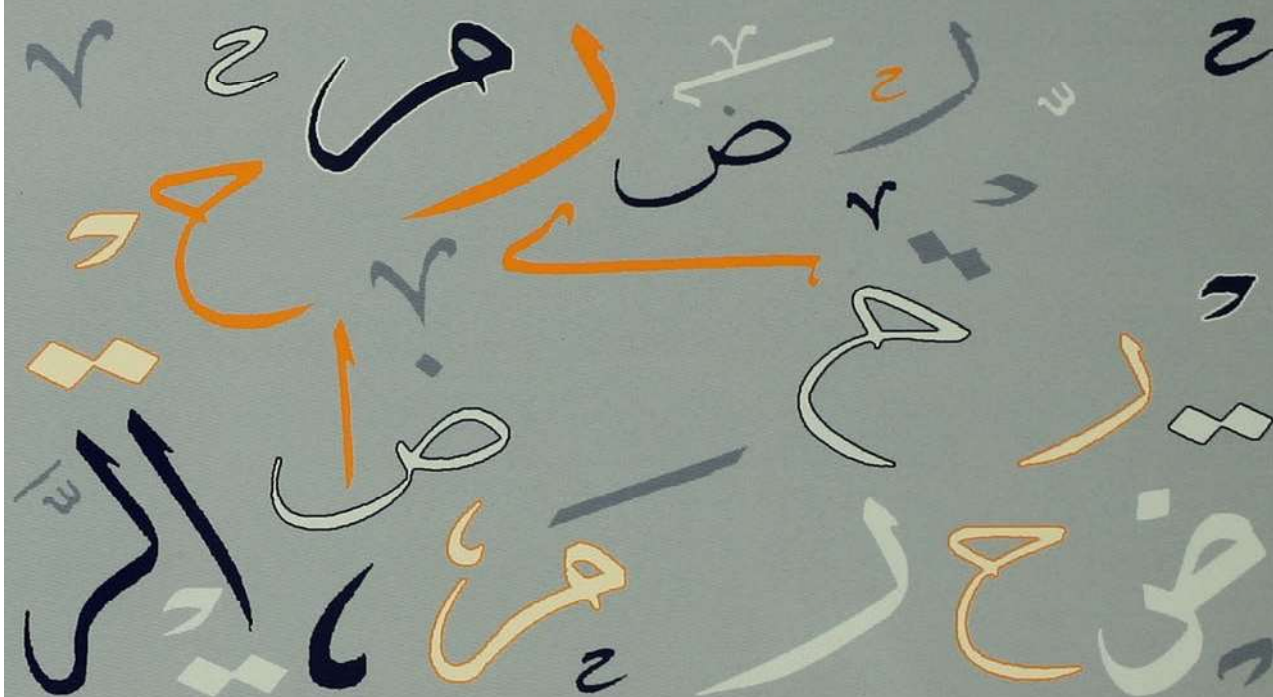


*Handbook
for Arabic Language Teaching
Professionals in the 21st Century*



*Edited by
Kassem M. Wahba
Zeinab A. Taha
Liz England*

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Edited by

Kassem M. Wahba

Georgetown University

Zeinab A. Taha

The American University in Cairo

Liz England

Hong Kong Institute of Education



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We dedicate this book to our students, who struggle with life's most valuable gift and most difficult challenge in the 21st century—learning another language; and to their teachers, who guide them on their journeys.

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Learner Strategies at the Interface: Computer-Assisted Language Learning Meets Computer-Mediated Communication

Vance Stevens

Petroleum Institute, Abu Dhabi, UAE

INTRODUCTION

I began my decades-long career as a teacher of English as a second and foreign language in 1975. That was also the year that I took my first Arabic course. At the time, many similarities existed in the way I taught English and was taught Arabic and in the way I had been taught French and Spanish in grade school and college in the decades preceding that. The techniques in all these instances used mimicry and memorization, noncommunicative practice with dialogues, and readings and listenings chosen more for the linguistic forms present than for relevance to students, most devoid of authenticity. There were two reasons for so many similarities in technique between teaching these various languages. First, arranging encounters with native-speaking interactants or to find and reproduce authentic and current materials in the languages to be taught was especially difficult back then. Second, my teachers and I were teaching the way we had been taught, so although techniques tended to be refreshed and reinvented, no radical changes in approach to language teaching existed to make much difference between generations of teachers.

