Learning Spoken Arabic through Computer-Assisted Instruction: An integrated approach

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This paper was completed and submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master Teacher Program, a 2-year faculty professional development program conducted by the Center for Teaching Excellence, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 2012.

Overview:

Arabic is a unique language in that it is diglossic—it has a spoken variety which is very distinct from the written variety. The distinction between the two is not simply a different “accent” in the way Americans would attribute to the English heard spoken by Londoners or Aussies, but is rather significant in its differences—many who study the Modern Standard Arabic we teach here at USMA quickly claim that they are hearing a new language spoken upon their first exposure to the spoken variety. This is not far from the truth as the spoken variety is a very simplified version of the written variety which utilizes new rules of grammar, omits pronunciation of several letters of the alphabet, and utilizes completely different words from many of those traditionally used in the written language.

Clearly, you might see how the problem of diglossia within the Arabic language might be problematic and much debate is ongoing in the field about when students should be introduced to the spoken variety in the course of their studies. At West Point we have traditionally taken the stance that introducing spoken Arabic to cadets at the same time they are first exposed to the standard written Arabic leads to a confused, unmotivated student who is constantly mixing the two varieties in their speech and writing, and grades in both varieties suffer as a result. We wait until they have at least five semesters of Arabic before offering a distinct course in the final year where cadets learn nothing but the colloquial variety spoken in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and
Palestine. This presents problems as many of our cadets participate in semester abroad programs, often prior to the offering of this course, and consistently mention in their post-semester abroad feedback that they are totally unprepared for the colloquial variety of Arabic they hear on the streets, become frustrated, and call into question the utility of the Arabic they’ve been taught at USMA. Our program has grown tired of hearing these complaints and seeks to introduce the spoken variety earlier in our curriculum, but in a practical manner that allows cadets to become gradually exposed to the spoken variety initially using computer assisted means and relying on the self-regulatory behavior of our autonomous language learners. We hope to capitalize on the technical savvy of our cadets and their internal motivations to learn language independently in order to minimize the problems educators have traditionally faced in introducing the spoken varieties into the classroom curriculum. Before embarking on this endeavor, we will survey the most relevant works in the fields of Arabic Language Pedagogy, Self-Regulated Learning, and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in order to ensure our proposed curriculum design is backed by solid empirical research.

The Pedagogy of Arabic Diglossia

Arabic is unique because of its diglossia—a term first introduced by Charles Ferguson, defined as “a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language there is a very divergent, highly codified superposed variety—the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature either of an earlier period or in another speech community—that is learned largely by means of formal education and used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation” (1959). In Arabic, according to Ferguson, the “high” variety literary language —al-lugha al-
fusha—co-exists with the “low” variety—al-lahajat al-‘ammiya—or the “dialects.” While the spoken varieties are the languages of daily life in Arab world and vary greatly along geographic and socioeconomic boundaries, the High version referred to as Modern Standard Arabic functions as the official language in the 22 Arab countries. One of the major challenges teachers of Arabic face is whether or not to teach spoken varieties of the language, and if so, how and when to teach it. The issue has become more prominent in the post- 9/11 era where the demand for skilled Arabic speakers has grown exponentially, but most universities and textbooks continue to teach the formal language of reading and writing, leaving learners struggling to be understood when they have the opportunity to engage native speakers on the streets in the Arab world. The fact that MSA continues to hold prominence in the Arabic foreign language classroom goes to show the lack of consensus amongst educators about how to deal with the diglossia “problem”. Al-Batal adds that the issue is further complicated because diglossia is not only a linguistic matter, but a political, religious, and national one—one that often leads to heated discussions amongst Arabic scholars (286).

One major element of the problem is the fact that there is more than one language to be learned, and requires that students learn two sets of vocabulary items, pronunciation and grammar rules. As a result, in order for learners of Arabic to become proficient in both varieties of the language they must spend considerable amounts of time inside and out of the classroom. With this challenge in mind, a CALL program designed to enable the autonomous learner to learn the spoken variety in an environment separate from the formal version learned in the classroom might make tackling the diglossic challenge a bit easier for the student to manage. Furthermore, Al-Batal and others believe that there exists not just two forms of the Arabic language, but a multitude of levels where the high and low forms are mixed (289). Karen
Ryding and others postulate that there exists a third form called “Educated Spoken Arabic” which mixes elements of formal and spoken varieties. Educated Arabic speakers alter the delivery of their spoken language naturally, depending on the communicative needs of the situation (Ryding).

