TALK LIKE AN EGYPTIAN:

EGYPTIAN ARABIC AS AN OPTION FOR TEACHING COMMUNICATIVE SPOKEN ARABIC

Saussan Khalil

Abstract

The field of teaching Arabic as a foreign language is dominated by the teaching of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), essentially a written language, while the teaching of the spoken varieties of Arabic plays a secondary role. In this paper, I challenge this status quo and aim to show that the spoken varieties of Arabic are necessary for learners to reach communicative competence in Arabic. I will also explore Egyptian Arabic as the most widely recognised dialect of Arabic, and on this basis its suitability for learners of Arabic as a foreign language. Additionally, I shall be exploring recent developments in the Arabic language with the rise of the internet as a new medium for written Arabic hitherto unexplored in terms of language use. Preliminary indications show that rather than using formal MSA for writing, internet users are writing in everyday spoken Arabic – a groundbreaking development in terms of Arabic language use, since the spoken language has been regarded as unsuitable for writing up until now. Finally, using first hand research data collected from current learners of Arabic, I will explore the learner's perspective of the Arabic language, and their experience of learning Arabic in the 21st century, with the aim of showing that outdated theory and practice regarding teaching MSA should be replaced with an up-to-date, learner-centred, communicative approach.

1. Introduction

With the growing interest in learning and therefore teaching of Arabic as a foreign language (TAFL), especially in Europe and the United States, new approaches in TAFL based on Western-style teaching approaches have started to take shape. One of the most prominent of these is the communicative approach; a popular approach currently used for teaching European and Western languages, the communicative approach poses unique questions when applied to the teaching of Arabic. Traditionally, Classical Arabic and more recently Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) have been taught at the university level, but critics have argued that these are insufficient in fulfilling the aims of the communicative approach – for example, Wilmsen (2006: 125) poses the question 'What is Communicative Arabic?' and argues that the Classical and Modern Standard varieties of Arabic alone, do not meet the need for students to be able to fully converse on a day to day basis in an Arabic-speaking country, since they are not commonly spoken in everyday situations and that doing so would result in comical or even potentially embarrassing situations. That is not to say that they are not spoken at all, or that proficiency in these is not required in order to attain overall proficiency in Arabic, rather that these are part of the whole of what is modern day Arabic.

As Wahba (2006) notes: "The communicative approach is based on the assumption that the goal of language teaching is to develop the learner's ability to communicate with native speakers in real-life situations in the target language (Spolsky, 1978)."

Canale and Swain (1980: 2) describe the communicative approach as being organised around the basis of communicative functions the learner needs to know as opposed to being organised around linguistic or grammatical forms.

These definitions become less straightforward when applied to the Arabic language, a diglossic language (Ferguson, 1959), as it differs considerably between its written and spoken forms. Although the written form is generally accepted as being one standard form, "no variety of spoken Arabic is accepted as the norm or standard for the whole speech community, although of course important centres of prestige and communication may exert a considerable linguistic influence over a certain region (e.g. Cairo Arabic in Egypt)"[1].

Furthermore, there is a current lack of discourse analysis for Arabic (Ryding, 2006: 18), which further presents problems when trying to understand and define the aspects of the language used for functional, communicative purposes. This is problematic when defining communicative competence in Arabic, since the functions of the language are not well defined or well researched beyond the common generalisation of using MSA primarily for reading and writing, and colloquial or dialect Arabic primarily for conversation.

Although recent literature[2] calls for teaching spoken Arabic as it is spoken by natives ('colloquial' or a 'dialect') alongside MSA, it is not sufficient to simply advocate that the communicative approach should include the spoken as well as written forms of Arabic – for which spoken variety should be taught? And how can it be defined? As Ferguson notes, certain varieties have become predominant, and thanks to the spread of Egyptian media and former president Gamal Abdul Nasser's[3] Arab nationalism during the 20th century, Cariene Egyptian has become one of the most widely-recognised varieties of Arabic and arguably the best choice for a learner of Arabic.

This study is primarily concerned with the spoken communicative competence and proposes the teaching of the Egyptian variety of Arabic for spoken communication. Given the general premise that MSA is the medium for writing, it would be inappropriate to suggest that Egyptian Arabic or any other variety of spoken Arabic be taught as a written language, or that it should replace the teaching of MSA altogether. Given the holistic view of the communicative approach to the function of language in terms of the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, the argument put forward in this study is that MSA, while suitable for the purposes of written communication, is insufficient for oral communication unless accompanied by knowledge of a spoken dialect. Within the scope of this paper, I propose to explore the spread, influence and dominance of Egyptian Arabic throughout the Arab world during the 20th century: its media, politics and socio-cultural influence. I will start by introducing the influence of Egypt within the region, as a bridge that socially and culturally connects the western-most countries of North Africa with the Levant and Arab Gulf as far as Iraq, through its media industry as well as its geographical location. I will look at media statistics to support the widely accepted view of the predominance of Egyptian media across the Arab world during the 20th century, and

[1] Ferguson, Charles A. *The Arabic Koine*. In Language. Vol. 35, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1959), pp. 616-630 (article consists of 15 pages). Published by: Linguistic Society of America. Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/410601

[3] A stance taken by the contributors and editors of the landmark book by Wahba, Kassem M. [et. al.] (2006). Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

look at how this influence has changed in the 21st century with the emergence of transnational Arab media. I will review existing literature of studies and interviews with native Arabic speakers regarding perceptions and attitudes towards Egyptian Arabic, and their ability to recognise it to support the notion that it is the most widely-recognised variety.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Communicative language teaching in UK higher education institutions

With the current predominance of the communicative language teaching approach in the UK, as well as in the US and Europe, it is important to understand the aims of this approach and its implications for teaching Arabic as a foreign language (TAFL) to western students. Wahba (2006) refers to Spolsky for his definition of the communicative approach as the following:

> "The communicative approach is based on the assumption that the goal of language teaching is to develop the learner's ability to communicate with native speakers in real-life situations in the target language (Spolsky, 1978)." (Cited in Wahba, 2006: 140)

This is in itself not a radical departure from the traditional understanding of the aim of language learning, it is rather its impact on the way foreign languages are taught, that is relevant. In fact, the communicative approach is "organised around the basis of communicative functions the learner needs to know and how to express those functions grammatically, as opposed to being organised around linguistic or grammatical forms and organising these into grammatical sentences" (Canale and Swain, 1980: 2).

Richards (2006) also views the communicative approach in comparison with the grammatical approach and sees it in terms of its goal of teaching 'communicative competence' as opposed to 'grammatical competence'. Richards defines grammatical competence as:

> "...the knowledge we have of a language that accounts for our ability to produce sentences in a language. It refers to knowledge of the building blocks of sentences (e.g. parts of speech, tenses, phrases, clauses, sentence patterns) and how sentences are formed. ... While grammatical competence is an important dimension of language learning, it is clearly not all that is involved in learning a language since one can master the rules of sentence formation in a language and still not be very successful at being able to use the language for meaningful communication. It is the latter capacity which is understood by the term communicative competence." (Richards, 2006: 2-3)

So we see the emphasis that the communicative language teaching approach places on not only the form, but also the function of language, which when taught together, allow the learner to develop communicative competence. It is communicative competence that is the ultimate goal of communicative language teaching and Richards (2006: 3) defines communicative competence in terms of the following aspects of language knowledge, to include:

- Knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions
- *Knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants (e.g., knowing when to use formal and informal speech or when to use language appropriately for written as opposed to spoken communication)*

- Knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts (e.g. narratives, reports, interviews, conversations)
- Knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge (e.g. through using different kinds of communication strategies)

The italicised point is of particular relevance to teaching Arabic as foreign language, as it is not clear from existing curricula and coursebooks, with their focus on teaching Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), that learners do achieve this particular aspect of language knowledge, resulting in often confusing or even embarrassing situations for the learner when they attempt to practice spoken Arabic with native speakers. This aspect will be looked at more closely in the rest of this section, and evidence of learners' experiences will be presented in section 4.

