

Teaching Arabic for Non-Natives in Jordanian Public Universities: Difficulties and Solutions

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the difficulties that non-natives face in learning Arabic at Jordanian Public Universities. It was also an attempt to find some solutions to such difficulties. To achieve these objectives the researchers used a questionnaire which was sent to fifty-three non-native students who learnt Arabic as a foreign language at two Jordanian public universities (i.e. the University of Jordan and Al Al-Beit University). The questionnaire consisted of three areas related to linguistic difficulties, the materials used in teaching and classroom activities. The results obtained by the questionnaire revealed that the existence of different varieties of Arabic constituted a major difficulty. The results also indicated that the materials used in teaching and classroom activities were not helpful for students' to develop communicative competence in Arabic. In the light of these conclusions, different solutions were suggested to overcome these difficulties.

Keywords

Teaching, Arabic, Non-Native, Difficulties, Solutions

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1. Introduction

Arabic ranks sixth in the world's league table of languages. As the language of the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, it is also widely used throughout the Muslim world. Arabic, one of the oldest languages in the world, is the spoken language of the Arab States in the Middle East and North Africa. There are about 289 million native speakers and about 256 million non-natives of Arabic in the world. This makes the Arabic language an important one to learn. (Gordon, 2005)

Arabic has a distinguished place among the world languages. It is the bowl of an international culture and a great civilization. It is one of the official languages of the United Nations. Students choose to study Arabic for a variety of reasons. Some students study it as part of their academic work, or to satisfy general interest in the people and cultures of the Arabic speaking world. Some students take Arabic to help them get jobs both with the US government or non-

government agencies operating in the Arab world. Students of Arab descent often take Arabic to better understand their heritage and gain familiarity with the language of a parent or grandparent. Muslim students usually take Arabic in order to read the Qur'an and other religious texts. Learning Arabic opens a vast body of literature and art, as well as offer opportunities for interaction with other Arabic speakers. (see Dweik 1986; Strout 2006, Hussein 2006).

In Jordan, a Royal Decree to establish a Language Center at Al-Yarmouk University and another center at the University of Jordan was issued in 1979. Later on, Many other language centers were established in Amman aiming at facilitating the Arabic language learning and offering the possible facilities and conditions to spread it among the speakers of other languages. Most of these students study the Arabic language and Islamic Shari'a (law) at the Jordanian universities despite the difficulties they face in learning, living expenses and being away from their families. This proves that the students'

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desire to learn Arabic and their strong inclination to get acquainted with its culture, civilization and true religion.

It is further noticed that these students study in the official Jordanian universities in accordance with the programs designated by the Jordanian universities for the Arab students; whether Jordanian or not, without any consideration to the increasing numbers of these non-native learners, their inclinations, potentials, needs and the demands of their communities. The strong appearance of Arabic around the world makes some countries start teaching Arabic for non-natives as a foreign language for many reasons. Non-native learners try to learn Arabic in Jordan to understand many science fields which cause several difficulties to the learners.

Students in any educational institution are considered the input of the educational process; and thus, improving their academic performance is one of the most significant results of the educational process. However, this performance is often affected by a number of factors which cause the deterioration of the students' academic level. As long as the foreign learners of Arabic are part of these students, they cannot be excluded from the general academic weakness that has started to appear at Jordanian universities.

Because the difficulties that non-native learners of Arabic face in learning Arabic are still in existence and the number of foreign students who come to Jordan for the purpose of studying Arabic in its homeland and among its own speakers, the researchers decided to examine this issue and take it further hoping to identify the barriers that impede its learning. In addition, the researchers hope to suggest different channels that may address the issues and offer some reasonable solutions to help the non-native learners of Arabic in Jordanian public universities.

Teaching Arabic to non-natives might cause difficulties that make the learning of Arabic a hard task to achieve. The aim of this study is to examine, identify and describe these difficulties which appear as a result of teaching Arabic for non-native learners and to suggest some solutions.

