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Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers: Current Challenges and Proposed Solutions

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***Abstract*—**This research paper seeks to address the issue of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers. This topic has received considerable attention from educational and linguistic researchers, given the spread and expansion of Arabic and the growing interest of foreigners in learning it.

Teaching Arabic to non-native speakers has faced many problems and encountered numerous obstacles, some of which are related to Arabic itself and its lexical, grammatical, and phonetic characteristics, while others are related to the teacher, the learner, curricula, and educational materials, which in turn have not been at an appropriate level for foreign learners. The research also seeks to propose some solutions that it considers means of developing Arabic language teaching and ways of reducing the extent of linguistic and other problems.

***Keywords*—**Arabic, teaching, problems, non-native speakers, learners.

Introduction:

Arabic is the language of the Islamic religion and the language in which the Holy Qur'an was revealed. It has been honored through acts of worship that cannot be performed in any other language. All of this has increased its vitality and activity and contributed to its spread across different parts of the world. Nations consequently became interested in learning and studying it, particularly Muslims. It has also been regarded as a second language in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere, and has succeeded in securing a place for itself in Islamic schools, universities, and institutes.

Therefore, the issue of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers has become a topic of great importance and significance. It has received considerable attention from Arab and other researchers, and efforts have been combined and studies intensified in order to develop its teaching by devising modern and effective methods aimed at facilitating its learning for students, investigating the problems associated with teaching it, attempting to address them, and finding alternative solutions to these obstacles, so that it may be presented in a scientific pedagogical manner consistent with the developments of the age and responsive to the needs of foreign learners with their diverse cultures and different languages.

1- Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers:

No one can deny the status that Arabic has enjoyed and the distinction it has been granted over other languages, which has made the interest of non-native speakers in learning it continuous and efforts to develop programs for teaching it ongoing, as it is the language of the last heavenly scripture revealed to the best of creation, Muhammad peace and blessings be upon him. Islam has increased its sanctity and enhanced its greatness, in addition to the fact that it constitutes a record containing the Arab heritage, both poetry and prose, from the pre-Islamic period. The Arabs therefore did not hesitate to glorify and venerate it through the masterpieces of poetry and the magic of eloquence produced by their minds. They viewed it as though it were a secret of the universe or one of the systems of existence. They established foundations for it and developed branches that included rhetoric, grammar, prosody, criticism, phonetics, and others.

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As for its status among languages, it has succeeded in asserting its presence and strengthening its position among the languages widely spoken worldwide, such as English, Spanish, and Chinese. Perhaps the reason for this lies in what God Almighty has enabled Islam to achieve in terms of spread and expansion throughout the eastern and western parts of the earth, because a newcomer to Islam cannot, under any circumstances, dispense with Arabic. In addition to this, there are other reasons, including assuming employment positions and the desire to learn about and benefit from the culture of the East.

Walid Al-Anati confirms this by stating: “The middle of the twentieth century witnessed a remarkable interest in learning Arabic among non-native speakers. This interest became clearly evident at both the Arab and international levels. British and American universities became concerned with learning Arabic, and learning and teaching it became an important and essential requirement for obtaining certain degrees and positions.”

2- Why Teach Arabic to Non-Native Speakers:

The benefits of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers are numerous, and the reasons for this vary between study, trade, and gaining knowledge of Arab culture and the civilizational heritage of the language. There is no way to delve deeply into these aspects except by learning Arabic, so that cultural exchange may take place and the interaction of civilizations may be maintained. The objectives agreed upon by some specialists in this field can be summarized as follows:[2]

2-1 Achieving Linguistic Competence:

This refers to the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Through these skills, the learner acquires the language to an extent that enables them to communicate in it.

2-2 Providing the Learner with the Three Linguistic Elements:

These include sounds, that is, the various phonetic phenomena; vocabulary and contextual and idiomatic expressions; and grammatical structures, together with an appropriate amount of rules of grammar, morphology, and orthography. This may be referred to as the language material: sounds, vocabulary, structures, and sentences.