2.2 History of Arabic language teaching in UK Higher Education Institutions

Arabic teaching has a long history in Britain and Ireland, which began as an attachment to theology. It was therefore taught as a classical language up to the middle of the 20th century. It was not until the latter part of the 20th century that MSA became a part of undergraduate degrees and Arabic teaching became more organised, coinciding with the publication of the textbook *Elementary Modern Standard Arabic*[4], which paved the way for the communicative language approach to enter Arabic teaching in Britain and Ireland. Subsequent teaching materials have developed the communicative trend and "most universities have transitioned to more communicatively oriented materials such as *al-Kitab fi Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya* (al-Batal, Brustad and al-Tonsi, 1995)" (Dickins and Watson, 2006: 107-108/110). As such, it can be said that most British universities have begun adopting a more communicative approach in adopting this and similar textbooks.

Interestingly though, the communicative trend seems to have focused rather narrowly on MSA, initially ignoring the spoken varieties of Arabic, or using MSA rather artificially as an everyday, spoken language. However, there is at least one striking exception to this, and possibly a model for 'true' communicative language teaching:

> "The University of Cambridge, by contrast, adopts a radically communicative approach. On the basis that Standard Arabic is only a spoken language in the most formal of situations, students are taught to speak colloquial Arabic (Palestinian) from the very start of the course. Texts are read in Standard Arabic but accompanying oral exercises are done in colloquial. Students thus become accustomed to Standard and colloquial Arabics in the contexts in which they are standardly used in the Arab world" (Dickins and Watson, 2006: 110).

Given that this 'radically' communicative approach does in fact reflect more accurately the use of the Arabic language by native speakers of Arabic, the question is no longer *if* spoken Arabic should form a part of any communicative language teaching approach, but rather *how* it should be incorporated and *which form* to adopt, particularly in university degree programmes. It is the purpose of this study that I intend to explore the Egyptian variety as the most accessible variety to the modern learner of Arabic for spoken communication purposes.

[4] Abboud & Marcus. 1975. Elementary Modern Standard Arabic. Michigan University Press.

At this stage, it is worth questioning the choice of one particular dialect over another: are there any pedagogical reasons for choosing one dialect over another? If we take Cambridge University as a model for teaching communicative Arabic, then what were the reasons and considerations behind its choice to teach Palestinian Arabic? Was it a strategic choice given the political significance of Palestine? I have been in contact with the University of Cambridge Arabic language teaching staff and they have confirmed that:

> "We decided to teach Palestinian for the practical reason that our native speaker language teacher was Palestinian. It's also of course a relatively central dialect, and so not too distant from most of those our students are likely to want to acquire in the future"[5].

So it seems that both convenience and practicality are factors in choosing a dialect to teach, as well as the ease of the dialect in terms of its linguistic features when compared to other dialects, or even MSA. So although Cambridge did not begin with a particular pedagogical or strategic reason for choosing to teach Palestinian Arabic, but made the choice out of practicality and convenience, their choice of Palestinian Arabic was influenced in part by the fact that it is, like Egyptian Arabic, a geographically central dialect and so it can be considered more easily understood across the Arab world compared to the most eastern or western dialects such as Iraqi and Moroccan Arabic respectively. It is therefore a suitable choice for learners of communicative Arabic.

Similarly Harvey (1979) in his coursebook chose the greater Syrian dialect, which includes Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. He states his reason for choosing this variety as "Geographically and linguistically this lies between Egypt, the greatest cultural centre of the Arab World, and the oil rich states to the east" and states his aim as being "to teach an "elevated colloquial" which one might regard as a relaxed version of the universally understood written language or as a "corrected" colloquial [i.e. Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA)]." (Harvey, 1979: 6). Harvey's view seems to support the view in section 4 below that ESA is the language understood and used in cross-dialectal spoken communication, rather than MSA. His choice of the greater Syrian dialect further supports the view that geographic as well as linguistic centrality is an important factor in deciding which dialect to teach learners of Arabic in order to maximise their ability to communicate with people from as many different Arabic speaking countries as possible.

In the US, Younis (2006) has developed an integrated approach to the teaching of Arabic at Cornell University, which like Cambridge, teaches both MSA and a dialect. Younis highlights the necessity of teaching both varieties of Arabic in order to achieve learners' main aim, which is to "achieve overall proficiency (to understand, speak, read and write)" (Younes, 2006: 158). Younes further believes that his integrated approach can be applied to the learning and teaching of any Arabic dialect, as he has had Egyptian, Sudanese, Lebanese, Palestinian and Jordanian teachers in the Cornell programme (Younes, 2006: 164). He refutes the argument that learners are 'confused' by being introduced to both MSA and dialect, and believes that "the way the two varieties of the language are presented in the classroom facilitates the understanding and internalization of their two roles." (Younes, 2006: 164). At both Cambridge and Cornell, the communicative approach is at the heart of their unique approaches, and both universities cover the four main skills of reading, writing,

[5] In an email dated 13 July 2011.

speaking and listening, where dialect is introduced through speaking and listening focus activities, and MSA is introduced through written texts. It is therefore reasonable to advocate the teaching of dialects for spoken communication and the teaching of MSA for written communication, in order for learners to achieve full communicative competence, which is the position of this study.

However, from the examples above, it is clear that although the argument for teaching a dialect as part of Arabic language higher education programmes is leading some institutions to adopt more innovative approaches, we can see that the choice of dialect remains fairly restricted to the 'central' dialects. In Younes's (2006) programme, although teachers from different dialect backgrounds have taught on the course, their dialectal backgrounds are fairly 'central', as they are from either Egyptian/Sudanese[6] or Levantine dialectal backgrounds. In the example of Cambridge, it seems unlikely that had the Faculty staff been from a geographically peripheral Arab country, such as Iraq or Morocco for example, the Faculty would have adopted solely the dialects of either of these countries for their communicative programme due to the lack of understanding of these dialects outside of their respective immediate regions. Given the widespread familiarity of Egyptian Arabic, as well as its geographic and linguistic centrality, I believe it would be the most suitable choice for learners of Arabic. Additionally, given the practical considerations faculties face, Egyptian Arabic is probably the most well researched and documented variety of Arabic compared with the other varieties, and the one with the most dedicated teaching materials. A review of existing teaching materials with specific reference to ones based on the communicative approach will follow in section 4.

With regards to the case for Egyptian Arabic, Holes (1995) refers to the results of a cross-dialectal study that confirms that Egyptian Arabic is the most recognised dialect, and the comparative lack of familiarity with other dialects in the group of educated Arabs from the Gulf, Baghdad, Cairo and Jerusalem. He states:

> "Speakers in a heterogenous group tend to 'level' their speech in the direction of what they recognise as a pan-Arab dialectal mean even if this sometimes involves, as it does here for the Iraqi, using a dialectal form which is not Iraqi at all. The preparedness of speakers to shift to dialectal forms which are not their own does vary, however. On the one hand, a Bahraini or Qatari would be most unlikely to use hast [dialectal form for existential 'there'] in a cross-dialectal situation because he or she might not even be understood by speakers from outside the Gulf, so localised is this word. On the other hand, Egyptians in particular seem much less inclined to shift away from Egyptianisms not found in other dialects, perhaps because of the dominant position which their dialect has established for itself over many decades in the educational systems and media of most Arab countries." (Holes, 1995: 294)

It is interesting to note the use of 'other' dialectal forms by the speakers (described as 'levelling' by Holes) in order to communicate with speakers of a different variety, rather than using MSA. This particular point is discussed further in section 4. The point remains clear, that the Egyptian variety of Arabic is a powerful communicative tool that can be exploited by learners of Arabic in order to communicate with speakers

[6] I group Egyptian and Sudanese together here as Sudanese Arabic is fairly close to Egyptian Arabic given the two countries geographical proximity and shared history, with Egyptian Arabic constituting a 'prestige' dialect in Sudan.

from different parts of the Arab world with more ease than using other dialects or even MSA.

2.3 Arabic linguistics and sociolinguistics

If we take the general premise of the communicative approach, that the aim of learning a language is to communicate with other speakers of that language, we must seek to understand how native Arabic speakers actually use the Arabic language to communicate with each other, in order to ascertain how to teach Arabic language learners to do the same.

