

A Pedagogical Approach to Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers in Arabic-Speaking Contexts

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Abstract

Learning and teaching Arabic involves several closely connected fields. These include rhetoric, grammar, morphology, reading, and spelling. Arabic grammar is central to understanding the language and using it in speech and writing. Several movements have called for Arabic grammar instruction to be renewed and simplified for native speakers. Such reform is even more important for non-native learners.

This paper examines the teaching of Arabic grammar to non-native speakers. It addresses two main questions. Is the grammar currently taught useful and necessary for achieving the aims of learning Arabic as a second or foreign language? Which methods are most appropriate for teaching Arabic grammar to these learners?

The study identifies the barriers that affect the teaching of Arabic grammar to non-native speakers. It also proposes suitable ways to make grammar instruction more accessible.

Keywords: Arabic language, grammar, language teaching, non-native speakers.

1. Introduction

Arabic is an ancient language with a rich vocabulary. It is the language of the Holy Qur'an, which was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad ibn Abdullah, peace and blessings be upon him. Arabic was already a mature and expressive language before the Prophet's mission. This is evident in its poetry and prose, which were marked by eloquence and rhetorical sophistication. These works rank among the finest products of Arab literary creativity.

The revelation of the Holy Qur'an in Arabic further enhanced the status of the language. Arabs and Muslims became increasingly concerned with its study because they needed it to understand their religion. Arabic also played a major role in the foundation and development of Islamic civilization. It became a medium through which the sciences and arts advanced. The need to understand and interpret the Qur'anic text also led to the emergence of linguistic studies, grammar, morphology, and rhetoric.

Arabic is distinguished by clarity, lexical strength, and well-crafted expression. The Holy Qur'an added to its prestige and helped establish it as a language of scholarship and civilization.

Many non-Arabs seek to learn Arabic. Some work in Arab countries, while others study it for social or religious reasons. Social motives include communicating easily with local communities.

Religious motives include understanding the Holy Qur'an. Grammar therefore receives particular attention because it is essential to mastering Arabic meaning and usage.

2. The Importance and Current State of Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers

Arabic has several features that distinguish it from other languages and contribute to its wide study and use. From the perspective of its speakers, its importance lies partly in its miraculous and concise character. It is described as miraculous because the Qur'an, whose wording and meaning are regarded as inimitable, was revealed in Arabic. The Prophetic tradition was also recorded in Arabic. Knowledge of the foundations of Islam therefore requires knowledge of the language and awareness of its culture. Arabic is also a language of concision. Its expressive style gives it a distinctive elegance that has been acknowledged by scholars of the language.

Arabic also has one of the most extensive and precise grammatical and morphological systems among the Semitic languages. Its linguistic properties reflect its strength and richness. One example is its flexible derivational system, which can generate an immense range of words, sentences, and expressions.

Arabic is one of the world's most widely used and prominent languages. Non-native speakers study it alongside other foreign languages in many regions. Interest in teaching Arabic to non-native speakers increased markedly in the mid-twentieth century. This interest was visible at both Arab and international levels. British and American universities expanded Arabic instruction, and competence in the language became an important requirement for certain qualifications and occupations.¹

Early initiatives in this field included the School of Languages project in Cairo and Egyptian Radio's Arabic-by-radio program. Other initiatives included the Cultural Center for Diplomats, the American University in Cairo, and the Bourguiba Institute of Modern Languages in Tunisia. Morocco also introduced programs to support Arabic instruction for non-native speakers. One example was the Arabic and North African Studies program (ARANAS) at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane.