**Self-Regulated Language Learning**

Language learning, most often, does not occur within the confines of a classroom, but rather involves a long-term commitment by the learner to study independently following any formal education. Therefore, the idea that a dialect of Arabic cannot be independently learned is a bit preposterous and is, in fact, quite ordinary. Going forward, it is important to differentiate between autonomy and self-regulation as we review the relevant literature. Autonomous learners take control of their own learning by applying self-regulatory methods, by effectively managing their priorities, time, and feelings. (Leaver, et. al., 201) However, self-directed learning is not necessarily done in isolation or an all-or-nothing approach, but instead is usually done in the context of other people where learning approaches are varied depending on previous knowledge and self-confidence with the subject, to name a few factors. And finally, while many posit that adults are naturally self-directed learners, everyone relies on some sort of instruction, to include computer-assisted guidance.

Self-regulated learners set goals for extending knowledge and sustaining motivation. They are aware of what they know, what they believe, and what the differences between these kinds of information imply for approaching tasks. They understand their motivation, are aware of their affect and plan how to manage the interplay between these as they engage with a task. They also deliberate about small-scale tactics and overall strategies, selecting some instead of
others based on predictions about how each is able to support progress toward chosen goals (Healey).

**Computer Assisted Language Learning**

Computer assisted language learning methods of the type discussed in this literature review have increasingly become incorporated in language curricula at secondary school institutions. Through the years, computer assisted technologies and platforms have become more complex, yet more effective in their delivery. Earliest forms of CALL methods employed simple word processor programs, email, and internet chats. More recently, podcasting, mobile phone applications, and intelligent feedback systems have taken prominent roles in the computer-aided foreign language learning realm. However, despite the vast array of computer assisted means available to learners and educators, the mode of delivery is shaped by learning goals and environment (Stockwell). Naturally, there exists hesitation within academia about whether or not to implement computer assisted technologies in the classroom, but increasingly faculty are participating in CALL training programs. This allows for more seamless integration into curricula, and helps to close the capability gap between the younger, more tech-savvy students and their teachers (Hong).

Computer-assisted language learning, by its nature, tends to promote autonomous learning, as students can work alone at their leisure. However, research has shown engaging in CALL does not necessarily create an autonomous learner (Benson), as this depends highly upon a range of factors, with learner motivation primary among them. Having access to computers and technology only provides the student the opportunity to be autonomous, and learners must take the initiative to learn on their own accord. Research has shown that becoming autonomous
is a gradual process where the student’s dependence on the teacher requires a transition to a
dependence upon himself in his learning (Healey), and from fixed content to variable content.
Therefore, CALL materials done in the absence of a professor which allow for more practice in a
certain skill or area might not be enhancing a learner’s autonomy, unless autonomy played a role
in facilitating the transition mentioned above. CALL activities which allow students the
opportunity to learn a spoken variety of the formal written Arabic taught to them in the
classroom practically demands they make the transition to self-dependence, as learning the new
dialect will require the student to autonomously make associations with the formal version of
Arabic that they have already learned. However, it is important to note that the design of CALL
activities which promote learner autonomy should incorporate feedback and interactivity, so
learners can assess their progress and use the newly acquired dialect in a practical way. (Figura
and Jarvis).

Finally, training the students how to effectively use CALL cannot be taken for granted.
Research has shown that CALL learners who are trained to use technology according to a
specified set of five principles leads to their more effective use of the technology (O’Bryan).
After ensuring the educator follows the five principles: experiences CALL himself, provides
learners with teacher training, uses a cyclic approach to the training, encourages collaborative
debriefings, and generalizes strategies learned to other activities, learners generally better
understand the importance of making a connection between the CALL activity and the desired
learning outcome (Hubbard). When considering implementation of CALL techniques in learning
dialects of the Arabic language, it is important at the outset, especially in an autonomous
learning environment, that the learner understands why the dialect is being introduced to the
learner in a manner different from that which they are accustomed.
Annotated Bibliography

*Pedagogy of the Arabic Diglossia*


The author writes this chapter as part of a larger volume on Arabic language pedagogy in the United States, focusing on the challenge that Arabic diglossia presents to educators. With an increasing shift toward improving students’ oral proficiency in Arabic, Al Batal re-examines how university level programs have dealt with the issue, and presents an alternative approach. He also elaborates on the problems in teaching the Arabic diglossia, which should be analyzed closely before designing any computer aided language learning approach.


