



Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World (CASAW)

مركز الدراسات المتقدمة للعالم العربي

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ARABIC ON CAMPUS AND BEYOND

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Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World
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“Arabic on Campus and Beyond”

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Executive Summary

The main aim of the conference was to enable students and teachers of Arabic at UK institutions to share perspectives and experiences of the way Arabic is taught. It brought together teachers of Arabic and other “hard” languages from universities, schools, and other professional environments from across the country and beyond. The conference was the result of an ongoing collaboration between the Centre for Advanced Study of the Arab World¹ (directed by Elisabeth Kendall) and the Centre of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies² (directed by Yasir Suleiman). The Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World had been established in 2006 to train the next generation of UK students in the Arabic language, and to enable scholars and social scientists to work with original sources and establish new contacts in the Arabic speaking world. Unfortunately, language training had recently been ranked as the least important learning benchmark in UK area studies³. The Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World and the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies aimed to challenge this approach.

The first session of the day considered students’ different reasons for studying Arabic. Participants considered whether it was helpful to distinguish between motivations that were “instrumental” (i.e. related a specific purpose such as a job) and those that were “integrative” (i.e. connected to a general interest in a subject, culture or people). Students’ motivations were in many cases linked to a personal, religious or political orientation towards the subject of study. For example, some students wanted to study Arabic because of an active engagement with political issues in the Arab world. In these cases, the experience of learning Arabic in the Arab world could serve to develop or strengthen such a motivation. The issue of student motivation led to the question of what type of Arabic educational institutions should be teaching. Should they focus on literature, culture and religious texts, or on teaching spoken dialects of Arabic? The gap between these two approaches was a particular issue because of the diglossic structure of Arabic: the distance between the spoken and written languages.

Students also described a variety of attitudes they encountered from various quarters while studying in the Arabic-speaking world. These ranged from hospitality to harassment, and from trust to suspicion. In many situations students found that they were welcomed and integrated into local networks; in some situations they encountered the desire to “instrumentalise” them or use them for particular purposes. Thus, people’s attitudes towards students (like students’ attitudes towards their subject) could be classed as either integrative or instrumental. Finally, this session considered how language teaching could itself inculcate either instrumental or integrative attitudes among students. Participants discussed how the Israeli state school system oriented Jewish Israeli children towards Palestinians and Arabs through the way it taught Arabic. The narratives used to teach a language could be used either to exclude or to integrate: to perpetuate stereotypes or to challenge them. While language was a potential tool for integration and knowing the other, the

¹ A joint venture between the Universities of Edinburgh, Manchester and Durham, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Scottish Funding Council and the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

² Part of the University of Cambridge.

³ See the Qualification and Curriculum Authority’s Area Studies Benchmark Statement 2008, p7, available at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/statements/areastudies08.pdf>

educational framework in this case saw knowledge of Arabic as a tool that should serve the state's military-security agenda.

The second session focused on the resources and methodologies used in teaching Arabic in the UK. The distance between formal written Arabic and spoken dialects was seen to pose a major challenge for both teachers and students, and the conference considered different strategies for dealing with this. However, it was also suggested that the academic bifurcation of Arabic into formal and dialectal languages was problematic, since most Arabs communicated somewhere in between these two extremes. For example, advertisements were increasingly being written in dialectal Arabic, and dialect expressions were creeping into print media. It was important to engage with this reality when teaching Arabic. In the light of this point, the conference considered the strengths and weaknesses of one of the most commonly used Arabic textbooks: *al-kitaab*⁴. It also discussed a range of other resources and the importance of exploiting and supplementing them in an engaging and imaginative way. In particular, "e-learning" internet-based materials presented exciting possibilities, such as being able to use podcasts, mobile devices, wiki-spaces and virtual books to support traditional classroom teaching.

The third session considered the different ways that Arabic was taught beyond university campuses – in institutions such as schools, adult education language centres, and the military. Discussion covered a number of issues such as the need for common standards, collaboration and coordination (particularly between schools and universities), as well as the methods and resources used to engage students outside universities. Several speakers emphasised the need to develop a set of agreed standards, and to develop Arabic A-level and GCSE examinations that responded better to students' needs. One speaker said that there was no clear guidance or policy on how to teach Arabic in schools and that consultation was needed to establish an agreed curriculum. The conference considered the increasing popularity of Arabic within secondary schools, and the implications of this for universities. It asked how university departments should cope with increasing number of university students who had studied Arabic at school and therefore did not need to be taught *ab initio*. Arabic language trainers from the Defence School of Languages added a military perspective to these issues, describing their own purposes for teaching Arabic and the methodologies and assessment framework that they used.

The final session compared the perspectives of Japanese, Chinese and Arabic teachers. Since these were commonly said to be difficult languages, speakers addressed the question of what made each language hard for students and teachers. The nature of the difficulties differed for each language, ranging from unusual vocabulary, style and morphological rules, to the subtleties of tone and register and the difficulties posed by diglossia. In conclusion it was suggested that what made a language hard was not any inherent difficulty but its distance from one's native language. This distance could be either structural – a question of unfamiliar grammar and vocabulary – or cultural.

The event was an exploratory workshop based on informal presentations, and this report seeks to represent the range of views expressed during the day. Since the discussion was held under 'Edinburgh Conversation Rules', no attributions are

⁴ Brustad, K., al-Batal, M. & al-Tonsi, A. 2004. *al-kitaab fii ta'allum al-'arabiyya*, Georgetown University Press

formally made to named speakers in the body of the text. CASAW would like to gratefully acknowledge the sponsorship of the Centre of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge, and the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies. We are also grateful to Alan Whyte, John Glendinning and Peter Glasgow for producing audio recordings of the event. Finally, we would like to thank Sophie Lowry for her invaluable organisational assistance.

