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Poetry in the Arabic Language Classroom
A Communicative Approach

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The number of students and the purposes of learning Arabic have changed significantly in America in the past decade. Twenty years ago, Arabic language classrooms were very much like classes of Latin or Ancient Greek; the main purpose was to achieve a reading ability with the help of a dictionary. Arabic was a research language, whereas today a majority of the students enrolling in classes across the country desire to use the language to communicate.

Traditionally Arabic has been taught with a focus on grammar, or rather the precedence of grammar over any other aspect of the language. This is why we ended up with students who knew and understood the concept of case endings, forms, and verb conjugation but lacked the necessary skills to formulate a couple of sentences or to carry out a basic conversation. They knew about the language but did not actually know the language. They performed very badly in speaking and listening comprehension. Despite their knowledge of grammar rules, they were not familiar with the proper sound system of Arabic, and they had very little vocabulary.

We are suggesting the use of poetry in the classroom in order to enhance competence in listening, pronunciation and vocabulary learning and retention. Aside from giving the language learner an example of an authentic text, poetry allows a glimpse into the culture of the language and a glimpse into the deeper meaning of words.

Selection of Poems

We are not suggesting the introduction of literature, which would expose students to a specialized literary language, but rather using popular common texts with a high performative quality that can be appreciated through listening and speaking skills rather than by grammar and syntax analysis.

Gathering these poems would be a very selective process. In addition to their musical qualities, these poems must have parallel structures, juxtapositions, and lexical couplets. These poems will be used to complement a textbook. Their main purpose will be to enhance pronunciation and to recycle already learnt vocabulary.

Listening and Pronunciation

If we look at an Arabic word that consists of the letters ع, ل and م ('ayn, lām, and mīm) as the basic components, we will be unable to determine its meaning unless we pronounce it with diacritics. Short vowels in Arabic are decisive to determining meaning. This other layer of Arabic words is usually ignored by many students. Students often think of Arabic words in terms of English spelling. A word that consists of the letters ع, ل and م is thought of as having one meaning. The use of poetry helps form the habit of learning a word with its short vowels and with its correct pronunciation. (See Figures 1 through 8 in the Appendix.)

The system of Arabic prosody is based on the alternation of long vowels, short vowels, and silent letters and, therefore, it is a powerful tool to enhance the correct pronunciation of Fusha. If the poems are to be employed in order to improve the students' appreciation of the sound system of Arabic, it is better if they maintain a strict rhyme and meter, because then, it can be demonstrated to students how the mispronunciation of the words and especially the alternation of long vowels, short ones and silent letters will disrupt the flow and the beat of the poem. (See Figure 9 in the Appendix.)

In fact, that is a point the students themselves might notice from merely listening to the poem without necessarily understanding the meanings of all the words. The essential quality of these poems is in their oral performance. With practice and further exposure to such texts, students will get used to listening to Arabic and will acquire an intuition for how words should be pronounced. Memorizing and being closely familiar with such short poems will give student a sense of accomplishment.

Vocabulary Learning/ Retention

The key for using a literary text in a communicative language learning classroom is to 'activate' the text. Direct grammar translation is avoided because that would reduce the class into another lecture on grammar. Poetry can introduce students to set phrases or expressions which cannot be learned by merely using a dictionary or analyzing text written specifically for language learner.

Unlike the de-contextualizing methods of learning vocabulary such as flash cards and vocabulary lists, this exercise challenges the false equation of one Arabic word to one English word and motivates the student to learn an Arabic word with all its subtle layers of meaning without necessarily seeking to assign to it one equivalent English word. For example the words: *taʿib* 'tired,' *ṭarab* 'ecstasy,' and *laʿib* 'play' all gain an additional meaning that cannot be found in the dictionary when learnt together in the context of this poem. (See Figure 10 in the Appendix.)

Relying on the rhyme and the parallel structure of the sentences makes reading easier and livelier. They can be used as mnemonic tools to enhance the retention of vocabulary. The musicality provides a remembering context which facilitates the learning of couplets and words in association with each other: Words such as 'sickness' *Saqm* and 'health' *Ṣiḥa*; 'laughter' *ḍaḥik* and 'weeping' *yantaḥibu*; 'to pass or disappear' *inqaḍa* and

'to return or reappear' *ʿāda* are opposites that are juxtaposed in the poem. (See Figures 11, 12, and 13 in the Appendix.)

In the Classroom

These sample activities are intended for a second-year Arabic class, where students have been exposed to Arabic for two semesters. They can read and write basic structures and they are familiar with most of the words of these short poems.

Activity Sample A: Listening and Pronunciation

The aim of this activity is to familiarize students with the correct pronunciation of words and to help them identify words by hearing them. Without focusing on meaning or syntactic analysis, the basic focus here is listening recognition.

a. Students listen to the poem in song
b. Handout of poem with the targeted words missing
c. Students listen to the poem again to fill in the missing words
d. Students sing the poem with the instructor

Follow Up

- As a follow up, students are provided with a sound file, so they can practice listening to the song accompanied with the written text of the poem.
- As homework, students will be also asked to record their reading of the poem and send it to the instructor.

