Enhancing Arabic Language Proficiency: A Comprehensive Approach

التعزيز لإتقان اللغة العربية: دراسة منهجية جامعية

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الملخص:

تعلم اللغة العربية الفصحى ضروري في هذا الزمن. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف استراتيجيات فعّالة لتحسين إكتساب اللغة العربية الفصحى الحديثة. من خلال تحليل مفصل للمنهجيات والتحديات الحالية حول تعلم اللغة العربية، تقدم هذه الدراسة التي تشتمل حول المنهج الإبتكاري لتعزيز مهارة اللغة العربية الفصحى. تؤكد النتائج على أهمية دمج لتقنيات التدريس المتنوعة والمصممة خاصة لإحتياجات الدارسين الفردية. مع ذلك، خاصة على أهمية توفير بيئة تعليمية داعمة لتسهيل إكتساب وتعلم اللغة. يتم تقديم التوصيات لمعالجة الفجوات الحالية وتعزيز التعليم الفعّال والتعلم للغة العربية الفصحى.

Abstract
Arabic language proficiency is crucial in today's interconnected world. This research aims to explore effective strategies for improving Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) acquisition. Through a detailed analysis of current methodologies and challenges, this study offers insights into innovative approaches to enhance MSA proficiency. The findings underscore the significance of incorporating diverse instructional techniques tailored to individual learners' needs. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of fostering a supportive learning environment to facilitate language acquisition. Recommendations are provided to address existing gaps and promote the effective teaching and learning of MSA.
Key words: Modern Standard Arabic, Arabic as Foreign Language, Arabic proficiency, Teaching MSA

Introduction

In 1959, Ferguson highlighted the distinctions between the standard Arabic language and the various local dialects spoken in different Arab countries. Since then, sociolinguistic research in Arabic has explored how language diversity relates to factors like age, education, and gender. Recently,

scholars have also examined the connections between language, identity, nationalism, and ethnicity (Reem, 2020).

Holes (2004, p.8) notes that the earliest clear evidence of a distinct Arabic language dates back to an inscription found on a tombstone in Nemara, Syria, dating to AD 328 – relatively recent in comparison to other Semitic languages. However, it's suggested that a spoken form of Arabic may have existed even earlier.

Before the Quran was revealed in the 6th century, there was limited knowledge about Arabic scripts, with only a few inscriptions available, along with mentions in pre-Islamic literature by Arabs (Dayf, 2003). The literary heritage of this period primarily consists of works by philosophers, poets, and preachers, preserved by early collectors and anthologists who compiled them in the 8th century (McDonald, 0303). The foundations of Classical Standard Arabic (CSA) were largely established during this period after undergoing various stages of growth and development.

Some scholars, like Assalih (1960) and Dayf (2003), suggest that CSA was the language of pre-Islamic poetry, supported by poets from different regions and tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. However, there is limited evidence to confirm that these poems were actually composed during that era; they are only mentioned in works from the 8th century AD. Moreover, these poems do not reflect the diverse tribal dialects of Arabia, raising doubts about whether they were composed or added during the early Islamic era (Monroe, 1972).

The spread of Islam facilitated cultural and linguistic unity among diverse regions, creating enduring bonds beyond political boundaries.

1. Classical Standard Arabic

Classical Standard Arabic is a cursive script comprised of twenty-eight consonant characters and is typically read from right to left. Its phoneme inventory includes unique features that are relatively rare among languages worldwide, particularly the pharyngeal sounds and the so-called emphatic consonants.

a. Phonology

Classical Arabic includes four emphatic consonants: /t̪/, /d̪/, /s̪/, and /ð̲/ (sometimes also identified as /z̪/). Additionally, it features an emphatic /l̪/, which only occurs in the word "Allah" [ɑɬɬɑːh] when the vowel /i/ is not preceding.

There are noticeable differences in how emphatic consonants affect the quality of neighboring vowels in Classical Standard Arabic. When the vowel /a/ appears before or after oral emphatic consonants, it is typically pronounced as [ɑ]. However, when it occurs before or after uvular /q/ or pharyngeal consonants, it is pronounced as [a].