Professor Yasir Suleiman
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Session One

“Learners’ Perspectives”

In the first session, students described their experiences of learning Arabic. The contexts they described were very different: learning spoken Palestinian Arabic as an Israeli in Israeli schools; learning Palestinian dialect as a US student in Bethlehem and Ramallah; learning modern standard Arabic as a British student in Egypt; and using Arabic as a British army interpreter in Iraq. One speaker in this session also presented the results of a recent survey of students at Manchester University which probed their reasons for studying Arabic. The presentations and ensuing discussion covered a range of topics; the synopsis below groups them into four sets of orientations.

Orientations towards Arabic – individual

One issue was students’ orientation towards their subject of study. The conference approached this issue by considering the different reasons why students chose to learn Arabic. The survey of fifty-four students from Manchester University revealed a wide range of motivations to study Arabic. The survey grouped these into five categories which in order of descending popularity were: social/personal; religious; to understand Arab culture; career; and for academic purposes. The most popular specific reason for learning Arabic was “in order to live in or visit an Arab country”, followed by “in order to be able to speak to Arabs in the UK”. Among those surveyed, interest in religion appeared to be more important than interest in employment skills. More than half either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they wanted to understand the Quran and hadith, while relatively few admitted to studying Arabic for specific career purposes such as working in the media or the military or security establishments.

There was some discussion over how to interpret these results. It was recognised that similar surveys would have different results in other universities or countries, since reported motivations were often connected to students’ backgrounds. The child of Moroccan immigrants might for example start learning Arabic so as to be able to speak to relatives. It was also recognised that motivations could change in the course of a degree, with students developing new ideas and plans as their studies progressed. One way to classify motivations was as either “instrumental” (i.e. for a specific purpose such as a job) or “integrative” (i.e. a general desire to become acquainted with a subject, culture or people). Under this classification, the five most commonly reported motivations in the Manchester survey were all integrative. However, it was also clear that most people had mixed motivations that often combined integrative with instrumental reasons. One speaker had learned Arabic in the British armed forces in order to become an interpreter (an instrumental reason), but also wanted to travel to and experience life in the Arab world (integrative), and had left the army when after six years she had still not been sent to an Arab country. Individual motivations could also be hard to classify. The desire to read the Quran in Arabic could be classed in some cases as “religious” or as “social/personal”. Since religious, personal and familial identities often overlapped, these motivations could not always be meaningfully separated. In summary, the distinction between integrative and instrumental was useful. However, individuals were complex: their motivations were usually mixed, changeable, and frequently cut across each other.

In some cases, the question of linguistic motivation broadened out into the more general question of political or personal orientation towards the subject of study. One speaker described how his own interest in learning Arabic had grown from his concern with the political situation in Israel-Palestine. As a young high-school teacher in the USA, this concern had led him back to graduate school where he took a Masters in Middle Eastern studies. He travelled to the West Bank in 2004 where he studied colloquial Palestinian Arabic for three months at a Christian college in Bethlehem. As an activist, his main interest was in using spoken Arabic to understand the political situation, primarily Palestinian experiences of checkpoints, land confiscation and the separation wall. He returned to the West Bank in 2006 to study Palestinian Arabic at Bir Zeit University in Ramallah, and found the Israeli military infrastructure more firmly established in the West Bank and the atmosphere much tenser than it had been two years before. For this speaker, the study of Arabic was not just as something that required motivation, but something that could itself motivate other concerns, or deepen existing motivations. His knowledge of spoken Arabic grew out of and strengthened an activist orientation towards a political situation. Education – in particular the process of learning a language – was seen here as something that could either reinforce or challenge existing orientations.

Orientations towards Arabic – institutional

The question of individual orientations towards the Arabic language was closely related to the issue of institutional orientations. Should educational institutions focus on teaching literature, culture and religious texts, or should they teach the Arabic used in the news media, or should they focus on spoken dialects of Arabic? Several speakers said that universities needed to understand what motivated students and what skills they desired, in order to design appropriate courses. A tension was identified between the old orientation towards teaching Arabic, which focused on classical Arabic texts, and the new approach which emphasised the ability to speak. The gap between these two approaches was a particular issue for Arabic, because of the distance between the spoken and written languages. It was difficult to bridge this gap because of the lack of time available in university curricula: spoken Arabic in particular required intensive training. Other speakers connected this problem of diglossia to the question of students' motivations. Institutions which valued "integrative" reasons for learning Arabic would focus on the written language, teaching classical, religious and literary texts. Institutions such as the Foreign Office of Ministry of Defence which catered to "instrumental" motivations placed an emphasis on intensive training on spoken (and media) Arabic. Resources were being developed that attempted to bridge the gap between the two approaches, and these were discussed further in session two.

Orientations towards Arabists

If the first two themes concerned the way in which students and teaching institutions oriented themselves towards Arabic, a third theme concerned the way in which others oriented themselves towards students of Arabic. Students described a variety of attitudes they encountered while studying in the Arabic-speaking world. One speaker described being impressed with the level of hospitality offered to her while studying Arabic in Egypt, which may have reflected a desire on the part of Egyptians to integrate and welcome her into her new surroundings, and learn about her own

culture. Other Egyptians insisted on speaking English with her rather than Arabic, which may have reflected instead an instrumentalising attitude – the desire to use the opportunity to practice English. The speaker also reported experiencing daily harassment by some Egyptian men, ranging from insistent requests for her phone number, to lewd comments and staring. This was the most difficult part of the experience of learning Arabic abroad, as it made it difficult to visit various public spaces such as the Cairo Museum.

