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Arabic Language Teaching in Poland

The aim of the present paper is to discuss some aspects of teaching Arabic in Poland in last decades. The outline of existing handbooks, practical aids and teaching methods has been done with the special reference to other standard textbooks and methods employed through out the world.

Introduction

The basic object of foreign language teaching is the examination of the activities of both teachers' and students', which includes means, objects, content, methods, modes, organization of education and social and material environment in which this activity takes place. Didactics can be divided into:

- General—it examines basic problems. They are common for every teaching and studying procedure;
- Detailed—it examines problems that are specific to a particular kind of teaching, to a selected subject, or to a certain level¹.

Hence the foreign languages teaching is a detailed one, because it concerns a limited and specific domain of education. There is an enormous diversity within the limits of this area, which results from a given language affiliation to a specific group, as well as from the area it operates, i.e. trade, legal or press language. It is worth mentioning that the majority of handbooks concentrate on the Indo-European languages. On one hand, the experience in teaching these languages could prove useful for preparing textbooks—in Arabic, for example. On the other hand however, the circumstances might require an exceptional attitude towards the teaching of a specific language².

¹ Okoń 1992:46-47.

² For example Japanese or Chinese, which require of the learner additional mastery of the difficult scriptures.

Before my report on concrete didactic methods, one question should be posed: what does it mean to know a foreign language? One of the answers might be the forming of so called linguistic competence³ in a learner, which characterizes native speakers of a given language. The linguistic competence is the ability to create an infinite number of correctly formed sentences in a given language and also the ability to comprehend them. This competence is creative, although the number of elements and rules for creating these sentences is finite and determined⁴.

About a language speaker's competence we can conclude only on the basis of his imperfect linguistic performance. The basis for a such conclusion provide:

- regularization, i. e. discarding accidental features;
- standardization, i. e. elimination of cultural and social diversities;
- decontextualization, i. e. recreating of gaps and understatements which a speaker could generate, because the statement was comprehensible from the remaining context⁵.

Thus we can determine these abilities, which characterize a competent language speaker. They are as follows:

- the features of linguistic competence such as recognizing and production of ones native language, connecting them in words and sentences, as well as understanding the utterances which are formed in this way by someone else;
- the features of communicative competence, i. e. ability of providing adequate utterances as far as these factors are concerned: subject of conversation, a situation, an interlocutor, a means of communication applied by the user;
- receptive skills, i. e. hearing and reading with comprehension;
- performance skills, i. e. speaking and writing; ability to carry on a conversation: to begin it, to keep it going, to indicate a misunderstanding or request for an explanation, and to end a conversation;
- the knowledge of basic cultural standards.

Foreign languages teaching methods

All foreign languages teaching methods are based on one or several teaching programs. We can distinguish five types of such programs:

1. Grammatical programs—arranged on the basis of grammar.

³ This theory arose on the basis of Noam Chomsky's generative grammar.

⁴ Komorowska 1993:12.

⁵ Komorowska 1993:13.

2. Semantic programs—the subject of teaching material selection consists of communicative functions of statements, or intentions they can convey.

3. Thematic programs—topic forms the subject of selection around which the program is concentrated, for example: economics, politics, arts.

4. Situational programs—focusing on concrete life situations.

5. Lexical programs—the teaching process is organized on the basis of words and word groups, which are considered to be useful in future language operation⁶.

Many Polish textbooks for foreign languages study are concentrated on the grammatical programs. However, imported ones are mostly based on the thematic or semantic approach. There are also textbooks, which employ mixed programs: semantic-situational or grammatical-thematic ones.

We can assume that the teaching methods of foreign languages are derivative in relation to the teaching programs and divide them into conventional and unconventional. They not only take advantage of research within the confines of the foreign languages' didactics, but also within other scientific disciplines connected with it.

We can distinguish five basic conventional methods:

1. The Direct Method, also called a conversational or natural⁷ method, the language learning process is based on total immersion in a language environment.