This clear distinction between the effects of different consonants on vowel quality is evident in the phenomenon of emphasis prevalent in modern dialects. Emphasis involves the emphatic pronunciation of adjacent consonants and vowels, often accompanied by lip rounding (Versteegh, 2014, p. 87).

b. **Word Structure**

One of the most distinctive features of Semitic languages is their unique relationship between meaning and form. According to traditional linguistic concepts, the core meaning of words is represented by root consonants, also known as radicals. Additional morphological meanings are then added to these radicals through vowel patterns, sometimes supplemented by auxiliary consonants. This system is referred to as root-and-pattern morphology in more recent morphological theories.

In this type of morphology, the syllable structure of a word is determined by a specific pattern applied to the consonant-vowel (CV) skeleton. This approach bears some resemblance to the method used by Arabic grammarians, who explained word structure using the f-ʿ-l notation.

The analysis of root-and-pattern morphology underscores the linguistic significance of root structures. Versteegh points out that proponents of the root-based approach rely on the Obligatory Contour Principle (OCP) as evidence. This principle, operating at the level of the CV skeleton, prohibits the occurrence of similar adjacent elements from left to right, thus ruling out roots such as *d-d-r or *m-m-d (Versteegh, 2014, p. 89).

Furthermore, the presence of homorganic consonants (those with similar articulatory characteristics) in adjacent positions is also disallowed. For instance, a root like *b-m-f, containing two adjacent bilabials, is not permissible (Rosenthall, 2008). Such constraints on co-occurrence have long been recognized in Arabic and other Semitic languages (Greenberg, 1950).

Whether roots are considered the fundamental building blocks of Arabic morphology or merely a by-product of stem derivation, modern linguists and Arabic grammarians utilize them as a valuable tool to elucidate the Arabic lexicon.

Some verbs exhibit a specific number of variants, which can be explained as stemming from biconsonantal roots. In some cases, these variants may

have originated from an original noun that is no longer in use. For example, "kanna" meaning 'to shelter' and "kāna" meaning 'to be' both derive from the same root. Similarly, "sakana" meaning 'to settle' may have had a related noun origin.

However, variations can also result from weak consonants and/or reduplication. For instance, the variations of the verb 'to be hot' include "ḥamma," "ḥamiya," and "ḥamā."

As a result, some comparative linguists propose that all words in Semitic languages were originally biradical, with the third consonant serving as a type of prefix or suffix, functioning as a 'root determinative' (Ehret, 1989).

c. Morphology

Most approaches to Arabic morphology adhere to the root-and-pattern morphology, where words are derived by adding a specific pattern to a root. For example, the root k-t-b, meaning 'to write', when combined with the pattern maCCaC (traditional notation: mafʿal), forms the word "maktab," meaning 'place of writing' or 'office'.

However, Larcher (2006) raised a question regarding the conventional practice of deriving all words from consonantal roots. He pointed out that there are words that cannot be directly derived from the consonantal roots k-t-b and ṭ-y-r, such as ṭayyāra 'airplane' and kitāb 'book'. Instead, these words should be derived from the nouns ṭayyāra and kitāb.

Verbs in Arabic are sometimes derived directly from nouns, rather than from a root, indicating that in some cases, the semantic connection of the consonantal root is seen as an emergent quality rather than an inherent feature of an abstract root (Versteegh, 2014, p. 92).

However, the majority of derivational processes in Arabic nouns occur through root-and-pattern morphology. There are only a few suffixes used, including the sound plural and dual suffixes, as well as nunation, the feminine ending, and the nisba suffix -iyyun (for example, from jism 'body', jismiyyun 'corporeal').

The basic non-suffixed derivations of nouns include the diminutive and the broken plural. McCarthy notes that the diminutive, with its consistent pattern fuʿayl (for example, from kitāb 'book', the diminutive kutayb 'booklet'), follows the same iambic pattern, with the exception that it includes a combination of vowel + y instead of a long vowel.

In standard grammars of Arabic, broken plurals are categorized into thirty-one patterns, but this variability could be significantly reduced through generalization. McCarthy (2008) notes that a large number of nouns have a plural pattern of the form CvCvv, known as the iambic pattern. This pattern

is found with various singulars, such as jazīra / jazā-ʾir 'island', nafs / nufū-s 'soul', and rajul / rijā-l 'man'. It's important to note that a long vowel is considered as two short vowels, and ninety percent of all nouns follow this plural pattern.