Computers and particularly access to the Internet have since changed the potential, if not always the practice, of the teaching of languages. Accordingly, this chapter focuses on the currently underdeveloped but potentially significant impact of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the teaching of Arabic as a second/foreign language.

CURRENT CONTEXTS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

Overcoming the Firewall in the Mind

Simply having access to technology does not guarantee its use in language learning. The reason that practice lags behind potential is teachers must overcome is the "firewall in the mind," a phrase coined on the occasion of a plenary speech I gave in Nicosia, a city whose two communities were separated by a wall built to separate two opposing armies (Stevens, 2001). Earlier, a similar wall had come down in Berlin and the Germans coined the expression, "wall in the mind," to describe the tendency of people to act as if the wall were still there even though it was no longer a tangible reality. Similarly, Arabic and other language teachers must now rethink the effectiveness of their methods in light of the innovative potentials inherent in a truly communicative medium.

Students can be more familiar with computers than their teachers and take for granted their use of computer-based tools in ways that teachers consider as bordering on plagiarism. This attitude was illustrated in a question following a recent talk regarding the prevention of students "cheating" through reliance on online dictionaries and translation services. Concerned that the state of the students' knowledge was difficult to determine when they had access to online resources such as dictionaries and translators that could feed them 'answers' the teacher could not distinguish as the students' own work for the purpose of assessment, the questioner clearly did not regard the available technology as a resource to be exploited. Another controversy is whether instant messaging should be accepted with its great potential for communicative language learning or discouraged for its potential for distraction and abuse. For chat tools to gain acceptance, the computer must be seen as a tool or resource seamlessly fitting into the pedagogical picture as does a photocopier or scientific calculator. Teachers who themselves use computers productively in their work are better able to revise their pedagogical paradigms to accommodate the increasingly common use of such technologies.

The Popularity of Chat

A commonly observed phenomenon is when people have access to the Internet, they often gravitate to chat resources, especially instant message programs. This observation is corroborated by entering a cybercafe in Europe, Asia, or Africa; no matter where around the world, cybercafes are full of people making contact through instant messaging. An instant message window is often the first thing students launch when they log on in their computer labs and the same is true for instructors around the world when they switch on home or office computers. Teachers often view these instant messages as a distraction to students and, indeed, they can be. On the other hand, these programs clearly appeal to our urge to communicate and, given appropriate direction, chat can have a useful role in language learning (Almeida d'Eça, 2003; González, 2003; Mynard, 2002a, 2002b).

The issue of facilitation of communication (language development) versus distraction is a topic of contention among language teachers at educational institutes in the United Arab Emirates. The main reason for this controversy is the students tend to chat in their native Arabic using transliteration through the English character keyboards. Some native Arabic chatters do use English, of course, in registers ranging from telegraphic to academic discourse and considering the potential inherent in learners of Arabic using the same stylized shorthand that the native-speaking Arabs (using Roman characters to communicate in Arabic or, better yet, using Arabic characters if provided with Arabic-enabled keyboards) is interesting. Indeed, the availability

of such a tool and the opportunity to interact with native speakers of the language as opposed to trying to improve one's Arabic through static and inauthentic materials might make the difference of someone bothering to pursue learning the language at all.

