

# Learning Arabic in Jordan

Mohammad Ahmad Ibrahim Al-Shallakh

Instructor at the Department of English, Sur University College, Sur, Oman

**Abstract:** *This study aimed at investigating the problems that the non-natives face in learning Arabic at Public Jordanian Universities, their causes and the suggested solutions. The researcher conducted questionnaires in his study. These questionnaires were sent to (20) teachers and (80) non-native students who learned Arabic as a foreign language at the University of Jordan and Al-Albait University. Only (53) questionnaires were completed by the students and nine by the teachers. Results of the study have revealed that the non-native students encountered different problems in learning Arabic such as linguistic difficulties and problems that are related to textbook materials. The causes of these problems are related to the nature of Arabic and textbook materials. Different solutions are suggested for these problems.*

**Keywords:** Non-Natives, Arabic, Problems, Causes

## 1. Introduction

Arabic has a distinguished place among the world languages. It is the bowl of an international culture and a great civilization. It is one of the official languages of the United Nations. It ranks sixth in the world's league table of languages. As the language of the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, it is also widely used throughout the Muslim world. It belongs to the Semitic group of languages which also includes Hebrew and Amharic, the main language of Ethiopia. Arabic is one of the oldest languages in the world which is the spoken language in the Arab States of the Middle East and North Africa. There are about 289 million native speakers and about 256 million non-natives of Arabic in the world. This makes the Arabic language an important one to learn. (Gordon, 2005)

Annaka (1976) claims that the Arab World has started to assume its role in many aspects of life. Accordingly, its language had better assume its role, as well. The Arabic language has had a tendency towards internationalism for many political and economic reasons; this is admitted by the non-native learners of Arabic and the non-believers of its originality. Researchers in this field of education and language teaching have started to study Arabic language-related issues; Annaka's study focused on preparing Arabic language curricula and materials, writing books to help foreigners learn Arabic based on appropriate scientific principles and finding out how beneficial these textbook materials (curricula) are and which are the best for various Arabic learners; though even this step has been taken quite tardily.

Arabic has a distinguished place among the world languages. It is the bowl of an international culture and a great civilization. It is one of the official languages of the United Nations. Students choose to study Arabic for a variety of reasons. Some students study it as part of their academic work, or to satisfy a general interest in the people and cultures of the Arabic-speaking world. Some students take Arabic to help them get jobs both with the US government or non-government agencies operating in the Arab world. Students of Arab descent often take Arabic to better understand this heritage and gain familiarity with the language of a parent or grandparent. Muslim students

usually take Arabic in order to read the Qur'an and other religious texts. Learning Arabic opens a vast body of literature and art, as well as offer opportunities for interaction with other Arabic speakers. (see Dweik 1986; Strout 2006, Husseinali 2006).

In Jordan, a Royal Decree to establish a Language Center at Al-Yarmouk University and another center at the University of Jordan were issued in (1979). Other language centers were established later in Amman whose aim was serving the Arabic language and securing the best possible means to spread it among the speakers of other languages. Most of these students study Arabic language and Islamic Shari'a (law) at the Jordanian universities despite the difficulties they face in learning, living expenses and being away from their families. This proves these students' desire to learn Arabic and their strong inclination to get acquainted with our culture, civilization and true religion.

It is further noticed that these students study in the official Jordanian universities in accordance with the programs designated by the Jordanian universities for the Arab students; whether Jordanian or not, without any consideration to the increasing numbers of these non-native learners, their inclinations, potentials, needs and the demands of their communities. The strong appearance of Arabic around the world makes a lot of countries start teaching Arabic for non-natives as a foreign language for many reasons. Non-native learners try to learn Arabic in Jordan to understand a lot of the science fields. This teaching causes a lot of difficulties to learners.

## 2. Review of Literature

Many scholars have addressed the difficulties that the non-native learners of Arabic face i.e. Amayreh (1984), Fagman and Niman (1996), Maxos (2002), Dabrowsky (2005), Elkhafaifi (2005), Faryadi (2007), Sehlaoui (2008), Dawood (2008) and Suliman (2008).

Amayreh (1984) analyzed the textbooks used for teaching Arabic to non-native speakers. The analysis covered writing, vocabulary, grammatical structures and methods of teaching. He claimed that the difficulties which the students faced while learning Arabic resulted in more from the poor

textbooks that did not have clear goals and efficient methods. Moreover, his study focused on the steps which might be taken to help improve textbooks for teaching Arabic.