In the case of the Arabic language, two main challenges appear on the linguistic and sociolinguistic scenes, namely that it is a diglossic language spoken in more than twenty countries, each with their own regional and local varieties; and the prestige of the 'High' variety, namely Classical Arabic and more recently MSA, which constitute the standard, formally-taught form of Arabic. Whereas the "Qur'anic" variety of Arabic was previously the model for standard (spoken) Arabic, the language of the media is becoming the model for present-day educated and non-educated native Arabic speakers (Badawi, 2006). The media is therefore a major influence on the language model of today, albeit a model for yet again, the 'standard' language – the written, formal spoken language, often scripted in the context of the media. In the discussion about the mass media in the Arab word that follows in section 2 of this paper, I will explore the influence of the media in further detail, looking at the influence of the less formal language of the bulk of Arabic entertainment media – Egyptian Arabic.

2.4 Diglossia and related concepts

Charles Ferguson first introduced the term in his landmark article *Diglossia* to describe the situation in which "Two varieties of a language exist side by side throughout the community, with each having a definite role to play" (Ferguson, 1959: 325). He defines diglossia as:

> "... a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) super-imposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either in an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is *not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation*." [Italics added] (Ferguson, 1959: 336)

Further, Ferguson identifies two main varieties – High (H) and Low (L) – used for formal and informal communication respectively. In terms of function, Ferguson notes that "an outsider who learns to speak fluent, accurate L and then uses it in a formal speech is an object of ridicule. A member of the speech community who uses H in a purely conversational or in an informal activity like shopping is equally an object of ridicule" (Ferguson, 1959: 329). This highlights the importance of teaching learners of Arabic more than one variety of Arabic and perhaps more importantly, teaching them to use the varieties of the language in their appropriate contexts.

In terms of the implications of the features of diglossia on TAFL, the result has been that the standard, formal, written language has been preferred over the informal, spoken colloquials. Ryding (2006) describes this as 'reverse privileging' and confirms

that it is imperative to ensure foreign language learners of Arabic can grasp both a spoken variety as well as the standard written language – there is simply no way around this if learners are to achieve a well-rounded grasp of Arabic that resembles that of a native speaker. Ryding calls this a new 'roadmap' for the future of teaching Arabic as a foreign language.

Building on Ferguson's work, several important contributions have been made to the field of Arabic sociolinguistics. Haeri (1996) delineates these as: the 'continuum' concept introduced by Rickford (1987) for usages that "fall in between" Classical Arabic and non-Classical Arabic; the sociolinguistic studies on Cariene, Egyptian and 'spoken' Arabic by Schmidt (1974), Schultz (1981), Mitchell (1986, 1990), and Mitchell and El-Hassan (1994); and the identification of Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA) through the studies of Mitchell (1986), Abdel-Jawad (1981), Haeri (1996) and Badawi (1973).

The identification of ESA has been a significant development in the field of Arabic linguistics and sociolinguistics, as the language used by educated native Arabic speakers. ESA has been described as a spoken language that has developed in 'educated environments' in all Arab countries that has acquired many of the characteristics of Standard Arabic (*fusha*) while avoiding many of those of colloquial Arabic (*'ammiyah*) (al-Husari, 1985: 283). Conversely, ESA has been described as a 'red herring', since it is essentially colloquial Arabic with some of the more formal and technical lexicon borrowed from Standard Arabic (Wilmsden, 2006: 130). It seems it is difficult to find or give an exact or agreed upon definition of ESA, but it is clear that the diglossic division of Arabic into 'High' and 'Low' varieties is simplistic, and that there exist deeper, more complex levels of language use in Arabic. The identification of ESA highlights two important aspects of Arabic language use: the first is the relationship between the High and Low varieties (or Standard and colloquial), since its relation to 'educated' speakers implies their language use has been affected by both their spoken variety and the Standard that they have come to learn through formal education; the second is that despite the existence of regional varieties of spoken Arabic, native speakers manage to somehow communicate through a mixing of both the Standard and their local varieties. Again, it is not clear whether native speakers rely on Standard Arabic for cross-dialectal conversation with some interference from their spoken variety, or whether they use their spoken variety with some borrowing from Standard Arabic. One study that has gone some way to define cross-dialectal communication (Abu Melhim, 1992) will be explored in some detail in section 4.

Some studies have even suggested that the two forms of Arabic (standard and colloquial) are treated as different languages altogether by the brains of native Arabic speakers. Feldman (2009) found that native Arabic speakers' brains register their spoken variety as the mother tongue whereas their brains respond to the Standard language in the same way that other speakers respond to a second language. It is plausible to believe that native speakers do register Standard Arabic in much the same way as a foreign language, given its limited use in everyday spontaneous speech and its perceived difficulty by native speakers, and given that some native speakers have described their spoken variety to be more 'direct' than the Standard (Haeri, 2003: 37-43). In fact, according to Haeri, "Making it [Classical/Standard Arabic] one's own was and remains a very difficult and complex struggle." (Haeri, 2003: 77). As a native speaker, I often find myself mentally 'translating' what I read in Standard Arabic into my spoken variety, and vice versa when writing Standard Arabic. Haeri confirms that

this is the case also in print media, where interviews are often 'translated' by professional 'correctors' (copy editors) from spoken Arabic into Standard Arabic as part of the process of text regulation (Haeri, 2003: 54, 95, 98). The same can be said for literary works such as novels, where "the writer translates – and I mean translates – how he believes any given character might speak in the classical language" (Imbabi, 1994: 412)[7].

Although some work in the field of Arabic sociolinguistics has been demonstrated above, Ryding (2006) and Badawi (2006) both confirm the lack of and subsequent need for more discourse analysis to better understand the structure and sociolinguistic uses of Arabic, in order to inform curricula and teaching strategies. In El-Said Badawi's Foreword to the landmark book *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st* Century[8], he remarks that:

> "Modern learners face the unenviable task of trying to learn an ill-defined, ill-researched, socially diffused phenomenon whose properties and functions are badly and disparately understood by non-native and native speakers alike. The lack of clearly defined language objectives that the teaching profession is suffering from today is a function of the lack of a clear understanding (or at least appreciation) of the sociolinguistic role it plays in present-day Arab societies." (Badawi, 2006: ix)

3. Egyptian media and its role in the spread of the Egyptian dialect

This section looks at the spread and popularity of Egyptian media in the Arab world, its origins and influence since the early twentieth century, as well as its development and distribution throughout the Arab world. It explores the notion that with the rise of transnational satellite broadcasting, the dominance of Egyptian media could or already is, fading away to other, rival countries in the region, and the relationship between this and the changing political dynamics of the region.

The idea is that through the spread of its media, Egypt has also managed to spread its dialect into the homes of Arabs across the region, making it widely understood beyond the borders of Egypt. This in addition to the popularity of Egypt as a destination for visitors from across the Arab world as indeed from across the world, makes Egyptian Arabic a suitable option for learners of communicative Arabic wishing to speak to as many people as possible in Arabic.

3.1 Spoken Arabic in the Audio and Audiovisual Media

The roots of the dominance and at the same time popularity of Egyptian media can be traced back to the 1920s with the rise of the Egyptian film industry as well as the launch of Egypt's radio service – the first in the Arab world (Boyd 1993: 17). This popularity grew and was consolidated during the Nasserite period in the 1960s when Nasser advanced his vision for a unified Arab World by capitalising on the oral culture prevalent in the Arabic-speaking world at the time to broadcast his famous speeches via the radio programme "Sawt Al-Arab" (Voice of the Arabs) (Amin, 2001: 31).

Traditionally, Egypt has been viewed as "the Hollywood of the Arab world" (Ayish, 2001: 118). In fact:

[7] Haeri (2003: 109-110) refers to the postscript to Imbabi's novel on the "Grammar of the Modern Arabic Language" (*nahw lugha 'arabiyya gadida*).

[8] Wahba, Kassem M. [et. al.] (2006). Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers. Foreword, p.ix.

