theory of "second language development." The main tenet of the PT is that "a learner can produce and comprehend only those L2 linguistic forms which the current state of the language processor can handle." Pienemann (1998) gave an example of how ESL learners process question formation where he identifies four stages, stage 1 being the easiest and stage 4 is the most complex. This theory was later verified in Arabic and discussed by Mansouri (2000) and later Al Shatter (2011). Mansouri (2000) made some interesting predictions about the stages of processibility in the acquisition of Arabic among non-native learners. He concluded that the predictions were more realized in syntax than in morphology. A summary of Mansouri's findings are adapted for stages (1-2) and tabulated below in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1 illustrates the developmental stages of the syntax acquisition, as follows:

Table-1. Syntax development structure (Stages 1-2)

|                                  |                      | Syntax                            |                          |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Predicted developmental sequence |                      | Data based developmental sequence |                          |
| Stages #                         |                      |                                   |                          |
| 0                                | Words                |                                   | Words (0)                |
| 0                                | Formulaic patters    |                                   | Formulaic patterns (0)   |
| 1                                | Equational sentences |                                   | Equational sentences (1) |
| 2                                | Canonical order (SV) |                                   | Canonical order (SV) (2) |

Based on Mansouri (2000)

Table 2 illustrates the developmental stages of the acquisition of morphology, as follows:

Table-2. Morphological development sequence (stages 1-2)

|                                  |                    | Morphology |                                   |  |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Predicted developmental sequence |                    |            | Data based developmental sequence |  |
| Stages #                         |                    |            |                                   |  |
| 1                                | Definite articles  |            | Definite articles (1)             |  |
| 1                                | Semantic gender    |            | Semantic gender (1)               |  |
| 2                                | Phrasal agreement  |            | Phrasal agreement (2)             |  |
| 2                                | Grammatical gender |            | Clitics (4)                       |  |
| 2                                | Case marking       |            | Inter-phrasal agreement (3)       |  |

Based on Mansouri (2000)

The two tables above demonstrate that research data in morphology breaks the predicted outcome. This sends a significant message to Arabic course designers that care should be taken when aspects of language forms of Arabic are introduced to the learner.

Furthermore, use an appealing term, the so-called Natural Approach (NA), comprising a number of hypotheses, one of these hypotheses is Krashen (1982; 1985) Comprehensible Input (CI). It puts forward the notion that in language acquisition, the understanding of the input is the only mechanism that leads to linguistic competence and the output is not seen as important. In addition, made a valid point when he states that “the mistake the innovators have made is to assume that a conscious understanding of grammar is a prerequisite to acquiring communicative competence.” However, (Swain (1995), cited in Funk (2012)) questions Krashen's claim that learners can only benefit from CI. “She points out and proves that learners also acquire language from their own output and can draw motivation for further improvement from discovering gaps in the Interlanguage systems.”

Furthermore, the cognitive sequence described by Swain poses two major challenges for textbook designers, curriculum developers and lesson planners that are:

1. How we can bring students to a position where they want to produce an output at an early stage on a basis of a little input
2. How language educators ensure that the output is nevertheless acceptable and useful as a basis for further language development and self-correction

In Swain's words “researchers and textbook designers have to date failed to provide systematic answers to those central questions.”

It is also important to discern between the term ‘methodology’ and ‘pedagogy’. According to Long (2009), methodological procedures are dictated by theories in the field of SLA whereas pedagogy dictates procedures. Long (2009) also propounds two approaches to methodology: synthetic and analytic. By ‘synthetic’, focus will be placed on the target language, it has an interventionist approach, which include grammatical syllabuses, grammar translation and audiolingualism, whereas, the analytic approach focuses on the learner.

This brief theoretical account sets forth the following significant arguments, that firstly, learners, not teachers have most control over the students' language skills. Secondly, students learn when they are ready to do so. Thirdly, learners' roles are seen in the Interlanguage (IL) development. According to Long (2009), the individual's IL's transitions are the psycholinguistic equivalent of idiolects. In addition, transitional structures are often not attested in the L1 or the L2 input, but created by the learners themselves.