To achieve the above mentioned goals, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the difficulties that the non-native learners encounter in learning Arabic in Jordan?
- 2) What solutions are suggested to solve these difficulties?

Teaching Arabic for non-natives is widely practiced in many countries in the world due to the importance of the Arabic language and its culture and because Arabic enjoys a special status not only among Arabs but also among Muslims. Therefore, many researchers especially in the USA have conducted studies related to its teaching and learning. However, very few studies have focused on teaching Arabic

for non-natives in Jordan. Thus, this study may fill a gap in literature. The samples used in other studies focused on learners who share one language or culture like the Malaysian learners. The sample used in this study included learners from Western and Muslim countries alike whose native languages included English, Russian, Malaysian, Indonesian and Japanese. Therefore, this study is of benefit to future researchers in the field, to language planners, to textbook designers and of course to language teachers and students alike.

The results of the study cannot be generalized to all non-native learners of Arabic in Jordan because the results are limited to the sample of the study. The limited time and resources available when conducting this study did not allow soliciting answers from a larger number of respondents.

2. Review of Literature

Many scholars, like Amayreh (1984), Fagman and Niman (1996), Maxos (2002), Dabrowsky (2005), Elkhafaifi (2005), Faryadi (2007), Dawood (2008), Suliman (2008) and Dweik & Abu-Irmis (2015), have addressed the difficulties that the non-native learners of Arabic face.

Amayreh (1984) analyzed the textbooks used for teaching Arabic to non-native speakers. The analysis covered writing, vocabulary, grammatical structures and methods of teaching. He claimed that the difficulties which the students faced while learning Arabic resulted from the poor textbooks that did not have clear goals and efficient methods. Moreover, his study focused on the steps which might be taken to help improve textbooks for teaching Arabic.

Fagman and Niman (1996) reported that the emphasis in teaching Arabic was on the literary language; thus stressing mainly reading, listening and writing. Students were hardly taught how to speak. Those who opposed teaching the spoken Arabic claimed that there were endless dialects. Therefore, it is difficult to decide which one to teach. In addition, Arabic has a linguistic variety of written language alongside the spoken one, which is also made of different dialects.

Dabrowsky (2005) focused on some linguistic challenges of learning Arabic by answering the question "What are the unique linguistic challenges for young adult Americans learning Arabic?" The findings were obtained from observations, interviews, and the analysis of questionnaires made by others.

Elkhafaifi (2005) focused on the classroom activities where anxiety played an important role in foreign language students' classroom performance. His study presented the results of the first empirical examination of the effect of general foreign language learning anxiety on students' achievement in an

Arabic course and of listening anxiety on students listening comprehension. That data came from two measures of anxiety and a background questionnaire administered to 233 postsecondary students of Arabic as a foreign language. Anxiety scores were correlated with final grades and listening comprehension scores. The results indicated that foreign language learning anxiety and listening anxiety are separate but related phenomena that both correlate negatively with achievement. The study also revealed significant negative correlations among foreign language learning anxiety, listening anxiety, and selected demographic variables.

Faryadi (2007) discussed the constructivist paradigm of teaching Arabic as a foreign language in Malaysian settings. He examined the role of interactive multimedia in enhancing the chalk and talk methods of teaching Arabic in Malaysian schools. His paper investigated the importance of the Arabic Language in Malaysia. Furthermore, it dealt with the Malaysian Government's plan of action to introduce a series of major educational reforms in an attempt to develop Malaysia into a regional educational hub. In addition, the paper looked further into possible methods of acquiring Arabic as a foreign language in Malaysian classrooms.

Dawood (2008) suggested different solutions related to the difficulties in different fields of the language learning skills. He claimed that every person is endowed by nature with certain capacities which enable him/her to assimilate and use the spoken form of language. This ability is achieved by deliberately training ourselves to use our spontaneous and inherent powers of assimilation. He reported that a teacher is advised to teach irregular forms contextually rather than formulating rules with numerous exceptions. Selection of irregular forms should be confined to Modern Standard Arabic instead of the classical form. In learning Arabic we should follow the natural order in which we learnt our own language; that is, we should begin by learning the spoken language then proceeding to the literary language. (p. 109).