Syntactically, broken plurals function as feminine singulars, indicating that semantically they are collectives.

Regarding the declensional system, there is a specific category known as diptotic nouns, which have only two case endings. Baerman (2004) mentions that the original Semitic declension had two endings: -u for the direct case (nominative) and -a for the indirect case (accusative), paralleled by the endings of the sound plural, -ūna / īna. The genitive ending -i is associated with the nisba suffix -iyyun and represents a later development. Proper names typically retain the original state and are predominantly diptotic. However, some argue that there were always two distinct declensions from the beginning.

d. **Syntax**

In Arabic, there are three main types of words: nouns, verbs, and particles. The nominal morphology encompasses pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs, as they do not differ from nouns in terms of their structure (Chejne, 1969). Nouns serve as names for people, places, things, as well as intangible concepts like 'mind', 'law', and 'consternation'. They carry meaning and are inflected for case to indicate their functions in a sentence, including genitive, accusative, and nominative.

Verbs, on the other hand, express 'events' and are composed of components such as 'patient', 'result', 'action', or 'agent'. They convey meaning on their own and are inflected to indicate tense and person. Number and gender are mandatory categories for both nouns and verbs in Arabic.

Particles constitute the third category, and while they have no inherent meaning on their own, they acquire significance when linked with other words.

In Classical Standard Arabic (CSA), sentence structure typically consists of one or more clauses, which can be either nominal or verbal. A nominal clause follows a noun-initial word order and comprises a 'noun phrase' (mubtada') and a 'report' (khabr), which can be either a verbal clause or another noun phrase (Chejne, 1968).

Arabic word structure allows for a certain level of flexibility, with word orders such as VOS, OVS, and noun+VSO being possible (Newman, 2013). However, Classical Standard Arabic (CSA) tends to prefer verbal

sentences, while nominal sentences are typically used for specific purposes, such as conveying specification or interest (Badawi, 1973).

In Arabic, the subject of a verb can be a place, person, cause, idea, etc., but the object cannot act as the agent or cause (Kremers, 2003). Pre-verbal subjects must have complete agreement in number and gender, while post-verbal subjects only require gender agreement (Mohammad, 2000).

In cases where the verb is separated from its subject, a masculine singular agreement is required, regardless of the gender or number of the subject. This agreement, known as neutralization agreement, ensures consistency in the sentence structure.

Classical Standard Arabic Dialects.

Despite Classical Standard Arabic (CSA) being the official language adopted throughout the Islamic era, traces of specific dialectal variations could still be recognized, especially during the standardization of the language in the 8th century. This diversity in Arabic dialects manifests itself in two main ways.

Firstly, the diversity is evident in the readings of the Qur'an, known as Qira'at, which encompass various techniques of recitation (Wafi, 2004). These different readings reflect the linguistic diversity among Arab communities, each with its own distinct pronunciation and linguistic features.

This variation in the recitation of the Qur'an highlights the richness and complexity of the Arabic language, showcasing the diverse linguistic heritage of Arab societies.

It's important to note that differences in recitation techniques do not alter the meaning of words; their meanings can only be discerned from the context in which they are used, as well as their syntactic and semantic roles. Further elucidation on the diversity of Arab dialects can be found in works dating back to the 8th century. Ibn Faris (1993) identified this diversity by classifying it into seven distinct categories.

The first category involves the use of short vowels, where the short vowel following the consonant /n/ in the word "nastʿīn" can be either /a/ or /i/. This can be represented orthographically with a short vowel diacritic either above the character for /a/ or below it for /i/, i.e., نَن or نِن.

The second category pertains to the absence of a short vowel. For example, the word "مكعم" can be pronounced as "maʿakm" with a short vowel /a/ after the consonant /ʿ/, or without a vowel as "maʿkm". This can be represented orthographically with either a short vowel diacritic ـَ above the character or no vowel diacritic ـْ located above the character, i.e., عَـ or عـْ.