Orientations towards Arabs

The conference also considered the Israeli state's orientation towards Palestinians. In particular, it discussed how Israeli state schools oriented Jewish Israeli children towards Palestinians and Arabs through the teaching of Arabic. One speaker described his experience studying Arabic as an Israeli in primary, preparatory and secondary secular schools in Israel. He noted that in all three institutions where he studied through the 1980s and 1990s, the teaching of Arabic rested on a Zionist rationale: it excluded Arab voices, people and culture. While Israel was one of the few countries to teach spoken Arabic on comprehensive basis to non-Arabs, the teachers were Jewish rather than Palestinian. The curriculum presented orientalist stereotypes of Arabs and Arab culture, and used the Palestinian dialect – including songs – to present Zionist narratives about Israel. While spoken Arabic could enable Israelis to talk to Palestinians, the possibility of meeting or learning with Arabs was not discussed in class. In preparatory school, formal (*fusha*) Arabic was taught; the curriculum here included political and media language and Arabs were increasingly represented to students as the enemy. At high school, students were given the choice whether to learn Arabic; the curriculum ranged from the Quran to media Arabic, and included a political week organised by the army which stressed the importance of Arabic to the Israeli security establishment.

In discussion, questioners asked why the Israeli government taught spoken Arabic if it did not favour the integration of Palestinians. It was suggested that there was some ambivalence within the Israeli Education Ministry: on the one hand, the 1948 Zionist project did not want to be seen to destroy Arab rights and culture; on the other hand, Arabic lessons were not designed to enable Israeli students to know or talk to Palestinians. There were both peace and security agendas. Ultimately, however, the methodologies used and the exclusion of Palestinian teachers showed that the language was taught for security reasons. By contrast, advanced methodologies were used to teach Hebrew as a second language within Israeli schools. This project was a great success, and part of a national project to teach the language to Jewish immigrants to Israel. In summary, there were two systems of education in Israel: one taught by Arabs, the other by Jews; it was suggested that this was an unsustainable system that would not lead to equal rights for both.

Trust and suspicion

The ambivalence noted above between peace and security agendas could be seen to reflect the dual nature of language as a bearer of both public culture and private information. As a bearer of public culture, language was potentially integrative; as a bearer of private or secret information, it was a tool that could be instrumentalised. This distinction between the instrumental and integrative nature of language might

also be linked to the distinction between instrumental and integrative motivations for learning Arabic. Although the conference did not consider this connection explicitly, it touched on a related aspect: the issue of trust and suspicion. In organisations such as military and security establishments that adopted a highly instrumental attitude towards the Arabic language, only those assumed to share an instrumental attitude (and a particular nationality) were trusted with certain tasks. One native English speaker described working as an Arabic translator in the UK army in Iraq. After intensive training in Arabic language, she left the army in 2002, before being called up as a reservist to go to Iraq in 2003. Because of the shortage of interpreters, she was used as an interpreter to assist military personnel during house raids and when weapons stashes were found. She found the Iraqi dialect a challenge. Nevertheless, in some of these more sensitive situations, the UK army preferred to use her to native Arabic speakers.

The other side of this coin was that students from Europe and America reported being seen as suspect precisely because they were learning Arabic. One speaker from the USA noted that students in the UK and some Palestinians in the West Bank frequently assumed that he was a spy because he was funded to learn Arabic. In some cases he was excluded from conversations because of this. Suspicion came from other parties too. It was wise in his experience not to admit to knowing Arabic when passing through Israeli border controls or checkpoints in the West Bank because of the suspicion that this aroused. At another level, some schools in the USA disapproved and were suspicious of projects to learn Arabic in the West Bank, and tried to funnel students to courses in other countries. Conversely, within the Arabic-speaking world, he found that he was often associated with his country's foreign policy even though he opposed it.

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In summary, four variables emerged from discussion during the first session: students' attitudes towards Arabic (which could be classed as a mix of instrumental and integrative); educational institutions' attitudes towards Arabic (which privileged either written or dialect Arabic); attitudes towards students of Arabic (which could be seen as integrative or instrumental); and perceptions of Arabs and Arabic speakers (ranging from knowable/trustworthy to other/suspect). These orientations shifted and affected each other in a variety of ways, and intersected with other aspects of identity such as gender and nationality. For example, students aiming to practice spoken Arabic outside language schools were sometimes treated as guests to be integrated, whereas in other cases they were foreigners to be used or abused. Students' ability to speak Arabic also combined with their gender and nationality in particular ways, marking them out in some situations as outsiders who were seen as hostile or suspect, and in other situations as insiders who could be trusted with sensitive information.

Session Two

“Resources”

The second session focused on the resources and methodologies used in teaching Arabic. The presentations and ensuing discussion covered three main topics: diglossia (i.e. the difference between spoken and written Arabic), textbooks and electronic resources.

Diglossia

This session picked up on the earlier discussion of the distance between spoken and written Arabic. The previous session had noted that some universities had traditionally focused on teaching classical Arabic literature and grammar, and neglected the need to communicate in the spoken language. The distance between formal written Arabic and spoken dialects was seen to pose a major challenge for both teachers and students. However, in this session a number of speakers questioned whether the situation was in fact so polarised. They referred to the well-established argument that there was a “third language”, between standard and dialectal Arabic. One speaker suggested that textbooks should focus on teaching this language, with simplified grammar and endings. Others argued that since the third language was neither written nor formally defined it should not form the basis of university teaching. Since most university courses were taught over four years, they should start with modern standard Arabic which would facilitate access to books and newspapers as well as the ancient texts.