Suliman (2008) conducted a study on code switching between Standard Arabic and colloquial every day Arabic spoken in Egypt. He sent five speeches to an Egyptian audience whereas the other five were delivered to non-Egyptian Arabic speakers audiences in Bahrain, Emirates, Jordan, Lebanon, and Qatar. The tapes were selected to examine the switches from Classical Arabic to Egyptian Arabic and to find out if there is a relationship between the frequency of switches and audience. The ten tapes chosen for this study were transcribed and the switches from Classical Arabic to Egyptian Arabic and back again were counted and analyzed. The total size of the transcribed data was approximately 18,200 words. One of the biggest difficulties encountered in this study was switching between two varieties of the same language which made it difficult to

provide an accurate distinction between the two varieties which shared some lexical, syntactic and morphological features.

Dweik & Abu-Irmies (2015) investigated attitudes of non-native learners towards learning aspects of Arabic culture. To achieve the goal of the study, the researchers used a questionnaire. The sample included 43 students enrolled at Ali Baba International Center, Qasid Arabic Institute and Modern Arabic Language International Center (MALIC). Results showed that the non-native learners of Arabic have positive attitudes towards Arabic culture and they favored aspects such as rules and behaviors, customs and festivals, political institutions, history, family life and food.

3. Methodology

A purposive sample of (53) respondents was selected from two universities in Jordan. The demographic information about the respondents' general background included data such as gender, religion, age, level of education, the type of university the respondents attended, nationality, the students' mother tongue and the language of the parents. The respondents have various language background and diverse nationalities such as English, Russian, Malaysian, Indonesian and Japanese. They hold different degrees such as PhD, M.A and B.A.; they speak different languages according to their nationalities. A questionnaire with a five-Likert scale (i.e. strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree) was designed used. The statements of the questionnaire were written based on Abu-Dulbough (2005), Bell (2005), Du (2008) and were modified to suit the objectives of the current study. The statements which were included in the questionnaire covered areas related to linguistic difficulties, difficulties related to the textbook materials and difficulties related to the classroom activities.

4. Results

In analyzing the received data, the researchers tallied the frequencies of responses to each item and as they were not experienced in statistics, they sought assistance from a professional expert in the field of statistics to figure out the means. When the mean is between (3.68-5), it means that the item is highly significant. When the mean is between (2.34-3.67), it means that the item is of medium significance. When the mean is less than (2.33) it means that the item is of low significance and is not important to be mentioned.

According to the students, as shown in Table 1 below, there are different difficulties the non-native learners of Arabic face. Results reported in responses to items (2, 7, 8) show their mean is between (5- 3.68), which means that the

difficulties with learning Arabic are high. This indicates that the students have difficulties in learning Modern Standard Arabic and the different varieties of colloquial Arabic. Items (1, 3, 4, 5, and 6) have medium means.

Table 1. Means and Percentages for the Linguistic Difficulties as Perceived by the Students.

Linguistic Difficulties	Students	
	Means	Percentage
1. The students have a difficulty in learning Modern Standard Arabic pronunciation.	3.40	68.0
2. The students have a difficulty in learning Modern Standard Arabic grammar.	3.72	74.4
3. The students have a difficulty in learning Modern Standard Arabic vocabulary.	3.00	60.0
4. The students have a difficulty in learning Modern Standard Arabic speaking.	3.11	62.2
5. The students have a difficulty in learning Modern Standard Arabic writing.	2.96	59.2
6. The students have a difficulty in understanding Modern Standard Arabic texts.	3.25	65.0
7. The students have a difficulty in distinguishing between the different varieties of colloquial Arabic.	3.92	78.4
8. The students have a difficulty in understanding Jordanian colloquial Arabic vocabularies.	3.76	75.2

Table 2 below shows that the students' responses have three high items and five medium items. This is an indication that the non-native students have difficulties in learning Arabic.

