

4 An immersive Arabic language course in Cairo moves online

Heba Salem¹

Abstract

This chapter describes the my experience as the instructor for a course rooted in community based learning theory that was forced to move online in spring, 2020, due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. The course, titled ‘CASA Without Borders’, allows Arabic language students in the Center for Arabic Study Abroad (CASA) program at The American University in Cairo (AUC) to leave the university environment and serve the community, while also benefiting from the experience both linguistically and culturally. This course was disrupted by the students’ mandatory return to the US from Cairo as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, and continued remotely in an online format. This chapter describes the CASA program and explains both the purpose of the CASA Without Borders course and its significance to CASA students and to the program. It also describes and reflects upon my experience of continuing the course remotely during the ongoing pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, online language teaching, community-based learning, Egypt.

1. Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education across the globe, forcing many institutions to scramble to shift to remote online learning. The

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CASA program in Cairo, for which I am both the executive director and an instructor, was no different in this regard. In addition to facing substantial challenges by the move of our Arabic language learning online in March, 2020, we also had to deal with the fact that out of concern for their safety our students were ordered to leave Cairo and return to the US prior to the closing of international airports. This was a considerable challenge, as I was at the time conducting a community based learning course called CASA Without Borders that allows students to learn Arabic by interacting with different people and institutions in Cairo. For the first time, and rather suddenly, I had to consider how to teach a community based learning course without the same level of access to community. What follows are some reflections on the situation faced in spring, 2020, and on how it might be possible to continue holding such courses in an altered educational landscape.

2. Description of the CASA full-year program

CASA is a scholarship awarded to competent learners of Arabic in the US that allows them to embark on a program of study abroad in Egypt at AUC. The overall objective of the CASA Full-Year program is to develop students' overall Arabic proficiency to a level that allows them to use the language as a tool for both communication and research in their graduate and post-graduate studies, and in their careers. The program aims to provide specialized language training for use in a wide variety of cultural, social, and intellectual contexts. Upon completion of the full year, program fellows reach a level of proficiency ranging between Advanced High, Superior, and Distinguished according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) rating scale, or C2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scale. At this level, students are sufficiently competent in Arabic to interact with Egyptians and other Arabic speakers in many different contexts, and many continue to do so after finishing the program, whether in their careers or in their personal lives. In fact, most professors and instructors of Arabic in the US who are non-native speakers of Arabic have been CASA fellows at one point in their lives.

3. The CASA student profile

CASA students are:

- American or non-American graduate students (depending on the grant);
- have had at least three or four years of prior Arabic language instruction;
- independent learners, brave, outgoing individuals;
- enthusiastic enquirers; and
- possess different individual areas of interest, in addition to the Arabic Language, Middle East studies, civil rights, human rights, Islamic studies, and Arabic language instruction.

4. The place of community based learning in the CASA program

The full-year CASA program starts in June and ends in May of the following year. Students are encouraged to engage with their surroundings and with Egyptian society throughout their fellowship year, but it is not until their final semester that their interaction with communities in Cairo is formalized through the CASA Without Borders course. This takes place, however, after extensive preparation and formal language study.

The Summer program marks the beginning of the CASA fellowship. It is a seven week long program offering 20 contact hours per week. The content course taught in the summer, titled ‘An Introduction to Cairo’, focuses on the four language skills using materials related to the city of Cairo, including opinion articles, works of history and geography, art, movies, soap operas, caricatures, novels, short stories, and memoirs. This course is based on community based learning theory, and helps students gain experiences related to places and people,

and to then reflect on those experiences in both modern standard and colloquial Arabic².

During the fall semester, students are exposed to another 20 contact hours of teaching, with a focus on aural and oral language skills. Focused attention on speaking and listening abilities is one of the unique aspects of the CASA program, and it provides students with a firm grounding in an aspect of language learning that is often neglected in US-based classes, and is largely unobtainable from other sources. In addition to in-class activities, the teaching faculty in the Department of Arabic Language Instruction at AUC³ have gathered, and constantly update, a large library of audio and video clips in order to supplement coursework and to allow students to work at their own pace outside of a classroom setting.

The program uses three courses to help accomplish those goals:

- Arabic Media, which focuses on strengthening listening and speaking skills, and which meets for a total of five hours per week;
- issues in the Middle East, which focuses on both reading and writing skills, and which meets for a total of ten hours per week; and
- enhancing ECA (Egyptian Colloquial Arabic), which meets a total of five hours per week.

