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## Teaching Arabic to Business Students

Amel Mili

*University of Pennsylvania*, [amili@wharton.upenn.edu](mailto:amili@wharton.upenn.edu)

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Amel Mili

*The University of Pennsylvania*

## TEACHING ARABIC TO BUSINESS STUDENTS

### ABSTRACT

It has become increasingly more critical for business students to be fluent in foreign languages and knowledgeable of foreign cultures. There is more to teaching a foreign language to a business student than teaching vocabulary and grammar. In order to prepare students to be successful businesspersons in the target geographic area, we must also introduce them to such topics as the local culture, local economic conditions, and local business ethics. In this article, I discuss my experience at Lauder with the Arabic language and culture program, by discussing in turn its requirements, premises, and lessons learned.

**KEYWORDS:** Arabic, Arab world, language learning, business language

What do the following countries have in common: the country with the highest per capita GDP in 2010? The country with the highest yearly growth of its per capita GDP (2010 vs. 2009)? The country with the tallest building in the world? The country that is currently building what will be the tallest structure in the world? The country with the largest proven oil reserve in the world? The country with the second-largest proven oil reserve in the world? The answer is that all of them are Arab countries. Qatar has the highest 2010 per capita GDP and per capita GDP growth, according to data compiled by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the CIA. Dubai is home of Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world (at 828 meters), and will soon be overtaken by the Kingdom Tower complex (at 1,000 meters) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The country with the largest proven oil reserves in the world is Saudi Arabia, and the country with the second largest is Iraq, though recent discoveries in Venezuela, if confirmed, may place them in second and third place, respectively.

Beyond the anecdotal nature of these remarks, one thing appears certain: with a population of 360 million, growing at the rate of 2.3% annually, 60 percent of whom are younger than 25 years, with vast natural resources and increasing financial resources, the Arab world is poised to play an important role in the economy of the twenty-first century, as a massive market, and most likely as an active player as well. A business student who learns Arabic will find it easier to gain a foothold in the Arab business sphere.

*Global Business Languages* (2011)

The Joseph H. Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania is a pioneer in integrating business education (and law studies) with studies in foreign languages and cultures, and more broadly in international studies. In terms of languages, it offers two-year programs in the following languages: Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, French, Hindi, German, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. In this article, I discuss the design and operation of the two-year Arabic program, by covering the program requirements, the program's premises, the program's syllabus and delivery, and finally some concluding remarks and prospects.

### PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

We see three types of requirements for our program: language requirements, which pertain to the target language fluency at graduation; culture requirements, which pertain to the target cultural proficiency at graduation; and business requirements, which pertain to the target familiarity with the economics of the Arab world.

- **ACTFL's Language Requirements.** At Lauder, students are recruited at the level of Advanced Low or higher on the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) scale established by The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), and are expected to achieve the level of Superior by the time of their graduation. According to ACTFL standards (Language Testing International, 2011):

[S]peakers at the Superior level are able to communicate in the language with accuracy and fluency in order to participate fully and effectively in conversations on a variety of topics in formal and informal settings from both concrete and abstract perspectives. They discuss their interests and special fields of competence, explain complex matters in detail, and provide lengthy and coherent narrations, all with ease, fluency, and accuracy. They explain their opinions on a number of topics of importance to them, such as social and political issues, and provide structured argument to support their opinions. They are able to construct and develop hypotheses to explore alternative possibilities. When appropriate, they use extended discourse without unnaturally lengthy hesitation to make their point, even when engaged in abstract elaborations.

- **ACTFL's Focus Areas.** The Standards for Foreign Language Learning advocated by the ACTFL (Standards, 2011) provides five focus areas, known as the Five C's:

- o *Communication:* According to ACTFL's standards, students must be able to engage in conversation, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions. Also, they must understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics. Finally, they must present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics.
- o *Cultures:* According to ACTFL's standards, students must understand the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied. Also, they must understand the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied.
- o *Connections:* According to ACTFL's standards, students must reinforce their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language; also, they must acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures.
- o *Comparisons:* According to ACTFL's standards, students must understand the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own. They need to be aware of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.
- o *Communities:* According to ACTFL's standards, students use the language within and beyond the school setting. They show evidence of becoming life-long learners by using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment.

