1 Teaching Arabic during the pandemic: the remote online classroom

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Abstract

The chapter gives the reader insights of teaching Arabic as a foreign language during the consequences of COVID-19. It tackles the outcomes of the spring and summer semesters in 2020 among students of Ningxia, Aarhus, Copenhagen, Cambridge, and Berlin universities. It sheds light upon the challenges faced by students, teachers, and management and how they are handled. The chapter depends on the collectives of two surveys carried out by the Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language (TAFL) team. It includes students' and instructors' feedback and the means of delivery of Arabic classes amid the pandemic. It also covers the needs of the online classroom in Arabic as a foreign language. It shares language achievements during the pandemic, and recommendations for the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, online language teaching, Arabic, higher education, training, Alexandria, Egypt.

1.   Introduction

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutes were on a forked road whether to postpone their semesters or turn to online classes. The TAFL centre of the Alexandria University turned most of its classes into online classes due to a number of factors that are to be discussed below. It has provided

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online sessions in spring 2020 for students of Aarhus University, Cambridge University, Copenhagen University, and Ningxia University. Similarly, back in 2011, the TAFL centre experienced the evacuation of the students of American programmes due to political unrest in Egypt at that time. Such experience made the TAFL instructors, 12 at that time, jobless. As a result, some of the teachers made their way to online classes via skype. Thus, the idea of moving physical classes into remote/online ones was fully grasped.

This chapter focuses on how staff and students reacted to the first wave of the pandemic.

2.   Institutional context

Alexandria University is a public university in Alexandria, Egypt. It was established in 1938 as a satellite of Fouad University, becoming an independent entity in 1942. The TAFL centre is established in 1985 as part of Alexandria University. It receives students from various cultural and educational backgrounds worldwide, and it immerses them in the Egyptian culture where they learn Arabic interactively.

The TAFL centre has a team of experienced Arabic language teachers who come with years of commended performance, as they take learners to higher levels of language proficiency. The centre is concerned with presenting an authentic image of the cultures of Egypt and the Arab/Islamic world. Moreover, the centre aims at creating a cultural bridge between Egypt and the international community, regardless of the world of politics altogether.

The centre receives students mainly from Ningxia University and China Center for International Economic Exchanges (CCIEE) programmes (China), Cambridge and Edinburgh universities (UK), Copenhagen and Aarhus universities (Denmark), and from other parts of the world like Senghor University (African countries), and a number of students from French and American universities.

3.   Going online

In March 2020, the 30-student programme of Ningxia University was asked to depart from Alexandria, Egypt due to the consequences of COVID-19. The Chinese administration inquired about the possibility of having Arabic classes online. Aarhus University students were obliged to go back to Denmark following the same procedures a week after. The students of the Cambridge University programme were also asked to return back to the UK and have their Arabic classes online. To accommodate the requests mentioned above, the TAFL administration encouraged instructors of Arabic who have experience in teaching online to be in charge of the required classes. During that time, the rest of the instructors would have the opportunity to develop the necessary skills to be on track to start teaching online. Some individual initiatives were taken by instructors to help their colleagues. Based on their experience teaching online classes, a team of three instructors gave a workshop on how to adapt Al Kitaab, third edition (Brustad, Al-Batal, & Al-Tonsi, 2011), to online teaching. Some chapters of the book, which integrates standard Arabic with colloquial varieties, were taught to seven students from Aarhus University totally online for six weeks in the spring semester, 2020. Another workshop was given to all TAFL instructors, numbering 17, on how to harness some websites and applications in online sessions. It was given in April 2020 to TAFL instructors via Zoom. It focused on using Kahoot! and similar applications to facilitate teaching new vocabulary in Arabic. It also offered alternative applications to Zoom to be used with Chinese students such as Zhumu[2] – a Zoom-like application that is compatible with Chinese software. The goal was achieved and all physical classes were turned into virtual ones including activities and material. This time we had the opportunity to get ourselves organised and to think about how to deal with what the coming weeks would bring along.

A report (see supplementary materials, Appendix A) was made to gather data about the training and workshops that TAFL instructors received from 2019 to 2020 that focused mainly on online language teaching and technology. It

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2. https://www.zhumu.com/download

was carried out via Google Forms. The respondents to this survey, 15 out of 17 instructors, have provided us with the data that included the following:

- title of the training or the workshop;

- the organisation that gave this training;

- the language of the training;

- whether or not there were fees for the training; and

- whether or not a certificate of attendance was issued upon the completion of the training.

It was concluded that 90% of instructors received over four training sessions about online language teaching. 40% of the training was given by international bodies and 60% was given by national ones. 59% of the training was in the Arabic language while 41% of the training was in English. 93% of the training was for free. 54% of the training gave certifications.