> "From the 1920's onward, Egyptian cinema dominated the Arab market and eventually became the second most important source of national income. No other Arab radio station could compete with Sawt Al-Arab." (Guaqybess, 2001: 61)

And even "Those living in the Kingdom during the 1960s can testify that one did not need a survey to document the popularity of Egyptian radio." (Boyd, 1993: 45)

In response to this dominance, the emerging oil-rich Gulf States were eager to play a role, starting with Saudi Arabia: "the Kingdom became aware that it had to be proactive in media affairs if it was to foster its emerging regional and world-wide leadership role" (Boyd, 2001: 43)

Egypt was later responsible for the production of the most important programming in the Arab World, namely television shows for cable and satellite broadcasting (Amin and Boyd, 1993). And with the introduction of satellite broadcasting to the Arab world, "Egypt played a pioneering role by introducing Egyptian Space Channel (ESC) in December 1990, a channel originally created for its troops posted in Hafr al-Batin, Saudi Arabia (El-Shal 1994 : 68ff)" (Guabqybess, 2001: 65). Egypt was also the first Arab country to launch its own satellite system, NILESAT in 1998, after the launch of the first satellite of the Arab Satellite Communications Organisation (ARABSAT) in 1986 (Ayish 2001: 117).

Again, the Kingdom soon followed in the 1990s with several Saudi-owned satellite packages broadcast from abroad (mainly in London), including Arab Radio and Television (ART) and Middle East Broadcasting Channel (MBC). It also set up the most widely read pan-Arab newspapers, again based outside of the Kingdom, such as Al-Hayat based in London. And with the Kingdom's growing wealth and coinciding power, Saudi Arabia became the "biggest customer of Egyptian television productions" (Amin, 2001). In fact, "most ART post-production is done in Cairo because of this city's vast store of film and television talent and available production facilities" (Boyd, 2001: 53-54). Additionally, by the 1990s "for ERTU, [Egyptian Radio and Television Union] the Gulf market [was] by far the most important regarding the sale of television series (76% of its revenues for 1991)" (Guaqybess, 2001).

As a result of this, Egypt's media production was set to grow even further in the mid to late 1990s with the construction of a new "media city":

> "Media-City aims to be the largest film production site after Universal Studios. See Omar 1995b; Ayad 1996 ... Its studios are expected to produce 6,000 hours of television programmes annually to face regional competition and to fill the time slots of Arab satellite networks" (Guaqybess, 2001: 68)

More recently, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has started to play a larger role in the media and communications industry. Due to the vast wealth of the region, it has been able to invest heavily in broadcast communications technologies as well as digital communication technologies (Ayish 2001: 118-120).

And by the end of the 1990s, there were dozens of Arabic satellite channels (Ayish 2001: 124) and the numbers were only set to increase into the new millennium.

The popularity and growth of satellite television has grown remarkably in the region since the mid-1990s up until the present time. With the further development of transnational channels such as Al-Jazeera, the Arab world is witnessing a revolution

in terms of exposure not only to the power of uncensored news media and freedom of expression, but also in terms of language. Most channels retain Standard Arabic for formal and 'official' programming such as news broadcasts, but the different varieties of Arabic can be heard and Arabs are now more exposed than ever before to the regional varieties of their language. Egyptian media, as we have seen, has dominated the Arab media scene since the early 20th century. However, with the recent emergence of Gulf-owned television and satellite channels, Egypt's role as the Arab media pioneer seems to be under threat. In light of this regional competition, it has been shown in this section that despite the rising rate of non-Egyptian ownership of channels, programmes and production are still predominantly Egyptian and therefore the Arab world is continuing to be exposed to the Egyptian dialect, through the country's films (both new and classic), songs and television dramas. New regional competition has emerged in Lebanon in the form of Lebanese singers and popular songs; in Syria, since its dubbing of Turkish soap operas into Syrian Arabic; and in Kuwait, which has produced some recent soap operas.

The criticism directed at the state of the Egyptian media industry has been primarily focused on the fact that Egyptian media is mostly state-owned and control, and that greater freedom must be awarded to the industry in order for it to thrive as it did in the past. Given the recent events in Egypt and its liberation from the oppressive regime, it is expected that its media industry will thrive more than ever. In the few days after the regime collapsed, it was noted in Egypt and abroad that the state media had already started to exercise its new found freedom, and several top editors were reported on the news to have been ousted by their (repressed) subordinates.

3.2 Arabic in the New Written Media

In addition to traditional and official or state-run media, the rise of the internet and the popularity of social networking sites in particular, present new forms of media that should be considered, as well as a new medium for Arabic language use that has not yet been considered in traditional discussions surrounding the use of the Arabic language, particularly its written form. Given the important role that the internet, and specifically social networking, has played in mobilising thousands to take to the streets in protests that became revolutions in both Tunisia and Egypt, and the spread of these movements to other countries of the region, the impact of the internet, the frequency of its use and the number of users cannot be underestimated.

Linguistically, the political sphere has traditionally been occupied by Standard Arabic, even when spoken, which is evident from the speeches of politicians and news media reports that have been delivered in the standard, written language. However, if we look at the new politics in the new media, we see a different and interesting picture. Young people across the Arab world are becoming politically active online, rather than on television or through newspaper columns: the Egyptian Revolution was started by a group of young people online through the social networking site Facebook, protesters in Tahrir Square used Twitter to update the world on events happening in real time, and readers of Al Jazeera frequently post their comments online on the network's website. In fact, a recent report published by the communications firm Spot On Public Relations claims that:

> "... there are more subscribers to social media service Facebook in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) than there are copies of newspapers circulated in the region. The report, 'Middle East and Africa Facebook Demographics', shows Facebook has over 15

> million users in the region, while the total regional Arabic, English and French newspaper circulation stands at just under 14 million copies." (Spot on Public Relations, 2010: 1)

This shows a clear shift in readership trends in the MENA region, and although newspapers and online social media are two very different platforms, it is clear that the force that is online social media has swept through the Arabic-speaking Middle East and will certainly continue to play a role in shaping the way news and public opinion are disseminated and shared.

And when reading such powerful social networking websites as Facebook and Twitter, it is evident that it is not just the type of political activity that is different, but also the language. Users of these websites are evidently more inclined to use colloquial Arabic than Standard, in cases where they actually use Arabic as the primary language for communication. A case in point is the 6 April Youth Movement Facebook page that first called for protests across Egypt, which is written entirely in colloquial Arabic. After Mubarak's departure, when a coalition of youth groups met the Egyptian Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to convey their demands, the group posted their notes summarising the main points discussed during the meeting on their website almost entirely in colloquial Arabic[9]. At first it seemed surprising that a meeting at this level, of this magnitude, was reported in colloquial Arabic, but after further consideration it does seem fitting with the rest of the website and wider cause, and arguably, the expectations of their readership. Had the group reported in a newspaper article, the language used would have undoubtedly been Standard Arabic, but given the freedom and speed of use of Facebook, as well its large audience of young people, it makes perfect sense that the group have communicated entirely in colloquial Arabic. Their use of colloquial implies a more open, transparent form of communication that puts them on the same level as their followers and makes their entire cause more accessible. Had they written in Standard Arabic, no doubt the impression would have been of a knowledgeable, 'superior' group of individuals imparting their thoughts and wisdom to the slightly 'lesser' reader. A question to ask is: was the use of colloquial language a conscious decision or not? Either way, it has proven to be an effective way to communicate their message and more importantly, to affect their readers and mobilise them to take action in the real world in a manner that was not possible before. It is therefore evident that the use of colloquial is much more powerful than use of the Standard, and a way of drawing a diving line between a new generation, and new way of thinking and acting, from the politically ineffective 'empty rhetoric' of the older generation.

[9] Some element of MSA can be seen most notably in the title and legal disclaimer. Full text of the meeting notes available at the webpage at: http://www.facebook.com/notes/%D9%83%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF-%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF/%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A9/203172733029888. Last accessed 13.05.2011.

It is interesting at this point to draw a comparison between use of the colloquial in this newly carved political sphere, and in an older, equally historic political sphere – that of Gamal Abdul Nasser, and his use of colloquial in his speeches to communicate and draw popular support from Egypt and across the Arab world. Whereas Nasser used colloquial language in his speeches, the internet generation have used the colloquial in writing, and this is the innovation.

The use of written colloquial Arabic on the internet has gained such ground that in 2008, after the immense popularity of an online blog, the content of the blog was published in print, as a book, entirely in Egyptian colloquial Arabic. The book ʻĀyzah atjawwiz ("I want to get married") has been hugely successful and is a bestseller that has been through seven reprints since its publication[10].

