

Developing Communicative Competence in Spoken Arabic: A Survey of Korean University Students¹

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the communicative Arabic teaching methods currently used in Korean universities that extend beyond MSA to promote learner understanding and awareness of colloquial Arabic dialects. Arabic is characterized by a diglossic linguistic situation, which means that it consists of both diverse colloquial dialects used in different regions and social classes, and the written standard of Modern Standard Arabic. Recent trends in the field of language education have been moving toward a communicative approach to instruction. Since both MSA and spoken Arabic are important language variants that cannot be ignored, university curricula should integrate both variants into language courses. In the spoken Arabic education awareness survey conducted in the present study, the majority of the respondents answered that they wanted to increase the number of spoken Arabic classes offered at their university. Concerning colloquial Arabic, the majority also answered that they preferred the Egyptian dialect, followed by the Gulf and Levantine dialects. In terms of the timing of colloquial Arabic instruction, most respondents answered that they thought it should start in third year or in second year at university. It is also important to develop textbooks and other teaching and learning materials to aid the efficient instruction of spoken Arabic, which will give students the communicative skills necessary to be effective and competent communicators regardless of where they travel, study, or work in the Arab world.

Keywords: *Arabic education, diglossia, communicative competence, Modern Standard Arabic, colloquial spoken Arabic*

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Introduction

Arabic is characterized by a diglossic linguistic situation, which means that it consists of both diverse colloquial dialects used in different regions and social classes, and the written standard of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). MSA is both the standard Arabic and the official language of the Arab world, but this variant is an artificially taught language that children learn after entering school, somewhat like a foreign language. In daily life, Arabs communicate with each other using their own unique colloquial spoken Arabic dialects.

Recent trends in the field of language education have been moving toward a communicative approach to instruction. In the United States, since the revision of the Arabic Proficiency Guidelines in 1989, the efficiency of Arabic education in consideration of Arabic diglossia has improved. According to the guidelines, high proficiency-level Arabic learners must be able to communicate effectively in both variants of Arabic, with understanding of the differences between MSA and colloquial dialects, and how the language changes depending on the discourse situation (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages [ACTFL], 1989, p. 374).

However, considering these circumstances, domestic Arabic education conditions do not satisfy learners' needs and the current demands of Arabic education as teaching efficient means of communication. The current Arabic curriculum in Korea is based on MSA, while the instruction of spoken Arabic is relatively neglected (Yun, 2015a, p. 3). Students who only receive grammar and translation instruction in Arabic will experience many difficulties in conversational situations with Arabic native speakers, and they will recognize the need for improved sociolinguistic abilities to communicate and understand the spoken Arabic used by native speakers.

Therefore, in light of the circumstances described above, this study examines the communicative Arabic teaching methods currently used in Korean universities that extend beyond MSA to promote learner understanding and awareness of colloquial Arabic dialects and spoken Arabic instruction.

Research Focus

Teaching methods in foreign language education are focused on improving communication skills. 'Communicative competence' is the term that was first used by Hymes in 1972. According to Hymes, communicative competence refers to learners' ability to understand and utilize the sociocultural context of foreign culture and communication based on their knowledge of language (Hymes, 1972, p. 32). According to this perspective, the core of foreign language education

must be based effectively on the four functions of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In order to improve communication skills, it is necessary to understand and properly use these four communicative functions. Based on the knowledge of the phonological, syntactic, and semantic systems of language among the four subcategories of communication, it is necessary to have the sociolinguistic ability to express language appropriately in a given situation. In particular, in Arabic, a balanced education of spoken Arabic as well as literary Arabic is needed to improve one's overall language ability, taking into account the unique sociolinguistic characteristics of Arabic diglossia.

Many scholars have pointed out that 'Arabic diglossia', which consists of both MSA and various spoken Arabic dialects and sociolinguistic functions, is a fundamental consideration in learning Arabic as a foreign language (Cadora, 1965; Ferguson, 1971; Zughoul, 1980; Badawi, 1985; Alrabaa, 1986; Oh, 1995).

According to Ferguson, MSA (al-Lughah al-Fuṣḥā), or the 'high' variety, and spoken Arabic (al-Lahajāt al-Ṣāmmiyyah), the 'low' variety, coexist in parallel in Arabic diglossia (Ferguson, 1959, p. 327). Al-Fuṣḥā, commonly referred to as MSA today, is the official standard language of all Arab countries and is used in a unified form and formal style (al-Toma, 1969, 3). On the other hand, colloquial dialects appear as diverse forms in various countries depending on geographical, religious, and social characteristics as a medium of communication in everyday life and literature.

