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## Review of “The Arabic Classroom: Context, Text, Learners”

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### Reviewed by Zakaria Fahmi (University of South Florida, USA)

Arabic studies have existed in US universities since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (McCarus, 1987), but such interest in language and culture has witnessed a remarkable surge in US institutions since the 9/11 attacks. The expansive interest in Arabic, though obscured by a political rationality related to issues of national security and foreign policy (i.e. Bale, 2010; Kramsch, 2005), continues to articulate the proliferating interest in language, culture and history while offering critical reflections on higher education policies (Brosh, 2013). Fundamental to several issues of Arabic language teaching and learning, Lo’s (2019) edited volume provides an extensive scope that intersects important aspects of the Arabic language learning and teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*The Arabic Language Classroom: Context, Text and Learner* offers a generous multi-perspectival examination of the nature of pedagogy, ideology, curricula, and learners, informed by heterogeneous experiences in an effort to refine the teaching and learning of Arabic. The focused tripartite design of the book allows for the interconnection of substantial idiosyncrasies encircling Arabic in academia as a whole. For instance, the book raises important questions related not only to the institutional contexts where Arabic programs are expected to meet rigorous institutional standards and flourish, but also pertaining to language teaching practices and students’ learning outcomes. The book comprises five parts with 19 chapters in its entirety.

The first part of the volume sheds light on the learning and teaching contexts of Arabic. Relying on geographically diverse experiences, this part revisits the status of the pedagogical implications engendered by Arabic syllabi, teaching philosophies, and classroom practices. It also entails four engaging chapters, which most importantly offer a critical deconstruction of “the curse of diglossia” (p. 19) and disambiguate its conceptions in the debate about Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and

Colloquial Arabic (CA) use. In chapter 1, Lo offers critical analysis of diglossia and instructs that pedagogical implications should adapt from relevant implications of multilingualism. Surveying 44 Arabic syllabi in 16 US universities, chapter 2 underscores the predominance of proficiency-based Arabic curricula conforming to ACTFL proficiency guidelines and the explicit awareness of Arabic teachers of such terms. Such results point towards the need for more professional opportunities to reinforce these standards, particularly for those who lack them. Chapter 3 integrates the exploration of two case studies from the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Johnson C. Smith and Bennett College in North Carolina. This chapter brings to light important questions of history, race, ethnicity and religion related to Arabic language teaching and learning. This part ends with chapter 4, which provides a unique, personal scholarly perspective, linking the trajectories of Arabic learning and teaching practices from two eminent universities, Edinburg University and Duke University.

With three chapters in total, the second part of the volume focuses on curricula and the teaching materials of Arabic. Chapter 5 offers a pedagogical perspective on the evaluation of the commonly adopted textbook *Alif Baa*. Using a qualitative approach that accounts for linguistic and cultural criteria for textbook evaluation and teachers’ questionnaires, this chapter highlights various advantages and shortcomings of *Alif Baa*, offering critical insights for areas of improvement. Chapter 6 offers a crucial perspective on technology and culture in Arabic classrooms, arguing for the integration of technology as a gateway to culture, recommending numerous classroom practices and teaching techniques to expand the cultural experience in Arabic courses. Fundamentally, this chapter raises awareness to view language in its rich cultural contexts in hope of avoiding essentialist or monolithic conceptualizations of culture and supporting language acquisition. Finally, chapter 7 adds to the preceding argument by proposing a set of nine principles to the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language and calls for follow-up examinations of the potential efficiencies of Computer-Assisted Language Learning models of Arabic.

Part three comprises four chapters, focusing primarily on SLA informed methods and methodologies in teaching and learning Arabic. This part opens with chapter 8 aiming at student-centered proficiency oriented curricula. This chapter discusses the shared values pertaining to student autonomy, content accuracy, and learning context, and offers an instructional understanding to advance proficiency. Chapter 9 instantiates the learning e-resources in the case of the Arabyola portal, or Arabic at Loyola University. This chapter features aspects of the online portal structure, course integration, and participation while stressing the necessity in the use of real-world tools for the students to independently discern cultural authenticity and customize their own experience. Keeping up with the status of diglossia in Arabic pedagogy, chapter 10 reports on a teaching experiment at the university of Cambridge, which combines MSA and Egyptian CA in a communicative teaching model of grammar. Although the approach lacks extended elaboration on structural linguistic variation, it supports contrastive teaching of structures common to both varieties to help students not only recognize the social value of Arabic, but also to gain grammatical accuracy and fluency. This part of the book closes with chapter 11 focusing on the incorporation of literature in content-based classrooms. Lucidly, this chapter reviews the utility of teaching Arabic short stories in an advanced course, emphasizing students’ relatedness vis-à-vis the themes and topics conveyed in these materials, regardless of language proficiency.