In fact, although recent studies of online activity and language use in the Arab world have focused on the use of 'Latinised' or Roman script Arabic as opposed to Arabic letters, as well as the mixing of other languages such as English and French, with Arabic, they have found that Arabic language users prefer to use the spoken form of Arabic to the traditional written form – MSA. One of those studies (Aboelezz, 2008: 4) states that:

> "[diglossia] presents a complexity when dealing with LA [Latinised Arabic], as the Latinised form of Arabic is often the spoken form, which essentially reflects the regional variety that the user/speaker is accustomed to (Bianchi, 2006)."

This supports the idea that the form of choice for Arabic language internet users is the spoken form of Arabic, as opposed to the more formal Standard Arabic. This shows that although people are writing on the internet, they are not using the traditionally accepted form of writing that is Standard Arabic; instead they are bringing the traditionally spoken form of the language into the written realm. We have also seen the ensuing print publication from online writing, which shows that this new form of written Arabic is spilling out of the virtual realm and into the 'real' world of print. This phenomenon cannot be overstated as it has a potentially huge impact on the current status of MSA as the language for all formal writing. In fact, this status is so ingrained in the Arab world and the minds of native Arabic speakers that even the ground-breaking senior lecturer, Munthur Younes, who developed an integrated Arabic language teaching programme, which includes teaching both MSA and a spoken dialect at Cornell University in the US, states that:

> "I believe that the main difference between Arabic and other languages resides in the unique status that the written version of the former enjoys for historical and religious reasons. It has not allowed, nor is it likely to allow at any time in the foreseeable future, the development of a writing system for any of the spoken dialects that closely reflects its structure. Any attempt at writing or codifying specific dialects is seen as a serious invasion of the territory of fuṣ ḥ ā, which is held in the utmost esteem by the overwhelming majority of Arabs." (Younes, 2006: 165).

The younger generation of internet users seem to have bypassed this convention and organically developed a writing system for the spoken dialect. And although they would likely claim the same esteem and regard for MSA, they have not (whether

[10] The latest edition has '7th reprint' printed on the front cover: ʻAbd al-ʻAl, Ghadah. 2008. *ʻAyza atjawwiz*. Cairo, Dar al-Shuruq.

consciously or otherwise) used it in writing online. Although the overwhelming majority of printed texts continue to be in MSA, we have seen that the popularity of online media is overtaking that of print media, and now that there have been publications originating online being printed as physical books, the language of the online media is being adopted in print. If this trend continues, we will see an increase in the number of print publications that are not MSA, since it does not appear that a formal process of 'translating' online content into MSA for print is taking place. In that case, MSA may cease to be the only form of written Arabic in the future. Given the popularity of the internet in general, and the preference of young activists to discuss their views online rather than in print, any potential learner of Arabic would be at a disadvantage if they did not understand spoken Arabic and its written form online. This alone supports the case for teaching spoken Arabic alongside MSA, since as this study highlights below, one of the main aims of UK/US higher education learners for learning Arabic is to understand Arabic media. If traditionally this meant reading Arabic newspapers and listening to Arabic news on official news broadcasts, it will no doubt include reading online blogs and unofficial news posted by the young political activists who have had a hand in toppling decades-old Arab regimes.

In fact, the use of 'colloquial' or spoken Arabic in writing has been around since the early 20th century when several prominent writers argued for the adoption of 'colloquial' Arabic in writing. Most notably poets such Bayram el-Tunsi, Salah Jaheen and Ahmed Fouad Negm have used colloquial Egyptian Arabic in their poems. And some novelists also supported the use of colloquial Arabic in their novels, such as the Egyptian novelist Tawfiq el-Hakim and the Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih (Dickins, 2008: 84; and Khawalidah, 2010).

Although the trend of using colloquial Arabic in writing did not die out and more modern writers have adopted this approach (Khawalidah, 2010), the power of the internet means that decisions and choices about language use are not limited to prominent literary writers; instead any literate person can choose to write what they like in the form they so choose and publish what they have written online, and in some cases as we have seen, have their writing published in print as well. In this sense the landscape of literary Arabic is undergoing a democratic change in that it is no longer controlled by an elite group of literary writers, but it is being shaped by the numerous individuals who choose to write online.

Again this points to the growing presence of spoken Arabic in the written realm and the importance of teaching learners the spoken form of Arabic as well as MSA if they are to achieve true communicative competence. The case for Egyptian Arabic is supported further when the trends of online users in various Arabic-speaking countries are compared: Egyptian bloggers are more likely to use Arabic as their language of choice, compared with bloggers from the Gulf and Levant who prefer to use English, and those from the Maghreb region (North Africa), who prefer to use French (Etling, 2009: 3-4). This shows that the dominance of Egyptian Arabic in traditional media is extending to new media, since Egyptian Arabic is used online far more than other dialects of Arabic. In my view, the use of Egyptian Arabic by young Egyptians online reflects the confidence Egyptians have been reported to have displayed in their dialect and their comfort in using it with non-Egyptian Arabic speakers in inter-dialectal communication[11]. In the case of Gulf and Levant users, their inclination to use English may be a reflection of their educational backgrounds and/or their level of comfort with their own dialects, especially in using the dialect to communicate and discuss

[11] See discussion of Abu-Melhim's (1992) study in section 4 of this paper.

serious political issues. In the case of the Maghreb users, it is well known that the educated users of that region use French freely and competently to communicate even on a daily basis. In fact, the Facebook page of the young blogger and activist, Slim Amamou, who picked up and posted online the first footage of the Tunisian protests, is all in French, rather than Arabic[12]. This can be contrasted with the Arabic language Facebook page of the Egyptian 6 April Youth Movement.

This is a phenomenon that undoubtedly will need further attention and research, and can be considered to be the next pertinent area of study in Arabic linguistics and sociolinguistics, which will in turn impact on teaching Arabic for communicative purposes. At this stage, we can conclude that Egyptian Arabic is and has been prominent in Arabic language media since the turn of the twentieth century. Despite the recent emergence of some regional competition from Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Syria, Egypt does dominate the market in terms of number and quality of its productions. This makes Egyptian Arabic a suitable option for learners of Arabic, as it will allow them to communicate with a large number of Arabic speakers from several Arabic countries, an advantage that other Arabic dialects may not achieve. In the following section, the use of a spoken dialect (Egyptian Arabic in particular) to communicate in the Arab world will be compared to the use of Standard Arabic, in light of the claim that Standard Arabic (MSA) is the language that Arabs use for cross-dialectal communication.

4. Learners of Arabic as a Foreign Language: Aims, Attitudes and Perceptions

A focus group with five learners was held to discuss the learners' views of learning Arabic as a foreign language, and to explore their attitude towards and perceptions of Arabic as a diglossic or multiglossic language, based on their learning experience. The focus group lasted two hours and the learners had all spent at least a year studying Arabic at degree level. Three of the five learners had spent four or more years studying Arabic and four of the learners had learned at least one dialect alongside MSA. All the learners speak another language other than English and Arabic (all the students were native English speakers).

A survey of background questions was sent to the learners before the focus group. The survey questions were based on those of Belnap (2006), who surveyed a group of university level learners of Arabic between 2003 and 2004 in the US. Belnap was chosen as a model since his survey is the first major national survey in the last two decades (Belnap 2006: 170), and although it was conducted in the US and not the UK, it sampled a large, representative group of university-level learners of Arabic. There were 621 respondents to the Belnap survey from 37 institutions, and a survey of this scale is not known to have been conducted in the UK. Additionally, the US and UK higher education curricula and approaches to TAFL are fairly similar – for example, one of the most widely used textbooks in degree-level programmes in both the UK and US is *Al-Kitab fi Ta'alum Al-Arabiyya* (al-Batal, Brustad and al-Tonsi, 2004). And as the following results of the focus group survey show, Arabic learner aims in both the UK and the US are similar.

There was a smaller study conducted by Byram (1992) in the UK. However, whereas the Belnap study was conducted fairly recently (his data was gathered between 2003 and 2004) and is therefore comparable to this study, Byram's study was

[12] The Facebook page of Slim Amamou, the Tunisian blogger and activist who posted footage of the first protests in Tunisia. Last accessed 7 October 2011. Available from: http://www.facebook.com/pages/Slim-Amamou-Notre-Pr%C3%A9sident/158748490855525.

conducted in 1992 against a backdrop of a decline in the number of students applying to study Arabic at university level. The main aim of Byram's study was to gather information to explain this decline in interest and help Arabic departments to attract new students. Belnap's study was conducted against a very different backdrop, when "the number of Arabic language learners worldwide has grown at a remarkable pace" and where in North America alone, the numbers had quadrupled in the five years prior to Belnap's study (Wahba et al., 2006: xv) The aim of Belnap's study therefore was to learn more about the increasing number of learners of Arabic, their goals and preferred learning styles (Belnap, 2006: 170). A number of similarities can be found however, between Byram's (1992) study and this study, which are outlined below.

