

An Uprising in Teaching Arabic Language

by Bilal Orfali, Rana Sibli & Maha Houssami

Abstract

The Arab uprisings that began in 2010 brought change not only to Arabs but also to the study of their language. Traditional books used to teach Arabic as a foreign language were of little help in understanding the colloquial speech and slang of the angry protesters demanding the fall of various regimes. Arabic left the elite *majlis* to dwell in the public *maydan*. Certainly, travel to the region became more difficult and at times dangerous, although it is increasingly necessary to learn the language in its social and cultural setting. Lebanon became an unlikely shelter for students who had been studying in Egypt and Syria. New teaching methods necessitated abandoning not only the glamour of classical Arabic but also blending modern standard Arabic with its dialects, a phenomenon that became increasingly visible in the media and in literature. Students in intensive Arabic summer programs, such as the program of the American University of Beirut, had to leave their traditional classrooms to mingle and communicate with native speakers, refugees, and disadvantaged groups in the streets. This shift has left its mark on the curriculum, with an increase in the use of pop songs, slogans, and talk shows in the classroom.

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About the AGYA Working Group Transformation

Popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have had a deep impact, not only on the societies in the respective countries, but also on academic disciplines and scientific relations between Europe and Arab countries. Many of the developments that have taken place in the region are not exceptional but reflect and accelerate global trends. The importance of new media, new forms of social mobilization and new instruments of governance are not limited to the MENA. Through a transcultural perspective the Working Group Transformation of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) aims to better understand these trends. The Working Group debates how ideas, norms and concepts are diffused in a context of mutual exchange and how scientific relations between Europe and the MENA can be improved.

An Uprising in Teaching Arabic Language

Dramatic political and social changes involving geographic regions or religious and ethnic groups increase the academic interest in those places, their people, and in the languages they speak. Over the past fifteen years, academics and practitioners of Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language (TAFL) have been witnessing quantitative growth and a qualitative shift: the increase in the number of learners has been accompanied by a wide interest in learning Arabic across different fields of specialization. Over the last fifteen years, the Arab world has become an increasingly popular destination for study-abroad programs for language and culture teaching in their natural setting. This demand for teaching Arabic to a wider and naturally more diverse student body has led to the development of new teaching techniques.

This article discusses how the daily political and social scenes in the Arab world inspired some of the teaching philosophies and practices at the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies (CAMES) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in Lebanon. The CAMES summer program in Arabic language offers intensive courses at eight different levels: Introductory, High Introductory, Low Intermediate, Intermediate, High Intermediate, Advanced, High Advanced, and Superior. The program emphasizes the instruction of Modern Standard Arabic, or MSA (*fuṣḥā*). CAMES also runs an intensive summer program in colloquial Lebanese Arabic. The MSA program runs for seven weeks and offers highly intensive coursework in Arabic. Each day, students receive six hours of classroom instruction in MSA, which also integrates colloquial Lebanese Arabic. Classes are held daily from Monday to Friday, offering 30 hours of classroom instruction each week. The total of 186 hours of MSA and colloquial instruction is the equivalent of nine credit hours at AUB, which are transferable to other universities (CAMES 2016). While the program attracts students from many countries, the majority of students come from the United States.

The article highlights the peculiarity of studying Arabic in Beirut, where students can experience and witness transformations in the Arab world firsthand. Furthermore, the article describes how the abundance of authentic material accessible to instructors at AUB has inevitably been accompanied by many challenges at the curricular, co-curricular, and administrative levels. Ultimately, this article departs from the discussion of the CAMES Summer Arabic Program to understand the impact of the Arab uprisings on TAFL.

► September 11 versus the Arab Uprisings

The September 11 events of 2001 in the United States were a major turning point in TAFL. Policy makers and students in the United States and across the Western world felt the need to learn more about the emerging “enemy” who had attacked them at home. This development was the precursor of the second wave of innovation that would take place a decade later in 2011 with the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The increase in financial governmental support for Arabic-language programs post-September 11 was mirrored by the nearly instantaneous increase in student interest. Arabic is now the eighth most studied foreign language in the United States (Modern Language Association 2010). In his study on the teaching of Arabic in the United States after 9/11, Chris Stone (2014) discusses the motives of studying “critical” languages, building on Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of using the language itself as a “weapon” and not only as a side effect to the act of war. Arabic became relevant not only because it provides direct access to several cultures and heritages, but also because it is the language of a direct

threat. Studying it became a “national” necessity. This left its mark on the way Arabic is taught: communicative approaches quickly dominated the language curricula and replaced the traditional methods that focus on grammar and philology necessary to access the written classical heritage.

