Chapter IV
Developing Hypertext Reading Materials for the Teaching of Arabic

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ABSTRACT

Enrollments in Arabic language programs are rapidly growing throughout the United States. Until recently, Arabic has received minimal attention in educational institutions. This chapter describes the textbook materials and software resources in the field of Arabic language teaching and learning. As Arabic programs and teachers rush to implement new teaching materials, modernize and improve curricula, attention is paid to enhancing the role of technology in teaching Arabic. This chapter presents a review of issues related to teaching and learning Arabic, software applications that may assist Arabic learners and an innovative example of hypertext software that may be used to facilitate reading proficiency in Arabic.

INTRODUCTION

In terms of the number of speakers, Arabic is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. It is the official language of over 20 countries and is one of the six official languages of the United Nations. Arabic is the fifth most spoken language in the world (after Mandarin, Hindi, Spanish and English). In terms of students studying Arabic in the United States, however, enrollments are much lower in comparison with more commonly taught languages such as Spanish, French and German. This disparity has recently been the subject of significant attention in the media, academia, and the government. Enrollments in Arabic in the United States are increasing at fast pace. To some,
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the pace is alarming because it comes too fast to be ready: there is a need for updated textbook materials, pedagogically sound resources and software and qualified instructors of Arabic. The ability to read, write, and speak Arabic has never been more important in the United States.

BACKGROUND

Teaching Arabic in the United States Enrollments

The teaching of Arabic in the United States is in an exciting period of change. The change stems from several different areas, including enrollment patterns, pedagogical innovation as well as in the availability of new materials. The most important transformation is the mushooming of interest in Arabic language and culture. Arabic has historically been viewed as an exotic language outside mainstream foreign language learning and teaching. All of this changed, however, after the terrible events of September 2001. Al-Batal (2007) describes the post-9/11era as a “sputnik” moment for Arabic, meaning that interest and increase in Arabic enrollments is comparable to the similar development of perceived foreign language relevance – particularly for Russian – after the Soviets launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957. Recently, there has been a steep rise in enrollments, quadrupling the number of students enrolled in Arabic language courses.

In her article on foreign language enrollments in United States institutions, Elizabeth B. Welles (2004) chronicles the beginning of the increase: “Enrollments in Arabic were relatively stable during the 1980s; however, since 1995 they have shown rapid growth, particularly between 1998 and 2002, almost doubling (from 5,505 to 10,584)” (Welles, 2004). As shown in the data, Arabic takes its place as the 12th most often taught language. Its percentage increase between 1998 and 2002 was 92.3%. However, the increase does not stop there. In a more recent report on enrollments in US institutions of higher education, Furman, N., Goldberg, D., & Lusin, N. (2007) show that Arabic continued its expansion between 2002 and 2006, gaining 126.5% in enrollments. Arabic almost doubled its enrollments from 1998 to 2002 and more than doubled its figures again in 2006, bringing the number of students in Arabic to 23,974. Furman et al. also state “Not only have enrollments in Arabic expanded two-fold, but the number of institutions of higher learning offering Arabic has also nearly doubled; we received reports from 466 programs in 2006 against 264 in 2002” (Furman et al., 2007). Arabic is now the 10th most taught language in the US, right after Russian.

With the study of Arabic poised to continue its strong increase in the years ahead, it is interesting to observe that the data also shows that enrollments are concentrated in lower-level courses. There is a strong differential in enrollments between lower-level and upper-level courses. For every eight enrollments in first and second year Arabic courses, there is only one enrollment in advanced Arabic (Furman et al., 2007). If this trend continues, it will have an impact on the type of teaching and materials required in the future.

Pedagogy

As with most foreign languages, Arabic has been making a transition from teaching primarily based on a grammatical syllabus to communicative language teaching. The impetus for change comes from a variety of different sources. What’s clearer is that students are interested in learning a foreign language to communicate with a speaker of the foreign language rather than to deal with metalinguistic analysis. Consequently, students want to learn Arabic as a modern foreign language and want to stress communicative skills. The job market has also been exerting pressure for acquiring conversational skills in Arabic. At