Fagman and Niman (1996) reported that the emphasis in teaching Arabic was the literary language; thus stressing mainly reading, listening and writing. Students were hardly taught how to speak. Those who opposed teaching the spoken Arabic claimed that there were endless dialects. Therefore, it is difficult to decide which one to teach. In addition, Arabic has a linguistic variety of written language alongside the spoken one, which is also made of different dialects.

Dabrowsky (2005) focused on some linguistic challenges of learning Arabic by answering the question "What are the unique linguistic challenges for young adult Americans learning Arabic?" The findings were obtained from observations, interviews, and the analysis of questionnaires made by others. This section identified the major linguistic challenges of learning Arabic experienced by the cadets and the soldiers as reviewed in the literature. These problems are related to the diglossic nature of Arabic, the Arabic writing system, and cultural proficiency.

Elkhafaifi (2005) focused on the classroom activities where anxiety played an important role in foreign language students' classroom performance. His study presented the results of the first empirical examination of the effect of general foreign language learning anxiety on students' achievement in an Arabic course and of listening anxiety on students listening comprehension. That data came from two measures of anxiety and a background questionnaire administered to 233 postsecondary students of Arabic as a foreign language. Anxiety scores were correlated with final grades and listening comprehension scores. The results indicated that foreign language learning anxiety and listening anxiety separate but related phenomena that both correlate negatively with achievement. The study also revealed significant negative correlations among foreign language learning anxiety, listening anxiety, and selected demographic variables.

Likewise, Strout (2006) focused on the purpose and importance of studying Arabic by asking some students why they wanted to learn Arabic as a foreign language. Many of them claimed that they needed the skill for career purposes. Others came from an Arab background and had a parent or relatives they would like to converse with in the language. Still others just wanted the challenge of learning a new language.

Faryadi (2007) discussed the constructivist paradigm of teaching Arabic as a foreign language in Malaysian settings. He examined the role of interactive multimedia in enhancing the chalk and talk methods of teaching Arabic in Malaysian schools. His paper investigated the importance of Arabic Language in Malaysia. Furthermore, it dealt with the Malaysian Government's plan of action to introduce a series of major educational reforms in an attempt to develop Malaysia into a regional educational hub. In addition, the

paper looked further into possible methods of acquiring Arabic as a foreign language in Malaysian classrooms.

Shehlaoui (2008) stated the following concerning the teaching institutions of Arabic in America:

There are numerous professional organizations today that promote Arabic language education in various ways. These include organizations such as the American Association of Teachers of Arabic, the Middle East Institute, and the Arab American Institute; which represent the policy and community interests of Arab Americans throughout the United States and strive to promote Arab American participation in the US electoral system. There are 15 Title VI-funded Language Resource Centers (LRCs) that support and promote language education in the USA.(p.285)

Moreover, different studies focused on the reasons that caused difficulties for the non-native speakers of Arabic such as: Almasri (1987), Al-Anati (2003), Belnap (2006) and Kaleefa and Al-Hrout (2007).

Almasri (1987) concluded that the students' lack of time-management skills, doing the homework at the last minute and the non-existence of study skills caused their difficulties.

Al-Anati (2003) focused on the general problems of teaching Arabic for non-natives. He claimed that teaching Arabic for non-natives had not occupied the desired position among the speakers of this language yet. Studies and researchers who dealt with the learners of Arabic as a second language had shown that there were reasons for the foreign learners' weakness in Arabic i.e. understanding the different varieties of Arabic. These reasons have much to do with the Arabic language itself, the books and curricula prepared to help foreigners absorb the language, and the language teacher.

Belnap (2006) highlighted the lack of students' interaction in the United States with the native speakers' community:

Students do not live in a community in which they have the ability to easily interact with native speakers outside the academic realm. Thus, the authenticity of language in conversations and curriculum has only recently become an issue, as more students travel abroad and are exposed to authentic language use. Since ( 87.4%) of 614 students from a recent National Middle East Language Resource Center study of Middle East language learning and teaching in the United States agreed that they were studying Arabic in order to interact with the people who speak it, teachers and students must first understand what the reality of Arabic in a native context would look like (p. 174).

Kaleefa and Al-Hrout (2007) identified the sources of non-native students' weakness in Arabic at Mu'tah University and they tested the differences in the reasons for this weakness according to several demographic characteristics of the study sample. A questionnaire was specially developed for this purpose; the truthfulness of its content and stability were verified. The study sample consisted of the Malaysian graduate students selected on purpose at Mu'tah University. The study showed a number of

significant reasons for the non-native students' weakness in Arabic; including: the isolated lodging, language vocabularies, the existing books, language of instruction and the unqualified instructor.