In the case of university students majoring in Arabic, they often do not experience difficulties in writing and reading when they study Arabic in the foreign language classroom. However, learners face considerable difficulties in understanding the spoken Arabic used in everyday life in the countries where they have gone to study. Given that the ultimate goal of learning a foreign language is communication, the need for balanced instruction in both MSA and spoken, colloquial Arabic must be taken into account, in addition to the need for considering the sociolinguistic characteristics of the language.

Al-Batal (1992) proposed a variety of teaching methods that can be applied in Arabic language education in consideration of Arabic diglossia, including the Classical Arabic Approach, the MSA Approach, and the Colloquial Arabic Approach. Among these three, the MSA Approach is the most commonly used approach today. Although this approach does not fully reflect the actual situation concerning how Arabic is used in the modern world, it can be considered an effective approach to dealing with the complex situation of Arabic diglossia. However, it is difficult to expect effective Arabic learning to be achieved if the MSA Approach is aimed at training Arabic learners to perform specific functions in specific situations with the aim of general language proficiency. In contrast, the

Colloquial Arabic Approach is an approach that focuses on speaking in a particular national or local Arabic dialect. This approach has been found to help learners become more interested in learning Arabic. However, most Arabic learners, especially Korean learners, are interested in mastering Arabic holistically. Thus, the Colloquial Arabic Approach cannot satisfy these learners' needs. Thus, MSA and spoken Arabic should both be taught in Arabic language classes to develop effective communication abilities in learners, and the rate of learning of these two variants should be appropriately regulated according to the level of learners, their needs, and the learning objectives.

Arabic Education in Korea

There are five Korean universities with Arabic language departments. Among them, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS), established on 1st January 1965, has the longest history of providing Arabic language education in South Korea. In this department, most first- and second-year courses focus on the four functions of the Arabic language: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In third- and fourth-year curricula, various courses such as 'Advanced Arabic Reading', 'Advanced Arabic Conversation', and 'Arabic Essays' are taught with the aim of mastering Arabic at an advanced level. Among the courses on spoken Arabic are 'Comparative Studies of Written and Colloquial Arabic' and 'Studies of Colloquial Arabic' offered in the first and second semesters of the fourth-year program. However, these courses are based on MSA. Thus, students cannot expect to receive sufficient instruction in colloquial Arabic.

Busan University of Foreign Studies (BUFS) was the third university in Korea to establish an Arab studies department in March 1983. BUFS offers Arabic courses using various media, and the program is unique in that the course 'Colloquial Arabic I' is offered in the second semester of the second year, which helps intermediate learners to deepen their understanding of spoken Arabic. Then, in the first semester of the third year, the course 'Colloquial Arabic II' is offered. Of the other three universities in Korea with Arab studies departments (Myungji University, Chosun University, and Dankook University), none offers courses related to spoken Arabic (Yun, 2015b, p. 4). And there is the Graduate School of Interpretation and Translation (GIST) at HUFS, in which 23 students, who completed their bachelor's degrees at five Korean universities, are currently studying (2017) to gain a master's degree in Arabic translation and interpretation.

Most of the Arabic courses offered in Korean domestic universities focus on MSA, and few courses on colloquial Arabic are offered. As mentioned above, this educational reality poses problems for Arabic language learners when they visit

Arab countries and cannot understand the spoken Arabic used in daily life by native speakers. As Versteegh (2004) pointed out, MSA is a language variant used by Arabs in official discourse and business, and it is not used in daily conversation. However, fluency in MSA is considered as a measure of social status and educational background. On the other hand, colloquial Arabic is used by Arabs in daily conversations with their family and friends, and it is the actual language that enhances intimacy among its speakers.

It is true that MSA must be prioritized in Arabic as a foreign language education. However, to develop effective communication skills that can be used in real-life situations, students must also learn colloquial, spoken Arabic. Thus, universities should offer first- and second-year courses focusing on MSA, and then provide third- and fourth-year courses focusing on spoken Arabic.