• **Culture Requirements.** Language and culture are inseparable. Language is the custodian of culture, and is one of its most important components. Culture provides language with its idioms, its worldview, and its concepts. Hence it is quite natural that we teach them together. In our two-year program, we devote the first year to teaching the Arabic language along with Arab culture, which is often misunderstood, or understood through simplistic clichés. In particular, we use Arabic to discuss unique aspects of Arab culture, such as gender relations, gender politics, social structures, Arab legal systems and their origin, religious practice in the Arab world, Arab media, Arab political systems. It is hardly necessary to point out that Arab culture is not a monolith, but a vastly diverse mosaic. There is very little in common between the culture of Yemen, for example, an ethnically homogeneous, isolated country in the Arabic peninsula, steeped in history and millenary traditions, and the culture of Tunisia, a westernized, ethnically diverse country, that is at the crossroads of Africa, the Mediterranean, and

the Euro-Mediterranean zone, and is the melting pot of countless cultural influences throughout history.

- **Business Requirements.** While the first year of our two-year program is devoted to Arabic language and Arab culture, the second year is devoted to Arabic language and Arab business. The purpose of the second year is twofold. First, we want to familiarize the student with the business ethics, business etiquette, and business practices of the area. Second, we acquaint the student with economics of the Arab world, including such specific aspects as Islamic banking, Islamic law (wherever it is practiced), oil economics, real estate law, and emergent economies. Of course, our purpose is not to replace or supersede their business education, but rather to enrich it. Business topics are covered at a basic level, that merely introduces students to the relevant concepts and vocabulary. It relies heavily on case studies, discussed later. As with culture, the business climate of the Arab world is not a monolith, but a vastly diverse mix. There is hardly anything in common between the economy of Qatar, a modern resource-based economy producing a per capita GDP of \$179,000, and the economy of Mauritania, a traditional agrarian/ pastoral economy producing a per capita GDP of \$2,100 (CIA *Factbook*, 2010).

#### PROGRAM PREMISES

The design of our program is affected by the requirements listed above, as well as by a number of premises pertaining to language learning, language evolution, and to the current situation of the Arabic language. I discuss these premises in this section.

- **Focus on Standard Arabic.** While each Arab country or region has its own Arabic dialect, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is common to all of them. Dialects differ from MSA by their own unique vocabulary, accent, phonology, and sometimes grammar. But all countries have MSA as their official language. As such it is the language in which laws and contracts are written, business transactions are carried out, and business correspondence is written. From the standpoint of a business student or a businessperson, country-specific dialects are not significant, with at best some limited cultural value.

- **Focus on Logical Analysis.** Syntax is important in the study of a language only to the extent that it informs the logical analysis of the sentence, by elucidating the role of each term in a sentence, but it is not an end in itself, especially for business students. Consequently, we favor the logical analysis of sentences, and view the syntactic analysis as a means to that end rather than an end in itself. Hence, we take a pragmatic approach to the study of

Arabic grammar, which focuses on function rather than form, and on logical analysis rather than syntactic minutiae.

- **Arabic as a Communication Tool.** Whereas it is sometimes viewed as a relic to be studied and contemplated, Arabic is a communication tool that must adapt to better serve its speakers. As such, we should not be afraid to develop Arabic to make it more agile, nimble, and practical. This may involve enriching its vocabulary, simplifying its grammar, and shunning its more arcane or convoluted forms. In the same way that modern English is very different from Shakespearean English (and has about six times its vocabulary), we should expect modern standard Arabic to be very different from classical Arabic.

- **Arabic as a Thinking Tool.** A natural language, such as Arabic, is more than a communication tool; it is actually a thinking tool. One does not conceive an idea then map it into a language, but uses the language to conceive and formulate the idea. Each language has its own way of formulating and composing ideas, and language learning is not complete until one has learned to think, as well as speak, in the target language.

- **Language Evolution as a Bottom-Up Process.** As much as some would like it, language cannot be legislated, and language evolution is driven exclusively by usage. A natural selection process takes place, whereby the words, idioms, expressions, constructs, and rules that serve speakers are adopted. Those that speakers do not like fade away and are forgotten.

- **Scientific Practice as a Precondition for Long Term Survival.** All modern languages evolve through a constant flow of linguistic material from many sources, including scientific laboratories, to everyday practice through a set of transitions. This flow enables the language to remain relevant in today's technologically advanced world. In order for Arabic to remain relevant in the long term, Arabic-speaking scholars must practice (at least part of) their scholarly work in Arabic, to provide the necessary linguistic usage. This is not an unrealistic demand, since speakers of other languages that have a tradition of scientific practice do that on a routine basis.