The third category involves the placement of letters within words, whether they are positioned inward or backward. For instance, "ṣāʿiqa" can also be written as "ṣāqiʿa".

The fourth category concerns the replacement of letters. For example, "ʾawlālk" can be substituted with "ʾawliʾk".
The fifth category pertains to the pronunciation of the glottal stop /ʾ/, where its presence or absence can vary. For instance, "musthziʾwn" can also be pronounced as "musthzūn".

2. **Modern Standard Arabic**

The Arabic language experienced a period of decline between the 13th and 18th centuries, known as the Period of Decadence (Ryding, 2011). This era began with the fall of Baghdad in 1258 AD, marking the end of the expansive Islamic Empire and the rise of independent Muslim dynasties (Newman, 2013). Consequently, the influence of Arabic waned under the Turkish rule, as official documents were produced in Turkish and it became the language of high culture, while Arabic retained its significance primarily as the language of religion (Ryding, 2011; Newman, 2013).
During this time, Classical Standard Arabic (CSA) continued to be used as the literary language of early Islam, while the spoken Arabic of everyday life naturally evolved into distinct vernaculars specific to particular geographical areas (Ryding, 2011).
Napoleon's scientific mission included bringing a printing press to Arab regions, printing materials in both French and Arabic. This facilitated contact between Arabs and the West, leading to an influence of Western culture on the Arabic language. Although the Syro-Lebanese press preceded the Egyptian press, it was the latter that significantly impacted the development of a new style and literary techniques in Arabic.
Governments in nations such as Algeria, Lebanon, and Morocco extensively used European languages, particularly French, for an extended period, influencing many Arab countries. It is worth mentioning that Classical Standard Arabic (CSA) faced competition from two fronts: firstly, from European languages, and secondly, from vernaculars (Blau, 1981).

The Arabic Renaissance blossomed in the 19th century under favorable conditions. With increased exposure to Western literature, particularly novels, Arabs began to modernize literary techniques in Arabophone countries, resulting in significant influences on terminology and language style (Ryding, 2011).
These countries witnessed the spread of literacy due to the establishment of educational systems modeled after those in Europe. This facilitated the rise of a "new" type of Arabic known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA).

Additionally, the emergence of journalism in Arabophone countries played a significant role in promoting the adoption of the new form of Arabic. Journalists actively contributed to language reform and spearheaded a translation movement that, supported by the press, played a crucial role in the dissemination and development of the modern language (Newman, 2013).

The importance of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) extends beyond being a symbol of ethnic unity and shared history for Arab society; it also represents identity and cohesion (Ryding, 2011). However, as noted by Blau (1981), while most educated Arabs use MSA as their primary cultural language, they rarely use it as their mother tongue. Blau cites an "unusual" and "abnormal" case where some boys, influenced by Pan-Arab stimulus and personal motives, chose to use MSA in oral communication after moving between Arabic-speaking countries (Blau, 1981, p. 24).

Furthermore, Blau points out that Arabs typically use dialects in everyday conversations, despite not favoring them, as they fear that dialects may contribute to the division of Arabophone countries and threaten Arab national unity (ibid.).

Phonology

A number of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) phonemes have undergone dialectal pronunciation realignment, resulting in allophonic variants across Arabophone countries. Common variations include:

- The MSA voiceless uvular plosive /ق/ /q/ manifests as three reflexes in Arabic dialects: a glottal stop [’], [g], and [dj]. For example, the word ṭarīq (meaning "road") is pronounced as /tarī’/ in major cities of Egypt and the Levant, while in Iraq and most Gulf countries it may be pronounced as /tarīdj/, /tarīdz/, or even /tarīg/ (Holes, 2004; Kaye and Rosenhouse, 2006; Watson, 2011).

- The MSA /ج/ /j/ also has three main reflexes: [ǧ], [g], and [j]. For instance, the MSA word jaml (meaning "camel") is pronounced as /ǧaml/ (emphatic j) in most dialects of Mesopotamia, the Levant, and some parts of North Africa. In Yemen and Egypt, it is pronounced as /gamal/, while in some parts of Iraq, the Gulf, and the Syrian desert, it is pronounced as /jamal/.