Research Methodology

Instrument and Procedures

The purpose of this study was to investigate the awareness and learning needs concerning spoken Arabic among Korean university students majoring in Arabic language studies. A survey was conducted with 90 students at HUFS, BUFS, and the Graduate School of Interpretation and Translation (GIST) at HUFS.

Surveys were conducted to assess the students' opinions of the Arabic language instruction in their university courses. The surveys were composed of 10 items to meet the aims of the study; the students responded to the items on a five-point Likert scale: (a) strongly agree, (b) agree, (c) neutral, (d) disagree, or (e) strongly disagree. A total of 90 students (43 students from HUFS, 24 from BUFS, and 23 from GIST) participated in this survey. The questionnaire was conducted for 20 days, from 1st to 20th December 2017.

Research Results

This section explores the results of the questionnaires filled in by the students, concerning their Arabic language education and experience. Table 1 presents the responses to Q1, which asked about the students' understanding of the difference between literary standard Arabic and spoken Arabic. In response to Q1, over 81% of the respondents answered that they understood the difference between standard Arabic and spoken Arabic.

Table 1. Do you understand the difference between literary standard Arabic and spoken Arabic? (Q1)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Responses	45	28	12	5	0
Percentages	50%	31.1%	13.3%	5.6%	0%

According to the responses to Q2 and Q3, the 71 students who answered that they had studied for six months or more in an Arabic-speaking country were placed in Group A. The distribution of the students' study-abroad experiences by region are shown in Table 3.

Table 2. Have you studied Arabic for more than six months in an Arabic-speaking country? (Q2)

	Yes	No
Responses	71	19
Percentages	78.9%	21.1%

Table 3. Where did you go for language training? (Q3; Group A)

	Gulf countries	Jordan	Egypt	The Maghreb
Responses	5	20	27	19
Percentages	7%	28.2%	38%	26.8%

Table 4. Do you think you need to learn colloquial spoken Arabic to communicate effectively in Arabic? (Q4)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Responses	52	21	12	5	0
Percentages	57.8%	23.3%	13.3%	5.6%	0%

In response to Q4, more than 80% of the respondents answered that they needed to learn spoken Arabic. Students in Group A were asked questions about the status of MSA education and the need to use spoken Arabic in the Arab world. The results are presented in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5. Before your study abroad experience, had you ever studied spoken Arabic? (Q5; Group A)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Responses	0	14	9	32	16
Percentages	0%	19.7%	12.7%	45.1%	22.5%

Table 6. Was it possible to have daily conversations with native speakers using only the standard Arabic you learned in class? (Q6; Group A)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Respondents	2	10	15	36	8
Percentage	2.8%	14.1%	21.1%	50.7%	11.3%

Given that courses in spoken Arabic are typically not offered by universities until fourth year, most students go to Arab countries for language training without having learned any spoken Arabic. Q6 asked about the students' abilities to communicate with native speakers using the Arabic they had learned in their classes. Only 16.9% of the students answered 'Strongly Agree' and 'Agree' in response to the question 'Was it possible to have daily conversations with native speakers using only the standard Arabic you learned in class?' On the other hand, 21.1% of the respondents answered 'Neutral' and 62% of the respondents answered that they had difficulty communicating with Arabic speakers using only the MSA that they had learned in their university courses.

Table 7. Do your professors teach spoken Arabic as well as Modern Standard Arabic in your courses? (Q7)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Responses	0	9	14	45	22
Percentages	0%	10%	15.6%	50%	24.4%

Q7 asked whether the respondents learned both MSA and spoken Arabic in their university courses. Only 10% of the respondents answered 'Agree'. To increase communication skills efficiently, it is desirable to teach both MSA and

spoken Arabic in courses. However, the survey results indicate that currently MSA continues to be the only Arabic taught in university Arabic language courses in South Korea. Most students responded that they required more classes in spoken Arabic, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Do you think you need more spoken Arabic classes in your Arabic course?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Respondents	39	38	8	5	0
Percentage	43.3%	42.2%	8.9%	5.6%	0%

This finding indicates that the students with experience in the Arabic language, regardless of their level of difficulty in communicating with the use of only MSA, commonly require more instruction in colloquial Arabic. As mentioned above, the field of foreign language education is changing rapidly in response to the need to improve learners' communication abilities. Moreover, learners also demand teaching methods aimed at improving their communication skills. Analysis of the survey results demonstrates that the demand for improvement in Arabic communication skills through instruction in spoken Arabic seems to be urgent for the students of HUFs, BUFS, and GIST. These results are consistent with the findings of the National Middle East Language Resource Center in the United States, showing that more than 86% of Arabic learners in 37 different higher education institutions in the United States were interested in learning spoken Arabic (Al-Batal & Belnap, 2006, p. 393).