Activity Sample B: Vocabulary Learning and Retention

(Note: Students of this level are asked to have their Arabic- English Dictionaries in class at all times.)

The aim of this activity is to recycle words that students already know, but which might have been encountered in different contexts and functions. This activity reinforces the words, so that they may be actively learnt.

a. A hand out of the poem is passed out. Targeted words are crossed out and placed in a word bank.
b. Student are expected to fill in the blanks with the correct forms of the words in the context of the poem, based on their prior knowledge of these words and relying on rhyme and meter for clues.
c. The complete poem is then read in class.

Follow Up

- In groups, students will attempt to guess the meanings of new words in relation to already known vocabulary.
- Students will be asked to find the roots and the meanings of other new words with the help of a dictionary.

- As homework, students will be asked to write a short paragraph summarizing the poem in their own words.

These words will be learnt implicitly or passively. This is an important way in which exposure to authentic texts helps expand vocabulary.

Literature can be employed to contextualize vocabulary through authentic texts. What literature adds to the language classroom cannot be accurately described. The phrase "a feeling for language" is rather vague, but it closely hints at the kind of intimacy with language that literature, and especially poetry, provides. Successful reading of poetry in the second language class is valuable because it places the abstract grammar in an actual context. It gives the classroom more life and more insight into the culture of the language, since many of these poems are also well known popular songs.
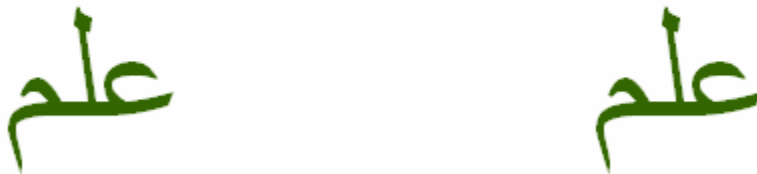
Appendix

علم

Figure 1

Knowledge or Banner?!

علم   علم

Figure 2

عِلْم

Banner

عِلْم

Knowledge

Figure 3

عِلْم

Banner

'alamun

عِلْم

Knowledge

'ilmun

Figure 4

عبرة

Figure 5

Tear or Moral?!

عبرة   عبرة

Figure 6

عَبْرَة   عِبْرَة

Tear   Moral

Figure 7

عَبْرَة   عِبْرَة

Tear   Moral

ʿabratun   ʿibratun

Figure 8

حَاملُ الهَوَى تعِبُ   يَسْتخِفُّهُ الطَّربُ

إن بَكى يَحُقُّ لَهُ   ليْسَ مَا بهِ لعِبُ

كلما انْقضَى سببٌ   مِنْك عَادَ لي سببُ

تعْجَبين مِن سقمي   صِحَتي هِيَ العَجبُ

تضْحَكِين لاهية   والمُحِبُّ يَنتحِبُ

Figure 9

Vocabulary: Discovering Connections

بَيسْتَخِفُّهُ الطَّرَبُ   حَاملُ الـهَوَى تَعِبُ

لَيْسَ مَـا بهِ لَعبُ   إن بَكى يَحُقُّ لَـهُ

مِنْك عَادَ لي سببُ   كلما انْقضَى سببٌ

صِحَتي هي العَجَبُ   تَعْجَبين مِن سقمي

والمُحِبُ يَنتحِبُ   تضْحَكِين لاهية

Figure 10

Vocabulary: Creating Couplets

بَيسْتَخِفُّهُ الطَّرَبُ   حَاملُ الـهَوَى تعِبُ

لَيْسَ مَـا به لَعِبُ   إن بَكى يَحُقُّ لَـهُ

مِنْك عَادَ لي سببُ   كلما انْقضَى سببٌ

صِحَتي هيَ العَجَبُ   تَعْجَبين مِن سقمي

والمُحِبُ يَنتحِبُ   تضْحَكِين لاهية

Figure 11

Vocabulary: Creating Couplets

حَامِلُ الْهَوَى تَعِبُ	يَسْتْخِفُّهُ الطَّرَبُ
إن بَكى يَحُقُّ لَهُ	لَيْسَ مَا بِهِ لَعِبُ
كلما انْقضَى سببُ	مِنْك عَادَ لي سببُ
تَعْجَبين مِن سقمي **صِحَتي هِيَ العَجَبُ**	
تضْحَكِين لاهية	والمُحِبُّ يَنتَحِبُ

Figure 12

Vocabulary: Creating Couplets

حَامِلُ الْهَوَى تَعِبُ	يَسْتْخِفُّهُ الطَّرَبُ
إن بَكى يَحُقُّ لَهُ	لَيْسَ مَا بِهِ لَعِبُ
كلما انْقضَى سببُ	مِنْك عَادَ لي سببُ
تَعْجَبين مِن سقمي	صِحَتي هِيَ العَجَبُ
تَضْحَكِين لاهية	**والمُحِبُّ يَنتَحِبُ**

Figure 13