A First-Hand Beginner's Guide to Studying Arabic At the College Level

Project paper

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Introduction

This document is intended to serve primarily as a guide to the what and why of studying the Arabic language as an English speaker at the post-secondary education level in the United States of America. As a first-hand account, however, there will be included anecdotal evidence in the form of examples, advice and opinion from the author's own experience in endeavoring to learn the Arabic language. Thus, the result is that this paper will be less a rigid research treatise on the absolute best process to go about learning Arabic, and more a wide-ranging discussion on topics relevant to a person not sure how to begin his or her course of study.

Benefits of Previous Study

What prerequisites might a potential student of the Arabic language expect or hope to have? There are at least a few elements of prior learning that will help in the study of any language that is foreign to the student. None are truly required, however.

First and foremost, having a good command of the English language – here assumed to be the language in which the Arabic instruction will be delivered – is key. The more knowledge of correct grammatical forms such as parts of speech, verb tense nomenclature, and noun and pronoun cases (nominative, objective, genitive), the easier it is to compare the language being learned to one's native language. Upon later review, it will then be easier to reorganize one's class notes in a manner more consistent with the student's own previously learned framework of grammar. Not every element of grammar in the new langauge will match the old, but at least there will be a means of comparison.

While knowledge of additional languages other than the student's native language and Arabic is not necessary, the author has found it to be a tremendous advantage. Despite additional languages being mostly stored in regions of the brain distinct from a primary language, and also in a somewhat less efficient manor, there is some reuse of basic language skill areas[1]. When the student needs a third area or beyond, the brain has already performed this process before, so it may have an advantage in setting aside other such language areas.

1Calvin and Ojemann, *Conversations with Neil's Brain*, 220-221

Linguistics courses are by no means a requirement, either. In informal surveys of classmates taken during various Arabic courses, it was found that there was often one or more linguists or linguistics students in the class, but students with linguistics backgrounds did not make up the majority of the students. That being said, the author can attest from his own experience to several useful topics gleaned from taking an introductory linguistics course.

One topic is exposure to the newest phonetic alphabet of the International Phonetics Association (IPA). Since the alphabet was only revised in 1989[2], some students – especially older ones – may only be familiar with the original, 1888 standard, or perhaps some other, English-specific phonetics system. Your instructor may use this international standard for writing phonemes during lectures, especially in initial instruction where the student is learning the Arabic script. Needless to say, familiarity with this standard can assist in the learning of proper pronunciation, and perhaps later in transliteration (from Arabic script letters to phoenician letter approximates) or in guessing the spelling of new vocabulary during listening drills.

Another benefit of prior exposure to basic linguistics is in the area of phoneme and morpheme recognition. Knowing the basic physiological categories of phoneme production in human speech can help in learning to generate some of the more difficult sounds the English speaker will encounter in Arabic, such as ع ("ayn"), غ ("ghayn"), خ ("kha"), and ح ("hha"). And, while it is true that primary and secondary education in English will most likely include copious exercises in identifying such morphemes as prefixes, suffixes, and base words, a basic linguistics course can show the student a more general approach that isn't English-centric, which can then be applied to studying another language.

Even prior exposure to computer programming might be helpful in learning a foreign language. Just as sign language and complex musical ability tends to be housed in the same hemisphere of the brain as other langauge skills[3], it is likely that knowledge of computer languages – at least in terms of syntax and name recongnition – is similarly stored. Further, introductory study of computer language compiler design often overlaps

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2Fromkin and Rodman, *An Introduction to Language*, 184
3Calvin and Ojemann, *Conversations with Neil's Brain*, 72-73

with topics from linguistics. The author himself happened to find limited but useful crossover benefits from the study of computer languages to the study of foreign language, and Arabic was no exception.

The Difficulty of Arabic

How does the study of Arabic stack up against other languages in terms of difficulty? In short, the author would rate Arabic as moderately difficult. There are several reasons why this is argued, but it is best to develop a spectrum of difficulty of language study, and place Arabic within that albeit debatable spectrum. Then the reader can decide for himself.