Many instant message chat areas now augment text with voice or video, offering freely accessible software for use on relatively low-end computers. Also, students chatting in a foreign language have available to them resources such as dictionaries and the free translation services, such as Google (http://www.google.com/language_tools) or Altavista (Babelfish at <http://world.altavista.com>), that can help them converse with native speakers at levels unreachable if relying solely on their own proficiency. For the first time, language teachers almost anywhere are able to expose students to authentic language and even put them directly in touch (via text as well as aurally and visually, asynchronously or live, in real time) with native speakers of almost any target language. Teachers today have an historical opportunity to teach language in the context and purpose for which it was invented: to communicate with others, to express one's ideas and feelings, and to understand and interact with the ideas and feelings of other native speakers of a target language.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

If the purpose of learning a language is communication, then a context that promotes this purpose should increase the motivation of students to learn it. However, a context that promotes communication must be rich in interactants. Suitable interactants can be hard to find locally, especially in an AFL (Arabic as a Foreign Language) situation. The Internet can play a critical role to help students find other speakers of a language to communicate with them.

To appreciate the role of technology as facilitator of communication among language learners and teachers, recent trends in language teaching must be considered alongside developments in the use of computers in language teaching. At the time the Apple computer was developed (the breakthrough that made it possible for anyone, including teachers, to make meaningful use of computers) language teaching methodology was weighted toward behaviorism; audiolingual was the dominant approach and teachers taught transformations as a way of understanding syntax. Concurrently, a move into humanism, more cognitive approaches, and stress on learner centeredness and "communicative competence" arose (Hymes, 1970). More humanistic teaching methods, such as community language learning, the silent way, and total physical response, were being reflected in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) software (Stevens, 1992). Teachers were finding computer-based learning compatible with tools-based approaches (Taylor, 1980) and with students starting to work in networked environments, evidence of students' scaffolding, or teaching one another, was noticed. With networks increasingly including access to the Internet, language learners and teachers began to understand more clearly what was unique to the medium and implementing projects-based curricula became more realistic as opposed to dwelling on linguistic form and function (Warschauer & Healey, 1998; Higgins, 1999).

When teachers favor project work over traditional teaching of grammar, they rely more on their students' ability to figure out the structure of a language through an innate ability to make sense out of what appears to be gibberish (e.g., Pinker, 1994). John Higgins once defined authentic teaching material as anything not written by a teacher for the purpose of teaching the language. Before computers began opening doors to a world of readily accessible natural language, teachers tended to avoid confusing the learners with realia on the assumption that students wouldn't be able to process it. Higgins and his collaborator, Tim Johns, were proponents of students

getting at the meaning of texts through text manipulation and concordance programs to engage students in what Johns referred to as Data Driven Learning (Johns, 2000). This method suggests that natural language should be presented to learners from the earliest stages of their training, not withheld from them and replaced with inauthentic materials created by teachers for the purpose of teaching (as opposed to learning) languages.

Improved access to the Internet has greatly facilitated the trend of learners and teachers of many target languages to spontaneously form Internet communities where communication in the target language is the focal point. In such win-win situations, the learners join the community to practice the language and the teachers join to learn how to facilitate computer-mediated communication with language learners, often to put the online participants in touch with their own face-to-face students. Communities that form spontaneously for the purpose of raising everyone's expertise in the common practice are called *communities of practice*. A community of practice is that set of all people who band together and interact to learn and work in unison to improve their expertise in their common interest throughout their respective networks. (Snyder, n.d.; Wenger, 1998; Johnson, 2003).

The theoretical underpinning of the practical success of such communities has been expressed in the work of social constructivists. Vygotsky's contention was learning is a social phenomenon where learners help each other as each progresses through various aspects of a practice in a process called *scaffolding* (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998) and this process works when learners interact with others in their *zone of proximal development*, or ZPD (Gallagher, n.d; Ryder, 2002). Healey (2001) has a cogent characterization of the role of constructivism in language learning.