Students in any educational institution are considered the input of the educational process; and thus, improving their academic performance is one of the most significant results of the educational process. However, this performance is often affected by a number of factors which cause the deterioration of the students' academic level. As long as the foreign learners of Arabic are part of these students, they cannot be excluded from the general academic weakness that has started to appear at Jordanian universities.

Because the problems that non-native learners of Arabic face in learning Arabic are still in existence and because the number of foreign students who come to Jordan for the purpose of studying Arabic in its homeland and among its own speakers, the researchers decided to examine this issue and take it further hoping to identify the barriers that impede its learning. Also, the researchers hope to suggest different channels that may address the issues and offer some reasonable solutions to help the non-native learners of Arabic in Jordanian public universities.

### 3. Statement of the Problem

Teaching Arabic to non-natives might cause difficulties that make the learning of Arabic a hard task to achieve. The aim of this study is to examine, identify and describe these causes which are raised as a result of teaching Arabic for non-native learners and to suggest some solutions.

### 4. Question of the Study

To achieve the above-mentioned goals, the study will answer the following question:

1- What factors might have caused the problems that the non-native learners encounter in learning Arabic in Jordan?

### 5. Significance of the Study

Teaching Arabic for non-natives is widely practiced in many countries in the world due to the importance of Arabic language and its culture and because Arabic enjoys a special status not only among Arabs but also among Moslems. Therefore, many researchers especially in the USA have conducted studies related to its teaching and learning. However, very few studies have focused on the teaching of Arabic for non-natives in Jordan. Thus, this study will fill a gap in the literature. The samples used in other studies focused on learners who share one language or culture like the Malaysian learners. The sample used in this study included learners from Western and Moslem countries alike whose native languages included English, Russian, Malaysian, Indonesian and Japanese. Therefore, this study will be of benefit to future researchers in the field, to language planners, to textbook designers and of course to language teachers and students alike.

### 6. Limitations of the Study

Results of the study cannot be generalized to all non-native learners of Arabic in Jordan because the results are limited to the sample of the study. The limited time and resources available when conducting this study did not allow soliciting answers from a larger number of respondents.

### 7. Method

A purposive sample of (80) respondents was selected from two universities in Jordan. However, only (53) students completed the forms. The demographic background information about the respondents' general background included data such as gender, religion, age, level of education, the type of university the respondents attended, nationality, the students' mother tongue and the language of the parents. The respondents have various language background and diverse nationalities such as English, Russian, Malaysian, Indonesian and Japanese. They hold different degrees such as Ph.D, M.A and B.A. they speak different languages according to their nationalities.

### 8. Instrument of the Study

A questionnaire with a five-Likert scale (i.e. strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree) was used to reveal the problems of teaching Arabic for non-natives in the Jordanian public universities. The statements which were included in the questionnaire covered areas related to linguistic problems, problems related to the textbook materials and problems related to the classroom activities.

The questionnaire in its final form was sent to a panel of experts. The jurors were asked to review the phrasing, suitability, thoroughness and ease of use of the instrument. To establish the reliability of the questionnaire a sample of five students who were excluded from the main samples were selected to respond to the items of the questionnaire. Two weeks later, it was distributed to the same participants and the responses showed stability in the answers.

### 9. Results of the Teachers' and Students' Questionnaires

The focus in this part is on the causes of the previous problems. As indicated in Table (9) below, items (3, 6) for the students are the main linguistic causes which score high means between (5 – 3.68). The other items are medium causes between (3.67- 2.34). On the other hand, the teachers stated that just one item (1) is a high cause. All other items are medium linguistic causes between (3.67- 2.34). As shown in Table (10), the students' responses have (2) high items and (4) medium items while teachers' responses have (1) high item and (5) medium items.

**Table 1:** Means and Percentages for the Linguistic Causes as Perceived by the Students and the Teachers

| Linguistic Causes   | Students |            | Teachers |            |
|---|----------|------------|----------|------------|
|   | Mean     | Percentage | Mean     | Percentage |
| 1. Learning of Arabic is influenced by students' mother tongue.   | 3.36     | 67.2       | 3.89     | 77.8       |
| 2. The goal of joining the Arabic learning program is to read and make conversations in Arabic.         | 3.60     | 72.0       | 3.56     | 71.2       |
| 3. The linguistic system of Arabic is different from that of my language.                               | 3.87     | 77.4       | 3.33     | 66.6       |
| 4. The existence of too many synonyms in Arabic.  | 3.64     | 72.8       | 3.44     | 66.8       |
| 5. The language of teaching at university differs from the colloquial language spoken in the community. | 3.64     | 72.8       | 3.33     | 66.6       |
| 6. The existence of different varieties of Arabic   | 3.70     | 74.0       | 3.67     | 73.4       |