The TAFL team carried out an oral survey on the phone about the teachers' online experience during the spread of COVID-19 and here are the results of that survey. The team contacted 15 instructors for 15 minutes each. 90.9% of instructors were 24-34 years old. The programmes that were frequently used in online teaching were Zhumu (100%), Zoom (90.9%), Skype (27.3%), Google Meet (9.1%), Webex, and Microsoft Teams (9.1%).

In the conventional study-abroad experience, where the number of students can be from 4 to 18 per class, students have teaching hours, office hours, language-partnering sessions, and a number of extracurricular activities. They work in groups in class to practise Arabic, and then they meet up with their Egyptian language partners to practise colloquial Arabic in cafés or on the street. Because of all these activities, typical students would pick up the Arabic language and culture naturally and gradually, directly and indirectly. For instance, students

would learn new words from flyers and menus written in Arabic, or they would engage in a simple conversation with the taxi driver on their way to the cinema. All of these activities would need to be condensed into a couple of hours online during the pandemic. Hence, the decision to move fully online had its costs in terms of the immersive experience of the students. The spring semester that normally starts in February was rescheduled to begin in March. A number of challenges followed.

One of the main challenges was in supporting the Chinese students, as they use certain apps and Zoom and Google were not the best technical options to use with them as some features are blocked in their region. A good alternative was a Chinese app named Zhumu that had all what a teacher would find in Zoom. A further challenge was how to keep classes as communicative as possible, almost similar to physical classes. Having 'break-out rooms' is a good virtual option but it could not fulfil all of the functions of working in groups. The instructor would not be able to follow what happens in the separate rooms and would not, therefore, be able to correct students' mistakes and provide immediate feedback. In addition, some classes could not be replicated as an online alternative was not a viable option. For instance, Arabic pronunciation[3] sessions were omitted from the schedule. One of the activities in phonetics sessions is to use a tongue depressor for each student to refer to a certain articulator and associate it with certain sounds: such an activity could not be replicated virtually nor physically due to the pandemic. Removing such sessions was a great loss, as students quickly pick up intonation and stress patterns in these classes.

Dealing with internet connectivity and efficiency was a major challenge. In Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) classes instructors usually warm up using a song on YouTube or using an educational game such as Kahoot!. Due to slow internet connections however, it took too long for everyone to participate. The synchronisation of sound and images was badly affected. What is more, while

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3. 'Pronunciation sessions' are classes that not only focus on Arabic phonetics, but also phonology; intonation and syllabic stress. These classes are taught by Arabic phoneticians who help students overcome pronunciation challenges on various levels.

scanning books was not an obstacle, uploading the accompanying audiovisual materials was. Some materials were available on clouds such as Google Drive. Other materials were sent via email or WeChat. Giving oral feedback to students was another challenge as it was frequently interrupted, as such the instructor had to write down his/her feedback again.

Finally, as some classes were taught from home, the lack of technical support was another challenge to some of the instructors. As a result, academic directors of the Arabic programmes at TAFL centre would normally meet bi-weekly to discuss students' progress and language needs. Teachers would spare some time during their coffee or lunch breaks to keep up-to-date with students' understanding of classes and activities. Amid the pandemic, all breaks became a matter of luxury. The administration and teaching staff made themselves available to students 24/7, not only to make sure that everything was clear and smooth academically, but also to double check that students were in good health and could access their classes online.

4.   Student feedback

In the surveys (see supplementary materials, Appendix B) focusing on the academic aspects of the spring and summer semesters 2020, students praised the communicative method (Brandl, 2008) used by the instructors. The surveys were conducted via Google Forms at the end of each semester. The respondents were 30 students from Ningxia University (China), seven students from Cambridge University (UK), seven students form Aarhus University (Denmark), one student from Sciences Po Institute (France), and one student from Berlin University (Germany). They showed their gratitude to the instructors for being able to alleviate the pressure they felt at first and for leading them to impressive results. The online classes enhanced students' vocabulary mastery and they indicated that the modern standard Arabic classes were an 'excellent opportunity' to practise speaking in a natural context. No matter how satisfied students were with their learning experience, they could not stop expressing how 'stressed' they were throughout their online experience.