It was generally agreed that academics could not redefine the language they wanted to teach; they had to engage with Arabic as it was spoken and used by Arabs. However, it was noted that language use was changing rapidly in the Arab world. One speaker suggested that the Hans Wehr dictionary of modern standard Arabic⁵ needed updating. Another noted that, over the last decade, advertisements were being written in dialectal Arabic, and dialect expressions were creeping into print media. The academic bifurcation of Arabic into formal and dialectal was therefore problematic, it was suggested. Most Arabs communicated somewhere in between the two; it was important to engage with this reality in teaching Arabic.

Nevertheless, to the extent that written and spoken Arabic did diverge, universities and other institutions had to decide where to concentrate their teaching. In many cases, university examinations tested and rewarded comprehension and correct grammar; there was generally less emphasis on pronunciation and speaking. This could have demoralising effects if students travelled to the Arab world and found that they were unable to communicate convincingly in spoken Arabic. One speaker recalled that as a student of Arabic at the London School of Oriental and African Studies twenty-five years ago, he had felt angry and humiliated when he first travelled to the Arab world and realised that he could not understand the language being spoken around him. Speaking formal Arabic in these situations could invite laughter or be seen as patronising. He therefore stressed that students should be given training in the spoken language. Some suggested that formal Arabic should be taught first as a basis for learning spoken Arabic; others said that the two could be taught in parallel.

⁵ Wehr, H. 1979. *A dictionary of modern written Arabic*. Wiesbaden : Harrassowitz.

Textbooks

A number of speakers commented on one of the most commonly used resources for teaching Arabic in UK and US universities: *al-kitaab*⁶. As the dominant textbook for teaching Arabic to English speakers, *al-kitaab* provoked a range of opinions among the Arabic teachers present. Its approach to diglossia was that formal and spoken Arabic were closely related aspects of the same language; it sought to teach the two simultaneously. Some of the language teachers present argued that it did so by creating a “watered down” type of formal Arabic and by making the dialect component unrealistically difficult. Others said that *al-kitaab* responded well to students’ needs for spoken Arabic; some of the dialogues were realistic enough that even Cairene taxi drivers had become familiar with them through conversing with students.

Many felt that *al-kitaab* was one of the best resources currently available, remedying many of the shortcomings of previous textbooks. While it clearly catered to a US readership and focused on Egyptian culture and dialect, some argued that its strength was that it combined a variety of different pedagogical approaches, types of material and different media (including audio-visual DVDs) in order to bring the language to life. The early stages of learning a language could be boring, but it was argued that *al-kitaab* went a long way to addressing this. The DVDs in particular were a useful tool for listening and learning vocabulary, although they were technically difficult to navigate and the dialect sections were too fast. A number of speakers found the overall structure of the book helped them to plan the year’s lessons, and also found its homework exercises, and the “useful phrases” section to be a key resource.

Others suggested that while *al-kitaab* was currently the best textbook, there was little for it to compete against, although a new work was being produced for the *Elementary Modern Standard Arabic* series. A number of suggestions were made for improving the current edition of *al-kitaab*. Grammar was often left unexplained, or introduced in a partial and fragmentary way. It required an active teacher who was prepared to provide supplementary grammatical explanations. Texts were currently not vocalised, which confused students and also required extra effort from the teacher. Currently, the book did not specify in detail how to conduct oral work in groups, or how to evaluate progress. Finally, *al-kitaab* required a great deal of the students, since it assumed that they would learn a long list of vocabulary at the start of each chapter, and that they would work two or three hours outside the classroom for every hour inside. This was not always realistic, especially where (as in Scotland) Arabic constituted only one third of students’ degrees. Students also found the jump in level between books one and two particularly challenging.

Most teachers said that they therefore integrated a number of different resources in their teaching. Some of the other resources mentioned included *Elementary Arabic*⁷ and *Intermediate Arabic*⁸, for their modules on the geography and history of the Middle East; *Mastering Arabic Grammar*⁹, as a supplementary resource for grammar; *Media Arabic*¹⁰,

⁶ Brustad, K., al-Batal, M. & al-Tonsi, A. 2004. *al-kitaab fii ta'allum al-'arabiyya*, Georgetown University Press

⁷ Younes, M. 1995. *Elementary Arabic: an integrated approach*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁸ Younes, M. 1999. *Intermediate Arabic: an integrated approach*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁹ Wightwick, J. & Gaafar, M. 2005. *Mastering Arabic grammar*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

by Julia Ashtiany; and *Kallimni 'Arabi'*¹¹, for Egyptian dialect. Many teachers supplemented these textbook resources with material they had developed themselves. One speaker suggested that each institution should develop its own tailored material in-house, designed with its specific objectives in mind. A number of speakers also stressed the importance of exploiting these resources in an innovative and engaging way. One said there was a need for a forum or research project through which Arabic teachers across schools and universities could accumulate and share experience on methods and resources. Another suggested that more teacher training modules were needed to train Arabic teachers in the UK. These could help teachers develop techniques for engaging students, and practical tips for how to design a module using diverse materials such as films and songs.