The aim of the focus group survey in this study was primarily to provide background information before the focus group is held to enable a discussion to take place without the need for time being spent detailing the learners' backgrounds during the focus group. The second reason was to see whether the participants of the small, intimate focus group, would be representative of the wider learner experience. The findings of the survey of the focus group participants and the larger survey by Belnap of 621 learners revealed several important similarities, which are discussed below.

4.1 Methodology

Five learners volunteered to take part in a 1-2 hour focus group to discuss their aims for and experiences of learning Arabic as a foreign language. The participants were all studying Arabic either at degree or postgraduate level at the time. The focus group method was chosen over other qualitative research methods such as interviews and large-scale questionnaires as it combines the best of both methods: it offers the opportunity for in-depth discussion that an interview would, in a shorter time scale as all the participants would take part in the discussion at the same time, as well as allowing for a larger number of participants to take part than a one-on-one interview would allow; a questionnaire would have included responses from a larger group of participants, but it would not have afforded the depth of responses that a face to face, small group discussion does.

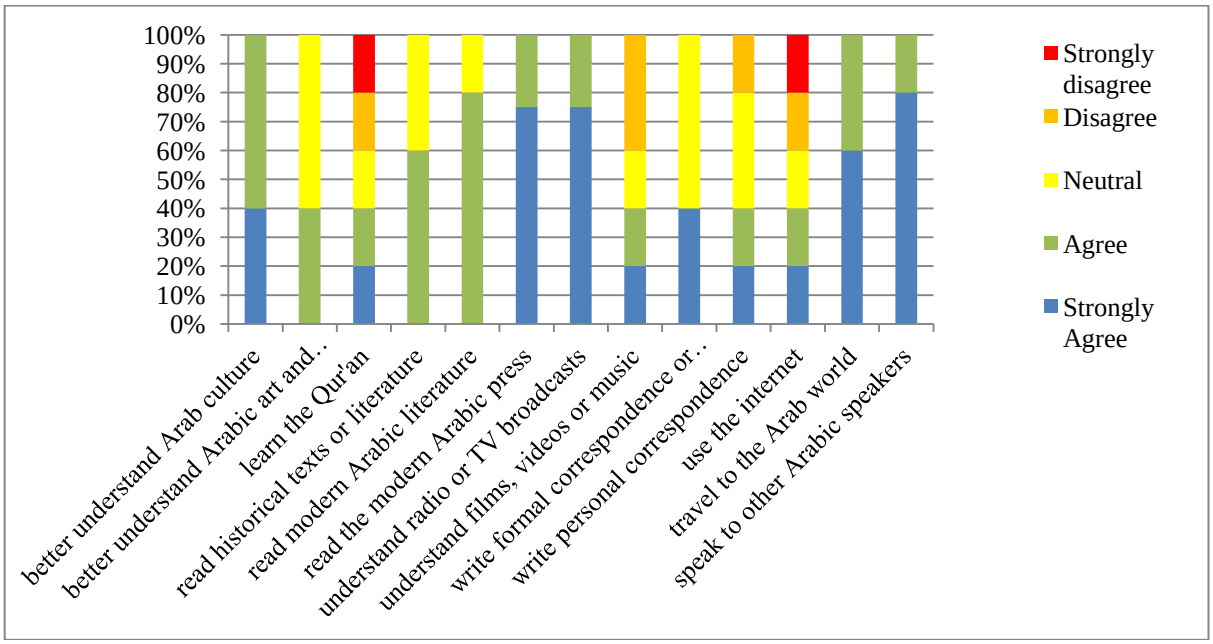
To ensure that the participants chosen for the study were representative of the general Arabic learner, a survey was sent to the participants before the focus group discussion to gather background information about the participants, as well as to uncover their aims for learning Arabic. The survey questions were largely based on the survey questions of Belnap (2006), who conducted a survey across 37 US institutions and had 621 respondents.

The survey was administered online towards the end of the academic year and the format for most of the survey was multiple choice questions with an opportunity to add further information in a comments box. The multiple choice format was chosen in order to allow for a set of quantitative data to be easily collected and compared with those of Belnap. The survey included questions about the main reasons learners have for learning Arabic, their perceptions about whether or not Arabic is a difficult language to learn, their attitudes towards learning MSA and spoken dialects, as well as their familiarity with the major regional dialects: Maghrebi (i.e. North African: Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, Libyan), Egyptian, Sudanese, Levantine (Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian, Palestinian), Iraqi, Saudi and Gulf Arabic. Most of the data gathered and analysed consist of the participants' responses on a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree) to statements such as "I can learn Arabic well".

4.2 Findings

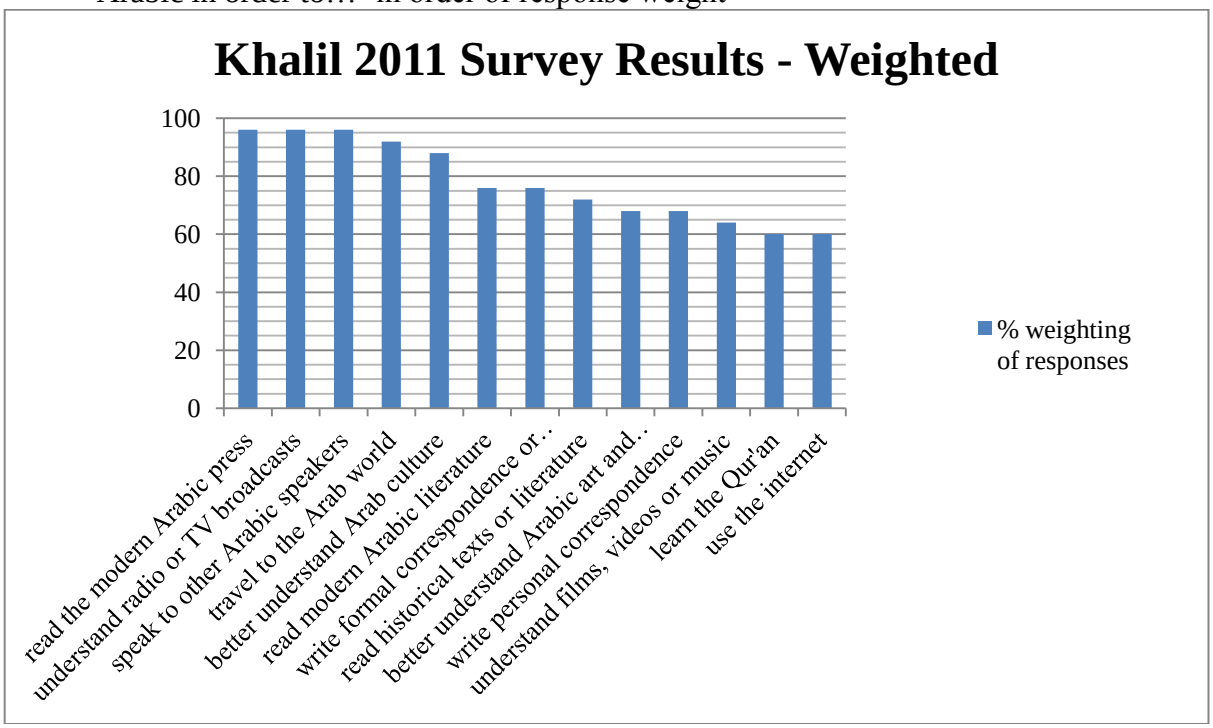
Figure 1 below illustrates the responses of the learners to 13 statements that begin with 'I want to learn Arabic in order to...' The learners were asked to mark Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree or Strongly Disagree against each of the statements. The highest number of students Strongly Agree that they want to learn Arabic in order to speak to other Arabic speakers – followed by they want to read the modern Arabic press, and understand TV and radio broadcasts. Given the diglossic view that MSA is the primary form of the written language and that 'colloquial' is the primary form for everyday speech, it is interesting that learners of Arabic aim to learn to both speak and read, since it follows that they must master both the spoken and written forms of the Arabic language, i.e. 'colloquial' and MSA, in order to fulfil their language learning aims.