Students also felt stressed when they did not know the appropriate answers or when they forgot new vocabulary items, and also in the context of introductions. They suggested that they should listen to the audio/video before class at home to find out details and that they should get additional writing assignments. They also indicated that their internet service was interrupted sometimes. Here are the results of students' feedback on the online sessions presented throughout spring and summer semesters as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.   Students' feedback

Internet connection and the software used	98.9% strongly satisfied	1.1% agree
Teachers were punctual	99.6% strongly satisfied	0.4% agree
Presentations were clear and organised	86.6% strongly satisfied	13.4% agree
Instructors effectively used time during class	90.6% strongly satisfied	9.4% agree
Course content	77% strongly satisfied	23% agree

As for the human aspect, the students summarised the advantages of the remote study experience as follows:

- the advantage of living with the family while studying;

- a new experiment whose success came unexpectedly;

- the flexibility of being in other cities and continuing to study. "Despite my presence in Cairo, I was able to join the classes of TAFL centre in Alexandria, and had it not been for the opportunity to teach remotely, I would not have been able to join the centre's summer programme. I have the freedom to travel and move from one city to another during the semester without this affecting my attendance. Actually, this was the perfect choice for me during the Corona pandemic. I was very pleased with the experience and I hope to repeat it in the future because technology provided all the tools that helped the instructors to provide an effective communication class", said one of

the respondents who was a former student at TAFL centre before and amid the pandemic; and

- self-reliance and easier access to information. "I can prepare intensively and rely more on myself. I also feel comfortable with the ease of obtaining information with the help of the professor or via the Internet, and if I were to choose between real and virtual classrooms, I would choose the virtual one", added a respondent who is a multilingual learner.

The disadvantages they mentioned were as follows:

- difficulty communicating with colleagues after class;

- absence of a blackboard: "Even a virtual blackboard doesn't help me like a real one", a respondent said;

- lack of privacy: "My sister is playing with her friend in the room and making loud noises", mentioned one of the respondents; and

- some students prefer to study in regular classes because they feel lonely: "I feel bored and lonely", added the respondent.

TAFL centre also carried out a survey about the impact of online teaching on the students' personal lives and here are the results:

- 66.7% of the students live with their families;

- 100% of students have a space for online learning;

- 66.7% the of students think that online teaching imposed restrictions on their families, while 22.2% of them didn't face that issue;

- 66.7% of the students enjoyed their online learning experience, 16.7% of them enjoyed it partially, and 16.7% did not enjoy it;

- 33.3% of the students think that working from home paved the way for a stronger kind of bond between family members, 33.3% think the opposite, and the rest of them partially think so;

- 66.7% of the students think about repeating the experience of distance learning, even partially, if the opportunity arises; and

- 66.7% of the students think that their families became more appreciative of their learning experience.

5.   The teacher perspective

We believe that the core of the learning process is the teacher who guides the rest of elements to help students achieve their objectives smoothly. Thus, we shed light upon the teachers' perspective to measure merits and demerits of the educational process amid the pandemic. Another oral survey of two parts, academic and human aspects, was created to gather all these insights for research purposes.

The demerits as shown by the instructors:

- 90.9% of the teachers were satisfied with the online software used for online teaching and 9.1% were strongly satisfied;

- the skills that teachers faced some challenges teaching while were: listening (54.5%) and writing (18.2%), while the rest of the teachers faced no problems (27.3%);

- the skills that teachers could not evaluate easily and successfully were: listening (36.4%), reading (9.1%), and writing (9.1%), while the rest of the teachers faced no problem (45.5%);

- the aspects of communicative teaching that teachers could not apply effectively were: working in groups (54.5%) which was reflected in the

students' results in their oral exams, getting students engaged in class activities (27.3%), sharing course materials (18.2%), and dealing with individual differences (9.1%);

- the class activities that the teachers could not do effectively were: role-playing (36.4%) and presentations (9.1%), while the rest of the teachers faced no challenges in doing any class activities (54.5%); and

- the technical issues that the teachers faced were: the internet speed (72.7%), the low quality of the used computer devices used (36.4%), and the power outage (36.4%).

The merits as shown by the instructors:

- 90.9% of teachers did not face any issues in homework corrections and giving feedback;

- 90.9% of the teachers were satisfied with achieving their classes' goals; and

- 90.9% of the teachers were generally satisfied with their online teaching experience.

These results led some students to perform less well than expected. This can be clearly seen in their Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPIs) according to the ACTFL (2012) guidelines. Only 43.5% of students levelled up to one sublevel in their Arabic OPIs after taking the course online. The usual number is around 70%. General suggestions for the improvement of teaching may be summed up as follows: reducing the number of students in the classroom; requesting special support for Internet quality; and supporting the use of paid applications to avoid disconnection during the class and to get more advantages.

Regarding the human aspect, the team examined the impact of online teaching on the teachers' personal lives and here are the results:

- 90.9% of the teachers live with their families;

- 100% of the teachers have an office room for online teaching;

- 66.7% of the teachers think that online teaching has imposed restrictions on their families, while 22.2% of them did not face that issue;

- 88.9% of the teachers enjoyed their online teaching experience and 11.1% of them enjoyed it partially;

- 77.8% of the teachers think that working from home paved the way for a stronger kind of bond between family members;

- 100% of the teachers think about repeating the experience of working from home, even partially, if the opportunity arises; and

- 66.7% of the teachers think that their families became more appreciative of their work.