2-3 Achieving Communicative Competence:

This is the learner’s ability to communicate with native speakers of the language and to express themselves in the language they have acquired.

2-4 Achieving Cultural Competence:

Through this, learners are provided with various aspects of the culture of the language, namely Arab-Islamic culture, in addition to patterns of global culture that do not conflict with the principles of the religion. The ultimate and most important objective of all this is to provide the learner with linguistic abilities that qualify them to engage in critical and creative thinking in Arabic and to analyze aspects of social life in this language through the intellectual abilities acquired by the learner.

3- Problems of Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers:

Teaching Arabic to non-native speakers is not an easy task. Perhaps the main reason for this is the structure of Arabic itself and the features and characteristics that make it flexible at all its lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical levels. On the one hand, there are also non-linguistic problems that have no connection with the characteristics of Arabic, but which constitute an obstacle between the language and those who wish to learn it among non-native speakers. Non-linguistic problems are confined to social factors, external influences, and cultural differences, in addition to teaching methods and curricula. Our research has combined linguistic and other problems.

3-1. Phonetic Problems:

The sounds of Arabic differ from those of foreign languages. For example, the sound /ʿayn/ does not exist in French and English, and the same applies to the sound /ḥāʾ/. If the learner has not encountered these pharyngeal sounds in their mother tongue and has never produced them, it is difficult to pronounce them. When attempting to pronounce them, they may become confused with the sounds existing in the learner’s mother tongue, which is known as linguistic hybridization, that is, the interference of two languages.

The learner may also confuse the short vowel with the long vowel, thus making two words with different meanings into a single word, such as kataba and kātaba, matar and matār, despite the significant difference between the meanings of the two words.

What further complicates the matter is the way in which sounds are presented by the teacher, as the system of progression, which begins with the easiest and ends with the most difficult, is not taken into consideration. The teacher should therefore begin with the voiceless consonants, such as /b/ and /t/, placing them in words that are easy to pronounce, then move on to the emphatic sounds /ṣ/, /ḍ/, and /ṭ/, and then to the guttural sounds, namely the glottal stop, /h/, /ʿ/, and /gh/, etc.

The designer of an Arabic language textbook for non-native speakers should keep this objective in mind so that the learner can master the sounds and employ them in words. There is no benefit in merely knowing their characteristics and points of articulation. In the age of technology, there is no alternative to making use of educational aids, represented by pictures, illustrations, and audio devices, because sounds are fundamentally based on comprehension, attentive listening, and then practice. These educational aids may provide significant assistance in identifying the correct pronunciation of sounds at any time without having to return to or seek the assistance of the teacher.

It is also useful at times to incorporate some traditional methods into the curricula, such as group repetition and collective repetition of sounds and words. These methods correct the errors of some students who may feel embarrassed to ask questions or request that an idea be repeated, and they may also contribute to creating an atmosphere of enthusiasm among the students.[3]

3-2 The Phenomenon of Inflection:

Inflection is a prominent feature of Arabic that it inherited from its Semitic origin, which is a common origin shared by Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian. It is “the change of the vowels at the endings of inflected words as a result of grammatical factors.”[4]

Inflection is therefore a unique phenomenon in Arabic, for which we find no equivalent in foreign languages such as English, French, and others. Inflection performs a semantic function represented in highlighting grammatical functions, such as agency and objecthood; it governs the sentence system and regulates the flexibility of its structure. If inflection means changing the endings of words according to the grammatical factors, there is no harm in the speaker departing from the word-order system adopted by most languages. The speaker may advance or postpone words as they wish, as long as inflection reveals the meanings and determines the grammatical functions, such as placing the object before the subject and the predicate before the subject. This constitutes a difficulty for both non-native speakers of Arabic and native speakers alike, in addition to interpretation, estimation, and ellipsis, which distinguish Arabic grammar from that of other languages.