In addition, the survey asked the respondents about their preferences concerning the dialects of colloquial Arabic that they most wished to study. The results are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. If you had more colloquial Arabic classes, which local dialect of Arabic would you prefer to study? (Q9)

	Gulf Arabic	Levantine Arabic	Egyptian Arabic	Maghreb Arabic	Other
Responses	23	20	44	3	0
Percentages	25.6%	22.2%	48.9%	3.3%	0%

The majority of the respondents preferred Egyptian Arabic (48.9%), which reveals the students' perceptions of the Arab world, perhaps owing to the fact

that Egypt has represented a political, economic, and cultural centre of the Arab world since the 14th century. Moreover, Egyptian Arabic is a useful dialect to learn, given that the Egyptians account for one-third of the total population of the Arab world. The second-most preferred dialect of the respondents was Gulf Arabic (25.6%), followed by Levantine Arabic (22.2%). This result may be related to the students' increasing awareness of the Gulf region due to increasing numbers of medical tourists coming to South Korea from Gulf countries. Finally, few students expressed interest in learning Maghreb Arabic (3.3%). These results are consistent with the findings of Al-Batal and Belnap (2006, p. 396), who found that most Arabic language students in US higher education institutions were interested in learning the Egyptian and Levantine dialects of Arabic.

In terms of the timing of colloquial Arabic instruction, most respondents answered that they thought it should start in third year (50%), while many others answered that they thought it should start in second year (33.3%). Few respondents (8.9%) answered that they thought colloquial Arabic instruction should start in first year. The results of this question are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. In which year do you think colloquial Arabic instruction should be commenced? (Q10)

	First year	Second year	Third year	Fourth year	No response
Responses	8	30	45	6	1
Percentages	8.9%	33.3%	50%	6.7%	1.1%

In order to create a curriculum that includes spoken Arabic in the courses offered by university Arabic departments, it is first necessary to consider which dialect(s) should be taught. For practical reasons (e.g., textbooks, learning materials, and available instructors), not all dialects can be included in the curriculum. Thus, a good way to determine the colloquial dialects to be taught would be to consider the preferences of the learners themselves.

Conclusions

This study examined the communicative Arabic teaching methods currently used in Korean universities focusing on students' opinions concerning spoken Arabic instruction. Currently, the learning contents of spoken Arabic courses focus on theoretical comparisons of MSA and colloquial Arabic, such as the

Egyptian and Levantine dialects. Therefore, it is urgent to develop more varied and practical learning content for spoken Arabic courses, and develop textbooks and other learning materials to support students in the learning process.

In the spoken Arabic education awareness survey conducted in the present study, the majority of the respondents answered that they wanted to increase the number of spoken Arabic classes offered at their university. Concerning colloquial Arabic, the majority also answered that they preferred the Egyptian dialect, followed by the Gulf and Levantine dialects. Concerning the timing of spoken Arabic instruction, the majority of the respondents answered that they preferred to start in second or third year. These results demonstrate that Korean learners have a strong awareness of learning Arabic as a means of developing effective communication abilities for practical purposes in response to the current changes taking place in the field of foreign language education.

Since both MSA and spoken Arabic are important language variants that cannot be ignored, university curricula should integrate both variants into language courses. Considering the preferences of Arabic learners in Korea, it is appropriate to design a curriculum that focuses on teaching MSA in the first and second years, while also instructing students about the basic features and differences of spoken Arabic. In the third and fourth years, various courses should be offered with the aim of implementing efficient learning of various regional dialects of Arabic. The point to note is that local dialects that are in fact effective and meet learners' needs and learning objectives should be chosen. It is also important to develop textbooks and other teaching and learning materials (e.g., multimedia) to aid the efficient instruction of spoken Arabic, and hiring qualified university Arabic instructors from various regions that can teach their own local dialect of Arabic, which will give students the communicative skills necessary to be effective and competent communicators regardless of where they travel, study, or work in the Arab world.

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