First, it is helpful to classify what would be considered the easier languages for a native English speaker to learn. The romance languages – those derived from Latin – fit this category for several reasons. First, although English is classified as a Germanic language, it has been influenced by many languages throughout history, including Latin in the Roman period (near the end of B.C.E.), and later, French during the Norman occupation (beginning in 1066)[4]. Second, these languages all share the phoenician alphabet. Having the virtually the same script and similar phonemes means that knowing one romance language partially prepares the mind to write, read, speak, and comprehend another.

Next on the spectrum would likely be Germanic languages, because of the influence of Angles, Saxons and Jutes[5], as well as the intermixing of English and German royalty over centuries. Their alphabets are both derived from the phoenician, too.

Any Eastern European languages that happen to use a phoenician-based alphabet would come next. The idea here is that familiarity with the script would make reading and writing easier.

The next category would be that of languages with non-phoenician alphabets. These are languages such as Hebrew; Arabic, Farsi and Urdu; as well as those using the Cyrillic alphabet, to name a few. These languages are thus judged as moderately difficult by means of requiring the learning of a new alphabet and thus a different phoneme-to-

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4Fromkin and Rodman, *An Introduction to Language*, 332-336
5Fromkin and Rodman, *An Introduction to Language*, 333

orthography correspondence and totally new morphemes.

Hardest among the living languages to learn would then, in this way of thinking, be the languages with pictographic writing. Some examples would be Korean, Japanese, Mandarin, and Cantonese. Interestingly, the latter two languages happen to so closely share pictographs that a sentence in their pictographs can be spoken as either language.[6]

While this discussion dealt with living languages – those currently spoken by native speakers – one might be encouraged to know that learning Arabic – a semitic langauge – might help in the learning of certain dead hieroglyphic languages, at least in terms of the omission of short vowels[7].

Types of Arabic

Before deciding on your course of study, it is important to know something about the types of Arabic available for study. There are three main types of Arabic – standard, classical and colloquial.

Standard Arabic is usually referred to as Modern Standard Arabic, or MSA. It is the language of governments, diplomats, newspapers, schools, and much broadcast and satellite television programming throughout Arabic-speaking nations. Official communications within governments, between nations, and in the media are often conducted in Modern Standard Arabic. An easy way to think of this type of Arabic is as being somewhat like "the King's English" of today, or maybe even at times like the English of Colonial America, but clearly Modern English. MSA is understood widely by common people in many nations, even though they are likely to use their own specific colloquial dialect in common parlance.

Classical is the Arabic of the Quran (or Koran), the holy text of the religion Islam. It might help to think of this as analogous to part-way between Middle English and Modern English[8]. People who know Modern Standard Arabic can at least read and comprehend classical, although a dictionary helps. In fact, when written with full "al-i'raab" case markings and vowelization, MSA is merely a modern variant of Classical

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6Fromkin and Rodman, *An Introduction to Language*, 372
7Ross, *The Pronunciation of Ancient Egyptian*, http://www.friesian.com/egypt.htm (accessed April 6, 2006)
8See *Appendix A: The Lord's Prayer* in this document

Arabic. Many people even refer to both Classical and MSA interchangeably as "al-fus-Ha", meaning the formal written form of Arabic. Classical Arabic passages from the Quran are meant to be recited in a fashion like singing, however, whereas spoken Modern Standard Arabic is often more lax in vowelization than it appears in writing. Further, newspapers in the Arab world tend not to show vowelization, despite being meant to be read as MSA, and may include colloquial terms occasionally.

Colloquial Arabic, referred to as "al-a'maia", is the form of Arabic that is commonly spoken by people in a given country or region. Since these are essentially only spoken dialects, their written forms may vary greatly or be inconsistent or unstable. Three popular forms of Colloquial Arabic are Egyptian, Levantine, and Moroccan.