**Table 2:** The Strength of the Linguistic Causes with Frequencies and Percentages of the Previous Table

| Strength of the Problem | Rating     | Students' | Responses  | Teachers' | Responses  |
|-------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
|                         |            | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
| High                    | 5- 3.68    | 2         | 33.4       | 1         | 16.6       |
| Medium                  | 3.67- 2.34 | 4         | 66.6       | 5         | 83.4       |
| Low                     | 2.33- 1    | 0         | 0          | 0         | 0          |
|                         | Total      | 6         | 100%       | 6         | 100%       |

As shown in Table (2), items (1, 2, and 3) for both the teachers and the students are medium causes. Their means are between (3.67- 2.34). As shown in Table (12), both the students' responses and teachers' responses have (3) medium items.

**Table 3:** Means and Percentages for the Causes Related to Classroom Activities and Exercises as Perceived by the Students and the Teachers

| Causes Related to the Classroom Activities and Exercises                         | Students |            | Teachers |            |
|--|----------|------------|----------|------------|
|  | Mean     | Percentage | Mean     | Percentage |
| 1. The lack of language laboratory activities for Non-Natives at the university. | 2.91     | 58.2       | 3.22     | 64.4       |
| 2. The activities are not suitable for the students' age.                        | 2.75     | 55         | 3.11     | 62.2       |
| 3. The activities don't present all language skills.                             | 3.28     | 65.6       | 3.56     | 71.2       |

**Table 4:** The Strength of the Causes Related to Classroom Activities and Exercises Frequencies and Percentages of the Previous Table

| Strength of the Problem | Rating     | Students' | Responses  | Teachers' | Responses  |
|-------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
|                         |            | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
| High                    | 5- 3.68    | 0         | 0          | 0         | 0          |
| Medium                  | 3.67- 2.34 | 3         | 100        | 3         | 100        |
| Low                     | 2.33- 1    | 0         | 0          | 0         | 0          |
|                         | Total      | 3         | 100%       | 3         | 100%       |

Means and Percentages for the Causes Related to Classroom Activities and Exercises as Perceived by the Students and the Teachers

teachers; it shows that three items (1,2,3) are medium causes and item number (4) is a high cause. As shown in Table (14), the students' responses have (4) medium causes while teachers' responses have (3) medium causes and one high cause.

Table (13) below, shows clearly that all the items (1,2,3,4) are medium causes in the students' responses. For the

**Table 5:** Means and Percentages for the Causes Related to the Textbook Materials as Perceived by the Students and the Teachers

| Causes Related to the Textbook Materials   | Students |            | Teachers |            |
|--|----------|------------|----------|------------|
|  | Mean     | Percentage | Mean     | Percentage |
| 1. The lack of references and periodicals related to teaching Arabic to Non-Natives. | 3.40     | 68.0       | 3.56     | 71.2       |
| 2. Arabic teaching books are tailored to Arabic speakers not to Non-natives.         | 2.96     | 59.2       | 3.33     | 66.6       |
| 3. Textbook does not have enough exercises.  | 2.70     | 54.0       | 3.11     | 62.2       |
| 4. Textbooks are not prepared to fill the cultural gaps that face the students.      | 3.34     | 66.8       | 3.78     | 75.6       |

**Table 6:** The Strength of the Causes Related to the Textbook Materials with Frequencies and Percentages of the Previous Table

| Strength of the Problem | Rating     | Students' | Responses  | Teachers' | Responses  |
|-------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
|                         |            | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
| High                    | 5- 3.68    | 0         | 0          | 1         | 25         |
| Medium                  | 3.67- 2.34 | 4         | 100        | 3         | 75         |
| Low                     | 2.33- 1    | 0         | 0          | 0         | 0          |
|                         | Total      | 4         | 100%       | 4         | 100%       |

## 10. Discussion

Results reported in Table 9 (p. 51) for example items (3, 6) indicate that the major causes of the problems that non-native learners of Arabic encounter are related to major linguistic differences between Arabic and the learners' native languages and the existence of different varieties of Arabic which are sometimes not intelligible.

However, the teachers stated that the main cause of learning Arabic is influenced by the students' mother tongue. These results are caused by the interference from the students' first language into Arabic. The students referred to language (1) when they respond into Arabic. These findings match the results of Al-Anati (2003) and Belnap (2006). They stated that teaching Arabic for non-natives had not achieved the desired position among speakers of Arabic language yet.