In Algeria, many universities operate institutes or programs that teach Arabic to international students. Several private institutes also provide Arabic instruction to non-native speakers.²

3. Challenges in Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers

Demand for Arabic instruction has increased among non-native speakers for several reasons. Yet learners encounter many difficulties when studying a language that is rich in vocabulary and structures. The most prominent challenges include the following:

- Learners are influenced by their first language. They may transfer some of its linguistic features to Arabic. This may include transferring familiar sounds or applying first-language patterns to Arabic structures and plural forms.
- The Arabic sound system is diverse and includes closely related sounds. It contains pharyngeal, laryngeal, velar, and emphatic sounds. Non-native learners may therefore find Arabic pronunciation difficult.³

¹ Walid al-Anati, *Applied Linguistics and the Teaching of Arabic to Non-Native Speakers*, 1st ed. (Jordan: Dar al-Jawhara, 2003), p. 29.

² See the same source, p. 33.

³ Zahir bin Hafif bin Marhun, *Curricula and Textbooks for Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers*, 1st ed. (Dar al-Rashid for Publishing and Distribution, 1970), p. 169.

- Learners may substitute one sound for another because of differences in their first language and established pronunciation habits. For example, an English speaker may pronounce the Arabic letter *dād* as *d*, while a Turkish speaker may pronounce it as *z*. Learners may also struggle with the long vowels *wāw*, *alif*, and *yā'*. For instance, they may pronounce *maṭār* (airport) as *maṭar* (rain). These difficulties are not limited to English speakers. They also occur among speakers of other European, Asian, and African languages.⁴
- Non-native learners may have difficulty identifying word meanings in dictionaries. According to Aisha Abd al-Rahman, polysemy can make it difficult to determine the intended meaning of a written text. This problem becomes more pronounced when linguistic materials are selected and presented without sound criteria. Frequency, importance, progression, and other curriculum-design standards must be considered.⁵
- The teaching of Arabic to non-native speakers is closely connected to applied linguistics, especially foreign-language teaching. A central problem is the wholesale reliance on theories developed by Western specialists in foreign-language education. Some of these theories can be applied to Arabic. Others cannot be applied without modification.⁶
- Non-native learners may struggle to recognize the different forms of Arabic letters. They may also find it difficult to distinguish between letters with similar shapes.⁷
- Non-native learners may encounter difficulties in writing and spelling. These difficulties are primarily associated with producing Arabic script accurately and according to its conventions.⁸
- Non-native learners are often taught from the same textbooks used with native speakers.

The teacher also plays a central role in Arabic instruction. Teachers are a vital link and a major driving force in the educational process. Their professional qualities must not be overlooked. They need the competence required to teach Arabic to non-native speakers. The challenges described above also create several difficulties for teachers:

- There is a shortage of specialists with advanced competence in teaching Arabic. One of the most serious problems in this field is the scarcity of qualified teachers. Effective teachers must be able to adapt objectives, materials, and teaching methods to learners' profiles, needs, and social environments.⁹
- Traditional practices, such as rote transmission, remain common, while modern teaching methods are often neglected.
- Linguistic content may be presented in a traditional and unnecessarily difficult manner. The aesthetic qualities of texts may also receive insufficient attention.

⁴ Abd al-Majid Ahmad Mansur, *Psycholinguistics*, 1st ed. (Saudi Arabia: King Fahd National Library, 1982), p. 212.

⁵ Aisha Abd al-Rahman, *Dictionary Abridgment: Aims and Methods*, 2nd ed. (Egypt: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1970), p. 55.

⁶ Mouloud al-Bouchikhi, *The Communicative Approach to Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers*, World Conference on Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers (Dar al-Rashid for Publishing and Distribution, 1982), p. 12.

⁷ See Jasim Ali Jasim, "Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers," *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, University of Jordan, 40(2), 2013, p. 40.

⁸ Rushdi Ahmad Tu'aymah, *Language Skills: Levels, Teaching, and Difficulties*, 1st ed. (Egypt: Dar al-Fikr al-Arabi, 2004), p. 303.

⁹ Mahmud Kamil al-Naqah, *An Introduction to Teaching Grammar*, 1st ed. (Saudi Arabia: Al-Rushd Library, 2011), p. 307.