E-learning

An important new source of teaching materials was the internet and associated electronic media ("e-learning"). There was already a diverse and growing array of online resources, many of which were free; the question was how to exploit them effectively and integrate them with traditional methods. The Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World, a joint venture between Edinburgh, Manchester and Durham universities, was developing new "e-learning" materials for use in intensive Arabic training, and using them in conjunction with modules developed for face-to-face classroom learning. CASAW's e-learning lecturer stressed that these projects were designed to enhance existing classroom learning and to enable remote learning. "E-Arabic" learning resources included a variety of audio-visual programmes such as those for learning one word a day; multi-media flashcards for vocabulary; video archives and photo sharing websites; audio dictionaries; and search engines in Arabic.

"V-Arabic" (or virtual Arabic) was a collection of digital pictures of real items from the Arab world, such as newspapers, packages, sign boards, advertising, and number plates. It aimed to support the teacher through bringing Arabic culture into the classroom and providing an authentic context for learning. Images of political banners and cartoons could for example be used to teach about culture and politics as well as pure language. Similarly, images of three-dimensional books (where it was possible to turn virtual pages on screen) could be used to teach the Quran. "M-Arabic" was designed to support mobile learning. Students could learn Arabic while walking to university, using mobile devices such as phones or MP3 players to listen to podcasts of vocabulary lists which could be downloaded from the m-Arabic website. It was also possible to watch or listen to streamed content such as Arabic television from the website. The idea was to enable students to immerse themselves in the sound of Arabic. It could also be used at more advanced levels to teach consecutive interpreting. Finally, wiki-spaces were being used to support learning. These were websites where students could both read and write, enabling them to conduct "written conversations" with one another in Arabic and to share information in Arabic on a collaborative website.

¹⁰ Ashtiany, J. 1993. *Media Arabic*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

¹¹ Louis, S. 2007. *kallimni 'arabi: an intermediate course in spoken Egyptian Arabic*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Session Three

“Arabic Beyond Campus”

This session considered the different ways that Arabic was taught beyond university campuses – in institutions such as schools, adult education language centres, and the military. Discussion covered a number of issues such as the need for common standards, collaboration and coordination (particularly between schools and universities), as well as the methods and resources used to engage students.

Schools and adult education

Increasing numbers of children were learning Arabic at secondary schools and more schools were offering the subject. The language was taught in a range of different contexts, including lunchtime and after-school clubs, weekend schools, and as part of the formal curriculum. The number of students learning Arabic at evening classes and in adult education programmes was also increasing. These students came from a wide variety of professional backgrounds, including journalism, the civil service, non-governmental organisations and academic anthropology. They had differing abilities and levels of proficiency, which required teachers to remain flexible in the way that they prepared teaching materials and strategies.

Common Standards

As the number of students studying Arabic outside university increased, several speakers emphasised the need to develop a set of agreed standards. One speaker said that there was no clear guidance or policy on how to teach Arabic; consultation was needed to establish an agreed curriculum. Currently the emphasis in most schools was on teaching modern standard Arabic, and not on spoken Arabic. Another suggested that A-levels and GCSEs were unnecessarily difficult. A comprehensive vocabulary list, agreed by examiners and teachers, was needed to support students in preparing for the examinations. Universities might also like consider devising a realistic A-level examination. In general it was suggested that schools and universities could communicate and cooperate better with one another; if schools could teach children Arabic to a standard agreed by universities, the latter could progress to teaching literature earlier in their courses. Another area where agreed standards were needed was teacher-training; there was minimal Arabic teacher-training provision in the UK, and in some cases teachers assumed incorrectly that they did not need it.

As the number of schoolchildren learning Arabic increased, university Arabic departments were finding some of their first-year undergraduates already had a level of proficiency. Traditionally, they had coped with this by putting some first-year Arabic undergraduates straight into second year classes. This was not always an ideal solution, even though only around one thousand schoolchildren took Arabic A-level. If this number continued to increase university departments might need to consider offering a wider variety of tailored first-year courses to meet the range of students' levels. This would have resource implications for already overstretched departments. The British Society of Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) was already looking at the co-ordination of Arabic teaching and course standards between schools and universities.

Collaboration and Engagement

Whether at school or in adult education classes, it was important to find ways to engage and inspire students. A method used at an adult education language centre was to use the classroom as a theatre where each student developed their own character and played out a role. The teacher supported them by selecting authentic material (such as films, television and newspaper cuttings) around the chosen themes. This method enabled students to express opinions on political issues which they felt less comfortable doing in more formal settings. The teacher was also able to present grammatical issues by using authentic material, and to engage students by designing courses around their particular interests.

Similar methods could be used in schools. Cultural activities such as recitals of Arabic music, calligraphy classes, Arabic plays and poetry declamations were reasonably cheap and a good way to maintain the children's interest. There was an opportunity here for schools and universities to work together. One speaker and university lecturer described a partnership she had been involved in with a local school. She had encouraged her final-year undergraduate students to help design and deliver language classes, using storytelling and plays. This was a good opportunity to expose them to different teaching methodologies. She also organised a video-conference to link the schoolchildren to students in Basra, and a trip to Egypt and Jordan where the schoolchildren took intensive language classes. On another project, she arranged "taster days" to introduce Saudi and Moroccan culture; some of the children also visited the university campus to learn how Arabic was written.

As well as collaborating through partnerships of this kind and through agreeing common standards, schools and universities could also collaborate by sharing teaching methods and resources. A number of speakers commented on the wealth of online resources that were available and under development. The Centre for Advanced Study of the Arab World, for example, was keen to share its online resources, and a single web forum was planned that would bring material together and share tips on how to exploit it. In addition, there were already a number of useful networks for sharing information, including Arabica, the Schools Arabic Network¹², and regular conferences organised by the British Council.