Egyptian Arabic is spoken mainly in Egypt. It has influences from ancient Egyptian as well as Coptic. However, Egyptian is a widely understood dialect due to past trends whereby television entertainment programming, movies, and other media produced in Egypt in the colloquial dialect were distributed to many Arabic-speaking countries via satellite broadcasts. Currently, there are many more satellite channels in Arabic-speaking nations, and the programming diversity has evened out somewhat. Still, Egyptian Arabic is often identified with Arabic television and movies the same way American English is identified with much English-language entertainment programming.

Levantine Arabic is the Arabic dialect of the Levant Region, which refers to Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine/Israel. These countries do have their own further minor variations in usage or vocabulary, but share much in form. This shared dialect probably results mainly from the domination by the Umayyid Dynasty, based in Damascus (now in Syria), and the later Abassid Dynasty, based in Baghdad (now in Iraq), both Arabic-speaking Islamic Empires.

Moroccan Arabic is a dialect that diverges greatly from Modern Standard Arabic. Morocco in MSA is referred to as "al-Maghrib", "the Western Region", and Moroccan as "al-Maghribiya", the dialect of this western reach of the old Islamic World. It is greatly influenced by French, introduced by French colonials during occupation. In addition, the language of the indigenous Berber population has also influenced this dialect. This dialect is useful in the Western North African region, but is understood much less outside of this area.

Setting Your Goals

So, you have decided to learn Arabic. You also now know something about the types of Arabic available in the classroom. But, which one is best for you?

If you are seeking to use Arabic in employment – whether in translation, business, or science – the best course of action would be to start with Modern Standard Arabic. After finishing at least 12 standard credit hours of MSA (see comparison chart in "Where to Study", below), then the student has to make a determination. If translating audio, or spending time living in a particular country while doing business there, or communicating with scientific colleagues and natives of a particular country, then it might be best to learn a spoken dialect at that point. Further study in MSA can continue concurrently, but learning a relevant dialect will open up that part of the world to you more fully in your work. On the other hand, if you are sure to only be translating written Arabic texts, or writing short official business documents, or speaking at scientific symposia, then perhaps all you'll need is Modern Standard Arabic. In any case, it is recommended for employment to learn as much Modern Standard Arabic as you can, preferably 12-24 standard credit hours.

If you are just looking to learn Arabic to facilitate travel, you should keep in mind your specific travel plans. For example, if you will only be travelling to Egypt, and you merely want to feel comfortable and show respect in the markets of Cairo and with your guide at the pyramids and other historical sites, then you probably want a short exposure to Colloquial Egyptian – specifically Cairene, or Cairo, Egyptian. If you are going only to Morocco, then perhaps only taking courses in Moroccan would be sufficient. But, consider this, if you were to learn some Modern Standard Arabic, you could be free to tour several Arabic-speaking countries, and the locals there would understand you, and probably try to communicate back to you, the tourist, in MSA if they could.

If you are interested in the simple enrichment of learning a second language, or only wish to pick a language to satisfy a foreign language requirement for your degree, then remember the earlier discussion about levels of difficulty in learning language. Perhaps an easier language would be acceptable. Then again, Arabic – as a language spoken by hundreds of millions of people worldwide – is indeed a useful second language

to know. It's increasing importance in today's world, both politically and socially, should also not be overlooked.

If you wish to learn about Arab or Middle Eastern culture, or even just wish to read and understand the Quran for yourself in its native tongue, then focusing on learning Modern Standard Arabic would be your best choice. Later, if you visit an Arab country, your knowledge of MSA would help you get by, and may even provide a first step in your acquisition of the colloquial. Certainly, though, a knowledge of MSA will help in understanding terms and concepts in studying "Cultures of the Middle East", for example.