- Many textbooks contain difficult words that non-native speakers cannot easily understand. This makes clear and accessible explanation more difficult.
- Curricula may be designed without sufficient regard for learners' proficiency levels. As a result, some materials are too difficult, while others are too easy.
- Modern teaching resources for Arabic as a second or foreign language remain seriously limited.
- There are not enough institutions devoted to teaching Arabic to non-native speakers.

3.1. Grammatical Challenges

Grammar is one of the most important components of Arabic instruction for both native and non-native learners. However, grammar teaching presents particular difficulties for non-native speakers because grammatical systems differ across languages. The main difficulties include the following:¹⁰

1. Arabic sentence structure differs from that of many other languages. For example, an Arabic sentence may contain no auxiliary or copular verb.
2. Arabic permits considerable flexibility in word order. Constituents may be moved forward or delayed for grammatical or rhetorical purposes. This flexibility is not found to the same extent in many other languages.
3. Grammatical gender and its markers can cause difficulty, although this issue also occurs in other languages.
4. The gender agreement rules for numerals are among the most complex areas of Arabic because they have many branches and conditions.
5. Inflection and case marking are distinctive features of Arabic and create difficulty for many learners.
6. Definiteness and indefiniteness are among the most complex issues facing non-native learners of Arabic.
7. Arabic grammar contains numerous rules with varied patterns of application.
8. Grammar rules are often taught without sufficient connection to reading, written and oral expression, or other language courses.

4. Methods of Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers

4.1. The Grammar-Translation Method

The grammar-translation method, also known as the traditional method, is one of the oldest approaches to foreign-language teaching. It became widespread because its practices resembled the teaching of a first language. Its use also reflected the absence of a clearly defined, research-based method for teaching foreign languages and the lack of linguistic theories that offered scientific descriptions of language systems. When the need to learn foreign languages arose, teachers relied on reading, grammatical analysis, and the first language as a supporting tool. For this reason, the approach became known as the grammar-translation method.¹¹ It begins with direct theoretical explanations of grammar and uses translation from the learner's first language to explain new linguistic items. Grammar may be treated as an end in itself, as if it were the language as a whole. It

¹⁰ Al-Bashir al-Mana'i and Dalal Washn, "Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers: Current Reality and Future Prospects," *Journal of Research and Studies*, University of El Oued, Algeria, no. 24, 2017, pp. 437-438.

¹¹ Nayif Khurma and Ali Hajjaj, *Foreign Languages: Teaching and Learning*, Alam al-Ma'rifa Series (Kuwait, 1978), p. 155.

may also be viewed as a way to develop intellectual abilities and patterns of thought. Translation from the target language into the first language then becomes the principal aim of study.¹²

The method aims to help learners memorize and understand grammatical rules. It trains them to write accurately through systematic translation from their first language into the target language. It also seeks to build a broad literary vocabulary. Learners are trained to derive meaning from foreign texts by translating them into their own language and to appreciate the literary significance of what they read.¹³

Advantages of the method:

- It may be suitable for large classes.
- Its emphasis on grammar may benefit advanced learners. The method may also be useful for specialists in linguistics, foreign-language teaching, or cultural studies.
- It may be useful when learners urgently need vocabulary, expressions, and sentences for specific religious, scientific, or political purposes.
- It may be appropriate when the aim is to read in the target language or become familiar with specialized academic writing without needing oral communication.

Limitations of the method:¹⁴

- Heavy reliance on translation and theoretical grammar, together with limited attention to other language skills, often impedes comprehension. It can delay oral production in the target language and may lead to frustration and disappointment.
- The method emphasizes reading and writing but gives insufficient attention to listening comprehension and spoken interaction in the target language.
- It often allows systems from the learner's first language to interfere with the target language.
- Learners usually assume a passive role in the classroom. They receive explanations and dictation, then write, translate, and memorize. This tense and demanding environment may reduce their motivation to learn.
- Learners taught through this method often struggle to produce accurate and natural sentences.
- Its proponents emphasize linguistic accuracy but offer little support for developing communicative competence.
- Its assessment practices are traditional and often limited to essay examinations.
- The method does not adequately account for individual differences among learners.