Military perspective

Although they worked in a very different context from schools and adult education programmes, Arabic teachers training UK military personnel provided a useful perspective on the same pedagogical issues. The aim of the Defence School of Languages was to train personnel to meet the strategic needs of the armed forces and to realise the students' linguistic potential. Their main focus was on modern standard Arabic as used in the news media, and on training in Arabic dialects by using transliteration. Because of operational requirements, the emphasis was on fluency rather than accuracy. The main current dialect needs were Iraqi, followed by Gulf Arabic and increasingly Sudanese.

Common Standards

¹² A mailing list contact was provided: samia.earle@ssatrust.org.uk

The Defence School of Languages worked to a “standardisation agreement” that specified different levels of training and assessment. The levels were: survival Arabic (ten weeks’ training); operational Arabic (forty weeks *ab initio*); minimum professional (fifty-four weeks training, equivalent to an undergraduate training); fully professional (sixty-seven weeks training, leading to a diploma equivalent to postgraduate level); and native speaker level. Students were assessed in all four skills of reading, speaking, writing and listening. Assessment could involve both “transacting business” (where students were given a scenario and asked to act out a role) and, at the diploma level, consecutive interpreting (where students listened to a short report and asked to translate it orally as soon as they had heard it). Currently an external body – the University of Westminster – was used to assess students, although assessment was soon to be brought in house.

Methods and Engagement

All training was conducted on a one-to-one basis. They found that the best methodology was to use transliterated social and military dialogues appropriate to the situation, such as stop-and-search scenarios. Alongside this, they also focused on early aural comprehension and speech production, often using a language laboratory and the Rosetta Stone programme for visual aids. The vast majority of their resources were developed in-house or adapted from the media and they had developed their own material for teaching grammar. Selected excerpts were also used from existing textbooks.

The trainers distinguished between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. This was similar to the distinction discussed in the previous sessions between integrative and instrumental approaches to Arabic. With intrinsic motivation, students became Arabists for life and tended to maintain the language of their accord. Extrinsically motivated students were learning Arabic purely because their job required it; for them, knowledge of the language tended to fade more quickly. As professional military officers, many students were extrinsically motivated. Since they had many demands on their time, the intensive nature of the training – introducing three thousand words over the first ten weeks – posed a real challenge. Skills such as writing and listening required a great deal of training and did not mature for some students until late in the course. Because students were required to learn quickly, they also tended to forget quickly: the training was closer to surface learning than deep learning. Those who continued to use the language as part of their job were able to maintain their language skills; others could do so through part-time study with academic institutions, or via the internet.

Session Four

“How Hard is ‘Hard’? Arabic in a Comparative Perspective”

The final session compared the perspectives of Japanese, Chinese and Arabic teachers. Since these were commonly said to be difficult languages, speakers addressed the question of what made each language hard for students and teachers. The session brought together representatives from some of the area studies centres of excellence recently established by UK funding councils: the British Inter-University China Centre¹³, the Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World¹⁴, the White Rose East Asia Centre¹⁵ and the Centre for Russian, Central and East European Studies¹⁶.

Chinese

The British Inter-University China Centre said that among its students, instrumental or work-related motivations predominated over integrative or subject-related motivations. Only a minority of students were interested in researching Chinese history or culture, although some developed this interest during the course. Students with both types of motivation could be taught together at the elementary level. Many students were interested in a career in the Far East, especially given China’s rapid economic development. Over the past five years, the number of students taking Chinese at Oxford University had almost doubled.

Chinese was difficult because it effectively required students to learn two languages. It was possible, for example, to speak Chinese fluently without being able to read or write at all. Reading and writing skills were different from listening and speaking skills; around 160 million Chinese could not read or write. Three areas made the language difficult for English speakers: intonation, remembering and reproducing characters, and listening comprehension. Chinese characters were often homophonic, with differentiation being only by tone; students therefore needed to be able to recognise and reproduce pitch movements which not everyone found easy. Since Chinese also used pictograms, students required an excellent memory for the connection between images and sound. Overall they needed patience and tolerance to cope with repetitive and time-consuming learning methods.

Teachers also faced difficulties since, as with Arabic, they were no longer dealing only with *ab initio* students. Time and effort were often needed to undo the bad habits of first-year students who had already learned some Chinese. Repetition and learning by heart were the traditional methods for building vocabulary, but students did not always appreciate them – despite the fact that most of life was repetitive in nature! The Centre had developed a “learn and apply” system, encouraging students to recycle vocabulary from one area to another, based around a theme that changed every week. Frequent and regular tests also helped students to consolidate what they had learned. The risk of this approach was that students would rely on teachers too much. They should develop their own methodology, working out their own best way for

¹³ a consortium of Oxford, Bristol and Manchester universities.

¹⁴ a consortium of Edinburgh, Manchester and Durham universities.

¹⁵ a consortium of Leeds and Sheffield universities.

¹⁶ based at the University of Glasgow with partners from the universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Nottingham, St. Andrews, Strathclyde and the West of Scotland.

consolidating what they had learned. Alongside interactive classroom teaching, the Centre therefore cultivated an emphasis on self-study, encouraging students to develop their own techniques for consolidating vocabulary. They were supported in this by the Centre's language material database and computer resources.