The latest version of the most popular Arabic textbook in the US has fully transitioned to a completely integrated approach toward introducing both MSA and a regional spoken variety (Levantine or Egyptian) simultaneously at the beginner level. The authors’ stated goal is to “present and teach language forms that reflect the linguistic behavior of educated native speakers… [who] produce and consume mixes of registers that include both formal and spoken elements.” Rather than espouse widely held notions that MSA should be learned first prior to a spoken variety, Brustad et. al. believe that learners must be introduced to the realities of both varieties from the beginning of their Arabic education. Their approach is based on empirical research which shows that the teaching of the spoken form early on results in improved fluency which transfers to formal Arabic as well. The text has been re-designed where the story of a
chapter is introduced in spoken Arabic, testing students’ oral and listening skills. Later the student will work with the passage in the standard variety, in order to improve reading and writing skills.


When considering approaches to developing Computer Assisted Language learning methods for use by the self-regulated learner of Arabic, one must read Ryding’s piece which argues against teaching a regional colloquial variety, but rather a formal spoken variety which mixes elements of both MSA and spoken geographic variants, representing a prestige form of spoken Arabic which serves as a practical means of communication in the Arab world. In the article Ryding presents the practicality in training students in the intermediate formal spoken variety, and uses a case study of the State Department’s Foreign Service Institute language program to demonstrate her point.

**Self-Regulated Language Learning (SRL)**


A chapter in this second-language acquisition text, the authors elaborate on the role of the student in the learning process and how students can take control of their own learning. The best self-regulating learners apply certain “tricks”—by setting achievable goals, staying aware of their feelings, keeping aware of their options, anticipating difficulties, prioritizing, being realistic, depending on others, and being independent where possible. Of particular interest is a discussion of commonly held myths about independent learning that the authors craftily dispel.

This article examines several areas of theory and empirical research that provides new details about what SRL is and how students can effectively develop their own SRL strategies. While this article does not deal with language learning specifically, it focuses on the completely autonomous type of learning (without faculty member “scaffolding”) which is the main topic of this literature review. Winne inquires into how learners exercise and develop self-regulation in the absence of scaffolding that might be provided by teachers or peers. He writes under the main assumption that most adolescent and adult learners will continue to have the will to exercise effective means for self-directing their learning, whether in a social context or in solitude. He characterizes SRL as a cognitively inherent aspect of learning, comprised primarily of knowledge, beliefs, and learned skills, and can form gradually as learners engage with instructional experiences, even after a single-study session.

**Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)**


This recently published collection of articles provides an overview of the diverse approaches to research and practice in CALL, as there has been an increasing range in technologies made available to educators, who employ different theories and pedagogies in their implementation. The book describes connections to practice and demonstrates limitations of the diverse options available. Of concern to this review, Stockwell includes a piece on autonomous learning and CALL and he clearly states that the two terms are not inherent elements of the other.

This article, from a leading journal from the CALL field, illustrates the need for educating faculty in the use of computer aids in order to successfully integrate technology into their curricula. While the focus of this literature review is the use of automation by self-regulated learners, teachers must be aware of the range of technologies and software available and know how to use them, in order to set the best conditions possible for their students to autonomously learn.


This article investigated whether or not training learners to use CALL effectively following a generally accepted 5-step approach leads to increased use of a particular hyperlink function where textual definitions or explanations are provided and encourage learners to interact both inter and intra personally with the text, leading to increased vocabulary acquisition. When considered in the scope of this review, the article shows the importance of ensuring your learners are trained in how to use the target technology, prior to allowing them to embark on their self regulated language acquisition journey. Furthermore, the learners better understand your goals in implementing CALL methods, which generally enhances the level of motivation in the autonomous learner, the focus of this review.

References