Communities of practice may be recognized as such and have names or they might have little recognizable structure. An example of a formally structured community of practice might be a professional organization such as EgyptTESOL (<http://www.egyptesol.org>). But one defining characteristic of a community of practice is its spontaneity. Easy access to groupware tools is allowing a proliferation of interaction within communities of practice with constructivist approaches permeating learning environments. One such community of learners and educators working online encompassing practitioners of numerous languages, including Arabic, is Webheads (Almeida d'Eça, 2004; Steele, 2002; Sanders, 2002).

IMPLICATIONS FOR ARABIC LANGUAGE TEACHING

In the closing years of the 20th century, getting at real authentic language through concordancing and analysis and manipulation of texts was the best available application of technological resources to the promotion of authenticity in the study of languages. Until then, computers were often seen as modern language labs—a way to increase efficiency by increasing the possibilities for drill and practice or by emulating what might be called the “teacher's knowledge base” and doling that out to the students. But comparisons between the computer lab with its predecessor, the aural-oral language lab, are for the most part invalid. Language labs were designed for little purpose other than to mechanize the audio-lingual method. A computer lab, on the other hand, contains equipment and components that students can use and relate to in many aspects of their real lives, many of which have now become accepted means of communication themselves. Given these many relationships between computers and communicating in a modern world, the most potentially successful paradigms to employ them in language learning today involve putting students in direct touch with other target language speakers in authentically communicative situations.

With the emergence of the Internet as a tool in language learning, the number of available texts has exponentially increased, and this fact is what many language

teachers saw as the greatest potential of the Internet in language learning—a rich source of authentic text, audio, and video. The Internet has increased access to authentic texts in electronic form with a vast proliferation of websites in Arabic as well as in other languages.

Throughout my career as a teacher of English applying pedagogical skills to the creation of materials for the learning of Arabic, I have developed successful models for environments promoting language learning and adapted these in my own experiences with the teaching and learning of Arabic. But my first experience with Arabic language learning in a classroom setting took place in the mid-1970s in the behaviorist mimem era. The book used (Abboud, et al., 1975) introduced Arabic script early and presented readings in Arabic from the ridiculously simple (my name, your name) abruptly into texts you might find in a newspaper (e.g., about a famous museum). An extensive explanation of case structure was at the beginning of the book. Aside from official ceremonies and some television broadcasts, I have never heard anyone speak using the case endings taught in this book and I would sound odd if I tried to talk like that myself.

Some of my Arabic teachers argued the reason they taught their students classical Arabic, despite the fact it isn't actually used except in special situations, is it's a variety of the language understood throughout the Arabic world. Conversely, if one were to learn the Lebanese dialect, this version might not be mutually intelligible to a Moroccan, whereas both the Lebanese and the Moroccan would understand classical Arabic. Because teachers who try to teach classical Arabic are at a loss to produce models for the language, they tend to teach their classes in English about *fushḥā* (describing it and explaining in English its rules and the circumstances in which various utterances were used) and teach by having the students repeat these utterances. Such approaches are too inefficient to succeed and probably contribute to a conviction also prevalent among many teachers of Arabic that Arabic is too difficult a language for Westerners to learn and, therefore, they have tried to make it easy for students by Anglicizing the script and avoiding speaking Arabic when English seemed to get the point across so much better. This practice is a self-fulfilling prophecy because by reducing opportunities for students to hear and speak the language, teachers were indeed making it too difficult for their students to learn it.

At this time, I had a teacher whom I'll call "Nasr." Nasr was energetic and personable but he used English predominantly in class and taught from scripted dialogues he had written. Nasr would have students repeat these as we were having our students do in English classes at the time. Usually, the dialogues were created to introduce a grammar point and then other parts of the dialogue would be construed to reinforce or contrast that grammar point.