On the other hand, the teachers stated that there is a major cause related to the textbook materials as shown in Table 13 (p. 52). They stated that the textbook materials are not prepared to fill the cultural gaps the students face.

This factor appeared as a result of preparing of the textbook materials poorly. These results agree with Al-Anati (2003) and Kaleefa and Al-Hrout (2007) who claimed that a number of significant reasons for non-native learners' weakness in Arabic are the existing textbooks, the language of instruction and the unqualified instructors.

## 11. Recommendations

On the basis of the results of this study, the researchers propose a number of points to be taken into consideration by future researchers:

- Evaluate textbook materials used in teaching Arabic as a second or a foreign language, and show their strengths and weaknesses.
- Design textbooks that emphasize both cultures and focus on all language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, in addition to paying attention to grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary.
- Conduct further research on non-natives who are younger than university students i.e. non-natives who are enrolled in Private Jordanian Secondary Schools.
- Conduct further research on the best methods used in teaching diglossic languages.

## 12. Acknowledgment

I would like to thank the management of Sur University College for the continued support and encouragement to conduct this research. Also, I would like to thank the dean at Sur University College for his motivation toward doing this research.

## References

[1] Al-Anati, W. (2003) Applied linguistics and teaching Arabic to non-native speakers, Jawhara for Publishing and Distributing, Amman – Jordan. ( Arabic Published Paper).

- [2] Almasri, A. (1987). *Academic-point incentives and college-students use of study skills*, Unpublished master's thesis, Western Michigan University, Kakanasoo, MI.
- [3] Amayreh, M. (1984). *A linguistic analysis and evaluation of Arabic textbooks materials and methodology*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, Indiana, USA.
- [4] Annaka, M. (1976) Basics of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers. Ninth Conference of the Federation of Arab Teachers, Khartoum- Sudan.
- [5] Belnap, R. (2006). A profile of students of Arabic in U.S. universities. In K. Wahba, Z. Taha, & L. England (Eds.), *Handbook for Arabic language teaching professionals in the 21st century* (pp.303-341) . New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- [6] Dabrowski, M. (2005). *Criteria for appraising computer-based simulations for teaching Arabic as a foreign language*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, Indiana State, USA.
- [7] Dawood, S. (2008) *Teaching of the Arabic language in South African schools-nature of the language and methodology*, Unpublished master's thesis, University of South Africa, Africa.
- [8] Dweik, B. (1986) *Research papers in applied linguistics*. Hebron: Hebron University Press.
- [9] Elkhafaifi, H. (2005). Listening comprehension and anxiety in the Arabic language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 88, (2), 45-69.
- [10] Fagman, A. & Niman, I. (1996). How to Say it in Arabic? A Project in Teaching Spoken Arabic in Ramot – Hefer High School. Retrieved May 12, 2009 from [http://www.ph-ludwigsburg.de/html/9e-aaax-s-01/seiten/SymposiumBB/alon\\_fragman.pdf](http://www.ph-ludwigsburg.de/html/9e-aaax-s-01/seiten/SymposiumBB/alon_fragman.pdf)
- [11] Faryadi, Q. (2007). Techniques of Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language through Constructivist Paradigm: Malaysian Perspective. Retrieved April 8, 2009 from: [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/27/ff/69.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/27/ff/69.pdf).
- [12] Gordon, R. (Ed.). (2005) *Ethnologic: Language of the world*. Dallas, TX: SIL International.
- [13] Husseinali, G. (2006). Who is studying Arabic and why? A survey of Arabic students' orientations at a major university. *Foreign Language Annuals*, 2,(39), 395-412.
- [14] Kaleefa, G. & Al-Hrout, A. (2007) Causes of weaknesses of students in learning an Arabic language. Middle East University, Amman-Jordan. ( Arabic Published Paper)
- [15] Maxos, H. (2002). Arabic for non-natives series- Hussein Maxos: Comparative Studies 1995-2002 IRAMES Group Damascus Retrieved June 26, 2009 from: <http://hmaxos.com>
- [16] Sehlaoui, M. (2008). Language learning, heritage, and literacy in the USA: The case of Arabic. *Language, Culture & Curriculum*. 3, (21), 280-291.
- [17] Strout, E. (2006). The challenge of teaching Arabic. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14, (53), 31-51.
- [18] Suliman, A. (2008). *The changing role of Arabic in religious discourse: A sociolinguistic study of Egyptian Arabic*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana State, USA.