4.2. The Direct Method

The direct method seeks to teach a language in a manner similar to first-language acquisition. It requires an environment centered on the target language and avoids the learner's first language or any intermediary language. Gestures, pictures, and other aids connect words with their meanings.¹⁵ Communication between teacher and learner occurs directly in the target language. Translation is

¹² Abd al-Aziz ibn Ibrahim al-Usayli, *Methods of Teaching Arabic to Speakers of Other Languages* (Makkah: Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University, 2002), p. 34.

¹³ Mahmud Kamil al-Naqah, *Teaching Arabic to Speakers of Other Languages* (Makkah: Umm Al-Qura University, 1985), p. 70.

¹⁴ Abd al-Aziz ibn Ibrahim al-Usayli, *Foundations of Teaching Arabic to Speakers of Other Languages* (Makkah: Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University, 2002), pp. 288-290.

¹⁵ Ali al-Hadidi, *The Problem of Teaching Arabic to Non-Arabs* (Egypt: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi), p. 5.

replaced by gestures, images, and physical movement. The method is called direct because it assumes a direct relationship between a word and an object, or between an expression and an idea, without mediation from the first language.¹⁶

Advantages of the method:¹⁷

- It emphasizes listening and speaking and makes purposeful use of visual aids in the classroom.
- It gives attention to meaning and the natural use of language. It also warns against artificial linguistic and social situations that do not lead to genuine learning.
- It calls for intensive classroom activity and seeks to create an atmosphere similar to that of the target-language community.
- It encourages learners to think in the target language, which is an advanced level of proficiency. It cautions against translation because translation often causes cross-linguistic interference. Lengthy explanations are reduced. Teachers instead paraphrase expressions, use visual aids, and employ gestures and role-play.

Limitations of the method:

- It assumes that a foreign learner can acquire a second language in the same way that a child acquires a first language. This assumption overlooks important differences between the two learning situations.
- It assumes that presenting the target language through prescribed techniques, while preventing the use of translation or the first language, will ensure natural learning and eliminate first-language interference.
- It overstates the direct relationship between words and objects, or between expressions and ideas. It emphasizes vocabulary but neglects the study of grammatical structures.
- It does not adequately address individual differences among learners.
- Instruction through this method requires a very long period and may continue for years.

4.3. The Audiolingual Method

The audiolingual method requires foreign-language instruction to begin with phonetic units and sound patterns before reading and writing are introduced. It also requires audio and audiovisual resources, such as recordings and educational films. The method does not completely exclude the learner's first language or an intermediary language.¹⁸

It combines initial exposure through listening with an oral response, with or without visual support.¹⁹ Learners begin by listening, then proceed to pronunciation and imitation, followed by reading and writing. In this sequence, learners do not write material they have not read. They do not read material they have not pronounced, and they do not pronounce material they have not heard.

Advantages of the method:²⁰

- It gives particular attention to the oral dimension of language.
- It addresses the target-language culture in a broad sense. It presents cultural examples from everyday life through pictures, films, and audio recordings.

¹⁶ Al-Usayli, Foundations of Teaching Arabic to Speakers of Other Languages, p. 299.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 305.

¹⁸ Al-Hadidi, The Problem of Teaching Arabic to Non-Arabs, p. 5.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 27-28.

- Learning the target language without translation into the first language or reliance on an intermediary language is a valuable objective.
- Its highest aim is to help learners think in the target language. It proposes several means of achieving this aim, including oral interaction, reduced translation, and instructional media such as pictures, films, and recordings.

Limitations of the method:²¹

- It privileges hearing and neglects the other senses.
- Learners may repeat forms without understanding their meaning. They may then use them in situations for which they were not prepared.
- Memorization procedures can lead to boredom and fatigue.
- The method neglects cognitive processes and focuses on mechanical performance.

