

Arabic Language Instruction in Nigerian Educational Institutions: The Challenges a Head

Dr Aliyu Ibrahim Kari

Institute of Education, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

email: wakeelaleey27@gmail.com

Abstract

Although there has been a noticeable improvement in the mode of teaching Arabic language from 16th century to date, a lot more has to be done to improve its teaching in various institutions of learning. So while this paper locates the search for durable interventions within the context of the present objectives of teaching Arabic in Nigeria, the realities of teaching the subject or course as a foreign language and the numerous barriers which frustrate the effectiveness of its teaching in Nigeria are explored. In specific terms, the paper examines four crucial issues concerning the studies of Arabic language in Nigeria, namely the instructional materials, the learning materials, the learning environment and the learners' attitude to the language. Suggestions are proffered to achieve a more effective teaching of the course.

Keywords: Learning Material, environment, process, attitude, challenge

Introduction

Language is defined as a method of communicating ideas, feelings, and information from one person to another. Language is naturally seen as conventional, systematic in style, symbolic and as well as dynamic. People use language to express their feelings, pass information or knowledge to others. Language deals with symbols to facilitate the accomplishment of all the aforementioned tasks. Language enables men and women of various shades and interests to interact meaningfully with one another. It also plays a very vital role to a nation in the areas of commerce and international relations.

The paper examines materials that are used in teaching Arabic language in Nigeria, what the students learn and the environment in which they study. The paper also looks into some problems created by learners themselves in the learning process. Finally, solutions are offered with the hope to help eradicate or minimize some of the problems identified by this paper as they affect the teaching and learning of the Arabic language. It is hoped that when accepted, these would help improve instructions in the language and contribute more to our national development in the 21st century and beyond.

Arabic is no doubt one of the most important and widely spoken languages in the world. The language is very rich in both grammar and literature. In Islam, Arabic is regarded as the mother of all languages due to its richness and vastness. Arabic is said to have been introduced into this pan of West Africa in the 8th century. According to Ibn Munabbah, it reached Borno Empire around 738AD. The language was introduced by Arab traders who simultaneously brought with them the religion of Islam. The religion and the language started to spread and Umme Jilme the Mai ruler of Borno Empire who ruled between 1055-97 became a Muslim, laying the foundation of Islam as the state religion (Ajayi & Crowder, 1976). The trend continued, and in the 14th century, when Kanuri scholars and poets achieved a very high standard in the writing of classical Arabic. This was evident in the letter written by the chief

scribe of the Kanuri Court in the year 1392. Arabic and Islam continued to spread into the hinterland particularly in the 13th and 14th centuries when it was introduced into Hausaland.

Indigenous Arabic and Islamic scholars were produced in these areas. Prominent among them were Muhammad Dan Masina d. 1667 and Muhammad Dan Marina d. 1665. These 17th century scholars were to be followed by other prominent scholars in the 18th century, who continued the task of writing and spreading the language alongside Islam. Some of these scholars were Sheikh Jibrilla (Usman Dan Fodiyo's teacher), Usman Dan Fodiyo, Abdullahi Bn Fodiyo, Muhammadu Bello and many others. Thus, Arabic language gained a lot of prominence so much so that at the beginning of the 19th century, after the Islamic Jihad led by Usman Dan Fodiyo, it was adopted as the official language of the Sokoto Caliphate. However, research and studies in the language continued informally until the 1930s when modern Arabic scholars were introduced. Later on, the government introduced the study of Arabic in her various institutions of learning as a modern language (Fafunwa, 1974).

State of the Art

Instructional materials

Language study in modern times can be facilitated with the assistance of modern teaching aids such as tape recorders, video machines and online materials. But then, it is disheartening to note that these teaching aids are not available in most of our primary and post-primary institutions, including tertiary institutions in this ongoing 21st century. Some of our higher institutions of learning do not have language laboratories. In the few ones where such laboratories exist, they are not well equipped. And it is also appalling to mention that where such facilities are available there is a dearth of qualified personnel to handle them. In a situation whereby most foreign language learners are influenced by their mother tongue or any other language they understand, they will consequently find it difficult or fail to articulate words correctly and differentiate between two or more words that are similar in their spellings and sounds but not the same (having different meaning). In the table below are examples of such Arabic words with similar sounds but having different meanings.