Where to Study

You know which Arabic you wish to begin studying. Now, where can you take a class? Arabic language programs have been popping up in colleges and universities all over the United States in the past decade, but much more so after the events in September, 2001. Some programs seem to appear overnight. Others are evolving and expanding year by year or semester by semester. This section hopes to provide some general information about course availability, time, and costs involved in learning Arabic at a college or university.

Many institutions, from community colleges to universities, in undergraduate and graduate programs, offer some courses in Arabic. Thus, you can begin your Arabic language college coursework anywhere it is offered, provided that you can transfer the credit elsewhere if you need to go beyond the offerings of the initial institution. Some programs offer "Arabic" courses, but do not specify whether it is MSA, colloquial, or perhaps some mix of the two based on the instructor's and institution's choice. Usually, however, courses listed as "Arabic" will cover Modern Standard Arabic only. The University of Maryland at College Park (UMCP), for example, offered only "Arabic" courses that covered MSA before the Fall 2005 Semester[9]. Then, suddenly, courses in Egyptian and Levantine Colloquial Arabic were added, and courses that were previously

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9UMCP 2004-05 Undergraduate Catalogue – Approved Courses,
  http://www.umd.edu/catalog/0405/chapter8.pdf (accessed April 6, 2006)

labeled as "Arabic" now were referred to as "Modern Standard Arabic"[10].

It is a good idea to check the course offerings of all your local post-secondary institutions – especially community colleges. One example is Howard Community College in Columbia, MD[11]. You may be surprised to learn that a fledgling Arabic program or even an associate degree program is offered by a nearby community college. Programs appear, are updated, and grow at many institutions from semester to semester.

Full Bachelor's degrees in Arabic are less common, but certainly available. Again, it is best to check with institutions in your area. Just one example on the east coast is Georgetown University's program, which has an undergraduate degree in Arabic[12]. In contrast, UMCP's Arabic course offerings may now look more like Georgetown's program, both for MSA and Colloquial, but UMCP still does not offer even a minor, let alone an undergraduate degree, in Arabic.

Graduate work in Arabic is rarer still. The author will give two examples, again from the east coast. Georgetown University has graduate coursework[13]. Johns Hopkins University includes Arabic as a foreign language in its School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS)[14].

In addition to ordinary college-level programs, you may find government or industry sponsored Arabic language programs. One such example, a government-sponsored program, is the National Flagship Language Initiative(NFLI). This program is administered by the Center for the Advanced Study of Language (CASL). For information on the NFLI program from CASL, please refer online to: http://www.casl.umd.edu/nfli/index.html. For information on the NFLI program as it is offered at UMCP, please refer to:

http://www.languages.umd.edu/AsianEastEuropean/arabic/programs.htm
http://www.professionalstudies.umd.edu/arabic/

10UMCP 2005-06 Undergraduate Catalogue – Approved Courses, http://www.umd.edu/catalog/0506/chapter8.pdf (accessed April 6, 2006)
11HCC, http://www.howardcc.edu/catalog.cfm (accessed April 6, 2006)
12Georgetown University, http://www.georgetown.edu/departments/arabic/undergraduate.htm (accessed April 6, 2006)
13Georgetown University, http://www.georgetown.edu/departments/arabic/undergraduate.htm (accessed April 6, 2006)
14Johns Hopkins SAIS - Arabic Language Program, http://www.sais-jhu.edu/languages/arabic/ (accessed April 6, 2006)

For information on the NFLI program as it is offered at Georgetown University, please refer to: http://www.georgetown.edu/departments/arabic/capa.html.

For a comparison of two sample sets of undergraduate Arabic language course offerings, please refer in this document to Appendix B: Course Comparison.

What Else You'll Need - **Additional Resources**

The most important additional learning resource in learning Arabic is a dictionary. Furthermore, it is usually a good idea to get at least two of the following three types: root-based (Arabic-English, by root), comprehensive (English-Arabic, Arabic-English), and lookup (English-Arabic).