When we reached our next posting in the mid-1980s, we had another teacher whom I'll call "Sālem." His technique was similar to Nasr's but we also had a director of our language center, Clive Holes, who wrote a book on Gulf Arabic and, in language pedagogy, we were then tending away from behavioristic and toward more humanistic methodology. The English language teachers used communicative approaches and a number of us tried applying these to our study of Arabic. Under Sālem's tutelage, we formed a group where students took the responsibility of creating materials and bringing them to class. For example, one of my colleagues recorded an Omani Television show where housewives were interviewed speaking candidly about their daily lives and we (students of Arabic, teachers of English) created materials to help us delve into the language used. Eventually, we reduced this to an even smaller formula wherein students made no elaborate preparations but spontaneously brought realia to the class. Simply put, the only operative rule was, "No English, Only Arabic." We formed classes of students who would follow this rule. Sālem, whose other classes were conducted in a more traditional vein, often remarked about how much he was learning about language teaching through the experience of working with us. We were

all learning that authentic materials were more motivating than traditional ones and that communicative approaches allowed us to use what Pinker (1994) called our “language instinct” to efficiently learn the language. This efficiency was also improved by focusing our concentration on Arabic, allowing us to actually think in that language, and cutting out the factor of code switching that constantly throws students off in bilingual language classes. We were learning what we needed to know about creating materials once the technology caught up with our need to find and present authentic language learning materials in Arabic.

A SYLLABUS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

This section elaborates on the idealized syllabus for learning a language such as Arabic and how it can be augmented with technology. The syllabus accrues from experiences with “Sālem” described above and can be minimalistically characterised as finding teachers who will use only Arabic in class (spoken and written) and putting them before students who agree to read, speak, and write the same. I have had the opportunity to replicate this configuration in two learning situations since that time and in both instances, the technique was markedly effective with small groups of students who self-selected to learn on these principles.

However, creating such a pure and facilitative learning environment in an Arabic class is not easy in practice. I have faced problems with Arabic teachers who are not convinced teaching with only discourse in their target language is possible. They feel that students’ first-language support is necessary and they tend to over-use it, thus suppressing opportunities for students to internalize patterns discernible from rich target language input. I have known Arabic teachers who refuse to teach Arabic script in the belief that this would be too great a leap for their students. However, the converse is true: Using student-language emulations of target language features often disguises the patterns inherent in the target language and can actually hinder the learning of the language through elucidation of its otherwise predictable features.

Resistance also comes from students who don’t realize the possibility of learning Arabic using only discourse in the target language. They feel that first-language support is necessary and tend to ask questions in their native language, thus suppressing opportunities for internalizing patterns discernible from rich target language usage and input (when the response is made in the target language rather than the student’s native). Oddly, some students in this group are themselves language teachers who teach classes using the target language only yet still persist in relying on support in their native language in their own Arabic classes rather than persevering in the target.

Once all concerned agree to learn and work in Arabic only and settle on a time to meet regularly, finding things to do in the class has never been a problem when the students are encouraged to raise topics for class discussion. They have the essential ingredients for good language learning; namely, an informant, a commitment on the part of students to digest the material, and materials proposed by and therefore relevant to the students themselves. The classes I’ve experienced have all gone well *‘ala munāsib* (according to the occasion) but both students and teachers must seed discussion and activities.

What happens in such classes? How does such a syllabus promote learning over other models of syllabus design and how can this learning be enhanced through the adaptation of technology? Techniques with such an approach use a wide range of instructional technologies and include the following:

- Primarily in such classes, conversation takes place. The conversation is spontaneous and unpredictable and, at several junctures, the teacher digresses with

further explanation (grammar is a valid topic of discussion as long as the discussion is in Arabic). One technological enhancement is, therefore, a simple tape recorder on which the conversation can be recorded for students to listen to and review when commuting or at other opportunities. If the recording is digital, students can prepare a digitally edited version of the most naturally occurring discourse in the class. This exercise is invaluable to the one preparing the recording and the others can increase language learning efficiency by not having to repeatedly listen to redundancies and dead spaces when they replay the recording.

