

An Innovative, Communicative Approach to Teaching Modern Standard Arabic

Al-Absiová, E. (2013). *Arabský jazyk I. (Spisovná arabčina pre začiatočníkov)*.

Nitra: Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa, 168p.

ISBN 978-80-558-0545-0.

Eva Al-Absiová's recently published textbook, *Arabic Language I (Modern Standard Arabic for Beginners)*, written in Slovak and Arabic, represents a new and innovative approach to both teaching and learning this world language. It provides a comprehensive grounding for beginners who have an aim of achieving elementary writing skills and communicative competence. Before discussing the book both from methodological and linguistic perspective, I find it appropriate to briefly review the linguistic "state of affairs" in the Arab world.

The current linguistic situation in Arab countries is often discussed in terms of Charles A. Ferguson's *diglossia*; an umbrella term referring to the existence of two forms of language - the formal (*al-fushā*) and the vernacular (*al-'amēya*). While the former constitutes the high variety of the written, standard Arabic; the latter is considered the low, colloquial form of language. This "two-in-one" language system has significantly complicated the question of both teaching and learning Arabic. Arabic language teachers have to decide whether to take a "standard-only approach" or whether to expose their students to both standard and vernacular simultaneously. Should they take the second stance, they need to determine which of the multiple vernacular forms they want to teach (Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi, etc.). The students, on the other hand, need to realise that if they want to be both literate and able to converse, they must learn both forms (which are often mutually unintelligible). Consequently, the question of appropriate textbooks and teaching materials has posed a dilemma for Arabic language teachers worldwide.

The textbook *Arabic Language I* represents an innovative and refreshing communicative approach to teaching this Central Semitic language. From the point of view of "al-fushā or al-'amēya dilemma", the author takes the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) approach, imparting MSA which is to serve as a foundation for learning dialects after the learner has acquired a sufficient command of the standard forms. The primary focus is placed on teaching standard grammar and reading. However, the book places attention on the oral component of MSA as well since it includes practical dialogues simulating various

communicative situations that students might encounter in the Arab world (greetings, introducing people, communicating at the airport, at the hotel, etc.). This dialogic component is to practice learners' communicative competence and enhance their vocabulary in the respective area as the sentence structures and vocabulary is partially adapted to colloquial discourse. The prospective recipient of the book is a complete beginner who has not yet been exposed to Arabic language alphabet, which is discussed in the first unit of the textbook. The book is not intended for the students of linguistics who mostly focus on studying classical Arabic and Arabic language literature, but for those who aim at acquiring practical, up-to-date vocabulary which can be used in modern writing and an everyday working environment. Since current Central European employers demonstrate a growing interest in graduates that are fluent in Arabic, the book is a clear answer to the market demands.

This first of the three-book series is divided into 12 units. All units (excluding the first one, dedicated to Arabic script) are further subdivided into four parts – a grammatical part, a textual part, some exercises and a dictionary. The initial grammar section represents a step-by-step guide to mastering the most important aspects of MSA, including the article, number, equational and verbal sentence, perfect and imperfect tense of the strong verb forms, the genitive construction (*idāfa*), etc. The grammar presented in this initial part of the unit is further demonstrated in the textual part and practiced in the exercises. The second part provides learners with multiple texts and dialogues which provide information on Arab and Slovak geography, customs, traditions and consequently, they prepare students for future intercultural encounters. The exercises not only provide a wide variety of grammar practice but they also contain vocabulary drills enhancing the vocabulary presented in the textual part. A small number of exercises focus on the translation from Slovak into Arabic. The concluding part of the unit is a dictionary, arranged in alphabetical order. The book draws on the long-term pedagogical practice of the author who methodically and unequivocally underscores and explains the differences in meaning between the words and syntactic constructions which are very frequently confused and perceived as problematic by Arabic language learners. The appendix at the end of the textbook contains notes on writing *hamza* and specialised vocabulary lists. The alphabetically arranged Arabic-Slovak and Slovak-Arabic dictionary embraces the whole vocabulary presented in the book.

Arabic is a world language, currently spoken by approximately 220 million people. In 1983, UN adopted Arabic as its sixth official language. The European Union supports numerous projects focusing on Arab-European cooperation (e.g. EUROMED - Euro-Mediterranean Partnership). The Central European working

market demonstrates a clear-cut interest in fluent Arabic language speakers. Despite all of the above, the Slovak (and Central European) market still lacks appropriate teaching materials which would be an answer to the market demands. The new textbook is, therefore, a great contribution to Arabic language teaching. It offers a fresh, communicative approach which provides prospective learners with a step-by-step exposure to both linguistic and cultural encounters between Slovakia (Europe) and the Arab world. Having mastered the book, the learner will be able to read and understand simple Arabic texts; to translate and to write short compositions and to hold a simple conversation on everyday topics. Thus, the book prepares students for mastering not only the linguistic difficulties of MSA, but it also paves the way for them to become autonomous and self-possessed intercultural mediators between European and Arab culture.

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New Contribution to the Survey of Discourse Analysis

Bhatia, V. K., Flowerdew, J., & Jones, R. H. (Eds.) (2008). *Advances in Discourse Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.
ISBN 978-0-415-39809-1.

The publication *Advances in Discourse Studies*, edited by Vijay K. Bhatia, John Flowerdew and Rodney H. Jones, published by Routledge in 2008, brings together contributions from top scholars in the field of discourse. It is intended for academics dealing with linguistics, sociology, psychology, cultural and translation studies. as well as a source for students who can consider major approaches to the study of discourse and see its interdisciplinarity. Its main focus is on varying aspects of language use that covers conversation analysis, ethnographic-based discourse analysis, corpus-based and multimodal discourse analysis, as well as genre analysis, critical discourse analysis and mediated discourse analysis. Although in some sense these distinct approaches to discourse analysis differ from each other in terms of the objectives they serve, they are not developing in isolation, as all of them pay some attention to text and the social context. The book has a sophisticated composition providing a clear introduction to each section, followed by particular contributions and suggestions for further work, including recommended reading and case studies.