Table 2. The Strength of the Linguistic Difficulties with the Frequencies and the Percentages of the Previous Table.

Strength of the Difficulty	Rating	Students'	Responses
		Frequency	Percentage
High	5- 3.68	3	37.5
Medium	3.67- 2.34	5	62.5
Low	2.33- 1	0	0
	Total	8	100%

Table 3 below indicates that the students believe that the non-native learners have difficulties related to the textbook materials. The means of all items (1- 7) for the students are between (3.67- 2.34), which means the difficulties are medium.

Table 3. Means and Percentages for the Textbook Difficulties as Perceived by the Student.

Difficulties Related to the Textbook Materials	Students	
	Means	Percentage
1. The assigned Arabic student's textbook (Teaching Arabic for Non-natives) does not focus on learning speaking correctly.	2.85	57.0
2. The student's textbook does not relate content to the learner's culture and environment.	3.23	64.6
3. The student's textbook does not select structures with regard to differences between L1 & L2 cultures	3.13	62.6
4. The student's textbook does not present vocabulary in appropriate contexts and situations.	3.06	61.2
5. The student's textbook does not relate reading passages to the student background.	3.23	64.6
6. The student's textbook do not select passages within the vocabulary range of the pupils.	2.89	57.8
7. The student's textbook does not relate written work to students' age, interests and environment.	3.49	69.8

Table 4 shows that the students' responses have seven medium items which means that there are no major difficulties related to the textbook materials.

Table 4. The Strength of the Textbook Difficulties with the Frequencies and Percentages of the Previous Table.

Strength of the Difficulty	Rating	Students'	Responses
		Frequency	Percentage
High	5- 3.68	0	0
Medium	3.67- 2.34	7	100
Low	2.33- 1	0	0
	Total	7	100%

As indicated in Table 5, the students focused in this part on the difficulties related to the classroom activities and exercises as shown in items (1- 9) below.

Table 5. Means and Percentages for the Difficulties Related to the Classroom Activities and Exercises as Perceived by the Students.

Difficulties Related to the Classroom Activities and Exercises		Students	
		Means	Percentage
1.	Activities do not take into account students' cultural background.	3.30	66.0
2.	Activities neglect the mother tongue of the students.	3.49	69.8
3.	Activities do not encourage students' participation.	2.85	57.0
4.	Activities do not include some interesting games.	3.04	60.8
5.	Activities are not based on library skills.	2.94	58.8
6.	Activities do not require students to work outside the classroom.	3.04	60.8
7.	Activities do not use teaching aids such as visual, auditors... etc effectively.	2.98	59.6
8.	Activities do not give students opportunity to practice the language.	2.83	56.6
9.	Exercises do not help in transferring theoretical knowledge into classroom practice.	2.85	57.0

According to Table 6, the students' responses have nine medium items which means that there are no major difficulties related to the classroom activities and exercises.

Table 6. The Strength of the Difficulties Related to the Classroom Activities and Exercises with the Frequencies and Percentages of the Previous Table.

Strength of the Difficulty	Rating	Students'	Responses
		Frequency	Percentage
High	5- 3.68	0	0
Medium	3.67- 2.34	9	100
Low	2.33- 1	0	0
	Total	9	100%

Table 7, shows that the items (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7) are important solutions because they scored high means between (5- 3.68).

Table 7. Means and Percentages for the Linguistic Solutions as Perceived by the Students.

Linguistic Solutions	Students	
	Mean	Percentage
1. Students should work hard on the pronunciation of Modern Standard Arabic.	4.04	80.8
2. Students should work hard on learning and practicing Modern Standard Arabic.	3.96	79.2
3. Students should work hard on learning vocabulary of Modern Standard Arabic.	4.04	80.8
4. Students should practice speaking Modern Standard Arabic in different situations.	3.91	78.2
5. Students should practice the writing of Modern Standard Arabic.	3.85	77.0
6. Students should understand the linguistic phenomenon through Modern Standard Arabic texts.	3.74	74.8
7. Students should take into consideration that they have to learn and practice more the Jordanian varieties of colloquial Arabic.	3.96	79.2

Table 8 shows that the students' responses have seven high items related to linguistic solutions.

