Literacy and the Literary: Reading and Speaking Arabic: Goals, Strategies, and Curricula in Advanced Arabic Learning

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I am honored to write in tribute to Mahmoud al-Batal, author of the Arabic-language text series al-Kitaab. Having studied Arabic in the pre-al-Kitaab era and taught in the post-al-Kitaab era, I’ve borne witness to how al-Batal’s work has radically transformed the field. He revolutionized both the teaching of the Arabic language and an intellectual tradition that insisted—despite all evidence to the contrary—that Arabic was a dead language from a dead culture and a dead civilization.

Traditional approaches to teaching Arabic treated the language as existing in the silence of books, grammatical manuals, and lexicons. It was among the most arcane subjects—in the purview only of the most specialized scholars. Language teaching emphasized the remoteness of the subject, stressing the geographic distance of the Arab world from the Western university and its inaccessibility, as a place, culture, and language difficult to penetrate and apprehend, as strange, different, and foreign. Even in the Arab world, the grammatical sciences of the Arabic language have been a knowledge reserved for a select few, the educated elite and the religious scholars. Pedagogical advances in the teaching of Arabic as a second language were slow in coming—seemingly in response only to cold-war threats and the exigencies of political crises.

My initial experience of learning the language was totally contrary to the perspective of Arabic as hermetic. I spent two years with the Peace Corps in Morocco and learned through direct, nearly unmediated contact with the community. My classroom was my neighbor’s kitchen; the lessons were rituals of hospitality; my teachers were patient, encouraging, and enthusiastic; my rewards were community, food, and drink; my graduation was in degrees of assimilation. The Peace Corps’s techniques in second language acquisition combined immersion with emphasis on oral communication and human interaction. It had its own diglossia—one that more accurately reflected the reality of everyday life in Morocco—where dialect predominated, coupled with basic literacy skills. The language pedagogy capitalized on the naïve idealism of the volunteers, whose motives for joining rested on convictions of cultural intelligibility, understanding through dialogue, and community through communication. Moroccan dialect is vibrantly alive—adaptable, multicultural (with Berber, Italian, Spanish, French, and Turkish influences), and inclusive.

I entered graduate school at Columbia University with the aim of expanding a primarily oral experience of the Arabic language. When I first arrived in New York, I made a sort of pilgrimage to Edward Said’s office. He spoke to me in Arabic. When I replied in Moroccan dialect, he laughed, telling me to come back when I stopped speaking pidgin. Thus I began a quest in pursuit of an elusive literary Arabic, pieced together principally through texts.

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Columbia had two tracks of Arabic: the literary and the spoken. Since I aimed to study Arabic literature, I followed the literary track. In these classes we fully voweled and translated texts from Arabic to English; for six hours a week for an entire year, we translated. There were some tangential, disconnected forays into grammar points: there was zero discussion, no development of oral skills, not even hello or good-bye in Arabic. Our text was the Reader in Modern Literary Arabic, published in 1964 and re-issued in 1980 without revision, sponsored by Esso Middle East and the Exxon Corporation, “realizing the importance of the work for training students in Arabic” (Ziadeh, frontispiece). The texts—from a variety of Arabic literati—were presented without introduction, without explanation, and with grammatical points and idiomatic expression as endnotes. One-paragraph biographies of the writers, in English, essayed an explanation of cultural context. There was no systematic connection of grammar to literature, the literature to the culture, or the writers to their history. As has been endemic to academics, the teachers seemed to desire a divorce from the actual practice and practitioners of the language. Arabic became nailed to the page like some butterfly sacrificed to the lepidopterist’s study. About the time of al-Kitaab’s publication, Columbia abandoned the so-called literary method and the presumed split between writing and speaking Arabic.

The materials I compiled during the era of language learning before al-Kitaab include reams of notebooks, self-made dictionaries, grammatical charts, arcane and arbitrary grammatical lists. My early efforts at piecing together a coherent picture of standard Arabic were disjointed and fragmented. I had an odd collection of children’s books and complex grammars—my attempt to connect an elementary reading level with an adult intellect. These materials mirror my struggle to gain a holistic sense of literary Arabic, one as coherent and sensible to me as dialect.

I posed myself the question, How to bridge the divide between the living language and Arabic teaching, between dialect and Fusha, between speaking and writing? These domains are not so disparate as to be mutually incomprehensible. After all, doesn’t the spoken language have a profoundly scriptural tradition at its roots, and don’t contemporary media depict the daily realities of Arab social and political life? My verb tables and grammatical charts were wholly disconnected from any context. The mechanics of language appeared like fragments or shards, conveying little sense of a larger form or of how the pieces fit into a whole. It was Arabic robbed of its strongest attributes—its logic, its history, and its culture.

Mahmoud al-Batal’s al-Kitaab series, written with Kristen Brustad and Abbas al-Tonsi, shortens the geographic and conceptual distance between the Arab world and the Arabic-language learner. Arabic is no longer confined to grammatical manuals or decontextualized texts but spoken close to home, in the streets of New York and the houses of Brooklyn. The authors orient the first book of the series within a deeply American idiom: immigration. The book narrates the experience of an Egyptian family living in New York, their relationship to the homeland, and their occasional feelings of alienation (Brustad, al-Batal, and al-Tonsi [1995]).