Table: Arabic Words, their Transliteration and Meaning.

Arabic Word	Transliteration	Meaning
مهنة	Mihna	Profession
محنة	Mihna	Punishment
سعال	Sual	Cough
سؤال	Sual	Question
ذكيّ	Dhakiyyun	Intelligent
زكيّ	Zakiyyun	Pure
فاهم	Fahim	One who Understands
فاحم	Fahim	One who is very dark
حارس	Haris	Guard
حارث	Harith	Farmer
حارص	Haris	Greedy
مجاهد	Mujahid	One who strives
مجادد	Mujahd	One who argues

From the above table, some noticeable differences could be seen in the case of some words and their transliteration. The distinguishing features of the words in isolation cannot be easily



perceived. One can only understand the differences in each pair by their contextual meanings only. One way in which the pronunciation of these words may be differentiated is for a competent teacher to drill his students by serving as a model or through a recorded tape, video or software tool. Otherwise, one is bound to mistake them for one for the other or others. Consequently, a wrong meaning will be received by the listener and the aim of communicating the message will be defeated. Unlike some languages in which words may still retain their meanings even if they are not accurately pronounced, words in Arabic have to be treated with a lot of caution.

Learning materials

“Learning materials” basically refer to the books and other reference materials used in the learning process. When Arabic language was introduced into the country, books written by foreign authors on language and literature also found their way into the country. After some decades, indigenous scholars began to write books on various branches of Arabic.

With the introduction of Arabic in government schools and modern Islamic schools, specific books mostly by foreign authors were selected for use as study materials. However, this is not to say that books written by indigenous authors were inferior and cannot be used due to their inferiority. Because modern Islamic secondary schools were meant to follow the pattern of those in the Arab world, the books used to teach the syllabus were probably preferred to suit the new arrangement in the then colonial Nigeria. Naturally, people would have expected some changes in the Arabic syllabus after the attainment of independence in Nigeria in 1960. However, it is sad to note that books on various branches of Arabic by foreign authors still dominate our schools today from primary to post-primary institutions. Mention, would, however, be made of some well-known books by Nigerian authors used in our primary and secondary schools such as *Al Arabiyyatul-Jadidah* (New Arabic) which is in two parts, for primary and post-primary institutions. Even then, these books are mostly used for category B learners of Arabic, i.e. those who learn Arabic as an optional subject or modern language at government secular institutions. The modern Arabic and Islamic secondary and primary schools do not use these books in their syllabus. This is partly because they are regarded as being too elementary for students of these schools because of their earlier orientation which differs from that of students learning Arabic as a modern language at secular schools. And because, the language of instruction in Arabic and Islamic schools is Arabic, students of these schools are at a better advantage to learn to speak Arabic more fluently than their counterparts at secular schools. Here, we would also like to agree to the fact that the differences which exist in the organization and teaching of Arabic in these two types of schools are traceable to differences in their syllabuses.

So in place of these Nigerian authored books, books by foreign authors mostly from Egypt are adopted and used in Arabic and Islamic schools. However, this is not to say that foreign authored books are not used for Arabic studies in secular schools. To date, the standard recommended books on grammar in our primary and post-primary institutions, Islamic and secular alike are Egyptian authored books. Not only in the area of grammar are foreign books used but also in prose.

The situation is almost the same in our higher institutions of learning except in some specific branches where books by Nigerian authors must be used. Such branches relate to aspects of Arabic Literature in Nigeria and West Africa or the contribution of some Nigerian and West African scholars to the development of Arabic literature in Nigeria and West African sub-region. Foreign novels and other literature are mostly used in comprehension, drama and prosody. The



complication here is that these books mostly tell us about the environment of their authors. As a matter of fact, in the learning process, students come across some issues or names of things that they are not familiar with, and that could make their understanding difficult.