Table 8. The Strength of the Linguistic Solutions with the Frequencies and Percentages of the Previous Table.

Strength of the Difficulty	Rating	Students'	Responses
		Frequency	Percentage
High	5- 3.68	7	100
Medium	3.67- 2.34	0	0
Low	2.33- 1	0	0
	Total	7	100%

Table 9 shows that there are solutions related to the textbook materials. Items (1, 3, 4, 5, 6) scored high solutions between (5- 3.68), which means that there are main solutions while item (2) scored medium solution.

Table 9. Means and Percentages for the Solutions Related to the Textbook Materials as Perceived by the Students.

Solutions Related to the Textbook Materials	Students	
	Mean	Percentage
1. The student's textbook should focus on learning speaking correctly.	3.89	77.8
2. The student's textbook should relate content to the learner's culture and environment.	3.51	70.2
3. The student's textbook should present vocabulary in appropriate contexts and situations.	3.98	79.6
4. The student's textbook should relate reading passages to the student's background.	3.70	74.0
5. The student's textbook should select passages within the vocabulary range of the pupils.	3.75	75.0
6. The student's textbook should relate written work to Students' age, interests and environment.	3.72	74.4

Table 10 shows that the students' responses have five high solutions related to textbook materials and one medium item.

Table 10. The Strength of the Solutions Related to the Textbook Materials with the Frequencies and Percentages of the Previous Table.

Strength of the Difficulty	Rating	Students'	Responses
		Frequency	Percentage
High	5- 3.68	5	84
Medium	3.67- 2.34	1	16
Low	2.33- 1	0	0
	Total	6	100%

As shown in Table 11, the students reported that items (3, 6, 7, 8, 9) are important solutions because they scored means between (5- 3.68) and the items (1, 2, 4, 5) are medium solutions.

Table 11. Means and Percentages for the Solutions Related to Classroom Activities and Exercises as Perceived by the Students.

Solutions Related to the Classroom Activities and Exercises	Students	
	Mean	Percentage
1. The activities should take into account students' cultural background	3.38	67.6
2. The activities should not neglect the students' mother tongue.	3.25	65.0
3. The activities should encourage students' participation.	3.94	78.8
4. The activities should include interesting games.	3.62	72.4
5. The activities should be based on library skills.	3.11	62.2
6. The activities should require students to work outside the classroom.	3.92	78.4
7. The activities should use teaching aids such as visual, auditors ; etc. effectively.	4.06	81.2
8. The activities should give students opportunity to practice the language.	3.98	79.6
9. Exercises should help in transferring theoretical knowledge into classroom practice.	3.87	77.4

Table 12 shows that the students' responses have six high items and four medium items related to the classroom activities and exercises.

Table 12. The Strength of the Solutions Related to the Classroom Activities and Exercises with the Frequencies and Percentages of the Previous Table.

Strength of the Difficulty	Rating	Students'	Responses
		Frequency	Percentage
High	5- 3.68	5	55.6
Medium	3.67- 2.34	4	44.4
Low	2.33- 1	0	0
	Total	9	100%

5. Discussion

The results obtained from the analysis of the students' answers show that there are major and medium difficulties that the non-native learners of Arabic face. The results reported in Table 2 indicate that the existence of different varieties of Arabic constitutes a major difficulty. For example, items (2, 7, 8) show that there are difficulties in learning Modern Standard Arabic grammar, distinguishing between the different varieties of colloquial Arabic and understanding Jordanian colloquial Arabic. Similarly, the students' answers indicate that the students suffer from all the linguistic difficulties shown above. The students face these difficulties because of the diglossic nature of Arabic. The mix of Arabic varieties leads to serious pedagogical difficulties and even to feelings of linguistic insecurity in communication among high numbers of learners. These results indicate that the most important difficulties of learning Arabic are the diglossic

nature of Arabic. The learners do not know which variety of Arabic they should learn or use.