During the fall semester there is also a ‘meet the author’ lecture series, where students get the chance to interact with the authors of many of the works that form the source material for their lessons. These lectures give them the opportunity to work on developing note-taking skills and to sharpen and strengthen their listening comprehension skills. They also introduce them to a number of prominent figures in Egypt who provide the students with an historical overview

2. For an example of language instruction rooted in community based learning see Ibrahim (2010).

3. <https://www.aucegypt.edu/academics/studying-arabic>

of Cairo, share personal experiences on a variety of topics, and offer valuable insight into the current political, intellectual, and artistic scene in Egypt.

By the end of the fall, fellows are ready for the spring semester, in which they tackle more specialized content courses directly related to their own areas of interest and specialization. The spring semester is designed to provide the fellows the opportunity to refine and apply the advanced language skills they have developed during the summer and fall by allowing them to enroll in content-based courses of their own choosing. Students are also encouraged to interact and communicate with Egyptians both in and out of the classroom, and to engage in activities that will benefit their future studies or careers.

5. CASA Without Borders

CASA Without Borders is a course that is offered to students in the spring. Based on community based learning theory, the course allows students to develop both cultural and linguistic knowledge via firsthand experiences with the Cairene community (Ibrahim, 2010). Arrangements for the class are made as early as November of the previous year, and the class itself runs from the end of January until mid-May when the spring semester ends. The CASA program staff and executive director work with the students to identify institutions and initiatives with which they can work (though usually on a volunteer basis) in the spring semester, allowing them to gain real-world experience using Arabic in a professional environment. The main objectives of the program are to enable students to (1) communicate effectively using speaking skills; (2) communicate effectively using writing skills; and (3) demonstrate listening and critical thinking skills.

The objectives are assessed through:

- discussions that take place both within and outside of the class;
- student presentations;

- participation in AUC’s annual research conference;
- written and voice-recorded reflections; and
- a final reflection paper in which students work to identify and deal with cultural and linguistic problems they have faced throughout the semester.

Student safety is of utmost concern, so students are only allowed to choose from a list of AUC-approved institutions for their semester-long course, institutions that are not politically sensitive, and that will therefore help students avoid any unwanted negative experiences. For example, not all institutions that deal with human rights issues are able to get clearance from AUC security. What happens, then, is that students indicate their areas of interest, after which the administration connects them to the appropriate people and institutions. The students are then assigned a work position or an internship placement.

CASA Without Borders also includes a classroom component. All of the students in the course meet once at the beginning of the semester, after which individual meetings are held with the instructor on a weekly basis. Students are expected to submit weekly reflections about their work, and toward the end of the semester they all prepare presentations about their work as part of the university’s yearly research conference, which allows them to share their experience with their peers and with the wider AUC community. At the end of the semester they also produce and present a final reflection paper of 1,500 words in Arabic.

From the end of January to mid-March, 2020, CASA students worked in diverse organizations, including:

- the Cairo Institute for the Hearing and Speech Impaired;
- Arab Lit Quarterly, where the student covered various cultural events;
- assisting a professor with a research survey investigating Egyptians’ relationships to Pharaonic artifacts;

- the Women and Memory forum;
- Saffarni, a local initiative that works with underprivileged Egyptian children and helps expose them to foreign cultures;
- working with and teaching Syrian, Sudanese, and Nigerian refugees in Cairo; and
- working with children at risk with Banaati foundation.

Students were fully enjoying and engaged in their work and were regularly contributing to the shared digital folders that the program created for them, as well as uploading their reflections on their experience. However, in mid-March the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the CASA program, much as it did with educational programs across the world.

6. Decision to move online

In mid-March of 2020, AUC made the decision to suspend all physical presence on campus and all on-campus activities, which included the CASA Without Borders course. Soon after, the program's US-based administration made the decision to evacuate the CASA students before the country's airports closed. As the instructor for the CASA Without Borders course, I immediately panicked, unsure of how to continue online with a course so heavily centered around face-to-face interaction.