We now need to discuss the contents of our two-year program, by discussing in turn the program of year 1, focused on language and culture, then the program of year 2, focused on language and business.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am writing a two-volume language textbook, where each volume corresponds to a year of the program; volume 1 (Mili, 2011) appeared in September 2011, while volume 2 is expected to appear in 2012.

## PROGRAM DESIGN: YEAR 1

The two-year program at the Lauder Institute starts with a two-month summer immersion program, in which students take Arabic classes in an Arab country, and combine their classes with a cultural program (visits to historic or cultural sites) and a business program (corporate visits). In the summer of 2011, the summer immersion included two components: a five-week stay in Rabat, Morocco, hosted by Amideast; and a three-week stay in Dubai, UAE, hosted by the American University of Sharjah.

The academic year includes two terms: the fall semester runs fifteen weeks from September to December; and the spring semester runs fifteen weeks from January to May. The 30 weeks of the academic year are divided into ten sets of three weeks each, each set covering one chapter from the textbook (Mili, 2011). The following topics are studied:

1. *The Arab World*. We introduce the student to the Arab world, present all 25 countries that make up this region, and discuss the many dimensions of Arab unity, including geography, shared history, ethnic issues, culture, religion, and politics.

2. *History of the Arab World*. We discuss the history of the Arab world, starting from the pre-Islamic Arabian peninsula, Islamic expansion, the various dynasties, then the Ottoman dynasty, and its breakup after World War I, and the emergence of the modern Arab world as the result of colonial and post-colonial partitions.

3. *Arab Media*. The current media configuration in the Arab world is studied, and how it emerged as a result of the various socio-political forces at play. We discuss such media phenomena as Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, and Arabsat.

4. *Arab Law*. The legal systems of Arab countries are analyzed, and how they combined legal principles from the Roman/ European tradition with legal principles inspired from Shari'a law, the latter playing, in most countries, a minor and relatively benign role.

5. *Arab Religious Practice*. Whereas people sometimes equate being Arab with being Muslim, in fact these identities are distinct, and neither implies the other. Not all Muslims are Arabs: Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Iran are all Muslim countries, but their inhabitants are not Arabs. On the other hand, countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Jordan have important Christian communities, and countries such as Yemen, Morocco, and Tunisia have had, until recently (and in some cases still have) significant Jewish communities. We discuss religious beliefs and dogmas in the Arab world.

6. *Arab Sciences*. The Arab world is capitalizing on its vast human resources, its educated elite, and its increasing financial resources to jump-start an autonomous research agenda that acknowledges the specific needs of Arab countries and produces specific solutions (as opposed to adapted foreign-made turnkey solutions). Such solutions serve the community of Arab nations as a whole, in the long term. We discuss the recent interest in scientific research across the Arab world, including such initiatives as Masdar City (Abu Dhabi), Education City (Qatar), and SESAME (Jordan).

7. *Arab Governance*. The Arab world is currently in the midst of a broad struggle to replace old autocratic regimes with new representative governments. We examine the social, economic, demographic, and political factors that led to this situation, as well as the prospects that are emerging for Arab countries, as people conquer their fear and demand meaningful participation in the political process.

8. *Gender Issues in the Arab World*. The state of gender relations in the Arab world stems from a combination of political, social, economic, and religious factors, all of which are currently in flux. We present objective statistics on the status of women in the Arab world, identify outstanding issues, and explore future prospects in light of the fluid political evolutions taking place currently across the region.

9. *Arabic Literature*. Students are exposed to samples from Arabic literature, including excerpts from the *Arabian Nights* (stories from the Middle East, compiled during the Abbasid Dynasty in Baghdad), *Kalilah wa Dimna* (fables about politics, featuring a cast of animals), prose by Gibran Khalil Gibran (a Lebanese-American author of the early twentieth century), poetry by Aboul Kacem Chebbi (a prolific Tunisian poet), and the *Quran* (which is not strictly speaking a literary source, but a religious text that had significant influence on subsequent Arabic literature).

10. *Arabic Linguistics*. Students are exposed to elements of linguistic theories from an Arabic standpoint. They get an overview of Arabic structure and semantics, as well as some elements of language analysis, including Chomsky's hierarchy of grammars (Chomsky, 1965) and Fillmore's semantic cases (Fillmore, 1968).

Along with each of these ten themes, students are introduced to four additional topics:

- Vocabulary pertaining to the theme of the chapter.
- Idioms, expressions, and formulas pertaining to the theme of the chapter.



- Grammar, pertaining to particular aspects of Arabic grammar (Brustad et al., 2004; Ryding, 2005).
- Conjugation, studied separately from grammar because it is a complex topic (Brustad et al., 2004; Ryding, 2005), and occupies a significant part of a learner's attention.