On the other hand, students' responses to items (1, 2, 4, 5, 8, and 9) as shown in Table 5 indicate that the classroom teaching activities like lecturing are not helpful enough for the learners. These difficulties might occur because the teachers or the textbook materials are not well prepared or organized to teach the non-native learners of Arabic using the classroom activities. These findings show that the most important challenges that learners of Arabic face are the classroom activities where anxiety plays an important role in foreign language students' classroom performance. Students are not given the choice to learn cooperatively and at the same time they are not encouraged to participate in the classroom activities (e.g. discussions and learning by doing) without fear. Furthermore, instructors have not integrated technology in teaching process which might help students in learning and achieving effective and creative ways of knowledge transfer. All other items are medium and do not

show major difficulties for the students.

Students' answers have suggested solutions for the difficulties that the non-native learners of Arabic face as shown in Table 7. They have stated that the students should work hard on learning pronunciation, learning vocabulary, learning grammar, practice speaking, practice writing of Modern Standard Arabic and understand Modern Standard Arabic texts and practice different varieties of colloquial Arabic. These solutions help the students to bridge the gap between the Arabic language varieties.

The second part of the second question suggested solutions related to the textbook materials as shown in Table 9. The students suggested that the textbook materials should focus mainly on learning speaking correctly and that they should present vocabulary in appropriate contexts and situations. It was also pointed out that they should relate reading passages to the student's background, and they should select passages within the vocabulary range of the pupils, and relate the written works to students' age, interests and environment. It is very important to help the students to learn a foreign language. If the students have difficulties in learning Arabic, the materials should solve these difficulties and make every thing clear and easy. These findings show that the solution to this difficulty is to keep in mind that language is made up of a number of skills that are not totally separate and when a group of scholars try to write a textbook they should begin by finding the basic vocabulary and structures that the students need and teach the writing system by using these basic elements as writing examples and exercises.

Finally, the suggested solutions for the classroom activities and exercises, as shown in Table 11, indicate that the teachers should focus on the activities which encourage students' participation in classroom discussions and should include some interesting games; should require students to work outside the classroom, should use teaching aids effectively; should give the students the opportunity to practice the language and the exercises should help in transferring theoretical knowledge into classroom practice. The communicative method of teaching should be utilized instead of the grammar-translation method and the use of the teaching aids (e.g. audio, video, pictures, drawings...etc.) should be used to help the students in the learning process. These findings show that one of the suggested solutions is to use teaching aids such as audiovisual materials in teaching Arabic. Moreover, students must be given the choice to learn cooperatively and at the same time they must be encouraged to participate in class activities without fear and humiliation by the mistake tolerance policy that teachers and other students have. Students should not feel afraid of being mistaken. Instructors must integrate technology to aid them while teaching their lessons. Learners should be persuaded to

use critical thinking and reasoning in the classrooms to help improve their learning skills.

6. Conclusions

The results of the study showed that learners of Arabic might encounter many difficulties during the learning process. The results also showed that such difficulties could be overcome. Thus, the research question could be answered as follows:

1. The most intriguing difficulties, according to both the learners and teachers of Arabic for non-natives, are related to the diglossic nature of Arabic where learners read and write in the Modern Standard variety of Arabic in the classroom but listen to the Jordanian colloquial variety outside the classroom. Additionally, some difficulties were related to the textbook materials used in teaching Arabic to non-native speakers. These textbooks were not well-prepared for teaching the non-natives and they do not have enough exercises.
2. Different solutions were proposed to overcome such difficulties by the learners and the teachers as well. Among them, textbooks should include various activities that are of interest to learners and are suitable to their needs and age range. In addition, many classroom activities should be offered in order for learners to transfer their knowledge in and out of the classroom. Regarding the diglossic nature of Arabic, it was recommended that learners should be taught the Jordanian colloquial variety.

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