Figure 1. Focus group survey responses to the statement 'I want to learn Arabic in order to…'



In Figure 2 below, the same responses were weighted by scoring each response 5 for Strongly Agree through to 1 for Strongly Disagree. The scores are used to represent the highest weighting responses and again show that the highest responses indicate learner priorities are to speak, understand and read Arabic. The five highest weighted responses correspond with the five highest responses of the Belnap survey below.

Figure 2. Focus group survey responses to the statement 'I want to learn Arabic in order to…' in order of response weight



Khalil, 2011: Top five reasons for learning Arabic (out of 13 given options):

1. Speak to other Arabic speakers (96%)
2. Read modern Arabic press (96%)
3. Understand TV/radio broadcasts (96%)
4. Travel to the Arab world (92%)
5. Understand Arab culture (88%)

Belnap, 2004: Top five reasons for learning Arabic (out of 12 given options[13]):

1. Interact with people who speak it (87.4% agreed)
2. Travel to the Arab world (78.6% agreed)
3. Read modern Arabic press (67.5 % agreed)
4. Understand Arab culture (67% agreed)
5. Understand TV/radio broadcasts (66% agreed)

These top reasons are further confirmed by Husseinali (2006) who surveyed a group of 120 learners of Arabic as a foreign language. Out of 16 given options, the top five reasons given for learning Arabic were:

1. Travel to Arab countries
2. Converse with people
3. World culture (learn other cultures)
4. Understand Middle East politics
5. Getting a good job

[13] The 13 statement options indicated in Figure 1 include all of Belnap's options – 'use the internet' is the 13th option added in this survey that was not in Belnap's. Use of the internet was included here as it is felt to be a usage of language that was not covered by Belnap's options.

Interestingly in Husseinali's survey, the learners seem keen to travel and converse with people as the learners in the Khalil and Belnap surveys are. It is evident that speaking Arabic with native speakers is a priority for learners of Arabic, and it should certainly be given at least the same level of attention in TAFL curricula as reading and writing, bearing in mind that learning to speak MSA alone does not fit the learners' intended purposes – this is discussed further below.

There are also similarities between this study and that of Byram (1992): Byram found that even as early as 1992, the trend had started for learners with no previous Arabic language training, nor a connection with the Arab world, to decide to study Arabic at university. Some of these learners had studied other European languages and were looking for a new challenge (Byram, 1992: 23). Of the participants in this study, 100% described themselves non-Arab and 80% as non-Muslim, and all of the participants had at least one other language other than English and Arabic. This seems to correspond with Byram's findings and shows that the trend in interest in learning Arabic has continued to grow among those without a particular connection to the Arab world. Byram contrasts this with the previous twenty years, when "it would be students whose parents were in the Foreign Office ... [or students] with parents who served in the Middle East as businessmen or people who have travelled quite a lot for one reason or another. They would be people who do Arabic." (Byram 1992: 23). Byram notes the trend at that time for universities that had previously only taught Classical Arabic, to include Modern Arabic in their curricula as well, due to an increased interest from learners in current affairs and their desire "to be able to function in [modern] Arabic, to speak it, to read it and write it with the reasonable degree of fluency [...] whether colloquial or standard [...]" Byram (1992: 27). Although most universities now focus on teaching MSA rather than Classical Arabic, the debate has moved on to whether colloquial Arabic should be taken on alongside MSA, as this paper argues.

4.3 Attitudes & perceptions

The survey included a section about learner attitudes and perceptions towards learning Arabic. Learners were asked to mark 'Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree or Strongly Disagree' against the following statements:

- I believe I can learn Arabic well
- My teacher believes I can learn Arabic well
- Language instruction should focus on the general language of everyday situations
- It is important to me to acquire proficiency (now or later) in speaking colloquial Arabic
- It is important to me to acquire proficiency (now or later) in speaking Egyptian colloquial Arabic
- My teacher thinks it is important that I learn colloquial Arabic
- I like language classes that use lots of authentic materials (print, audio, or video originally intended for an Arab audience)

There was a strong correlation between responses to the two statements 'I believe I can learn Arabic well' and 'My teacher believes I can learn Arabic well'. 92% of learners surveyed agree they can learn Arabic well and 84% believe that their teachers believe they can learn Arabic well. However, only 40% of learners agreed that their teacher thinks it is important that they learn colloquial (Spoken) Arabic. Despite this

figure, 80% agreed it is important to learn colloquial (Spoken) Arabic and 60% agreed that language instruction should focus on the language of everyday situations.

40% of learners agreed with the statement 'It is important to me to acquire proficiency (now or later) in speaking Egyptian colloquial Arabic'. This finding corresponds with Palmer's (2007) findings that the majority of learners want to learn either Egyptian or Levantine Arabic. Palmer further confirms that:

> "These are not only the two most commonly spoken and widely understood varieties of Spoken Arabic, but there are abundant materials available in each that would make it relatively painless for even a native Moroccan or Iraqi speaker to teach a class in Levantine or Egyptian; though the opposite is not viable." (Palmer, 2007: 115)

The purpose of this study is to explore the suitability of Egyptian Arabic as an option for communicative language teaching and Palmer's study suggests that it would be a suitable option, and that learners already express the desire to learn this variety of Arabic, which has been supported by the survey results above. The case for Egyptian Arabic is discussed further in the focus group findings below.

4.4 Focus group findings

A focus group with five learners of Arabic was held to discuss in further detail the results of the survey above and explore the learners' aims for learning Arabic as well as their experience so far of learning Arabic. The findings, conclusions and a set of recommendations from the focus group are included below.

The focus group lasted two hours and took the form of an open discussion in which the learners were encouraged to describe their experience of learning Arabic, including their views on learning MSA and spoken Arabic dialects, their aims and expectations, and what they feel they have or have not achieved so far. Most of the learners had spent time in one or more Arabic speaking country as part of their degree. One learner was yet to go abroad but had already decided where she would be going and what she would be studying. For the purposes of clarity while maintaining confidentiality, the five learners will be referred to as follows: U1, U2, PG1, PG2 and PG3.

U1 is a final year undergraduate student who spent his year abroad in Morocco. He did not choose to learn Moroccan or any other dialect but instead focussed on improving his MSA skills during his time abroad. U2 is at the end of her first year of undergraduate study and has chosen to go to Egypt for her year abroad in order to learn the Egyptian dialect as she believes learning Egyptian will allow her to communicate with Arabic speakers from other countries as well. PG1 is a postgraduate student who spent time in both Egypt and Syria for her year abroad. She chose to learn both the Egyptian and Syrian dialects while abroad and feels confident communicating in spoken Arabic. PG2 is a postgraduate student who studied in Syria for her year abroad but did not choose to learn the dialect of that country. She reported being unable to communicate in MSA with members of her host family and managed limited communication with other locals. PG3 is a postgraduate student and studied in Morocco for her year abroad. She did not learn the dialect and spent some of her time with members of her husband's family as well as a host family. She reported being able to communicate in MSA with her husband's family, but not with her host family.

The learners had studied at different institutions so the results do not necessarily reflect the learning experience at one particular institution. Instead, it highlights the

similarities between institutions, such as degree-level study focusing only on MSA, incorporating a year abroad spent in a choice between Morocco, Egypt and Syria. Learners are able to choose which country they spend time in and can even chose more than one country if they wish, as one learner in this study chose to do. During their year abroad, learners can choose whether or not to learn the dialect of the country, although they have no formal examination in dialectal competence. As a result, only one learner (PG1) reported learning the dialects of the countries she visited, and a second (U2) said she does plan to learn a dialect when she goes abroad. The other learners, although stating in the survey that they did think it is important to learn spoken Arabic, did not choose to do so during their year abroad. They stated similar reasons for their choice, namely that the focus of their respective institutions on MSA competence made them feel that they ought to focus on achieving proficiency in MSA and worry about learning a spoken dialect later, after they had completed their degrees/postgraduate study, which does not fit with the learners' primary aim for learning Arabic, which is to speak with other Arabic speakers.