In part four, the focus shifts to students and learners of Arabic. Chapter 12 puts forward an alternative dual instructional system guided by a nontraditional curricular model and a revised method comprising diverse activities and classroom procedures. In its cogent attempt to rid the Arabic classroom of recurring issues (i.e. medium of instruction, diglossia, meaning and form, knowledge), this chapter argues that true empowerment of the learner takes a realistic curricular model that relies on functional features (i.e. ACTFL guidelines) and learners individual factors in collective and communicative settings. Similarly, chapter 13 examines more structural issues and suggests the syntactic binary principle to facilitate the teaching and learning of Arabic without overstressed, nonoperational abstractions. Further, chapter 14 reports on an empirical study that investigates the use of connectors amongst advanced native and non-native students, looking into the effect of group membership and task types, exploring the similarities and differences between

the two groups. While the effects of both variables are both found statistically significant, qualitative results ascertained not only the available repertoire of both groups, but also their overall realization of the context-dependent nature and organizational function of connectors. Such findings are equally crucial to L1 and L2 writing, for they set forth a conjoined integrated-skill genre-based approach (i.e. reading-writing approach; semantic relations; rhetorical characteristics) to the teaching of Arabic connectors. The final chapter in this part showcases the Middleton College study-abroad experience in Jordan, discussing challenges such as the effects of scant at-home exposure to colloquial Arabic and limited contact with Arabic native speakers. A remarkable way to improve cultural immersion as proposed in this case is to raise students' awareness of the cultural models and historical dynamics that assume the conventions witnessed in society.

The final part documents the history of Arabic programs in China, Azerbaijan, Nigeria, and the UK. In this global context, chapter 16 lays out the developmental stages of Arabic in Chinese universities and attributes its unique trajectory to the inherited traditional educational practices (i.e. Jingtang Jiaoyo - Madrassa and new schools), the work of eminent Muslim scholars (i.e. Ma Jian, Na Zhong), the state's educational reform, and foreign language policy. Chapter 17 brings the transcaucasian case of Azerbaijan, concentrating on the contributions of Professor Ali Asgar Mammadov's textbooks. While identifying positive and negative features in his textbooks, this chapter unveils the inherited challenges and discusses the value of reformed curricula, methodology, and instruction. Moreover, chapter 18 presents an empirical study on the role of private Arabic Schools (PASs), examining their contributions in curricular activities, as well as their challenges. The results reported from the questionnaires and the interviews in this study indicate the concerted efforts of these schools in maintaining Arabic education in Nigeria, and akin to the previous chapter, suggest a comprehensive review of curricular activities, expanding funding opportunities, and moving beyond the notion of Arabic as a religious value. The final chapter of the book reviews the recent research commissioned by the British Council in relation to the teaching and learning of Arabic. This chapter evaluates several aspects related to the Arabic language learners, including: learning motivations and ambitions, methodologies used, teaching materials and resources, training and professional development, and assessment. The chapter concludes with practical directions to improve the future of Arabic instruction in the UK.

The main strength of Mbaye Lo's *The Arabic Classroom: Context, Text, and Learners* lies in its comprehensive scope, reinforced by the robust complementarity of each parts' components. The book accounts for various variables and deploys rich, assorted perspectives on the complexities of Arabic language teaching and learning, discussing global and local instructional Arabic language phenomena in empirical, theoretical, and personal pedagogic accounts. It delivers valuable insight to both researchers and practitioners alike, proposing practical answers for future directions in Arabic teaching and learning. Fundamentally, such contents strive to elicit further structural refinement to enrich the curricular and instructional standards of this language classroom.

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