The Arab uprisings prompted interest in the Arab region and its language despite the budget cuts that programs in the humanities have faced in the United States as a result of the world economic recession. The massive scale of the uprisings and their multilevel consequences drew the world’s attention and constituted a threat to the interests of major powers. The changes that September 11 introduced into Arabic-language curricula became even more relevant and necessary. Arabic in this context constituted a language of change, or protest, and of revolution (see Mehrez 2012). Traveling to the region became increasingly necessary to follow the rapid changes taking place, yet increasingly more difficult for students of the language. Uncensored, slang and colloquial Arabic was on the streets and in social media, but it was hardly present in the textbooks of the language. The traditional methods of approaching the language were being challenged once again.

► Lebanon and the Arab Uprisings

Syria and Egypt were attractive destinations for learners of Arabic because of the reasonable cost of living there and the unpopularity of foreign languages among their natives, enabling students of Arabic to practice the language with native speakers. However, the growing insecurity in the countries that witnessed the uprisings, especially Egypt and Syria, triggered a shift in viable study abroad locations, and diverted a large number of students from Egypt and Syria to Morocco, Lebanon and Jordan since 2011. Lebanon itself did not witness an uprising that demanded the fall of the regime, but the effect of the Arab uprisings cannot be underestimated in a country where refugees constitute a considerable portion of the population (see UNHCR country profile 2016). The Syrian uprising in particular left its mark on Lebanon on many levels – social, political, economic, and humanitarian. The uprising also prompted several debates within the country in different sectarian, social, and political circles, especially with the heavy military involvement of Hezbollah in support of the Syrian regime. Hezbollah and the Syrian regime are widely accused of assassinating Rafik Hariri in 2005, Lebanon’s former prime minister and an influential political figure in the country as it emerged from a long civil war and was under Syrian military control for years. Moreover, since 2011 a significant number of Syrian refugees have sought shelter from the emergent civil war in Syria, which exerted economic pressure on Lebanon’s already weak economy. At times Lebanon was under security threats, as when clashes occurred, for example, in northern Lebanon, where a significant Alawite community resides within a dominant Sunni population. Despite this, Lebanon continued to be relatively attractive for tourists and foreign students, especially in safe havens such as AUB. These students could experience closely the Arab uprisings – its agents and consequences – in a relatively safe setting.

► Remapping the Destinations for Studying Arabic Abroad

The Arab uprisings observably rerouted learners of Arabic to safer study abroad destinations. Jordan, Morocco, and Oman quickly became the top destinations for students from Europe and North America. There was an abundance of advertisements on Listservs and at conferences promoting both new and established programs in these countries. As stated in Mitch Smith's (2012) article "Many American universities will not support study abroad programs in countries with travel warnings, and sometimes refuse to accept transfer credits from institutions in those nations or withhold financial aid for students traveling there against the advice of the government and college." Universities with strict policies on travel warnings have moved some of their programs and students from Egypt and Syria to Jordan, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates (Smith 2012). While almost all colleges take the warnings seriously, some are lenient if they trust the academic standing of the host institution and its seriousness in dealing with security issues. Beirut experienced its share of the consequences of both travel warnings and lack of funding, but it also became a viable alternative for students who were not discouraged by unrest in the Middle East, who needed to do research in Lebanon, or who wanted to experience the Arab uprisings and their repercussions upclose (see Faddoul 2013).

The period following the Arab uprisings in late 2010 and early 2011 witnessed two waves of change in enrollment in the Summer Arabic Program (SAP) at CAMES¹. From 2008 to 2010 an average of 72 students enrolled in SAP. The summer of 2008 marked a year of relative stability in Lebanon, and also for the SAP program, after the 2006 war with Israel (when 60 students enrolled). The summer of 2010 was the last summer before any repercussions of the Arab uprisings took effect in Lebanon (76 students enrolled). Starting in January 2011, and in the following few months, when most applicants were choosing their study abroad destinations, the probability of a domino effect of the uprising reaching Lebanon was still in sight. This explains the slight decrease in student enrollment in SAP during the summer of 2011 (65 students). In contrast, the enrollment rate in the summer of 2012 gained momentum, reaching 86 students. This is one of the positive effects of the Arab uprisings felt in the TAFL field in Lebanon. The growing interest in Lebanon was supported by the difficulty of pursuing study abroad in Syria and in Egypt. Even though the political situation in Lebanon was not wholly stable, students who enrolled in SAP were willing to take the risk. It is worth noting that the campus of the American University in Beirut and the surrounding Ras Beirut area are particularly attractive to students from abroad, as they have been safe havens in the midst of many conflicts. Smith (2012) quotes Katherine Nugent Yngve, AUB college director of international programs: "The benefits of studying in Lebanon outweigh the risks. (...) Many U.S. students tell us that they feel the State Department's travel warning is an unfair impediment to studying abroad at AUB, as do their parents, and sometimes their study abroad advisers".