A root dictionary is one in which words are listed not by whole word, but by a word's root letters. In Arabic, this is usually a tri-literal, or 3-letter, root. The author recommends the "Hans Wehr" (Green Book)[15] root dictionary. The "compact" version is fine, more available, and much more affordable.

The second category, which I call "comprehensive", is really just a bi-directional language dictionary. Words are referenced either in English or Arabic. The author recommends "al-Mawrid"[16]. However, perhaps because it is published in Lebanon, this dictionary seems somewhat more biased to the Arabic speaker wishing to learn English. Nevertheless, it is an expansive dictionary. Be sure you are ordering a fully bi-directional version, however. For an alternate, look for a bi-directional Oxford English-Arabic Arabic-English Dictionary, which is much more available.

It is sometimes good to have a smaller dictionary in which to look up English words to translate into Arabic. For this, the reader could find the Oxford English-Arabic dictionary. There is also a concise version, available at about 40% of the cost, which is much easier to carry.

Another place to look for additional resources is online, in the form of Arabic-language news sources, newspapers, audio, and occasionally video. Just a few links are:

http://www.bbcarabic.com

http://www.al-jazeera.net

15Wehr, *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 4th Edition
16Baalkabi and Baalkabi, *Al-Mawrid Dictionary: English-Arabic/Arabic-English*, Dar El-Ilm Lilmalayin

http://arabic.cnn.com

http://www.google.com – and search for "arabic media", "arabic news", etc. No claim is made as to the acceptability of the content on these sites. The reader should make his or her own determination.

Satellite television can provide a valuable resource outside of classroom instruction. There are two main ways to go (other than online). The student can aquire a free-to-air satellite dish for several hundred dollars in equipment. After that point, the satellite channels are available at no cost. Alternatively, Dish Network Satellite Television provides an Arabic language package. In contrast, however, the package is in addition to basic Dish Network service, and thus requires not only the equipment and regular service fee, but a supplemental monthly service fee as well. (Check with Dish Network for the latest information - http://www.dishnetwork.com/content/programming/international/packages/indexpackage. asp?language.)

The best additional resource beyond the classroom is experience living in a country where Arabic is spoken. Usually, this best takes place some time after two semesters of coursework have been completed. This is useful whether you are learning MSA, colloquial, or even classical. Look for foreign study opportunities at your school. In addition, some specialized advanced study programs actually include study abroad.

Evaluating Your Progress

One key to evaluating your progress is testing. If you apply to special academic programs (such as the aforementioned NFLI), or for employment with the federal government, testing of your skills is often sponsored. This will include written examination as well as an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). One goal to achieve before enlisting in advanced academic programs is to score 1 to 1+ on the U.S. Government Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale[17]. Another is to score "Intermediate" to "Intermediate High" on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

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17Interagency Language Roundtable – Skill Level Descriptions – Introduction, http://www.govtilr.org/ILRscale1.htm (accessed April 6, 2006)

(ACTFL) scale[18]. Before seeking employment, having equivalent knowledge to at least a 1+ or Intermediate High is probably preferable.

If you cannot get access to or afford testing on your own, and can't get sponsored, then your completed coursework should be your guide. As an example, please refer to Appendix B: Course Comparison. Also, don't be afraid to ask your instructor how you are doing. Many instructors actually assist in OPI's during their free time or as part of other employment, and are thus familiar with current language learning proficiency standards.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most important thing to remember when studying Arabic is that your day to day performance can be uneven. Some days you will undoubtedly feel like quitting. Other days – sometimes during the very next class meeting – your confidence in your skills will run high. The best thing to do is to take advantage of ancillary course materials such as DVDs, audio tapes, dictionaries, and the like. Try to expose yourself to as much Arabic as you can. If at all possible, plan a trip – with or without foreign study – where you can spend a period of several months simply living in an Arabic-speaking country. If not, try to get together with classmates or a native speaker in your area and practice. Try to think of all these options as being additive to your learning process, and don't worry if you are unable to do everything. Every little bit of effort will help.