2. The Grammatical-Translating Method, which has been used in the teaching of Latin. Its aim is to master a language in such a way that a learner will be able to read foreign texts unaided.

3. The Audio-Lingual Method—its aim lies in the development of so called linguistic habits in a learner, which is achieved through multiple repetition, memorization and consolidation of the material.

4. The Cognitive Method—it aims at development of the linguistic competence in a learner.

5. The Communicative Method, which aims at development of effective communication skills in a learner of a given language. It is achieved by implementation of many dialogs, simulations, role plays, games, guessing games and discussions. The semantic or thematic programs are mostly taken into consideration in this case.

Guided by a conviction that a language is learnt not only by the mind, but also by the body and emotions, many unconventional methods have recently arisen. The most important are:

⁶ Komorowska 1993:17.

⁷ I would like here to draw the reader's attention to that the natural method is one of the unconventional didactic methods too, over which I write below.

1. The Total Physical Response Method, which uses sets of props instead of a textbook. Its aim is to include the whole brain into a language learning process: the left hemisphere responsible for the speech, and the right one responsible for the movement.

2. The Silent Way Method: it employs silence and meditative concentration as its main means. The essence of the teacher's work lies in the limitation of the distraction factor and increase of the students' concentration.

3. The Counseling Language Learning Method: it employs psychoanalytic and therapeutic techniques in the teaching process. Language learning framework bears resemblance a therapeutic group meeting. The voice is given only to those who want to speak on the subject that is interesting to them.

4. The Natural Method, which is based on the significant exposition premise, that is: listening to foreign language statements, which are generally comprehensible for a learner, because of situational context. This method puts emphasis on the elimination of any stress generating so called affective filter, which makes efficient language studying impossible.

5. The SALT Method is based on a premise that a human mind has large reserves that can be activated during a full relaxation.

After the presentation of plan-methodical issues' of language teaching, I would like to deal with its practical realization with the example of Arabic language teaching.

Arabic language teaching in Poland and in the world

As the authors of The Arabic Language Teaching state "there are no theoretical studies concerning Arabic didactics in the Polish language. Among Polish Arabic philologists only Anna Parzymies was partially engaged in this while publishing the article *L'enseignement de l'arabe littéral face à la diglossie*⁸. Elżbieta Górńska and Marek Skoczek's book deals with this in both a theoretical and practical way for the first time.

After a short report on the theoretical and practical works in the field of Arabic language teaching written in Poland and elsewhere, the authors present their own method based on two criteria:

1. Arabic should be taught as communication language (*luġat at-tawāṣul*). This premise was verified by the programs and didactic work of

⁸ Górńska and Skoczek 1999:11.

the most famous Arabic language teaching centers, e.g. Institut Bourguiba des Langues Vivantes in Tunis among many others⁹.

2. The didactic process should be based on structural-global method (also called integral method). Its basic guidelines are:

- giving priority to a spoken language according to the rule that the words and sentences mastery should be followed by writing and reading study;
- focusing on phonetics by implementation of audio-visual techniques;
- limitation of vocabulary for real communicative needs in a given cultural context;
- considering interpretation, application and internalization of a given vocabulary, its use and function in a context;
- the didactic substance is based on the material which takes into consideration the needs of the student;
- gradual introduction of a new material¹⁰.

Aims and contents of Arabic language teaching

In the teaching of a foreign language the objective aim is the most important one. It depends on an established method and a certain level of knowledge of a given language. In the case of Arabic studies the direction aims are:

- development of full linguistic competence (communicative and cultural) within Modern Standard Arabic (MSA);
- development of full communicative competence within one dialect at least;
- acquainting students with the structure and grammar of classical Arabic, and how they function in MSA¹¹.

Every direction aim is accompanied by short-term stage aims and realistic ones. According to Elżbieta Górska and Marek Skoczek, the Arabic teaching program was divided into 3 levels: basic, intermediate and advanced. “The basic level is provided for the 1st and 2nd year (12 hours of classes per week), the intermediate one—for the 3rd year (12 hours of classes per week) and the advanced one—for the 4th year (8 hours of classes per week)”¹².