## 5. A Short Critique of the Present Arabic Program at Deakin

As noted earlier, language program design should constantly reinvent itself by reassessing what has and has not worked. The “transformative reflection” Biggs and Tang (2011) approach requires critical reflection leading to change and this approach was utilized throughout the development and implementation phase of the first iteration of the ASP pilot program at Deakin. The brief critique identifies areas for improvement based on the experience of developing and implementing the first program in early 2014.

The current Arabic program uses BL in the teaching of Arabic at Deakin and relies heavily on the textbook of ‘*Ahlan Wa Sahlan*’ (henceforth AWS). The textbook is equipped with audio-visual materials coupled with an online platform that includes various resources, online assessments and various activities. Pedagogically, this program suffers from four major flaws:

1. Emphasis on translation methodology and grammatical approach
2. The teaching of the Arabic alphabets is problematic
3. The teaching of discourse such ‘speech-acts’ is missing in the program
4. The themes selected for the study do not cater for the students' needs.

Due to the limitations of this paper's length, these are discussed as follows:

The textbook AWS incorporates three teaching levels. For absolute beginners (stage 1), AWS offers students the opportunity to learn the Arabic alphabet and sounds. As for the beginner and intermediate levels (stage 2 and 3), the program fails to cater for the various needs of the students. This needs to be confirmed by a further research to measure the students' level of success and retention rate.

Without being overly critical, AWS has struck a chord with the students of Arabic (native and non-native speakers), especially at the beginners level. On the surface level, it appears to be an aberration from the imported teaching materials from other Arab countries, such as Egypt and Syria. Almost all Arabic resources imported from overseas to Australia have something in common, that is the emphasis on the grammatical approach. Although, recent resources like Madina's encourage speaking as a follow-up activity, however receptive skills such as listening are ignored

### 5.1. Teaching of the Arabic Alphabet

In the teaching of Arabic for non-native speakers, it is always recommended that the students be introduced to the Arabic alphabet as they appear in the usual alphabetical sequence. This gives the students an opportunity to use all facial muscles used during the pronunciation process, especially those sounds that have no equivalence in English.

### 5.2. Teaching the Four-Macro Skills and Pragmatics

All four-macro skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) are incorporated in AWS, but the program fails in methodology. For instance, in the listening component, there are no hints of activities that deal with (pre-listening, while listening and post-listening stages). This is exacerbated by the fact that the questions are not synchronized with the text and hence the students may become confused. This could cause frustration on the part of the student and the teacher. Furthermore, there is an obvious missing element in AWS (above stage 1) that is pragmatics. There are no exercises implicitly or explicitly designed to improve students' pragmatic competence through speech-acts.

### 5.3. Blended Learning

Blended learning is becoming a welcoming trend in learning languages worldwide. It could be a powerful way of learning languages; many researchers such as Garrison and Kanuka (2004); Bransford *et al.* (2000) and McCombs and Vakili (2005), confirm this. Vignare (2006) believes that the results from fully online courses show mixed results but overall meta-analyses show that online courses are at least as effective as traditional classroom instruction (Russell, 2001; Zhao *et al.*, 2005).

In the current program the online module is delivered through eLive session with the tutor.

Furthermore, Thorne (2003) suggests that a system should be in place to make Blended Learning successful. This is summarized in firstly 'how to support blended learning', secondly 'integrating different types of learning', thirdly 'designing blended learning' and finally 'tracking blended learning'.

## 6. The ASP Program: A Question of Design

The pilot ASP program aims to create a language program that addresses the shortcomings of the current program taught at Deakin University.