In rural dialects of the Levant, Iraq, the Gulf, and parts of Jordan, the reflex of the MSA phoneme /ج/ /j/ can be either [ch] or [ts]. This deviation is particularly noticeable when addressing females. For example, the question

expression "kayfk?" (meaning "how are you?") is pronounced as /kayfts/ in some central to northern parts of Saudi Arabia and as /kayfch/ in Kuwait.
Regarding interdentals such as /ḏ/ and /ṯ/, the sound /ḏ/ is the most common allophonic realization of the phoneme, with variations such as [ḏ] or [d]. For instance, the word /ḏahb/ (meaning "gold") can be pronounced as [ḏahb] or [dahb].
On the other hand, the MSA phoneme /ṯ/ is the preferred articulation in most dialects, except for those in the Levant and Egypt. For example, the word ṯalāṯa (meaning "three") can be pronounced as /talāta/ or /falāfa/ in Eastern Saudi Arabic and Bahraini.
In addition to their occurrence in loanwords, some Arabic dialects have developed the pronunciation of voiceless /p/ or /v/ sounds in native words. For instance, Moroccan Arabic has the word Java (meaning "inside"), and Yemenite Arabic has the word sapāk (meaning "pipe fitter").

a. **Morphology**

The morphological root-and-pattern system is similar in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Arabic dialects.
Although the root-and-pattern system is shared between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Arabic dialects, there are notable differences in the usage of affixes and clitics, which are absent in MSA. Clitics are morphemes that exhibit syntactic properties of a word but are phonologically dependent on another word or phrase; they are not inflectional affixes (Zwicky and Pullum, 1983).
In Arabic dialects, there is a tendency to drop case and mood aspects almost entirely, substituting them with a variety of affixes. This represents a significant morphological difference from MSA. For example, the MSA feminine suffix marker /+t/ is typically retained unless it occurs in a pre-paused position. However, in most dialects, it is omitted and replaced by /+a/ (as in Levantine dialects and some parts of western Saudi Arabia) or by /+ih/ in Iraq. In some Yemenite dialects, it may even be pronounced in the pre-paused position (Kusters, 2003).
Furthermore, while the dual method is extensively used in MSA with both nouns and verbs, in Arabic dialects, it is generally preserved only with nouns.
Some Arabic dialects have developed a phenomenon known as 'pseudodual,' where the dual suffix /īn/ is used to indicate the plural of certain nouns, particularly paired body parts. For example, /’aynīn/ means "eyes," /rijlīn/ means "feet," and /eadīn/ means "hands" (Blanc, 1970).
In terms of broken plurals in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), while there are general patterns, some are more typical of specific dialects. For

instance, patterns that include /+a/ and /+an/, such as /fursān/ meaning "mares" and /talāmḍa/ meaning "students," are preferred in Moroccan dialects.

Additionally, some Arabic dialects employ a method of pluralization that combines two types of plurals by suffixing the sound plural to the broken plural. For example, in Gulf Arabic, we have words like /zaʿāmāt/ meaning "leaders" and /furūqāt/ meaning "differences." In Syrian Arabic, we have /ṭarʾāt/ meaning "roads," and in Moroccan Arabic, we have terms like /dmūʿāt/ meaning "tears" and /ḳawātāt/ meaning "sisters."

b. Lexicon

In the literary domain, Arabic dialects have a narrower lexicon compared to the rich and diverse lexicon of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Classical Standard Arabic (CSA). Arabic dialects are typically not used in normative or educational contexts, but they expand their lexicon by borrowing from various dialects and languages. This borrowing can take several forms.

Firstly, there is diglossic borrowing from MSA, where words or expressions from MSA are incorporated into dialectal usage. Secondly, borrowing can occur from neighboring languages such as Turkish and Persian, which are also used in certain regions. Thirdly, borrowing can come from European colonial languages, primarily French and English. It's important to note that borrowed words may undergo semantic and/or phonological changes.

A distinctive feature of the diglossic situation is the presence of doublets, where two lexical items for the same concept exist in both MSA and dialects. In various dialects, an original lexeme may be used in formal contexts in MSA and in informal or household contexts in dialect. For example, in Bahraini Arabic, the word "gidr" means "cooking pot," while in MSA it's "qadir," meaning "he was able." Similarly, in Najdi dialect, "kān" means "if," whereas in MSA it means "it was."