18American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages,
http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=1 (accessed April 6, 2006)

Appendix A: The Lord's Prayer

Old English (ca. 10th Century)	*Middle English (ca. 14th Century)*
[....]g fæder, þu þe on heofonum eardast, geweorðad wuldres dreame. Sy þinum weorcum halgad noma niþþa bearnum; þu eart nergend wera. Cyme þin rice wide, ond þin rædfæst willa arǽred under rodores hrofe, eac þon on rumre foldan. Syle us to dæge domfæstne blæd, hlaf userne, helpend wera, þone singalan, soðfæst meotod. Ne læt usic costunga cnyssan to swiðe, ac þu us freodom gief, folca waldend, from yfla gewham, a to widan feore.	The Lourdes Preyere Oure fadir that art in heuenes, halewid be thi name; thi kyngdoom come to; be thi wille don, in erthe as in heuene. Yyue to vs this dai oure breed ouer othir substaunce, and foryyue to vs oure dettis, as we foryyuen to oure dettouris; and lede vs not in to temptacioun, but delyuere vs fro yuel. Amen.
Source: http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/ballc/oe/paternoster-oe.html	Source: http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=1529987

<u>**Appendix B: Course Comparison**</u>

Howard Community College (Columbia, Howard County, MD)

Modern Standard Arabic Course Offerings, 2005-2006

Course	*Alternate*	*C.H.*	*Course Name*	*Material Covered*
ARAB-901 (8 credits)	ARAB-101	4	Elements of Arabic 1	Alif Baa, begin al-Kitaab 1
	ARAB-102	4	Elements of Arabic 2	continue al-Kitaab 1
ARAB-902 (8 credits)	ARAB-201	4	Intermediate Arabic 1	cont. al-Kitaab 1, start 2
	ARAB-202	4	Intermediate Arabic 2	cont. al-Kitaab 2
ARAB-903	(none)	8	"Advanced" Arabic	al-Kitaab book 2* (*partial)
ARAB-907	(none)	3	Arabic Through the Media	TV, newspapers in MSA
TOTAL	**(none)**	**27**	**MSA thru Advanced**	**Alif Baa, al-Kitaab book 1, al-Kitaab book 2* (*partial coverage); MSA media**

Source: https://hcczulu.howardcc.edu/datatel/openweb/st/hcc_search.html (accessed April 6, 2006); author's experience

University of Maryland at College Park (College Park, MD)

Modern Standard Arabic Course Offerings, 2005-2006

Course	*C.H.*	*Course Name*	*Material Covered*
ARAB-104	6	Elementary MSA I-II	Alif Baa; start al-Kitaab book 1
ARAB-105	6	Elementary MSA III-IV	finish al-Kitaab book 1
ARAB-204	6	Intermediate MSA I	start al-Kitaab book 2

Course	C.H.	Course Name	Material Covered
ARAB-205	6	Intermediate MSA II	finish al-Kitaab book 2
ARAB-304	3	Advanced MSA	short stories and newspaper articles in MSA
TOTAL	**27**	**MSA thru Advanced**	**Alif Baa, al-Kitaab 1-2, MSA media**

Source: http://www.umd.edu/catalog/0506/chapter8.pdf (accessed April 6, 2006)

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[8] Appendix A – This document.

[9] UMCP 2004-05 Undergraduate Catalogue – Approved Courses, http://www.umd.edu/catalog/0405/chapter8.pdf (accessed April 6, 2006)

[10] UMCP 2005-06 Undergraduate Catalogue – Approved Courses, http://www.umd.edu/catalog/0506/chapter8.pdf (accessed April 6, 2006)

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[17] Interagency Language Roundtable – Skill Level Descriptions – Introduction, http://www.govtilr.org/ILRscale1.htm (accessed April 6, 2006)

[18] American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=1 (accessed April 6, 2006)