At first I was busy organizing the logistics for the students' return home, especially following an announcement that Egypt's airports were going to be shut down in only a matter of days. But soon it was necessary to confront the reality that the students had all left for the US and that we needed to start meeting over Zoom, as we were doing with all of our other classes. I realized that it was necessary to meet with them to help maintain their enthusiasm. The university pushed spring break up a bit so as to give instructors time to become familiar

with Zoom and to adjust to the new situation. AUC's Center for Learning and Teaching⁴ has been very active from the very beginning of the pandemic, and started giving group information sessions on how to make the transition to online instruction, as well as individualized ones if needed. They stressed the importance of effective communication in online teaching, as well as the use of slideshows, tools for digital uploads, and online discussion forums.

7. Pedagogical considerations

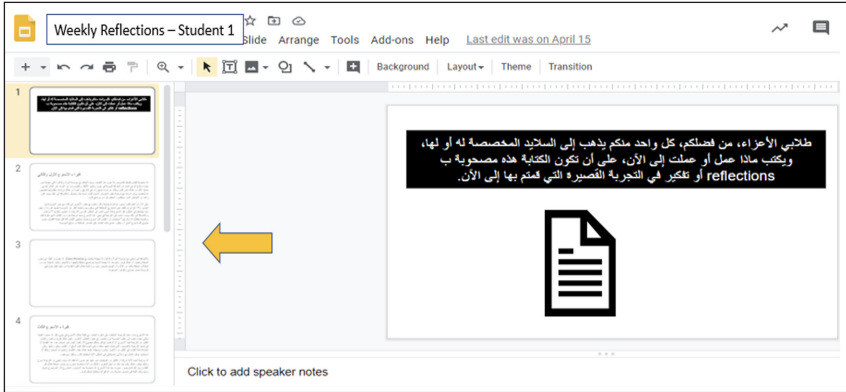
The most challenging part of moving online was figuring out how to continue achieving the course's learning outcomes without the students being able to experience the immersion, interaction, and communication with Egyptians that the course is built upon. Virtual communication had to take the place of in-person communication, and some of the students' internships had to change. I met with all of the students over Zoom both individually and in groups, which involved taking into account time differences between California, the US East Coast, and Cairo. The students and I had long talks. We decided to make use of the encounters they had already had in their first five or six weeks of work in Cairo, and decided to spend the rest of the semester reflecting on those encounters and addressing their linguistic aspects.

A group of the students decided to collaborate on a translation of the book *Building and Struggling* co-authored by university professor and activist Hoda ElSadda, which was originally published in Arabic⁵ by the Women and Memory Forum (ElSadda & Hassan, 2018). They would meet together, communicate and debate over Zoom, and worked hard to finish translating the whole book in order to produce the first draft before the end of the spring semester. They created a Google document in which they identified some translation issues and I held meetings with them to discuss different translation choices, with all of us speaking in Arabic, of course (see Figure 1).

4. <https://www.aucegypt.edu/faculty/center-learning-and-teaching>

5. Hudā al-Ṣadda (2018). *Binā' wa niḍāl: min arshīf al-ḥaraka al-niswiya al-miṣriya*. Mu'assasat al-Mar'a wa-l-Dhākira.

Figure 1. Sample of students' reflections



Each student then made an excellent video presentation at the end of the semester which they uploaded to the class platform in order to receive comments and feedback from their peers. Other students continued some of their work online, talking to refugees, for example, and working with Arab Lit Quarterly.

Figure 2. Presenter profiles



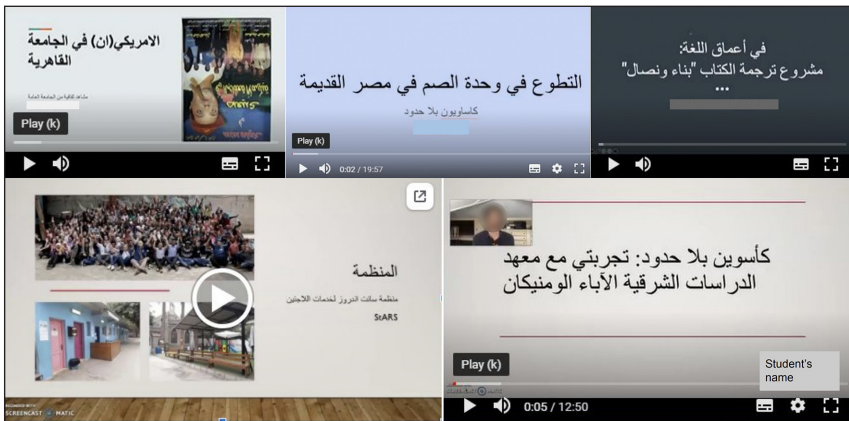
Another issue with moving online was that we still needed to hold the AUC conference in which the students would deliver their presentations. Although the conference had been cancelled along with all other activities on campus, I still considered it an important activity to achieve our learning outcomes and to allow me to submit the student's grades. The students' presentations at the conference (see Figure 2 above), during which they reflect orally on their linguistic and

cultural experiences, are the means that I use to assess the students' overall performance in the class. As a result, we agreed to hold the conference online and I organized it over Zoom in April 2020.