The short answers questions showed that (1) most of the teachers' families preferred that teachers work from home to ensure that they were protected from the dangers of mixing with others during the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) some family members felt uncomfortable as a result of imposing restrictions that hampered their comfort at home, and (3) most children expressed their happiness with this decision that mothers spend all their time with them while one child expressed her dissatisfaction with her mother having to work at all.

In general, most teachers agreed on the advantages of working from home as follows: time saving; flexibility in setting appointments; avoiding traffic jams; providing support for the family as much as possible; and strengthening family bonds.

The survey also found some disadvantages: difficulty in teaching in case of family emergencies; being bored as a result of staying at home; missing

the work environment and personal professional space; lack of privacy; and imposing restrictions on the rest of family members.

6. Outcomes

Although the whole world undergoes a difficult time dealing with the pandemic, some aspects seem to be fruitful. The management starts to change its notion from crisis management method into setting strategies to maintain a healthy flexible work environment where teaching skills can be more innovative. Thus, the outcomes of the pandemic encounter can be found in two main parts; achievements and future requirements.

6.1. Achievements

- A committee of senior instructors was established to help develop educational curricula that meet the virtual needs as there is a lack of material that can be fit to online classes in AFL.

- A group of experienced examiners with different backgrounds was created to compile and create virtual assessment tools such as placement tests, evaluative exams, and proficiency-oriented exams.

- A wide range of graduation projects were collected to help in both documenting students' proficiency in the language and disseminating Arabic classes. This would be the result of replacing final exams with final projects such as videos, skits, and other creative outcomes.

- We taught 2,782 online contact hours (out of the 3,868 'normal' hours) in both spring and summer semesters 2020.

- 12 out of 17 instructors at TAFL Centre received more than five different training programmes/workshops online to enhance their digital teaching skills in the spring and summer semesters in 2020.

- Paying more attention to non-academic elements in encouraging students to achieve their desired level of proficiency in Arabic. Teaching amid the pandemic was an eyeopener to students' human side. The educational process does not only depend on curricula and students' academic achievements, but it also depends on their culture and bonds with society.

6.2.   Future requirements

- Decrease the number of learners in classes so they can benefit more from the offered academic time and feel less stressed.

- Have a teaching assistant in virtual classes to follow the different groups in the breaking rooms to fulfil the academic objectives of each and every class.

- Have an alternative to some of the extracurricular activities where Arab culture is the goal. Virtual platforms are needed not only to enhance students' awareness of the target culture but also to let them interact with native-speakers and fully grasp that target culture. This leads us to the question of whether or not virtual cultural activities can be an alternative to the study-abroad experience.

- Agree on common issues with regard to internet connectivity as the pandemic experience has shown us that both developing and developed countries suffer from poor internet. Hence, there will be a worldwide demand to have solutions for technical support and internet improvement where advanced teaching tools can be simpler and more adequate.

- Give more space for further research with regard to humanistic theory and distance learning in teaching foreign languages. More trainings are needed in this regard for future requirements and improvements in Egyptian universities.

7.   Conclusion

It is profoundly useful to test the weaknesses and strengths of our educational body. Writing this chapter gave us the opportunity to examine what we achieved as well as what we need to do in the future. By moving online, the TAFL centre has become fully aware of the logistic and academic needs. In the transitioning phase, instructors created and compiled a number of educational materials to be used for online classes. In time of need, alternative and creative solutions are made.

We realise that we need to improve our research skills and give more time to explore new methods and approaches. Dealing with various students from totally different backgrounds has enhanced our overview of the teaching process. Besides our regular surveys at the end of each semester, the team of contributors dedicated their time to carry out oral surveys with their colleagues to tackle the challenges they face amid the first wave of the pandemic. This move was made specially for the sake of creating this chapter.

The COVID-19 experience is still an ongoing story that we really hope will have a happy end, or at least a safe one. In this chapter, we attempt to show the world how students and teachers can go through the same experience and bear the consequences of a world disaster by sharing their enthusiasm within class activities. Teachers feel urged to give not only academic feedback on assignments but also endless support to the young people they teach. Teaching Arabic as a foreign language has developed a new path where more students can be reached and more teachers be trained.

8.   Acknowledgements

9.   Supplementary materials

https://research-publishing.box.com/s/cqslfyl1udjofqek894l5s18akmbbryr

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The world universities' response to COVID-19: remote online language teaching
Edited by Nebojša Radić, Anastasia Atabekova, Maria Freddi, and Josef Schmied