**Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language: What Sequence?**

**Abstract**

Teachers of Arabic as a foreign language need to teach ALL aspects and skills of Arabic over time. Ideally, students should reach native or native-like levels. So, there is no aspect, in the long run, that is reserved for native speakers only. However, choosing the most appropriate sequence would make learning relatively easier, and vice-versa. Determining the most appropriate sequence depends, among other factors, on the difference between learning/ teaching Arabic as a first language versus Arabic as a foreign language. The presenter will suggest an alternative sequence to the prevailing one in the field.

1. **Alphabet**:

Arab kids go to school. The first lesson they learn is the Arabic alphabet. American kids go to school. The first lesson they learn is the English alphabet. Non-native speaking kids go to school to learn Arabic. Should we start with the Arabic Alphabet? No. What’s the difference? Native speaking kids know thousands of words, and most of the structures of the language. They use their knowledge of the language to learn the alphabet.

Known → unknown

If American kids start with the Arabic alphabet, they go:

Unknown → unknown

which is very difficult. We advocate starting with oral Arabic – accumulation of vocab & structures, preferably thru. stories and a lot of speaking; discussing the stories, acting them out, etc.

A second reason for not starting with the Arabic alphabet is the mental development of children. Before the age of 7, kids’ analytic ability is weak. They understand addition & subtraction, but they do not understand the concept of multiplication & subtraction. They cannot tie their shoes. They cannot learn the alphabet of a foreign language efficiently.

* Piaget’s developmental stages:

1. Sensory motor 0-2
2. Preoperational 2-7
3. Concrete operational 7-11/puberty
4. Formal operations 11-∞

A third reason for not starting with the Arabic alphabet is that at an early age, kids have a comparative advantage in imitation and learning orally. (discuss LAD – Critical Period Hypothesis). Any time spent on learning the alphabet is deducted from the time of “acquiring” the language.

1. **Tashkeel**:

The usual practice is to introduce tashkeel with the letters. This is because teachers teach student to read in order to know the words. However, if we teach language orally, and give the students a lot of practice opportunities, they will be able to read the words they know WITHOUT tashkeel. This is much easier. Tashkeel should be introduced at a later stage when students will use their knowledge of words and their right pronunciation to learn tashkeel.

(give examples on reading).

How to teach the Arabic alphabet? On stages. The first stage with no tashkeel. The letters of the alphabet could be divided into four parts of seven or eight letters each. Since students have a lot of vocabulary now, we can practice each group of letters before moving to the next. The following words are covered by the first half of the alphabet plus و – ي – ة

سرير باب بيت حذاء سيارة دراجة دجاج خبز خس جزر خيار زبادي حساء بيتسا دب أسد ذئب

يدرس يجري يزور يخرج يسبح يسجد يرى يختار

جديد شرير جيد

1. **Reading**:

The prevailing mode of teaching writing nowadays is for students to learn the strategies of skimming and scanning. These are two very important skills, but they should come after a lot of practice on reading comprehension. At the beginner and intermediate levels, we should build very strong foundations of vocabulary. At the advanced level, students should practice skimming and scanning. Now they know a lot of vocabulary, which will greatly help them deal with the text they are reading.

1. **Varieties**:

Although standard and colloquial Arabic are considered one language, the differences are big (they don’t compare to formal English and slang). Starting with both varieties places an extra burden of the students. Students may end up not knowing either variety.

I suggest starting with one variety only, preferably standard Arabic, until the students know it fairly well. The choice of which colloquial usually depends on where the university graduate will work (there could be other goals). If the university graduate will be stationed in Morocco, why should they learn the Omani colloquial?

The above suggestions are based on the presenter’s experience in teaching. The best way to accept or reject them is by experimenting. Our most important goal is to find easier ways for our students to learn Arabic, love it and succeed in learning it.