Although new textbooks and approaches are being developed and published, some are poorly designed and produced. Thus some materials are not of good quality, some contain mistakes and typographic errors, some are not comprehensive and sufficient, and lack of availability of teaching materials in different areas that must be covered.

It is also worth mentioning that most Arabic practitioners see the need to explore new paths and move in a new direction that can teach authentic language while providing a well-rounded knowledge of Arab culture. But unfortunately, the issue is that there is still no connection between research-based language acquisition theory and the development of teaching materials. Hence there is a clear mismatch between applied linguistics research and textbooks. One final aspect that needs to be mentioned is the visuals; most books available today in the market lack the necessary appeal to attract students of Arabic (the consumers).

The learning environment

Learning environment does not only refer to the classroom but also the school and the community where the school is located as well. It is an undisputable fact that learning a language in a foreign environment is a very difficult task. In this situation, both the teacher and the learner are bound to face some difficulties, because they do not breathe in the culture of the language. In fact, it is important for learners of Arabic language to learn about the Arab culture, because culture is a great tool to keep learners hooked to Arabic, it brings them closer to the people and it humanises everything surrounding the Arab culture. In fact, language is the embodiment of culture; so the understanding of the latter is imperative and a prerequisite for harnessing and mastering the contours and power of the language. A student cannot only interact with Arabs to only talk about politics and current events, he or she needs to be able to perform other social tasks and engage in various daily life situations, like watching a soccer game or eating together, talking about the Arts, singing, etc. It is for this reason that the need for acculturation always arises for learners of foreign languages.

Acculturation is a situation whereby students learning a foreign language in a foreign environment are sent to the indigenous environment of the language for practical experience and access to first hand information about what they have been learning. Moreover, the exercise would help increase the students' understanding of the language as they interact with native speakers at various places such as schools, markets, hospitals, roadsides, clubs, hotels, etc.

This is unlike their own environment whereby the use of the language is only restricted to classrooms. It is in line with this that foreign students of Hausa are sent to Nigeria to acquire acculturation. Within Nigeria also students of Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba as a second language are sent to Kano, Aba or Oyo respectively for a similar purpose (NCCE, 1996). The Nigerian government, up to the early 1980s, sent her French and Arabic students to French and Arabic speaking countries for a one-year acculturation programme. However, in the late 1980s the exercise was halted because the government could no longer bear the financial burden of sending her students on this exercise. Consequently, National Arabic and French villages were established by the Federal Government at Ngala and Badagry, respectively to cater for the needs of the learners of these two foreign languages.



While acknowledging the effort of the federal government, it is also good to note that these two national institutions are located within the shores of Nigeria. The said Arabic village at Ngala is more or less another Nigerian higher institution. If the aim of any acculturation programme is to enable the participants to be 'acculturated' and learn some practical experiences in the environment of the native speakers of the language they are learning, then the Arabic village at Ngala is far from meeting the demands of participating students. The people of Ngala do not speak Arabic as the Arabs do, notwithstanding the fact that Shuwa Arabs inhabit the area and that much of their language is Arabic. But the Shuwas are not the only people living at Ngala town; the Kanuris also inhabit the town. Consequently, students of Arabic stand to benefit little from the Shuwa Arabic. Besides, the Shuwa culture is different from that of the Arabs. What the students read in literature books about tradition and culture of the Arabs are virtually absent at Ngala. Moreover, 99 percent of lecturers at the institution are Nigerians.

Although it is boldly written at the entrance of the institution that "we communicate in Arabic here", 60 percent or more of discussions taking place outside classrooms are done in English or local Nigerian languages. Communication in Arabic is mostly confined to classrooms. Most of the supporting staff at the Arabic village cannot speak Arabic. They communicate among themselves and with students in languages other than Arabic. So, it seems that the village is, to a greater extent, duplicating what the universities and other higher institutions are doing.