Japanese

While many students found Japanese difficult, it was in many respects easier than English. Japanese had many fewer vowel sounds than English, and was easier to pronounce. Nor was it a tonal language, which made it easier than Chinese. Syntactically it was simple: there was no number or case for nouns, no gender or person, and only two irregular verbs in whole language. Despite this, many students who started learning Japanese either dropped out or failed to learn the language well. The main reasons were the difficulties of vocabulary, the writing system, social deixis, and discourse structure.

Vocabulary building in Japanese was time-consuming because it had so few words in common with European languages. More difficult than this, however, was the complicated writing system. Japanese used two separate phonetic syllable systems of 48 characters each. Chinese characters (Kanji) were used for historical reasons, but this added a further complication, since some were used semantically for their sense, while others were used phonetically for their sound. Every Chinese character therefore had at least two readings in Japanese: a semantic reading and a phonetic reading, and some had as many as twelve separate readings. There was no way of predicting what reading should be used without having learned the actual word.

Another complicating feature of Japanese was social deixis. Japanese society was organised in terms of hierarchy and group membership; these differences were encoded in Japanese vocabulary and grammar. Students therefore had to learn how they fitted into Japanese society in different contexts before they could start speaking. A further difficulty was that when students learned to read Japanese texts, they were faced with an unfamiliar discourse structure. While English writers tended to proceed from their evidence to their conclusion, Japanese texts were organised differently. The presentation of the writer's purpose was often delayed; statements were loosely related to a central topic which might or might not be explicitly presented; and conclusions were not necessarily based on any of the preceding statements. The result was that, to native English-speakers, Japanese texts could seem vague.

While helpful techniques had been developed to overcome some of these problems (such as audio-visual techniques to help learn characters), time, experience and flexibility were needed to learn Japanese properly. Time was required to memorise Chinese characters; experience was needed to understand how the Japanese related to one another; and flexibility was essential in order to adopt social roles in Japanese society that students might at first find unfamiliar.

Arabic

Four elements made Arabic difficult: diglossia, morphology, vocabulary and style. As discussed in the first session, Arabic was diglossic: students needed to learn both standard Arabic and a dialect; they could not simply rely on speaking standard Arabic.

Due to factors such as increasing levels of literacy and education in the Arab world, many native speakers of Arabic in fact combined these two registers; students therefore also needed to be able to operate “in between” the two. While some speakers argued that many dialects shared a similar grammatical structure, others noted that the differences between dialects made it difficult to learn one and then simply make a few changes to learn another. In fact, students found it difficult to learn dialects, and often did not recognise when they had failed to learn a dialect properly.

One reason for this was that university Arabic courses traditionally had not emphasised speaking. They had preferred to teach Arabic as a classical language. However, it was not a straightforward matter to teach dialectal Arabic. A serious problem was the inclusion and exclusion of mood and case endings. To sound informal, students generally needed to miss them off, but in some cases they could not be avoided, so needed to be learned. Students also needed to learn when they were appropriate and needed to be included. So while no Arabs actually spoke formal standard Arabic (*fusha*), it was nevertheless a useful base language for students to learn to speak. Indeed, learning “conversational *fusha*” gave students the psychological confidence that Arabic was a living language that they could learn to speak – ideas that had traditionally been lacking in many UK university Arabic departments.

Morphology – the forms of the verb and rules for gender and number agreement – also made Arabic complicated. Students often saw these as boring issues but they needed to be learned. Finally, Arabic vocabulary and style were fundamentally foreign to native speakers of European languages. The root and pattern system made Arabic words more difficult to learn, since the shape of words, prefixes and suffixes were unusual for native English-speakers. The size of Arabic vocabulary and the large number of near-synonyms also made Arabic difficult. More elusive still was the issue of style. Certain types of repetition were typical of Arabic but alien to English-speakers. Others noted that culture was intrinsic to language, and that the Arabic language in particular had accumulated cultural resonances and subtleties which were difficult for students to master. These issues had hardly been addressed in the teaching materials.

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Finally, it was suggested that in many ways English was as difficult as any of the languages being discussed. While students of Arabic needed to come to terms with diglossia, students of English also needed to grasp the use of different registers. In many cases, social and regional differences were inscribed into the use of language: some people “failed” while others “flunked”; some got “married” while others got “hitched”. While it was argued that diglossia in Arabic was of a different order (since in Arabic several registers existed within a single dialect), nevertheless subtle differences between regions and registers made English a difficult language to learn. The pronunciation of English vowels and diphthongs, and the rules for stressing syllables, could also be hazardous for even the most accomplished linguists.

In conclusion, it was suggested that what made a language hard was not any inherent difficulty but its distance from one’s native language. This distance could be structural (unfamiliar grammar and vocabulary) or cultural (unfamiliar resonances and social rules). At the same, difficulty was not only a function of distance; closeness also could

create problems. For example, Syriac, Persian and Arabic shared a number of words which looked and sounded the same but had different meanings. In these cases, the seeming familiarity of a language could be confusing and deceptive.

Annex A – Outline of Day

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|----------------|---|
| 10.30am | Coffee |
| 10.45am | Welcome by Professor Yasir Suleiman and Dr Elisabeth Kendall |
| 11.00am | Session 1 – Learners’ Perspectives |
| 12.15pm | Session 2 – Resources |
| 1.30pm | Lunch |
| 2.45pm | Session 3 – Arabic beyond Campus |
| 4.00pm | Coffee |
| 4.15pm | Session 4 – Comparative Perspectives |
| 5.30pm | Conclusion |
| 5.35pm | End |

Annex B – Questions Sent to Speakers

Session 1 – “Living Arabic”: Learners’ Perspectives

This session invited students to reflect critically on their experiences of their year abroad.