4.4. The Reading Method

Developing comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing is the best route to acquiring a foreign language. However, all these skills cannot be fully developed within a limited period. Teachers must therefore focus on an attainable short-term skill that learners can later develop independently. Silent reading was proposed as the solution because reading can support the other language skills. The approach consequently became known as the reading method.²²

Advantages of the method:

- It helps learners develop sound reading habits. These include grasping the general meaning of a text and avoiding excessive reliance on dictionaries, especially bilingual dictionaries.
- It fosters an interest in reading and encourages extensive reading in the target language. This provides learners with substantial comprehensible input and supports natural language acquisition.
- It emphasizes comprehension and makes reading meaningful. This can motivate learners to read more and deepen their understanding.
- It avoids excessive grammatical explanation. This is an advantage because some linguistic features and rules are difficult to understand through explanation alone. Learners may acquire them gradually and naturally through extensive reading.

Limitations of the method:

- It concentrates on one aspect of language, namely reading, and neglects other skills. Oral skills receive especially limited attention. The method therefore does not provide comprehensive language development, and its learning objectives remain narrow.
- It neglects writing, which requires specific practice under a teacher's guidance and supervision.
- It does not fully recognize the oral nature of language and does not allow learners to hear its sounds before producing them.
- Exclusive emphasis on silent reading, together with limited immediate feedback and error correction, may delay pronunciation development and cause hesitant speech. These problems soon become apparent in oral reading. Errors may also become fossilized and difficult to correct.

²¹ Rushdi Ahmad Tu'aymah, *Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers: Curricula and Methods* (ISESCO: Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1989), p. 135.

²² Al-Usayli, *Foundations of Teaching Arabic to Speakers of Other Languages*, pp. 309-310.

5. Methods of Teaching Grammar

5.1. The Deductive Method

This method relies on explicit grammatical explanation. The teacher first presents a rule or a new linguistic structure. Learners are then given enough time to practise it through examples and apply it more broadly. The method is effective for irregular or difficult grammatical topics that learners cannot easily discover through analysis, comparison, and inference. A skilled teacher can use it to save learners time. Some learners also prefer to know the rule first and then apply it when producing new sentences.²³

The method is often criticized for being dry and for relying on technical terminology. It can make the lesson feel monotonous and artificial. The examples may also be contrived, which can frustrate learners when they try to apply the rule to new sentences. In addition, the method may turn foreign-language learning into an intellectual exercise rather than a means of communication. It may require the teacher to explain the rule in the learner's first language or through an intermediary language. Nevertheless, it can be highly effective when a new structure or rule is presented in a meaningful communicative context rather than through isolated examples.²⁴

The method follows these procedures:

1. The teacher presents one or more statements that formulate the rule.
2. Learners repeat a selection of examples that illustrate the rule.
3. Learners receive enough time to examine and practise the examples before producing new examples based on the same pattern.

These procedures are usually conducted orally with beginners. Once learners can work successfully with a model presented orally, the teacher introduces its written form. At intermediate and advanced levels, difficult and complex rules may be handled differently. The teacher may first present written examples and models, then discuss and practise them orally.

Teachers using this method should employ varied techniques and resources to highlight the central features of the rule. These may include the board, colored chalk or markers, display cards, and a projector.

5.2. The Inductive Method

In this method, the teacher presents examples that contain the target rule. Learners read and practise the examples. The teacher then guides them to identify the generalization and formulate the rule. This method is particularly effective for simple and regular grammatical rules.²⁵

A major advantage is that learners participate in using and formulating the rule. They actively practise the language by reading and writing sentences that contain the target structure. The resulting generalization therefore becomes meaningful and easier to understand.

One limitation is that the method takes more time than the deductive method. Some learners also prefer to know the rule before practising examples that illustrate it.

²³ Hamdi Ismail Baligh, *Strategies for Teaching Arabic* (Jordan: Dar al-Manahij for Publishing and Distribution, 2013), p. 119.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 120.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 113-114.