3-3 Abundance of Grammatical Material:

Grammar is the foundation of Arabic, and no student wishing to master Arabic can dispense with it. What distinguishes Arabic grammar is the large number of grammatical topics and the branching of its rules. Let us take, for example, pronouns in Arabic and compare them with English. We find that Arabic has more pronouns, including separate and attached pronouns, as well as overt and covert pronouns. As for number, Arabic has the singular, dual, and plural, whereas English has only the singular and plural. In addition, there is diversity in the plural, including the sound masculine plural, sound feminine plural, broken plural, collective nouns such as ibil and ghanam, and the plural of plurals, as in ahāyin and aqāwīl, the plurals of ahyan and aqwāl.

We also find that most Arabic teachers present this grammatical material in detail without arranging it in a manner that benefits the learner and achieves the educational objective, because any subject that the learner studies without needing it will cause them to miss what they actually need to learn, particularly given the abundance of grammatical rules in the language, as is well known.[5]

4- The Teacher:

The teacher of Arabic to non-native speakers is one of the pillars of the educational process and bears a significant responsibility. There is no doubt that the success of the educational process and the achievement of the desired objective depend on a set of qualities and qualifications that make the teacher an effective element in teaching. Therefore, “attention to developing and improving their skills is essential to ensuring the quality of the other elements of the educational system. The teacher is a fundamental pillar of the educational process, regardless of its stages and curricula. This does not contradict the numerous educational movements that call for paying attention to the learner and making them the focus of the teaching process, because the teacher, through their guidance, direction, and experience, contributes to achieving the objective of the educational process.”[6]

The academic qualifications of the Arabic language teacher and the skills they acquire do not, by themselves, enable them to achieve the results they aspire to. Rather, they must possess a considerable degree of personal motivation and positive aspirations toward teaching. All of this enables them to master the field in which they wish to employ their abilities. The more deeply knowledgeable the teacher is in their subject matter, the greater the evidence of their ability to achieve the objectives of the subject curriculum.[7]

Accordingly, among the conditions that should be met by a teacher of Arabic to non-native speakers are the following:

- The teacher should possess knowledge of all branches of the Arabic language sciences, including grammar, morphology, etc., or should have acquired a substantial amount of knowledge sufficient to achieve their objective.
- The teacher should be familiar with the customs and traditions of the peoples of the environment in which they teach Arabic and be immersed in their communities, so as to gain an understanding of the problems of learning and the obstacles to education.
- The teacher should have a command of one or more foreign languages in addition to Arabic.
- The teacher should be capable of diagnosing problems by assessing the abilities and aptitudes of students, using teaching methods, and developing programs to enhance their linguistic knowledge in light of their educational needs. If we conduct a field study of teachers of Arabic to non-native speakers in educational centers, universities, and other educational institutions concerned with this field, and examine their cultural and linguistic experience, we would confirm a weakness in the teacher's educational competencies [8] and the impossibility of fulfilling all the aforementioned conditions.

From all the foregoing, we conclude that the teacher may constitute an obstacle to teaching Arabic to non-native speakers if they do not meet the expectations of the task entrusted to them or have not received training before entering the profession. Therefore, "institutes were specifically established for this purpose in some Arab countries and elsewhere, some of which are relatively recent. However, a large number of teachers in this field were trained in certain educational institutions, such as faculties of arts, faculties of Arabic language, faculties of Sharia and Islamic studies, and faculties of education. These faculties prepare Arabic language teachers to teach native speakers, but do not prepare them to teach Arabic to non-Arabs, and many of them have not received professional or educational training."[9]

5- The Learner:

The learner is a key element in the educational process, as they are also the vessel that receives the Arabic language. Given the difficulty and flexibility of the language, as well as the abundance of its sounds and vocabulary, this has a negative impact on the learner and causes them to become reluctant to learn the language. This is a feeling of failure and disappointment, particularly among learners with a limited level who are unable to endure and exercise patience. Such frustration may lead to their breakdown and result in unacceptable behaviors.[10]