Questions

Teaching

- What country did you go to?
- At what stage in your degree did you go?
- What was your experience of the teaching?
- Were you there long enough?
- Could you have been better prepared before you went there? If so, how?
- Were you learning Arabic principally for “instrumental” reasons (i.e. to enable you to pursue a particular line of work or further study) or for “integrative” reasons (to enable you to deepen your appreciation of another culture)?
- Did you find that particular views and perspectives of politics and history were promoted as part of your lessons abroad?
- What problems would you identify in the way that the programme ran, and what solutions would you propose?

Relationships

- How did you relate to the other students?
- Did you widen your social circle beyond the students / school where you were studying? If so, how did you do so?
- How easy did you find it to integrate yourself socially with the local population?
- How did people outside the school respond to you?
- What perceptions did they have of you and your reasons for studying Arabic?
- What was your experience of the country you visited, outside the language school?
- Did you experience any harassment?
- To what extent do you think your experience was conditioned by your gender or other aspects of your identity?

Overall impact

- Apart from improving your Arabic, what did you learn about the Arab world?
- How did your experience compare with your expectations?
- What did you find most attractive about your experience?
- What did you find most difficult during your year abroad?
- As far as you can tell, what impact has your year abroad had on your overall (academic and non-academic) development and interests?

Session 2 – “Resourcing the Future”

This session invited practitioners to reflect critically on the resources they used in teaching Arabic.

Questions

Using the resources

- What resources (which textbooks etc.) do you use to teach Arabic? What are their strengths and weaknesses for you and your students?
- What are the areas that students would ideally like *al-kitaab* to cover that it currently omits?
- How do you use your textbooks? Do you work through them closely, or use them as a skeleton resource that you supplement with other materials?
- How did you deal with diglossia in teaching Arabic?
- Do the resources you use (such as *al-kitaab*) require you to teach actively, or just to facilitate students’ self-learning? Does *al-kitaab* make the teacher “redundant”?

The textbook market

- Is it fair to describe *al-kitaab* as the dominant textbook for teaching Arabic?
- How did *al-kitaab* achieve its dominance / popularity? Is it a question of fashion, institutional structures, or simple market supply and demand?
- Is its current dominance / fashionableness a good thing?
- Do you think there are any gaps in the current market of resources?
- Do you find it useful to have common sets of standards (such as ACTFIL) in teaching Arabic?

E-learning and Technology

- What new technologies (such as e-learning) are available for teaching and learning your language?
- How well suited are these technologies to your language: what are their strengths and weaknesses, and what are the barriers to and requirements for their success?
- How are these technologies used? Are there variations in how people use them?
- How do new technologies affect teaching methods?

Session 3 – Arabic Beyond Campus

This session focused on the methods and objectives of Arabic teaching outside universities, and the demands and needs for Arabic language expertise beyond universities.

Questions

Teaching

- What are your objectives in teaching Arabic?
- How do these objectives affect your methods of teaching and assessment?
- What materials do you use to teach?
- What are the main challenges you encounter in teaching your students and how do you deal with them?
- To what extent are your students able to maintain their Arabic after the initial language training has ended? How do they do so?
- Is there any follow-up for discover how students use the Arabic they have learned?

Motivations and careers

- How well does a university training prepare students for non-academic careers involving Arabic language expertise?
- Why do students choose to study Arabic? Do they do so for “instrumental” reasons (i.e. to pursue a particular career path) or for “integrative” reasons (to understand, appreciate or pursue a particular way of life)?
- Do students sometimes start with an instrumental attitude and later change to an integrative approach?
- Does the distinction between instrumental and integrative approaches imply that there should be a difference in teaching methods and course content?
- Is this distinction between “instrumental” and “integrative” approaches a valid one?

Session 4 – “How hard is ‘hard’?” – Arabic in a Comparative Perspective

This session considered similarities and differences in the way that “hard” languages are taught in the UK, and in particular the role of technology in teaching. The panel will include Arabic, Chinese and Japanese teachers working at ESRC-funded language-based area studies centres.

Questions

What makes “hard” languages hard?

- What attracts students to the subject, and is demand for it growing or declining?
- Is it fair to describe the language you teach as “difficult”?
- What do students find most difficult about the language, and what do they find easiest?
- What challenges do these difficulties pose for you as a teacher, and how do you deal with them?
- What techniques do you use for vocabulary building?
- How do you manage consolidation? Do you use regular revision tests?

Annex C – List of Speakers and Sponsors

Speakers

Paul Anderson (University of Edinburgh) (Chair of Session 1)
Amal Ayoubi (School of Oriental and African Studies)
Anissa Daoudi (University of Durham)
James Dickins (University of Salford)
Mourad Diouri (University of Edinburgh)
Jonathan Featherstone (University of Edinburgh)
Otared Haidar (University of Oxford)
Shioyun Kan (BICC)
Tom McAuley (White Rose Centre)
Yonatan Mendel (University of Cambridge)
Hassan al-Milaik (Defence School of Languages)
Luke Peterson (University of Cambridge)
Philip Sadgrove, University of Manchester (Chair of Session 2)
Haroon Shirwani (Eton College)
Rasha Soliman (University of Manchester)
Paul Starkey (University of Durham) (Chair of Session 3)
Lindsay Stewart (University of St Andrews)
Shahla Suleiman (University of Edinburgh)
Yasir Suleiman (CASA and University of Cambridge) (Chair of Session 4)
Margaret Tejerizo (CRCEES)

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