8. Technical support

I used Google Sites as the class platform, and students uploaded their presentations to Google Slides and then linked them to the conference website (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Stills from student presentations



Not only were the students able to watch each other's presentations and comment virtually, but an audience from the university at large was also invited to join, and encouraged to record their feedback via Google Sites. The audience consisted of more or less the same people from AUC who were expected to attend the regular conference; although, of course, attendees were fewer in number. Participants also included AUC faculty members, as well as others who were interested in the students' work and learning experiences. Professor Hoda Elsadda, the author of the book *Building and Struggling* was invited to watch the students' presentation about the book.

After one week of reviewing each other's videos, writing comments to each other, and replying to all the comments, a large Zoom meeting was held where students had the chance to talk about their feelings regarding the experience. Some colleagues of mine attended this meeting after watching the students' videos. Many of them asked the students questions, and were impressed by their deep reflection on the experience. Prof. Hoda Elsadda's reaction was as follows:

“I would like to thank you again for the work you have done with women and memory. I am also delighted that I met some of you and only wish that I had met the whole team. I enjoyed your presentation very much, your comments on translation and the thought process that went into finding the correct word. I am also really pleased that you are interested in continuing working with [the Women and Memory Forum] after the completion of the translation of the *binaa wa nidal*. I think I speak for [named person] and myself when I say that we value your work and enthusiasm” (private communication, April 27th, 2020, reproduced with kind permission from Prof. Elsadda).

I have had training previously (2017-2018) on computer supported collaborative learning, and Web 2.0 technologies, such as: infographs, flipped classroom techniques, Screen Cast-o-Matic, as well as video tools, Google Sites, Google Forms for instant feedback activities, and Google Slides for the presentations. This gave me a base for all the ideas and introduced me in details to these tools, which made the transition to online easier. Meanwhile, when moved online, I had training with AUC's Center for Learning and Teaching⁶. They offered one-on-one service over Zoom when needed.

Although the sudden move online completely upended the normal format of the CASA Without Borders course, as well as all the students' other courses, there were some surprising benefits to continuing the course in an online format. Meeting with students individually over Zoom and listening to them express their feelings about the situation inspired me to make the best of a bad situation by

6. <https://www.aucegypt.edu/faculty/center-learning-and-teaching>

helping them channel their emotions into writing projects. I asked them to write about their feelings alongside their end of semester reflection paper. I gathered these writings and published them in an electronic magazine, which remains something the students are very proud of⁷. I also reached out to the university's magazine, *Caravan*, which published two of the students' compositions. The act of writing and working with me, and their other instructors on writing, as an additional component of the course was both fun and a good outlet for them, especially considering that they were forced to leave Cairo in quite a hurry, which was emotionally difficult for them.

9. Student feedback

Students were proud of the work they did in these difficult circumstances, and they still have the recordings of their 15 to 20 minute conference presentations, which they will be able to list on their CVs. Student feedback was overall quite positive, and highlighted the positive aspects of the course, despite its format having completely changed⁸.

“Dr Heba has been very insightful and more than helpful in every regards. I appreciate the weekly meeting and her enthusiasm. I think that the weekly writing assignments could have turned out very stiff, if it weren't for her motivation and kind demeanor”.

“Thank you Ustadha Heba for being very supportive and responsive throughout. I can't imagine what this whole experience would have been like with anyone other than you being in charge of this class and the CASA program”.

As an instructor, I was initially quite worried about this community based learning course, since it depends so greatly on the students' work outside of

7. http://redtech.club/wp-content/CASAMagazineOnline/story_html5.html

8. See more student feedback in [supplementary materials](#).

class, and wondered how we would be able to still fulfill the course requirements. However, with careful thought it turned out that everything could be done online, other than meeting people in person to perform public or community service. For example, the student who was working at The Cairo Institute for the Hearing and Speech Impaired, with children who need to learn Arabic sign language, found it extremely difficult to continue his work. He had to modify his approach and use a computer program to develop learning activities for the children. And although the online aspects of the course were beneficial for the students, the linguistic and cultural benefit of immersion in the Egyptian community could not be easily achieved without direct, face-to-face interaction.