A basic level student should master Arabic phonetics properly and acquire the ability of writing, reading and comprehension of simple

⁹ Górska and Skoczek 1999:14.

¹⁰ Górska and Skoczek 1999:15.

¹¹ Górska and Skoczek 1999:15.

¹² Górska and Skoczek 1999:17.

commands and texts. He should also master the ability to hold a conversation about daily matters. He should also gradually take cognizance of the social-cultural distinctness of the Arabic language.

The second year of studies, first and foremost, should be devoted to developing vocabulary and phraseology, as well as to training in the usage of synonyms and idioms usage. The authors also suggest introducing dictations in order to improve the orthography and to develop comprehension skills. Introducing mass media language as a fixed element of classes is also advisable. Moreover “in the material prepared (...) for this program needs, the rule of basic vocabulary gradation and usage is obeyed”¹³.

A general teaching aim at the higher levels is to reach the language knowledge at the abstract level. The mastering of the ability to express feelings and views in more and more diversified form is achieved by using authentic audio-visual materials.

Full linguistic, communication and cultural competence is achieved by conducting a course on MSA, dialect and descriptive grammar, in which units are closely connected. A Polish instructor supervises the whole teaching process, especially with regard to the presentation and explanation of grammatical material to the students. He also does repetition drills, prepares control and examination tests, and is responsible for a consistent gradual implementation of the material¹⁴.

Role of a native speaker in the teaching process

It is widely known that no philology studies are complete without careful and efficient input of a native language speaker. He/she is obliged to supervise over proper pronunciation of students, especially in the initial learning stage. In this respect Arabic is considerably different from Indo-European languages, particularly if we take into account the phenomenon of diglossia, which occurs within this language. It also has its impact on the phonetics of Arabic lecturers, for example: an Egyptian will pronounce *gā'* ‘he came’, a Lebanese—*žā'*, a Jordanian—*ġā'*. An Iraqi lecturer may not differentiate between the pronunciation of *ḍ* and *z*, a Syrian, on the other hand, may pronounce *z* instead of *ḍ*. The impact of the idiolects of an individual lecturer may be also observed in the presentation of vowels. Some differences however, have been already included into MSA—*darbūka*,

¹³ Górska and Skoczek 1999:18.

¹⁴ Górska and Skoczek 1999:26.

darābukka, dirbakka ‘darbookah - a folk clay percussion instrument’¹⁵; darābazīn, darabzīn ‘balustrade; rail’¹⁶. All these are examples of dialectal forms incorporated into MSA.

The learner is faced with the phenomenon at the very beginning of the learning process as soon as he or she starts to cope with the first phonetic material. More problems arise when the teaching of grammar and of the vocabulary of colloquial dialects begin (and they are often completely different from MSA).

In order to acquire proper pronunciation skills, the learner should be offered (and make use of) diverse techniques of phonetic presentation, such as, for instance, the (repeated) number technique, the technique of enumerating repeated words, the odd-one-out technique or the single word repetition technique. They are all based on sets of contrasting minimal pairs¹⁷, e.g., ṣār ‘he became’ sār ‘he went’, fuṭūr ‘breakfast’ futūr ‘debility’, qalb ‘heart’ kalb ‘dog’.

The native instructor’s role, however, should by no means be restricted to teaching pronunciation. He is usually expected to familiarize the student with the consonantal script, which not only substantially varies from European alphabets, but is also written from right to left. It is therefore important that the student should be able—from the very beginning - to imitate the natural script of a native speaker. That could help him or her avoid bad writing habits and master at least the nashī style, which is predominantly used in print. In addition to imitating native instructors, the students may also make use of special handwriting exercises and refer to special handbooks, which emphasize the writing and reading skills. Peter F. Abboud’s¹⁸ *Elementary Modern Standard Arabic* and Langenscheidts *Praktisches Lehrbuch—Arabisch. Ein Standardwerk für Anfänger* by Harald Funk¹⁹ are good examples of textbooks that could be used for the purpose.