Here, the role of the teacher comes into play, particularly in terms of the psychological and skill-related aspects, by encouraging the learner and providing them with abundant practice, enabling them to use the language to express themselves and speak without hesitation. Moreover, the excessive corrections and interventions through which the teacher corrects learners' mistakes may cause them to lose self-confidence. Social and academic pressures may also constitute an obstacle between students enrolled in institutes for teaching Arabic to non-native speakers and their learning of the language, which has negatively affected their academic achievement and reduced their linguistic acquisition.

In addition, there are a number of obstacles related to the learner, which can be summarized as follows:

- The absence of basic objectives for learning the language, as learners' purposes differ from one person to another. Some learn it for the sake of the Holy Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah, while others make it a means of entering an Arab university institute in order to continue their studies in Arabic, in addition to those who wish to apply the comparative approach between Arabic and their mother tongue. [11]
- In addition to the differences between the culture of the learner's country and that of the country in which they study Arabic, as well as the diversity of environments, which negatively affects the learning process and leads to the predominance of the mother tongue and the transfer of its customs into Arabic.

6- The Problem of Curricula:

Educational curricula are no less important in hindering and obstructing the teaching of Arabic to non-native speakers when compared with other problems. Perhaps the reason for this is that their designers do not take into consideration the level of foreign students; instead, they develop and construct them according to materials designed for native Arabic speakers, despite the significant difference between the two. Yusuf states: "The curricula and educational materials of these centers are still, in many respects, influenced by the educational problems experienced by the teacher when teaching Arabic to native speakers. The content, topics taught, and educational materials are closer to the needs of Arab students studying at Arab and Islamic universities, which has led to the emergence of many difficulties and consequently to the weakness and frustration of these learners."[12]

- Here, it is also worth pointing out that the designers of curricula and authors of textbooks for teaching Arabic to non-native speakers have not distinguished between language acquisition by native speakers and language learning by foreigners. Language acquisition is supported by social and environmental factors, as well as by an environment whose inhabitants speak the target language, which makes learning or studying it easier because the learner has already acquired certain aspects of it, unlike the non-native speaker.
- Hence, there is a need to compile Arabic language textbooks for foreigners and adapt their contents according to what suits their level and enables them to achieve linguistic competence. Yusuf Okasha has pointed this out in his discussion of *Some Rules of Arabic Grammar among Native and Non-Native Speakers: An Attempt toward the Concept of Absent Grammar[13]

Books should therefore be designed according to the differences in linguistic needs between the two groups. He illustrated this through:

- Differences in the nature of Arabic language acquisition
- Differences in the nature of linguistic problems.
- Differences in linguistic needs.
- Differences in Arabic language textbooks.

There are rules that learners acquire before entering school, unlike non-Arab students, whose minds are devoid of Arabic and who have had no previous exposure to it. Accordingly, consideration must be given to presenting linguistic material for non-Arabic speakers in a manner consistent with the learners' needs, while avoiding the inclusion of grammatical material that discourages the student more than it motivates them. Recourse should be made to lists of commonly used vocabulary, such as the list of the International Institute of Khartoum and the list of King Saud University, and these should be relied upon in compiling textbooks and developing the educational materials taught at these institutes and centers, as an attempt to standardize the basic language used for teaching Arabic as a foreign language and to plan textbooks that meet conditions dictated by specific objectives and imposed by the nature of the learners. Such textbooks should be based on the comprehensive approach, which presents the language through its four main skills: listening with comprehension, pronunciation, speaking, reading, and writing, integrating them in an interconnected manner so that they are closely related to one another. [14]

Proposed Solutions to the Problems of Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers:

In the Field of Grammar:

- Grammar in teaching Arabic to non-native speakers should be separated from the other skills and taught at the final stages of language learning. Specific sessions should be devoted to it, with emphasis on its fundamental role, which is to correct speech, as is the case with native Arabic speakers. In teaching its rules, attention should also be paid to the functional aspect, away from subdivisions and interpretations that have no connection with language teaching, in accordance with Al-Jahiz's view: "As for grammar, do not occupy the child's mind with it except to the extent that it leads him to avoid serious grammatical errors, to the extent of the ignorance of ordinary people in a book if he writes one, a poem if he recites one, and something if he describes it; anything beyond that is a distraction from what is more important for him."[15] The purpose of teaching grammar is therefore to develop linguistic competence by teaching simple rules that correct speech, and this educational objective can only be achieved by taking into consideration the learners' environment and their developmental characteristics.

- The teacher should make use of purposeful educational media in presenting the instructional material, such as pictures, videos, and audio recordings. The role of these means in bringing Arabic closer to learners and facilitating its acquisition is undeniable. There is no benefit in "teaching abstract rules and having students memorize them according to the method referred to by educators as the grammar-translation method."[16]
- Traditional methods that undermine the educational objective should be abandoned. In such methods, the teacher is the cornerstone of the educational process, while the learner is merely a vessel into which information is poured and a recipient of everything dictated by the language teacher. The learner is prevented from asking questions, expressing opinions, and articulating ideas. This method neglects speaking skills, which are fundamental to language learning. Moreover, excessive translation into the mother tongue reduces opportunities to learn the target language, and its failure has been established beyond doubt.[17]
- It is necessary to activate the contrastive approach, which is based on comparing the learner's mother tongue with the target language in order to identify similarities and differences between the two languages and predict the errors that the learner may produce.[18] There is no alternative to applying contrastive studies, because when learning Arabic, the learner's mind is hardly free from comparison between their mother tongue and Arabic, as well as from thinking in the language in which they are accustomed to thinking. Since this inevitably occurs, it is preferable to apply it in a systematic and organized manner so that the comparison is effective and yields greater benefit.

The Teacher:

The teacher is a prominent element in the process of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers. If the teacher has constituted an obstacle to the success of the educational process for several of the factors mentioned above, it is therefore necessary to pay attention to their training and preparation through appropriate educational and pedagogical preparation that qualifies them to perform the function entrusted to them.

- The teacher should be able to employ eloquent language that clearly conveys the meanings intended for the learner, together with all communicative movements and gestures that stimulate the learner's motivation. This can only be achieved through dialogue and direct visual communication with learners. It is also advisable for the teacher to master the learner's language.

Conclusion:

At the conclusion of this research, we arrived at the following findings:

- The problems of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers are numerous, and what we have presented is only a small part of a much larger issue. It is not possible in this context to identify all of them, as they affect the three elements of the educational process, including social, cultural, psychological, and other factors, in addition to the nature of the Arabic language and its distinctive phonetic, lexical, and grammatical characteristics.
- The methods of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers still require improvement and re-adaptation in order to keep pace with contemporary changes.
- The objectives of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers must be reconsidered and directed in a manner consistent with the nature of the language, while taking into account the differences between it and other languages.
- It is necessary to benefit from the foundations of the contrastive approach in identifying the differences between Arabic and the mother tongue, with a view to employing the similarities and differences in teaching Arabic according to the requirements of the contrastive approach.
- Attention must be paid to the cultural and intellectual content of Arabic language teaching programs for non-native speakers, and this content should be derived from Arab-Islamic culture and the teachings of the Islamic religion.
- Knowledge of the learners' cultural, scientific, and social backgrounds is an essential prerequisite for raising the level of Arabic in an environment that is not its native environment.
- Attention to the teacher and their educational and pedagogical preparation contributes to the development of Arabic language teaching, as most of those entrusted with teaching Arabic are not linguistically or pedagogically qualified, which negatively affects the learners' performance.

Research Notes:

Notes

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