The method follows these steps:

1. The teacher presents carefully written or selected examples that make the new structure easy to notice.
2. Learners practise the examples orally. They may read them while the teacher discusses their meanings and structures.
3. Learners derive the generalization that emerges from the preceding activity.

6. Modern Approaches to Teaching Arabic Grammar**6.1. Sentence Analysis**

This approach places meaning at the center of grammar instruction. Since intended meaning determines the inflectional ending, some Arabic-language educators have called for a new method that teaches learners to connect meaning with grammatical inflection. Learners analyze the target structure, identify its meaning, and examine each word according to its position in that structure. This makes it easier to determine the appropriate inflectional ending. Understanding the meaning helps learners identify the grammatical function of a word or clause. The Arabic grammatical system, in practice, revolves around inflection. Inflection is therefore a central concept in Arabic grammar and an essential framework for grammatical analysis.²⁶

A grammar lesson based on this approach proceeds through the following stages:

- Analyze the text.
- Analyze the relevant examples and identify the grammatical function of each word.
- Conduct a meaning-based grammatical analysis of each example.
- Determine the inflectional ending of every word by identifying its grammatical function.
- Identify similarities among the examples.
- Derive the grammatical rule.
- Apply the rule.

This method encourages active learning and helps learners master grammar through grammatical analysis. However, learners may encounter sentences whose meanings they cannot understand. This can create a sense of inadequacy and may lead them to disengage from Arabic and its grammar.

6.2. The Integrated Approach

Language is, by nature, an integrated whole. In real-life communication, it is used as a complete system rather than as separate parts. When people speak or write, they draw on grammar, literature, rhetoric, and other related areas at the same time.

Advocates of the integrated approach teach language as a unified whole rather than as separate branches. Under the general heading of Arabic, instruction includes language skills and fields such as literature, reading, grammar, handwriting, rhetoric, criticism, and composition. This is not simply a method for teaching grammar. It is an approach to teaching Arabic as a whole, with grammar as one of its components.²⁷

Grammar is taught through this approach as follows:

- The teacher reads the text as a model.

²⁶ Taha Husayn Ali al-Dulaymi, *Scientific Methods in Teaching Arabic* (Jordan: Dar al-Shuruq, 2003), p. 66.

²⁷ Atiyyah Muhsin Ali, *Teaching Arabic in Light of Performance Competencies* (Jordan: Dar al-Manahij for Publishing and Distribution, 2007), p. 196.

- Difficult vocabulary and unclear structures are explained.
- Learners read the text aloud.
- Learners complete language activities covering the different fields of Arabic.

This method helps learners view the branches of Arabic as connected rather than separate. However, it can be difficult to design a textbook that suits the approach and to select appropriate texts. It also offers limited support for addressing individual differences among learners.

7. Conclusion

This study reached the following conclusions:

- The teaching of Arabic in the Arab world has increasingly taken the form of organized projects and specialized institutes. However, the number of such institutes remains insufficient.
- The teaching of Arabic to non-native speakers faces several difficulties and barriers. These cannot be ignored if Arabic instruction is to improve and become more accessible.
- Current methods of grammar instruction do not serve all learners effectively. Some are too complex. In other cases, curricula do not match learners' proficiency levels or progress systematically from easier to more difficult content.
- Some specialists assigned to teach grammar do not possess the professional competence required for the task.

The study proposes the following solutions and recommendations:

- The appointment of teachers of Arabic to non-native speakers should be governed by precise professional criteria and standards.
- Curricula for teaching Arabic, especially grammar courses, should be reviewed and refined. They should include the knowledge learners need to participate in society. A clear distinction should also be made between curricula for native speakers and those designed for non-native learners. This would make grammar instruction more accessible and effective.
- Arabic-language education should draw on modern linguistic theories, especially research in applied linguistics and foreign-language teaching.

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