Mahmoud, Kristen, and Abbas tell two stories in one: one American and one Arab; one about the desire for assimilation and the other about maintaining, fostering, and nurturing the culture and language of the homeland. The authors encapsulate their audience—heritage learners and nonnative speakers—making Arab culture recognizable, immediate, and intelligible. The videos set the protagonists against familiar settings, integrated into the fabric of American social life. Yet the protagonists of their story are still profoundly attached to their roots, extended families, social customs, and language.

In the second book of the series, the authors orient the Arabic language in its contemporary historical and cultural context, focusing on a linchpin of its development: the press and educational reform (Brustad, al-Batal, and al-Tonsi [1997]). Like the press in Europe, the Arab press contributed to the formation of a national print culture; helped foster a new reading public; addressed the concerns of an emergent middle class; gave voice to several burgeoning political groups; and considerably simplified and modernized writing, bringing it closer to the spoken language. From an article in Al-Sharq al-Awsat, the third chapter describes the rise of nationalist movements in conjunction with the emergent print culture: it was a nationalist press that articulated the terms and parameters of contemporary indigenous culture. In teaching the Arabic language, the authors of al-Kitaab also teach about the language, stressing its modernization, proximity to daily events, and spread to the masses. The authors not only teach modern standard Arabic as
an accessible language but also provide historical details that substantiate their methodology.

This chapter closes with an essay on the educational reformer Rif‘ah Ra‘f al-Tahtawi, perhaps the patron saint of these books. Tahtawi also spearheaded the translation movement that instigated significant changes in the nature of Arabic narrative discourse, introducing new genres like the novel. The following chapters chart these parallel changes in education and narrative discourse, focusing on several key writers and thinkers of the twentieth century. Many of these, such as Amina Sa‘id, Ahmad Amin, Tawfiq al-Hakim, ‘Abbas Mahmoud al-‘Aqqad, and Suhayr al-Qalawamawi, appeared in the Reader in Modern Literary Arabic but, again, as fragments, without the broader historical context, without discussion of the significant social and literary upheaval these writers effected, and without a methodology for approaching acquisition of the language.

The chapter on the press includes an essay on the most famous organs of the early women’s press, emphasizing their contributions to social reform in the “age of urbanization and manners, whether in science and literature or character and morals or in clothes and fashion, or in education,” as Hind Nawfal commented about her magazine Al-Fatah (Brustad, al-Batal, and al-Tonsi [1997] 88). Throughout the al-Kitaab series, women’s voices are represented. Both the intermediate and advanced books devote entire chapters to the women’s movement, in addition to multiple essays by and about women. Women writers, scholars, and activists, like May Yamani, Daisy al-Amir, Huda Sha‘rawi, Anis Baz, Siham Bayumi, Nawal al-Sa‘adawi, Hanan al-Shaykh, and Layla Abu-Za‘id, foil stereotypes of the silenced, repressed Arab woman. The chapter on the women’s movement, strategically situated before the chapter on A Thousand and One Nights, is almost a warning against antiquated, sexist views of Arab women as helplessly languishing in the background of a patriarchal culture and a patriarchal language. Certain theories of the Arabic language have identified Fusha as a purely scriptural language, a kind of father tongue repressing the mother tongue of spoken dialect. The Moroccan scholar Abdelkebir Khatibi, for example, argues that the written language has become totally divorced from its “feminine aspects” (182–88). The authentic texts in al-Kitaab refute these abstracted claims about the nature of the Arabic language, as women prove to be among Arabic’s most eloquent and expressive practitioners. Despite assumptions to the contrary, women authors demonstrate the versatility and pluralism of the language.

Throughout the al-Kitaab series, practice puts theory into action. The authors consistently insist on the oral dimensions of Fusha, as a language that does not merely languish on the page. They have created a holistic sensory and intellectual experience through the use of audio, video, and text. Each of these media reinforces and augments linguistic input, so that the student never perceives the language as monodimensional or as somehow confined to a single domain. Instead, the student hears, sees, and reads Arabic, and learning is kept close to an authentic linguistic and cultural experience. Arabic is communicated in many registers and levels; it is something immediate and alive, not confined to a distant past. This pedagogical approach renders the language tangible and within the student’s grasp. Ultimately, this input shapes the student’s output.

The authors of al-Kitaab systematically weave a foundation of syntactic knowledge, gradually building on principles, providing explanations that expand from the source texts, and augmenting the grammatical points with exercises. They break down complicated rules into their constituent parts, always connecting them to both their textual context and oral articulation. The al-Kitaab books introduce audio reinforcement of grammar and idioms, with painstaking recordings of drills, texts, sample sentences, and charts. The authors gradually develop the lexical foundation through carefully selected texts that consistently reinforce learned vocabulary. The passages stimulate the students’ intellectual curiosity—and satisfy it by remaining in the range of their comprehension, while relying primarily on authentic texts. In addition, the grammatical points outlined in the chapters are explored through close readings of the text, problem solving, and inductive reasoning. These pathways make the systematic patterns of the Arabic language clear to the students, through a process of discovery facilitated by al-Kitaab. The selection of texts is remarkable for their cultural, historical, lexical, and syntactic content, which the authors have synchronized.

Mahmoud al-Batal has revived the field of Arabic language teaching, displaying the language’s many dimensions and richness, its history, logic,
culture, and speakers. Neither students nor teachers can reduce Arabic to a one-dimensional experience or tool. The academy is forced to reckon with the language as practiced by living, breathing human beings, not as a disembodied idea or an abstraction. On a church the other day I read a sign that said, “Communidad: palabra viviente” ‘Community: living word.’ This is the possibility that Mahmoud’s work has created for a modern era, a living language for a global community.

Works Cited
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