Its vision could be summarized in three points. The first point deals with the question of *context*. In other words, the program delivered a content that was appropriate to students who learn Arabic as a Foreign Language. Students should be familiar with themes that include and are not restricted to Arabic for Traveling, Arabic for Business, Arabic for Finance and Arabic for Politics. The selection of these themes catered for the needs of foreign language students. For instance, the majority of the students enrolled in the current Arabic program at Deakin are majoring in Middle-Eastern Studies and Political Science. In effect, this program was in-tune with all other disciplines such as Sociology, Political Science and Linguistics. The second point deals with the *approach*. The program provided simplified grammatical structures and postponed to later stages of learning the structures that are complex and not used in colloquial Arabic by the native speakers of Arabic. For instance, the teaching of personal pronouns for dual and third person feminine plural were postponed to later stages. Students find these to be difficult to remember. The third point deals with *accreditation*. The ASP program has a vision of following, ultimately, the European Framework for Languages. The authors contend that it is crucial that the language communication skills in Arabic should be compared with other language programs such as French or German. In fact, the present graduates at Deakin majoring in Arabic cannot compare their own performance against the performance of students majoring in other languages elsewhere.

The main challenges we have faced in the creation of the pilot ASP program deal mainly with how to introduce grammatical structures that are embedded with the themes selected for the course namely 'traveling', which is the first theme for Stage 1.<sup>3</sup>

In this stage, we have organized the course to introduce the following grammatical elements:

- a. nouns (without their plural forms)
- b. Personal pronouns (excluding dual forms, masculine plural, feminine plural)
- c. Verbs (present tense and past tense) with Sound Verbs only and conjugated only with personal pronouns (excluding dual, masculine plural and feminine plural)

The above choice is not haphazard and is based on the following assumed difficulties that the students may encounter in his/her learning. We take each case by case for discussion:

#### A. Nouns (Without Their Plural Forms)

In Arabic, noun plurals are formed in three different ways: sound masculine plural (SMP), sound feminine plural (SFP) and broken plurals. The first two kinds are easier to learn than the broken plural. In the teaching of the plural form, it is possible to provide the students with the list of nouns with their plural forms without engaging them in the explanation process.

#### B. Personal Pronouns (Excluding Dual Forms, Masculine Plural, Feminine Plural)

One of the features of Semitic languages is the existence of 'dual' forms for pronouns. It is important to learn these at later stages of the Arabic course, and by excluding them will not hinder communication using Colloquial Arabic because these pronouns are not used in daily conversation.

Arabic has 13 personal pronouns so it is difficult to learn them all at once if you are a speaker of other relatively easier languages such as English.

<sup>3</sup> This 'dilemma' is found in many Romance languages in the early stages of learning with the introduction of phrases such as 'what is your name?' in French '*comment t'appelles-tu?*' which is complex grammatically

## **C. Verbs (Present Tense and Past Tense) With Sound Verbs Only and Conjugated Only with Personal Pronouns (Excluding Dual, Masculine Plural and Feminine Plural)**

In Stage 1, the verb is introduced but focus will be placed on sound verbs. This is because sound verbs are fairly regular in conjugation. Irregular verbs with its conjugation paradigms (weak and hollow) are *la bête noire* for native and non-native speakers of Arabic alike. If verbs of this kind are found in a text, the teacher should not provide or explain its pattern of conjugation. According to Long (2009) because research has shown that attempting to impose a pre-set series of linguistic forms is futile and because it only works if the form is coincidentally happens to be learnable.

### **6.1. Face-To-Face Teaching**

Based on the students' feedback, most respondents, and nine students in total felt that face-to-face teaching is more engaging and enjoyable. The lessons were based on PowerPoint presentations, which incorporate audio and video materials. However, a few students felt that the content covered in the classroom is different to the content offered online. This is due to the unpredictability of the language. There are many instances where the focus changes from one aspect of the lesson to another based on the students' understanding of the content. The online content needs not to be carbon copy of the face-to-face content.

### **6.2. Online Content**

The online content covered weekly lessons with audio and video materials. The face-to-face lessons were recorded using the system EchoRecording where students could access the lesson if physical attendance is not possible. EchoRecording incorporated both audio and video recording of the lesson where the students could see the lesson with both audio and video content.

The Online materials included weekly online quizzes and hard copy assignments. The online additional supporting materials covered a wide range of relevant information related to the language and culture. The philosophy behind this was to offer students both challenging content where some of the content could be discussed with the students. For instance, some of the online materials included video clips from real life situations such as songs, audio podcasts downloaded from the internet. This has initiated discussions with the students. Our philosophy in including these materials is to establish an understanding of the language of culture beyond content.