The student who was working with Arab Lit Quarterly, who had previously been attending cultural events taking place in Cairo, writing about them and talking to authors, had to focus on translation instead after all public events in Cairo were cancelled, meaning she could not physically meet with authors or report on events. Even though the student had been doing her reporting in English, the act of translating her interviews from Arabic and the experience of attending cultural and literary events, as well as meeting and conversing in Arabic with diverse authors was incredibly enriching. Unfortunately, this only lasted for the first five weeks of the spring of 2020. Although she was still able to benefit from our online activities, they were no substitute for the immersive experience she would have been able to obtain had we continued as usual. In addition, the student who was working with underprivileged Egyptian children in the Saffarni initiative was only able to undertake reflection on the first five weeks of his meeting the children and explaining American culture to them in Arabic. He described giving them peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, talking to them, and showing them photos of his home in the US. However, he had to change his plans for the rest of the semester and work on the aforementioned translation project with his colleagues.

10. Conclusion and lessons for the future

Although the students enrolled in the spring, 2020, CASA Without Borders course eventually enjoyed the way we adapted to the situation of being entirely online,

they shared my initial hesitation about the change. Without the enthusiasm that the students brought to our class the work would never have gotten done. At one point, the US-based CASA administration even discussed cancelling the course, which was impossible due to the fact that it was a registered course at AUC and could not be dropped. But despite the drawbacks of teaching a community based learning course without any student interaction with the community, the course still provided great benefits to the students, and also raised several important questions about running community based learning courses in a remote, online format.

If such a course starts totally online from the beginning of the semester, the aspect of immersion in society and the component of serving the community need restructuring and revisiting. As an instructor, teaching online forced me to think differently in preparing my courses. I felt I had to be more organized and clearer. I realized that a lot of what I do depends on my physical presence in the class and on the way I use my personality to interact with the students. Without being able to rely on my in-person interaction with the students, my instruction methods, and hence my way of thinking, had to be clearer. I was forced to pay attention to details that I do not usually think of – not out of carelessness, but because I have always been able to communicate many details to the students verbally in class, and they can ask about them anytime if they feel they need to. However, moving online made the interaction different, forcing me to present information in other modes.

I found Google Sites to be an incredibly useful pedagogical tool, and plan to use it in the future as both the platform for the class and to keep all my class material and the students work in one place, whether the course is held in person or online. Even if students' future conference presentations are able to take place in person in front of a live audience, I will still ask the students to record their presentations and upload them to Google Slides on the class platform. The fact that the students recorded their presentations and uploaded them online made it easier for me to correct the students' linguistic mistakes and give them more detailed feedback on their presentations. It also made it easier for them to obtain feedback from their peers and their virtual audience.

Although I was able to continue the course online and thus complete what the students started, it would have been difficult to start such a course entirely online from the beginning of the semester given the work that most of the students chose. Especially in Cairo, many institutes and initiatives lack both the technology and a strong enough internet connection to offer students an online internship. Working with deaf students at the Cairo Institute for the Hearing and Speech Impaired, for example, would have been very difficult to start online. And indeed, a strong internet connection is incredibly important to any attempt to do community based learning, since without one nothing can be achieved. Institutions and private homes need to be equipped with reliable internet in order to make this possible, though in some countries this is a serious problem. I myself had some issues in this regard, especially as the whole country went online in the first months of the pandemic. But the students in my course were all very understanding, and the fact that we all wanted the experience to work helped us achieve positive outcomes.

It is also important to think of alternative ways to perform community service, such as by translating a work into one's native language and making it available to another culture and readership. And although some service work cannot be performed online, there are certainly ways to build language skills through interaction with an online community of speakers. Were one to plan out a community based language learning course that takes place entirely online, there are certainly ways to use social media and videoconferencing applications such as Zoom in order to connect students with native speakers of the target language. Even though COVID-19 has disrupted education across the globe, it has also offered the possibility of rethinking what it means to interact with and serve a community, and how we can continue holding community based learning courses even in the face of a devastating pandemic.

11. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/jokl7y6pzbl4sj2ilqjr92lh3k9p21x1>

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