

Learning Arabic in the Woods

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Introduction

Like other languages, Arabic as a foreign language is usually taught in a classroom-based setting. Yet the classroom is neither the only nor the best place to learn Arabic or any other language. Research on language immersion camps offers an alternative to language teaching that can be useful for teachers of Arabic operating in a classroom setting.

Learning Arabic in a Camp Setting

Using the language emersion model, and building on its well-documented success in thirteen other languages over the last 50 years, Concordia Language Villages (CLV) launched a two-week emersion Arabic program (Al-Waha = Oasis) in northern Minnesota during the summer of 2006. CLV is a nationally recognized language and cultural emersion program for elementary and secondary students, offering summer programs for youngsters ages 7-18 in thirteen languages, including Arabic.

The purpose of Al-Waha is to create an opportunity for American students to learn the Arabic language and culture in a rich and authentic environment. Students (villagers), mostly American youngsters with little or no knowledge of the Arabic language and culture, engage in a wide range of activities throughout the day, including eating, playing, singing, banking, shopping, conducting arts and crafts, and even listening to Friday sermons, among other things. In addition to practicing the language in their daily activities, instructors and students meet in small groups of the same proficiency level and focus on language forms and functions that can enhance their communicative skills.

The presenter, who spent several days at the camp observing the day-to-day running of the program, will examine the wide range of linguistic and cultural activities which were used during this summer camp and how these activities contribute to the development of proficiency in Arabic, reflecting the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning. In addition, the presenter will demonstrate that K-12 teachers of Arabic in full time Islamic schools can overcome the physical constraints of their schools and bring to life many of the best practices of an emersion program in their language classrooms to enrich the language learning experience of their students.

For example, teachers can emulate the emersion experience by creating physical areas in their classrooms where different types of language activities can be conducted (a store, a restaurant, play area, a coat closet full of second-hand - authentic clothes from Arabic and Muslim countries, etc.). Teachers can spark learners' interest, courage and enjoyment by creating a wide range of language play opportunities and meaningful activities in the classroom (e.g., celebrating special events/holidays, playing games, conducting arts and crafts projects, coming to school with ethnic dress, bringing culturally authentic objects and introducing them to other students, etc.). Thus, instead of sitting back in their seats and watch the teacher perform, learners of Arabic will step to the plate themselves and perform in the language in ways that are meaningful and

authentic.

In addition to emulating the emersion experience at the classroom level, teachers can also use other venues in the school to reinforce language skills. For instance, students can be asked to name (and express likes and dislikes or preference) of food items during meal times in the cafeteria, to say their du'a and to thank the cooks in unison. During recess and physical education classes, students can be encouraged to use Arabic to practice what they had learned in the classroom. Students can also listen to and make announcements in Arabic during morning assemblies and prayer times.

Principles Underlying Language Emersion Camps

The presenter will also discuss the six principles of a language immersion camp and how they can enhance and guide the work of Arabic teachers in Islamic schools. These principles are:

1. **Courage:** Activities in an emersion setting are designed to give learners courage to participate and use the language;
2. **Learner-centered:** Practices in an emersion setting are learner-centered in order to motivate learning;
3. **Authentic:** Activities in an emersion setting take place in linguistically and culturally authentic surroundings;
4. **Need:** Practices in an emersion setting are based on a real need to interact and communicate and involve the recycling of language in new contexts;
5. **Experiential:** Practices in an emersion setting are experiential, hands-on, and involving multiple senses, and drawing on multiple intelligences; and
6. **Extended:** Practices in an emersion setting are embedded within extended projects.

Conclusion

Whether it is done for religious or communicative purposes, or both, Arabic teaching in Islamic schools can benefit from the innovative teaching techniques used at the Arabic village (Al-Waha) and the principles underlying emersion education in general.