### **6.3. Success and Challenges of the ASP Program**

#### **6.3.1. Participants' Surveys**

As noted earlier, course designers especially when they deal with a pilot project should reflect on what has or has not worked. In our discussion, it is important to assess the program from the students' perspective. This may guide our discussion about some of the successes and dilemmas in designing this particular Arabic course.

In the survey questions, participants were asked to answer and comment on questions relating to their overall experience of learning Arabic using the three available modules: the online module, the face-to-face teaching or the blended form. Only seven participants have returned their completed survey.

Most participants have commented primarily on the pace and length of the 8 weeks program. A few students indicated that it was too ambitious to teach the alphabet in 8 weeks. Others have commented that their work commitment has prevented them to spend more time learning Arabic. Concerning the online experience, some students suggested that the online content should have incorporated additional materials to support the classroom activities.

#### **6.3.2. Discussion**

The ASP program was a positive step forward in the teaching of Arabic as a Foreign Language, despite the early stages of its implementation. Its strengths hinge on four main points. Firstly, the program is in-tune with the theoretical frameworks of language teaching and learning. It also endeavors to constantly revise its methodology and pedagogy through research. We believe that the success of a language program should embrace research.

Secondly, the program advocates and value both face-to-face and online learning. It seems that, based on the participants' responses, they value more face-to-face than online learning. Thirdly, the language program themes and topics that have been selected in this program cater for the needs of the students of Arabic in a contemporary and constantly changing world.

To enhance the online experience, the ASP aims to introduce a new platform named Blackboard Collaborative (BC). This methodology will have LIVE sessions with the students who chose only the online mode of learning. BC has one main advantage as it offers real-time contact between the students and the teacher with both video and voice mode. This method will be implemented in the re-teaching experiment of Stage 1 of this program.

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper outlines some of the principles and the philosophy behind the design of the ASP program in the teaching of Arabic. The program attempts to simplify the teaching of Arabic using both traditional and online delivery. In the design of the program, both theory and practice of language teaching and learning were integrated and were not considered as two separate entities.

Furthermore, this paper discusses the challenges and dilemmas that have been met when designing the course. For instance, among the challenges and dilemmas experienced in the ASP course design was the problem of diglossia and its impact on decision making with regard to the dichotomy that exists between MSA and Colloquial Arabic. Clyne (2005) is of the view that all stakeholders in Australia can contribute in various ways to build the language potential of Australians. He cites university level specialist training and teacher training programs as some of the many options to develop language potential among university stakeholders but emphasizes that collaboration among

stakeholders is key to building language potential. Furthermore, Arabic may take the lead by breaking with convention in second language learning approach to explore innovative practice and ultimately change the language learning landscape by pushing the boundaries creatively.

Finally, Arabic course designers should align with the view that MSA and colloquial Arabic should be incorporated in the teaching of Arabic, each with its own purpose and context. This will evidently prepare our students for real life situations when they use their skills with native speakers of Arabic.

Research into the teaching of Arabic through constant experimentation should be encouraged. This may lead to finding equilibrium between theory and practice in the teaching of Arabic. Furthermore, Arabic language designers should aim for students' competence not in one or two skills such as reading or writing, but in other skills such as speaking and listening. The aim to achieve communicative competence should not be let down by this obsession to achieve perfect knowledge of grammar. Certainly, grammar is crucial as a writing skill but it is counterproductive when conversing with local communities in the Arab world. A holistic framework should be explored in second language teaching and learning design and implementation especially when considering that languages such as Arabic have become more fully recognized as community languages (Clyne, 1991;2005) instead of remaining in the category of the 'foreign language' or as 'a migrant language'. Within an Australian context for example, depending on the local community context in which you live, study and work, the greeting '*Ahlan Wa Sahlan*' is no longer foreign as it has become a familiar community greeting in a multilingual living and learning space.

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