

Learning Arabic Effectively*

Tips from a trainer of Arabic teachers in the Arabian Peninsula

by SR

SR first went out to the Arab world in 1991, and her husband, PR, was the founder and first director of the Gulf Arabic Programme (www.gapschool.net) in Al-Ain/Buraimi. She worked alongside PR the whole time doing teacher training and working with the materials. Although PR resigned as the director of GAP in 2006, she has continued working there, and has worked with more than 300 full-time students, eight Gulf Arab teachers, two Middle Eastern teachers and three Western teachers.

Get a good foundation in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)

I often come across the attitude, 'I only want to be able to speak to people'. If you only speak colloquial Arabic, you are easily thought of as an illiterate person who might be very pleasant to be around, but you run the risk of not being taken seriously in any discussions of importance and certainly not in religious matters. Even illiterate Arabs themselves more easily listen to those who sound educated, as the Arabic language is seen as something revered and God-inspired, not just a tool for communication. If you have to move at any point, the transition to a new dialect will also be a lot easier if you have a foundation in MSA to fall back on. In my opinion, the best material currently available to learn MSA is the *Al-Kitaab* series (Georgetown University Press).

In teaching, use only the Arabic language from the start

It is not helpful to try to translate or explain in English or any other language, things like 'Assalaamo aleikum' which means 'peace be upon you', but is really a greeting phrase like 'hello'. To explain the meaning of such expressions just confuses beginners. We simply let the teacher repeat the phrase a number of times, shake hands, use pictures and so on, and language understanding will build up.

Have fun while learning!

This means both laughing at oneself ('Oops! I said *hot sword* instead of *hot summer*!') and using the little Arabic you have learned in amusing sentences. If you have learned the words for 'dinner' and 'cockroach', try using them together in a sentence, and you will more easily remember both of these words.

* The editor asked colleagues whose work involves teaching Arabic to foreigners to share what they have found to be vital in helping people learn the language well. Two such professionals shared some tips.

Do not use transliterations

There are ten sounds in the Arabic language that do not exist in English, so when you use transliterations, you have to make up symbols for these anyway. You use more parts of your brain if you associate a sound with the Arabic letter when you see it, hear it and write it. This leads to a more accurate pronunciation from the start. Using Latin, Korean or any other script that you know well may seem quicker and easier, but it is a bit like walking with a crutch when you don't really need one; it will in most cases take a lot longer to get the stability you need. When teaching the alphabet, we have used *Alif Baa*, the introductory book in the *Al-Kitaab* series (Georgetown University Press). Recently, we have started to use the cheaper, but just as good, book *Hayya Bina*, which is produced in Bahrain.

Practice active listening

Listen actively, both when the teacher is talking and when you are out visiting locals. Two aspects come to mind.

- Listen for understanding. When what you hear seems to be over your head, try to pick out words you know, look at how the person is expressing him/herself and try to feel what is being communicated. If you understood two words in five sentences, you were not completely lost!
- Listen for accuracy. Pay close attention to how they say things, in what order words come, how

they use tenses, etc. Try to spell out words in your head 'was that a *siin* or a *Saad*?' (the two different 'Ss' in Arabic).

Treat Arabic learning as a full-time job

In addition to three to four hours in the classroom five days per week, you need to do homework as well as go out and practise what you have learned among locals. Students who try to work part-time in parallel with their Arabic studies usually do not succeed in becoming as proficient as they could, and some fail in their language learning altogether.

Measure your progress by looking back

'Three months ago the script looked like worms, now I can read out most words I see.' 'One month ago I would never have been able to express that thought!' Be encouraged by your own progress, not discouraged by the smartest classmate, who seems to grasp anything without trouble. Many people say to me that Arabic seems difficult for foreigners to learn. I do not deny that it takes work, but I strongly believe that anyone who applies him/herself can do it. We have seen people with learning difficulties learn to communicate well, and we've seen high achievers excel in Arabic.

Enjoy learning Arabic, and enjoy the excitement of understanding and being understood by the people we love and want to reach in their heart language.

Tips from an Arabic programme director in North Africa

by SH

Following many years of service in the Marseille Media Centre, SH and her husband, AH, moved to North Africa more than ten years ago. One of our few Syrian members, she worked for several years, until this past summer, as the director of the local branch of DMG Arabophon, a chain of language-training centres founded by another colleague. (See <http://www.arabophon>.)

The course content and design need to relate to the local context

One of the key elements for learning Arabic is being in the context. Learning a spoken dialect is never complete in class. One must spend plenty of time listening to locals to start with, and a lot of time practicing what one learns in the classroom. For example, at DMG I used to insist that the teachers take the students to the market when they did a lesson on prices and money. There is a lot to learn outside the classroom.

Our courses were developed by DMG and are related to the daily life of the people. They are not just lists of vocabulary that you might never use. DMG always found that teaching culture is an important element of language learning. Foreigners need to learn how people around them think, not just how they speak. That way, they can talk to them about issues that relate to where people are at. We covered things like Ramadan, engagement, weddings, funerals, doctors, schools, sitting in a café... In courses like these, we would have the students see, hear or experience these

events, and we taught them appropriate cultural practices and sayings.

Also, we insisted on homework assignments. When they were learning *darija* (colloquial Arabic), the tasks were not written, but were usually oral. For example, they needed to ask someone about their wedding and bring back information of something new they had learned.

Assessments are very important

Some students assess themselves, but that is not enough. They need to be assessed by a proficient Arabic speaker. We worked hard at producing a good assessment for DMG.

Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is important

Unfortunately, not many people take classes in MSA. It seems that people think they can learn MSA on their own. However, through the years, I have noticed that people develop bad habits and learn wrong pronunciation, which undermines everything they are trying to accomplish in learning the written language. MSA needs diligent work. It is logical and interesting.

The problems with the Arabic text *Al Kitaab*

In DMG we used *AL Kitaab*. It is okay, but I have many reservations about it. One of the problems is that it is Egyptian (nothing against that), and so the Arabic native speakers use the Egyptian dialect on the DVD that is meant to help the students learn to speak! It is just not helpful to teach a dialect that is spoken only in one country. All the students I taught refused to do the speaking part because it was in Egyptian, so I used to prepare my own material to help them speak in MSA. Had they chosen a universal Middle Eastern dialect,

close to the Lebanese, Syrian and Jordanian dialects, the Arabic would have been a lot more useful and universal across the Arab world. These countries use similar vocabulary and their dialect is much closer to MSA.

My other problem with *Al Kitaab* is that it has too much English and does not allow for much oral practice. When teachers follow it faithfully, their teaching is lacking because the textbook lacks creative oral practice exercises. For that reason, when I used to train our teachers, I would spend many hours showing them games and exercises to use with the book.

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