Additionally, Jabbari (2013) highlights in his contrastive analysis of Levantine Arabic dialects and MSA that these dialects have a complementary lexicon encompassing all parts of speech, with similar meanings but different forms.

c. Syntax

The significant changes observed in the syntactical aspects of Arabic dialects are closely linked to morphological evolution. Haeri and Belnap

(1997) suggest that when a language undergoes morphological simplification due to external or internal factors, it tends to become more synthetic, allowing for greater flexibility in word order. These syntactic changes present various ways in which Arabic dialects can be analyzed in terms of their structure.

Three main topics—nominal syntax, verbal syntax, and sentence typology—highlight differences such as agreement rules and word order patterns. One notable case of agreement rules in Arabic dialects is 'deflected agreement,' where feminine singular forms are used in pronouns, verbs, and adjectives to agree with broken plurals (Haeri and Belnap, 1997). While agreement is also present in MSA, it is typically used for non-human references. However, in Arabic dialects, a novel pattern of deflected agreement is identified, extending to both human and non-human references.

Furthermore, there is a phenomenon of agreement neutralization, where the marking of number or gender on adjectives and verbs is neutralized when the head nouns or subjects are plural or feminine. This neutralization results in these words being treated as masculine because unmarked words for gender are masculine in Arabic (Blanc, 1984).

Similar to MSA's neutralization of agreement when a verb is separated from its subject, Arabic dialects have extended this neutralization to noun-initial as well as verb-initial sentences. They rely heavily on agreement between nouns and verbs or complements in such structures (Brustad, 2000).

d. **Modern Standard Arabic Dialects**

Modern Standard Arabic dialects can be classified according to parameters such as sectarian and religious affiliation, lifestyle, or geography. Blanc (1984) argues that Arabic-speaking countries represent a spectrum ranging from the existence to the complete absence of communal dialects employed by various ethnic or religious groups. Nevertheless, Watson (2011) mentioned that this spectrum might demonstrate that these particular communities lived detached lives, as protected minorities. These communities adapted to the dialect of the predominant group in public places. Bateson (2004) gave an example for the Christians and Jews of Baghdad, who use their dialect at home while adapting to the Muslim dialect in public places. A similar case exists in Bahrain, as the Shi’ite majority adapts to the dialect of the predominant Sunnis in group communication.

Watson (2011) stated that lifestyle classification is concerned with old dialects, since, in the situation of modern dialects, it has been manifested to be of diminishing sociological fitting and an oversimplification. It is sophisticated to associate some linguistic aspects as universally Bedouin or sedentary, since the feature considered Bedouin in one region could be considered a geographical marker in another. For instance, the third masculine singular object pronoun, "-u," is a 'Bedouin' feature in the Euphrates but a 'geographical marker' in Saudi Arabia, differentiating northern Najdi dialects from Central dialects (Ingham, 1982: 32).

Arabic dialects may differ significantly from one another according to their geographical distance. Neighboring dialects, for instance, the speakers of Kuwaiti and Iraqi dialects, can be simply equivalently comprehensible to native Arabic speakers of those vernaculars. On the other hand, remote regional dialects such as Moroccan and Syrian have developed accumulative varieties that make them less comprehensible and might require a conscious effort on the part of the speaker to modify their conversational language to a more mainstream level. Ryding (2011) believed that the process is relatively simple for educated native Arabs, who can recognize dialectal characteristics and adapt to the communicative requirements of any situation. Wafi (2004) added that their good knowledge of the standard language supports them with a number of grammatical and lexical rules that can be helpful in understanding differences in everyday communication.

In fact, Arabic speakers use various accommodating strategies in their everyday communicative exchanges, including code-switching from one Arabic dialect to another; total or partial code-switching from Arabic to a European language, mainly French and English; and diglossic switching from their dialect to MSA. Thus, it is somewhat inaccurate to mention that the speakers of various Arabic dialects use MSA to simplify comprehension in informal conversational situations.

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