Each three-week theme concludes with a homework assignment that includes exercises on the narrative of the theme, as well as exercises that test the student's knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and conjugation.

In the spring semester, around late March, each language program of Lauder organizes a two-day event, called a mini-immersion, in which students get together to participate in language-centered activities. These typically include listening to guest speakers, watching a movie, giving short presentations, participating in debates, and visiting cultural sites or exhibits. These mini-immersions involve first-year and second-year students, and are usually a great opportunity for students to practice their language skill in an interactive environment. Evaluation forms are usually very positive, as students feel that they learn a great deal.

#### PROGRAM DESIGN: YEAR 2

The program for the second year, which centers around language and business, is organized into another ten themes, delivered at the rate of one theme per three weeks:

11. *Oil Economics*. We discuss the global oil market, and the operation of resource-based economies built on oil wealth, taking Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar as sample examples. We offer no economic insights, so this is primarily a descriptive coverage of the topic, giving students the opportunity to learn relevant Arabic vocabulary.

12. *Service Economies*. This theme discusses the operation of service-based economies, using three Arab countries as illustrative examples—Dubai, Lebanon, and Tunisia—all of which have service-based economies (international trade and finance for Dubai, banking and tourism for Lebanon, tourism and Hi-Tech services for Tunisia).

13. *Economic Development*. We discuss patterns of economic development, and take as case studies Arab countries that are ranked as being in a phase of economic development, including Morocco, Sudan, and Yemen.

14. *Interest-free banking*. Whereas modern banking rests on the premise that banks lend money to individuals and corporations at an annual interest rate, Islamic law forbids the practice of charging interest on loaned money.

This raises the question of how one does banking without violating the Islamic prohibition of charging interest. A number of procedures, it turns out, constitute what is known as interest-free banking or Islamic banking. We acquaint the student with the main concepts and their associated vocabulary. As an illustration, we consider Islamic banks in Egypt, and in Tunisia.

15. *Emerging Economies*. The French magazine *La Revue* publishes a yearly report on emerging economies. In its 2010 edition, this report cites a number of Arab countries among its list of emerging countries, including Kuwait, the UAE, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Algeria. We discuss the criteria used by *La Revue*, and how the countries studied are faring.

The remaining five themes correspond to the last semester of the two-year program, and are made up of case studies. Each case study is an opportunity for the students to get acquainted with relevant vocabulary, legislation, documentation (such as contracts), and sample forms (such as administrative forms, sample letters, etc), all in Arabic.

16. *Case Study: Investment Law*. In this case study we imagine the student starting an off-shore company in Tunisia. This requires the student to become acquainted with relevant investment legislation, to fill out appropriate forms and applications, to address queries and requests to the correct administrative units, to fill out incorporation paperwork, and to write up relevant contracts.

17. *Case Study: Contract Law*. This case calls for the student to start and operate a cell phone company in Iraq. This involves reading pertinent legislation of Iraq, reading the call for submissions, submitting a bid for the work, going through the formalities, and seeking the necessary permissions.

18. *Case Study: Real Estate Law*. We imagine the student starting a real estate project in Dubai. This involves reading real estate legislation of the UAE, seeking the necessary permissions for the project, establishing a budget for the project, preparing a business plan, and drafting a contract with a construction firm.

19. *Case Study: International Law*. This case requires the student to act as an advisor for a multi-national company operating in an Arab country (such as Saudi Arabia). This may involve reading relevant international conventions to which Saudi Arabia is a signatory, reading Saudi legislation regarding fiscal regimes for multinational corporations, and writing to Saudi authorities about the company's fiscal obligations.

20. *Case Study: Humanitarian Law*. We imagine the student starting an NGO in an Arab country, for instance, a micro-finance institution in Jordan.

This involves reading relevant Jordanian legislation, filling out the incorporation paperwork, building a business plan, and seeking the necessary permissions to operate, etc.

In all these case studies, the main challenge for the instructor is often to find the relevant documentation.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have discussed a two-year program for teaching Arabic to business students, by discussing its requirements, its premises, its syllabus, and its intended delivery. The proposed program combines language and culture the first year, and language and business the second year.

The program is rather ambitious, for a weekly schedule of three hours over four semesters; but the goal of achieving an OPI ranking of Superior, along with all the accompanying content requirements, is difficult to achieve without a lot of concentrated effort on the part of the students and faculty alike.

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