Starting in 2013, a general sense of disillusion over any improvements in the political and safety situations resulting from the Arab uprisings has spread in Lebanon and other countries in the Arab world. As a result, SAP enrollment decreased (63 students). At this point, Lebanon was struggling to deal with the repercussions of the Syrian crisis. The tension felt across Lebanon diverted many students away from CAMES. This relative decrease stabilized, though, in the following two years as Syria entered into civil war (60 students in 2014, 62 students in 2015).

¹For a review of some of the summer programs in Lebanon, see the *Daily Star* article by Sarah Samaha and Houda Houbeish: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Jul-14/263719-why-arabic-students-choose-beirut.ashx>. See also <http://www.studyabroad.com/programs/middle+east,lebanon/summer+program/default.aspx>.

► A Shift in Learners' Motives

The decrease in the number of learners applying to study Arabic in Lebanon since 2010 has been outweighed by the increased motivation among the student body. Students who joined SAP after the Arab uprisings were those who were willing to take the risk of traveling to the Middle East. They were interested both in the events surrounding them as well as in the ongoing transformations not only of political regimes but also of culture and values. Some of them were appreciative of being in the Middle East and felt better equipped to understand the nature and events of the Arab uprisings than others who shied away from the region. Students were keen to learn about the instrumental social, cultural, and intellectual dynamics that led to the uprisings.

► Additions to the Curriculum

The wide scope of the teaching materials at CAMES includes textbooks that are supplemented with readings and materials adapted from current events. Although the program has adopted the *Al-Kitaab fi Ta'alum Al-'Arabiya* series by Al-Batal, Brustad and Al-Tonsi, the resources that instructors and coordinators add to the curriculum expose learners to real-life events in the comfort of their classroom and ignite their interest to find out more about different issues that emerge during their stay in Lebanon outside class time. For example, one of the classes completed a unit on pioneer women in the Arab world and connected that theme to the Arab women's rights movement that was actively establishing presence in social media and organizing demonstrations in Beirut. The final class discussion helped students connect the dots between the movement they were witnessing in Beirut and the issue of sexual harassment, which was a major concern at that time in Tunisia and Egypt.

Lectures in the program also shifted in focus to help students gain a better sense of the changing face of Beirut and Lebanon. One of the general lectures in the summer of 2013 contrasted Lebanese folk music to rising forms of alternative music that were gaining ground in Beirut as a result of new realities in the Middle East. For example, Mazen El Sayyed, known as El Rass, is an Arab hip-hop rapper who sings for political and social change, thereby rebelling against the status quo (see Marrouch 2013). The Arab uprisings inspired his song *Min thaa'er* (From a rebel) that was used as an example in the general lecture showing how the fusion of Modern Standard and colloquial Arabic in his lyrics spoke equally to the Arab masses and to the educated elites.

In addition to lectures, SAP offers a set of clubs for students to learn about Arab culture. The Arabic calligraphy club, for example, sheds light on an important traditional art that was used during the Arab uprisings as a means of expression and as part of an emerging form of graffiti (see Nippard 2011; <https://beirutwalls.wordpress.com/>). A well-known Lebanese graffiti artist, Yazan Halwani, was invited to conduct the club with the students. Halwani gave an overview of how graffiti is helping young Arab artists creatively voice their discontent with the political and social situation in their respective countries using words and imagery in different forms and colors. Students learned to decipher the graffiti inscriptions in class and went on a field trip with the artist to inspect walls in Beirut that had become an important platform for this art, regionally and internationally. Students also had the chance to see Halwani at work and to produce their own graffiti-style writings.

Learning about graffiti and expressing oneself in Arabic in this creative art form was approached not only from a cultural perspective, but also from a linguistic one. Different graffiti walls were analyzed to identify grammatical forms, like imperative verbs in the famous *kun ma' al-thawra* phrase, or the active participle (*ism fā'il*) in *malik al-ghāba rākib dabbāba* (The king of the forest is driving a tank). Eventually students learned about some stylistic forms in Arabic, such as parallelism and rhymed prose (*saj'*), and practiced producing similar slogans and phrases. The graffiti and music lectures and other activities and material used in CAMES highlighted the importance of colloquial variations of Arabic, a topic that we further discuss in the next section.