- Recordings can be downloaded from Arabic news stations or taken from radio and television broadcasts using cassette recorders or computerized audio and video capture devices. Many genres lend themselves to exploitation in language classes: talk shows, small parts of movies, and advertisements. The latter present particular challenges and pleasant surprises when students finally dissemble a fast-talking, 15-second advertising spiel.
- Students can undertake projects whereby they find web sites in the target language. Students can perform Internet searches and create their own compilations to show others. For example:
 - Teachers and students can collaborate in the design of Webquests. (Dodge, 2004)
 - Arabs in particular have a great affinity for poetry set to music in their native language. Numerous sites exist where such music can be heard juxtaposed with the lyrics.
- Students and teachers can use a digital camera to take pictures of shop signs, road signs, and billboards in the target language. These pictures can be used in all manner of language learning materials. For relative beginners, bilingual signs are of particular value.
- Students can make presentations in the target language and broadcast them to live audiences anywhere in the world. This exercise is becoming increasingly common in communities of practice where teachers support one another's projects by putting their students in touch with each other and often the distant audience is other teachers interested in how the broadcasting teacher makes use of the medium. One teacher who has organized such projects from Kuwait is Buthaina Alothman (2004).
- The teacher can organize a language exchange: Have a class of Arabic speakers who wish to learn a second language make contact with native-speaking students of that language trying to learn Arabic (Cziko & Park, 2003).
- Teachers shouldn't ignore print technology: Collect flyers, official correspondence, utility bills, and office memos and bring them to class along with the more obvious newspapers and magazines. Advertisements in these can be particularly succinct in language and rich in cultural insights. Print also lends itself to digital materials development through the use of scanners, optical character readers, and other devices.

Why might this method work? Some advantages of using such materials in language learning, as suggested by the discussion at the beginning of this chapter, are that they are:

- **Authentic**—These materials are drawn from the actual surroundings and not, as Higgins derided, prepared by a teacher for the sole purpose of teaching the language.
- **Relevant**—All of the target language used in such classes will be drawn from the immediate environment.

- Meaningful—Students bring in the materials themselves or, if the teacher prepares the material, it is done after noting the needs and interests of students. In the framework of social constructivism, the students create the meaning in what they want to say and it is not just the teacher who initiates all the utterances.
- Constructivist for all of the reasons mentioned previously:
 - The language comes from within.
 - Zones of proximal development are created and students scaffold one another.
 - The role of teacher is not central or authoritative but facilitative and guiding.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has traced the development over several decades of instructional technology in parallel with concurrent developments in language teaching pedagogy, particularly in contexts for language learning involving social constructivism and resulting in the formation of communities of practice. It has shown how instructional technology supports current trends in language teaching methodology by allowing students to engage in meaningful, authentic, and truly communicative activities that enhance their ability to learn languages such as Arabic through the use of the Internet. Computers have allowed the achievement of constructivist outcomes by facilitating the establishment of learning environments that have moved:

- from making behaviorist teaching paradigms such as tutorials and drill and practice more efficient;
- through more cognitive approaches such as simulations and better use and analysis of corpora and multimedia;
- to comprehensive access of a world of authentic target-language documents via the Internet; and
- most recently, to all of the above plus genuine communication and empathy with native and non-native speakers of Arabic through the formation of communities of practice online and in blended learning situations.

Whereas some software has been created and placed online to assist learners with the grammar and vocabulary of Arabic (e.g., Al-Ammar, Hadad & Mhaweck, n.d.; Al Zahmi, Al Meteri, Al Dahmani, Al Ka'abi, & Al Omari, n.d.), the greatest potential for technology to make a difference in Arabic learning is in support of constructivist environments along the lines detailed in the "ideal syllabus" above. In particular, software that supports the formation of communities of practice of students and teachers and facilitates interactions within those communities holds great promise of reducing affective filters to the point that learning can take place in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust that can be motivating, fulfilling, and, above all, effective for people wishing to learn each other's languages. Teachers of Arabic would do well to closely examine this trend. One very good way to do so is to get involved with communities of practice of other teachers who wish to gain familiarity with the tools in the company of peers scaffolding one another in a zone of proximal development.

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