Apart from what was said above, native Arabic language instructors are usually expected to present, introduce and comment audiovisual and textual teaching materials and to supervise the student’s work on the expansion of his or her vocabulary (including idioms and phraseology). It is also believed that native speakers are better than non-native speakers in stimulating the

¹⁵ Reig 1983:1727.

¹⁶ Reig 1983:1726.

¹⁷ Komorowska 1993:91-93.

¹⁸ Abboud 1968:68-97 and by the way of the units of the first part.

¹⁹ Funk 1985:20, 26 and by the way of the units.

student to participate actively in dialogues and in making him or her express their own sincere opinions during discussions²⁰.

Recapitulation and conclusions

It is rather unfortunate that majority of books and papers on teaching Arabic are restricted to what we called here the basic level. Adnan Abbas and George Yacoub's handbook *Język arabski dla Polaków* (The Arabic language for speakers of Polish), for instance, has been phonetically adapted for speakers of Polish²¹, but its lexical material is limited to only 500 words. Similarly restricted is Ernst Harder's *Arabische Sprachlehre*, which—additionally—assumes the slightly outdated grammar-translation method. Then, there is Mohammed Hussein Hassan and Ryszard Kurowski's textbook called *Zwięzły kurs języka arabskiego* (A brief course of the Arabic language), where the lexical material has been subordinated to grammatical explanations, not to mention the fact that the texts included in the handbook relate primarily to grammatical rather than lexical aspects of the language.

An exception, worth mentioning here (for its merits) is Jochanan Kapliwatzky's *Arabic. Language and Grammar*. The handbook contains an impressive number of diversified exercises, including various substitution drills, which can—quickly and effectively—form the desired language habits of a learner. Andrzej Zaborski also implements drills in *Dialekt egipski języka arabskiego* (The Egyptian dialect of the Arabic language). His handbook is partially based on American and British textbooks for Egyptian dialect. Despite scant graphics it presents a thorough teaching program from basic to advanced level. Similarly praiseworthy is a textbook by Richard J. McCarthy and Faraj Raffouly, *Spoken Arabic of Baghdad*, which presents a cohesive plan of teaching the dialect of Baghdad from the basics to the advanced level. The lexical and grammatical material is introduced here in gradual steps and the book is supplemented with many translation and grammatical exercises.

Yet, as far as the specific needs of the Polish learner of Arabic are concerned, the work of Elżbieta Górńska and Marek Skoczek has so far been the only book presenting a cohesive teaching program of the language which may be effectively employed in teaching both university philology students and learners of Arabic at extramural courses.

²⁰ Górńska and Skoczek 1999:29.

²¹ Abbas and Yacoub 1996:7.

The success of the book comes not only from the fact that the book is grounded firmly in both theory and practice but also from the textbooks that served its authors as models. These were, among others, such books as: *Elementary Modern Standard Arabic* by Peter F. Abboud, *Modern Standard Arabic: Intermediate Level* by the same author and *Advanced Standard Arabic* by R.M. Rammuny. Although the three textbooks are considered classic in teaching Arabic, in my opinion their lexical content needs slight updating (with items referring, for instance, to certain economic and technological phenomena—like globalization or computer technology). Extremely useful for these purposes is James Dickins and Janet C. E. Watson's textbook published in 1999, *Standard Arabic: An Advanced Course*, which covers a wide spectrum of issues from the Gulf War and Muslim Spain to ethnic groups in the Middle East and problems of Muslim fundamentalism. The textbook includes, among others, classical literary texts and listening exercises (the recorded materials are the BBC Arabic Service news programs²²).

The functionality of Elżbieta Górka and Marek Skoczek's handbook together with (relatively) easy access of the learner to other textbooks and additional materials herald a progress of teaching Arabic in Poland. As for the handbook itself, it is likely—in my opinion—to become a stimulus motivating further research in the field and resulting in detailed teaching programs of the language.

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²² Dickins and Watson 1999:155, 157, 180, 183, 205, 207, 264, 428, 429, 460, 494.

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