Learners' attitude

To some extent, students of Arabic language do not help themselves by restricting their usage of the language to the four corners of their classrooms. Considering the fact that they are learning a foreign language in a foreign environment, one will naturally expect students to constantly communicate with their mates in Arabic. In fact, through constant practice or use of the language outside classrooms, they stand a good chance of gaining more, as the saying goes "practice makes perfect". This is because their mistakes during such communication exercise could be picked by their mates and teachers and subsequently get corrected. And such mistakes, when corrected and noted, are not likely to be repeated. But unfortunately, some students feel shy and are reluctant to speak the language outside classrooms, either for fear of making errors or they do not want to be perceived as "showing off" unnecessarily. Neither of these reasons can be considered as an unassailable excuse or reason for shunning away or refusing to put into practice what one has learnt in the classroom. The ability to possess a good command of a language can only be achieved through consistent listening, reading, speaking and as well as writing. Through these ways, one will be able to understand and speak the language with a high degree of effectiveness in a reasonable period of time. Learning a foreign language in a foreign environment is not an easy task. So it requires a lot of commitments from the learner.

Furthermore, as Adeyemi (2017) puts it some "students of Arabic tend to become frustrated as soon as they are confronted with some of the difficulties encountered with the language itself. They may either drop out, which is a very common phenomenon, or become lukewarm in the course."

Recommendations

So far, some problematic areas in Arabic studies have been identified, and these problems certainly need to be given immediate attention to enable the language and its learners play their expected role(s) in the national development of Nigeria as well as prepare both teachers and



learners for the challenges of the 21st century. The following suggestions are hereby offered with a view of finding solutions to the problems outlined in the discussion.

1. The government, through various commissions of education, ensure that language laboratories are established and well equipped with modern facilities in primary and secondary schools, and as well as higher institutions in the country to help ease the difficulties encountered by both teachers and learners of languages, particularly the foreign ones during the learning process.
2. The authorities of those institutions where laboratories facilities exist should make sure that teachers or lecturers concerned make adequate and judicious use of the facilities for the students' benefit.

The government and private organizations should encourage indigenous Arabic scholars to take up the challenge of writing books that could be used in our various institutions of learning. Curriculum planners should also encourage indigenous authors by incorporating their literature in the Arabic syllabus at various levels of education. In essence, if Arabic books on prose and grammar are to be written by Nigerian authors, things, issues or events familiar to Nigerians could be used as examples. And this would in turn make the study more familiar and interesting and consequently easier to comprehend. Nigeria is a country with diverse cultures, festivities and ceremonies which could be reflected or projected in books that may be read by users of Arabic outside Nigeria. Along with this, there should be purposeful collaborations between material designers, researchers and publishers in order to produce adequate materials. For instance, the emerging Corpus Linguistics which is an essential tool in providing authentic linguistic input especially when it comes to learning vocabulary, and it is essential that such tools be applied in order to produce quality teaching materials that can help produce learners who are capable of communicating effectively.

3. Since the essence of acculturation programmes is to enable learners of foreign a language to get firsthand information and practical experiences in the environment of the language, the federal government is hereby advised to revert to the old system of sending Nigerian students of Arabic to a model environment for appropriate acculturation experiences, for it is clear that the Nigeria Arabic village at Ngala cannot serve the same acculturation purpose as acculturation centres in the Arab world. If this is done the same amount of money or even less spent by the government annually to run the National Arabic Village could be diverted to finance the trip of Arabic students for acculturation.
4. Students should try as much as they can to communicate in Arabic with their mates and teachers wherever they find themselves and at any given opportunity. Within the classroom, students should make it a duty to communicate in Arabic. When they meet one another in the market, hospital, roadside etc, their language of communication should be Arabic. Teachers should also find ways of encouraging their students to speak in Arabic within and outside classrooms. Teachers should not only endeavour to correct their students' mistakes but also encourage them to express themselves proudly in Arabic in the hope that they would be fluent speakers in the future. Students should also be encouraged by their teachers to read Arabic novels, newspapers and comprehension passages and listen to Arabic radio stations.

Conclusion



It is understood that studies in Arabic language and literature have been going on in this country for more than one thousand years and that there was a time when it was adopted as the official language of the Sokoto Caliphate of Northern Nigeria. We have seen the various efforts made by foreign and indigenous scholars in developing learning and teaching materials of the language. In this highly technological 21st century, concerted efforts by learners, teachers, government and other agencies should be made to improve its position in the society.

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