► Increasing Interest in Colloquial Arabic

The Arab uprisings brought to the fore a closer connection between colloquial dialects and Modern Standard Arabic, and encouraged AFL learners to make additional efforts to acquire at least one form of colloquial Arabic. Academics and practitioners in the TAFL field had been shifting toward a more structured integration of colloquial and MSA as two complementary forms of the same language. The third edition of the *Al-Kitaab* series presents learners with a number of Arabic dialects to choose from to complement the MSA portion of the series. Other series such as Munther Younes's *'Arabiyyat Al-Naas* were also published, solidly integrating colloquial and Modern Standard Arabic in everyday class lessons.

One of the catalysts that increased students' motivation to acquire and even master the *'āmmiyya* (colloquial) Arabic is that most of the popular chants and slogans of the Arab uprisings found on social media and online were colloquial. In the case of CAMES students, the Levantine dialect that students learned in class allowed them to read political slogans about the Syrian uprising and to communicate with the increasing number of Syrian refugees arriving to Lebanon. CAMES instructors found themselves at times integrating Damascene and Beirut colloquial forms in the same class, delving into the peculiarities of each as well as the differences between them. One of the most popular Syrian soap operas, *Bāb al-Hāra* (Gate of the Neighborhood), came to be used in the classrooms as support material to the *'āmmiyya* lessons. The series depicts Middle Eastern society and the popular upheavals that took place under the colonization of Western powers when Syria was under French control and Palestine occupied by the British forces. In the different episodes shown in class, the vocabulary and themes raised provided many insights to students: although the events in the televised series dated back to the 1930s, much of what is portrayed echoes the events and situations happening in the context of the Syrian uprising. Students benefited tremendously from the overlap between the language used in the series and the one heard in Beirut among refugees and the one reported in the news and on social media back in Syria.

In response to the aforementioned need and demand for *'āmmiyya*, in the summer of 2013 CAMES launched the *'āmmiyya* track, allowing students aiming to acquire the Lebanese dialect a chance to focus on it. The material and resources used for students in this track are based on Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA), a mixture of MSA and colloquial. In 2014 and 2015 two different levels of the track were offered to accommodate students.

► Social and Community Service

Many of the CAMES students wanted to help in the refugee crisis that has resulted from the civil war in Syria, which prompted CAMES to increase students' involvement in social service and community work. Their interest stemmed both from their commitment to humanitarian causes and from the opportunity to interact in Arabic with socially disadvantaged Lebanese and Arab groups, including Syrians and Palestinians who knew few or no foreign languages. Students needed to practice their colloquial Arabic in a setting that would allow them to interact meaningfully with locals and refugees from different age levels and backgrounds. CAMES organized weekly trips to orphanages, retirement homes and refugee camps, and designed various activities to engage participants. These activities included reading aloud books to children in small groups in Arabic and English, designing and performing sketches and short plays tackling problems the participant group were facing, interviewing elderly people, and reporting on their experiences in articles published in the CAMES SAP newsletter.

In 2014, CAMES worked with the grassroots nongovernmental organization NASMA, which is located in the Hamra neighborhood close to AUB and supports families living in different parts of Beirut, including the refugee camps. At its resource center, NASMA receives underprivileged kids between the ages of seven and 14 from the surrounding neighborhoods and offers them after-school support, in addition to other social and artistic activities organized at its summer camps². In 2013, NASMA started accommodating an increasing number of Syrian refugee children. Throughout the summer CAMES and NASMA developed a series of activities carried out during the students' several visits to NASMA's resource center. In preparation for their visits, representatives from NASMA introduced the organization and its beneficiaries to the students. The latter brainstormed in small groups after this introduction about possible ice-breaking activities that they could do with the kids. They also focused on the importance of doing fun and enjoyable activities. The language level of each group of students determined the information and topics they would share with the kids. The activities implemented included educational ones, such as setting up a map of the Arab countries and providing facts about them. This activity in particular opened up some very interesting conversations between the kids and the students, specifically on the countries most involved in the Arab uprisings, namely Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and Libya. Students later expressed that they benefited from hearing another view of the events and that it was rewarding for them to see how young kids understood what was going on around them. In another activity each person (children and students) drew his or her home or dream house and wrote down a small paragraph describing it. This revealed some insights about the children's (and students') social conditions and their needs or dreams. What is of great importance in the process of learning the language is that many times kids would take the lead in teaching CAMES students how to say certain words, correcting them and helping them express their ideas.

In addition to weekly group visits with NASMA, CAMES established an optional language-exchange partnership with the Syrian NGO Jusoor and the Civic Engagement Office at AUB. Most of the participants were Syrian university students with a weak command of English who were teaching Syrian students in special schools for refugees. These students formed tandems with CAMES students learning Arabic and met weekly to discuss various topics in English and Arabic. The experience was very successful and rewarding to students from both sides, and in many cases the partnership continued via Skype after the summer program.

