

Chapter 7

Teaching Arabic Online: Methods to Interact with and Engage Students

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ABSTRACT

Teaching Arabic online came with its own set of challenges and opportunities to employ technology to focus on students' learning, engagement, and enjoyment. Using instructional design principles, three Arabic courses were designed and delivered as learner-centered. With the use of technology tools such as video conferencing, screen-casting and audio recording, and editing software, the focus was on students' collaboration and engagement with the content, the instructor, and with each other. Because the structure of Arabic is very unlike English and the Romance languages, it presents special challenges because neither the symbols nor the words are familiar to students. The teaching methodology, the audience, and the political and social realities that make the study of Arabic important are discussed in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Someone once said, "We are the accumulation of our past experiences." When I immigrated to North America in 1979, I had only five words in my repertoire—hi, bye, yes, no, and thank you. As a young lady who not only did not speak the language of her new home country, I also arrived without a high school diploma. These were just two of the many hurdles I confronted. My experience makes me very sensitive to the students'

needs, especially when teaching Arabic to English-speaking students.

The road to learning English as a second language was the first hurdle for me in my new country, and it was filled with obstacles along the way. Some of my teachers thought Muslim Arab women should not dare to have ambition and a desire to learn. Some of my early high school instructors went out of their way to be neglectful, discouraging, and simply rude, ignoring and pretending that I did not exist in their classrooms.

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After I finished my high school, receiving an adult-equivalency diploma, I enrolled in a university to pursue a bachelor's degree. Some of my professors again were just as discouraging as my high school teachers had been. When I told my philosophy professor, that I wanted to aim high and reach the moon, he, said to me "Where do you get off reaching for the moon if you're an Arab woman?" There were those at the university level who wanted me to drop their courses because they felt I did not belong and I represented too much work for them as well.

I overcame each of these hurdles, completing my bachelor's and two master's degrees. But I was not satisfied to stop there. Moving to another city to pursue my doctorate was not an option. Online learning was the only viable way for me. It was time to choose a university for my doctoral degree. My work schedule and family obligations required that I study online; I was accepted in the online doctoral program at the University of West Florida. In this program, the majority of my course work, communications with my professors and my research committee were online. While working on my dissertation, I had regular meetings with my committee chair online as well.

While many universities are not totally comfortable with viewing students as customers (Courtney & Courtney, 2006), it is a fact that many more are trying to address and meet the needs of their students. Instead of the old view where the student has to do what the college dictated, within the new model, especially with the increasing availability of options to students, universities are often trying to meet the needs of the students. Students are seen coming to the counter with cash, and they expect to be treated with respect and listened to. Since I had none of these opportunities throughout my education, I go out of my way to be respectful to all my students.

What my students like is that online learning offers them classes at their time and place of convenience. This view of students driven by the need to increase enrollment and compete against

increased competition has motivated many institutions to offer online programs, and that includes the Arabic certificate at the University of West Florida (UWF).

Teaching and learning online has become the preferred option for many people, as it was for me when pursuing my doctorate (Kleinman, 2011). Today's workers in the global knowledge economy recognize that professional development whether a degree, certificate, bachelor's, master, or doctorate the path for better job opportunities, and in this times of economic downturn may be the difference between retaining or losing a position.

Education has another value. It helped me to learn about different cultures and to appreciate their differences. Some of my early negative experiences had at their root a general misunderstanding of cultures of people of the Middle East (Garman, 2011a). But appreciation of Middle East culture was not enough. Teachers lacked the skills in working with students whose native language was not English. Some of my instructors, who were not trained to work with students for whom English is their second language, did their best to help me. But not all! One of my teachers, years after I was a student in her class, said to me, "I tried everything I could think of to kick you out of my class because I thought you did not belong, but you proved me wrong."

How many students whose first language is Arabic or any other foreign language would have persisted? Understanding the importance of working and nurturing students learning a foreign language has helped to shape and strengthen my skills when I started teaching Arabic as a second language. This chapter is about teaching Arabic to western students, but it as easily could be written on hundreds of languages. The mobility of West and East mixes culture and language in a way that unprecedented. A person living in a tin hut in Micronesia may arrive in New York. For that person English is a second language. An individual from the South Pacific island nation, Vanuatu, usually speaks English as his third or

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