² For information about NASMA, see <http://daleel-madani.org/profile/nasma-learning-and-resource-centre>.

Distributing food to elderly people was another initiative executed via FoodBlessed, a local hunger-relief initiative run by a group of volunteers in Lebanon and founded in 2012³. Here too, the focus was on learning the language via the social work activity. Students learned the names of dishes and their ingredients, as well as recipe directions and related vocabulary. Moreover, they were able to converse with the elderly in *'āmmiyya* and report on their experiences in class or in essays.

► Daunting Challenges and Solutions

While all the previously mentioned changes brought new materials and dynamics to the TAFL classroom, they also imposed certain challenges. The *'āmmiyya* material in the textbook was not sufficient to accommodate students' needs. Coordinators responded by organizing workshops and weekly meetings with instructors to devise a convincing pedagogical curriculum that incorporates *'āmmiyya* without jeopardizing the MSA curriculum that needed to be covered for transferring credits and satisfying the requirements of each language level.

One of the most challenging matters CAMES SAP had to deal with after the Arab uprisings was channeling students' interests while also teaching the language and the culture objectively. Lebanon has a complex history of relations with Syria that has seen good days and bad days. Challenges arose, though, because some of the content brought up sensitive topics discussed in the Lebanese context. Teachers in the program came from different segments of Lebanese society and had different opinions, for example, about the military participation of Hezbollah in Syria or the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Students also had conflicting opinions that often clashed with those of the teachers or their classmates, especially since some students were so-called heritage language students from a Lebanese, Syrian or Egyptian background (see Kelleher 2010).

Some of the uprisings were easier to discuss in the classroom than others. For instance, the Egyptian uprising was always a "safer" topic than the Syrian uprising because of its geographical distance. Still, when the need arose to bring up the Syrian situation in class, CAMES instructors found ways to work with the material available. For instance, instructors selected scenes from the *Bāb al-Ḥāra* Syrian series for a listening activity that could very well have happened after the Arab uprising in Syria. Instructors were able to maximize the benefit of watching these scenes, and connect the listening to a speaking activity: students were asked to choose a current news article and a scene from *Bāb al-Ḥāra* and compare them. In their search for the news article, students' linguistic gain was complemented by critical thinking. After all, students managed to inspect the accuracy of the news articles they were reading by cross-checking information from different sources to compare terminology, writing style, and even rhetorical devices.

Another way CAMES managed to de-politicize the situation and still involve students in current events was to treat the events from a social and humanitarian perspective. This is where instructors worked on developing the community service program, an interactive opportunity for students to practice their language skills, especially colloquial Arabic. This also was partly in response to a growing interest, especially among US students, in seeking out "short-term volunteering abroad experiences that go beyond the traditional model," as observed by Christine Farrugia (2015), senior research officer at the Institute of International Education. According to this study, students seek out opportunities in which they can engage with

³ For information on these programs, see <http://daleel-madani.org/profile/foodblessed> and <http://www.foodblessed.org>.

community members in various contexts rather than just receive the knowledge in class and only through interacting with their professors or peers. Along these lines, since 2007 the CAMES SAP had already been organizing visits to elderly centers and orphanages, in response to students' repeatedly expressing the wish to do so in their end-of-program evaluations. In light of the events of the Arab uprisings, CAMES was able to take its community service initiative in a new direction by engaging students with refugee children, especially Palestinians and Syrians. Students who chose to come to Lebanon with an interest in exploring a society in transition found, through this community-based activity, the possibility to actually witness the effect of this change on some of its youth. The importance of this community service in linguistic terms is that students not only interacted with native speakers but also contributed to designing the activities implemented in the program.

Conclusion

The Arab uprisings had a major impact on the curriculum of teaching Arabic as a foreign language at AUB. The changes came in response to students' demands: they asked for more colloquial Arabic exposure and more interaction with native speakers. The change was gradual and, in addition to the curriculum changes, manifested in various social work activities and cultural clubs. These changes helped open up the gates of the AUB campus to the city of Beirut, and gave refugees and other underprivileged groups access to an academic institution from which they could benefit in various ways.

It will be interesting to continue to track the effect of the Arab uprisings in curricula in the Arab world, Europe and the United States in order to be able to generalize the effect of the uprisings on the field of Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language as a whole. Yet, the methods devised in the CAMES SAP can already provide some models to emulate and develop further in dealing with the refugee crisis in various Arab states and in Europe. These methods benefit from the participation of refugees and constitute ways to integrating them into their new settings.

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