4.5 Findings: MSA

Overall, the learners felt that that they had achieved their aim of reading the modern Arabic press as they feel confident reading MSA. However, three of the five learners (U1, U2 and PG2) felt that they had not achieved their aim of speaking with other Arabic speakers. Interestingly, two of those learners (U1 and PG2) chose not to learn a spoken dialect and the third (U2) had not yet learned a dialect. One of the learners (PG3) had not chosen to learn a dialect but feels confident she is able to communicate using MSA only. However, it should be noted that she reported only communicating with friends and family using MSA but that when trying to communicate with her host family she was not able to do so effectively.

Three learners (U1, PG1 and PG3) said they felt unable to communicate effectively with locals using Standard Arabic during their year abroad and one (PG2) said she did not make a conscious effort to speak with the locals, as she did not want to be recognised as a foreigner through her use of MSA. She did not choose to learn the dialect either, since she felt that her institution did not actively encourage it. All examinations test MSA competence and although she would not have been marked down for using dialectal elements in speaking, she felt that the time and effort spent in learning a dialect would detract from time and effort that would otherwise be spent improving her MSA skills. Given that she would be marked on MSA and not the dialect in her assessments, she did not attach any importance to learning the dialect while abroad, despite stating clearly that she had wanted to learn to speak to people from the outset. It seems in this particular learner's case that the perceived lack of importance that the institution attached to learning a dialect directly influenced her course of study despite it going against her aims for learning Arabic and having the opportunity to do so.

4.6 Findings: Egyptian Arabic

Another interesting finding is that the two learners (U2 and PG1) who have chosen to learn a dialect are the two learners who chose Egypt for their year abroad. Although one of them (U2) is yet to go on her year abroad, it is interesting that she chose Egypt because of the accessibility of its language – she believes by learning Egyptian Arabic she will be able to communicate with other Arabic speakers, more so than using any other dialect or MSA. The other learner (PG1) spent the first part of her year abroad in

Egypt and made a conscious effort to learn the dialect. She reported being able to communicate with ease with Egyptian locals as well as with Syrians when she arrived in Syria for the second part of her year abroad. She eventually picked up the Syrian dialect but it is interesting that she was able to communicate initially using Egyptian Arabic in Syria, rather than MSA. Her experience strongly supports the argument for learning to speak a dialect and Egyptian as a dialect that can be understood in other parts of the Arab world. The experience of PG1 is in marked contrast with that of PG2, who also spent time in Syria, but was unable to communicate in MSA and did not learn the dialect or make any further effort to communicate with the locals.

These findings support the findings of Abu-Melhim (1992), who studied the inter-dialectal communication of a group of native Arabic speakers. Abu-Melhim found that rather than using MSA to communicate, native Arabic speakers tend to use Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA) mixed with elements of their own dialect. MSA was used as a strategy when mutual intelligibility between dialects was difficult, such as between Saudi and Moroccan Arabic. This switching between varieties of Arabic happened in varying degrees between the different participants in Abu-Melhim's study. In fact, Abu-Melhim found that the Egyptian participants:

> "...appeared to have switched less because the other interlocutors could understand them, illustrating the widespread familiarity with Cairene Arabic in the Arab world due to its central place in Arabic communications, entertainment and education." (Abu-Melhim, 1992: 124)

Abu-Melhim further states that:

> "All informants [...] explicitly confirmed the comprehensibility and familiarity of Cairene Arabic to them. When the informants were asked, 'Among Arabic varieties, which one do you think is the most familiar to speakers of other varieties of Arabic, and why?' the informants unanimously identified Egyptian (Cairene) Arabic as the most widely known variety." (p. 125-126)

These reports point overwhelmingly to the fact that MSA is not the language used in everyday communication between native speakers, and is only used in part for cross-dialectal communication. When learners try to use MSA to communicate, they feel at a disadvantage as they are unable to communicate effectively with locals using that variety, since the locals themselves do not use it to communicate. It is therefore imperative that learners are encouraged by their teachers and institutions to learn a spoken dialect in order for them to achieve their aim of speaking and interacting with native speakers of Arabic.

When faced with the question of which dialect to learn, the experience of these learners shows that Egyptian Arabic is a more effective communication tool with locals in the Arab world than MSA. Other studies have shown that Egyptian Arabic is the most widely recognised dialect in cross-dialectal communication. It is therefore important to learn an accessible dialect such as Egyptian Arabic, if the aim of the learner is to communicate with as wide a range of people as possible. If a learner wishes to learn a particular dialect for their own reasons then this should also be encouraged, but they should be aware of how accessible the variety they have chosen is as most learners may not be aware of the differences between the Arabic dialects when they first start to learn Arabic.

This study does not claim that Egyptian Arabic is or should be a spoken or written lingua franca among native Arabic speakers, only that it can be a more effective oral communication tool for foreign learners than MSA as previously believed. However, others have claimed that it is or should be the lingua franca of the Arab world. For example, Haeri argues that it could become a written lingua franca to replace MSA in the Arab world:

> "That there would be no basis to choose one vernacular over another [for writing] is debatable. For several well-known reasons, Egyptian Arabic has become a lingua franca in the Arab world in oral interactions. Egypt has been exporting labor, movies and television programmes to the rest of the Arab world for decades. It has also been a cultural centre for centuries and hence visited by large numbers of other Arabs. As a result, Egyptian Arabic has become the most widely understood of all Arabic vernaculars." (Haeri, 2003: 139-140)

Although as Abu-Melhim's study suggests, Egyptian Arabic is not always used as a spoken lingua franca in cross-dialectal communication, Haeri's argument highlights the indisputable position of Egyptian Arabic as the most widely-recognised dialect of Arabic, further supporting the argument of this paper and the case for it being used by learners of Arabic as a more effective tool than MSA for oral communication in the Arab world.

4.7 Variations between 'Study Abroad' Countries

All the learners that took part in the focus group either have already spent a year abroad learning Arabic in an Arabic speaking-country, or are planning to do so. Most UK universities offer this as an integral part of their Arabic degree course. The most common options for study abroad countries are Egypt, Morocco and Syria. During the focus group the learners were asked about their country of choice as well as their course of study during their year abroad. The learners reported that their respective institutions taught MSA only for the first two years of their degree then they went abroad for a year and returned for their final year in the UK. The learners had no dialect training before they went abroad and felt they were expected to 'pick it up' while abroad. They felt they were also expected to continue their MSA study while abroad, while learning the dialect of their host country was an optional course of study in addition to the requirement of studying MSA. On their return to the UK, the learners reported all examinations testing their skill in MSA, although in oral presentations they would not be marked down for using colloquial or dialectal elements during the presentation.

Overall the learners reported feeling a lack of importance attached by their institution to learning a dialect while abroad. They also reported their surprise at their inability to communicate with locals on arrival at their host country. Only the learner who had been to Egypt (PG1) said she took a phrasebook with her and used it when she first arrived for example to get a taxi from the airport to her hotel. The others reported using English to communicate rather than MSA, although some learners were able to get by using some MSA phrases in some parts of Morocco. In Syria although it was possible to occasionally communicate in MSA, the learner who did so (PG2) felt she was recognised as a foreigner and felt like an 'outsider' by speaking MSA and was therefore discouraged from using it.

The two learners that chose Egypt for their year abroad (U2 and PG1) were the only two learners who expressed a desire and interest in learning the dialect of their host country during their year abroad. U2 said she specifically chose Egypt in order to learn the dialect of that country and be able to later communicate with people from across the Arab world. PG1 said communicating with people and speaking with them was always a priority for her for learning Arabic and so she worked 'doubly hard' to learn the dialect by attending classes full time – MSA classes in the mornings and Egyptian Arabic in the afternoons – whereas as some of the other learners in her class had free afternoons after their morning MSA lessons.

The breakdown of year abroad and course choice among the learners participating in the focus group and their course of study are as follows:

40% Egypt: MSA + Egyptian Arabic
40% Morocco: MSA only
20% Syria: MSA only

It is clear that the majority (60%) of the learners chose not to learn their chosen country's dialect despite all (100%) agreeing they wanted to speak with other Arabic speakers and most (80%) agreeing it was important to learn colloquial (Spoken) Arabic in the earlier survey.

The learners who did not learn a dialect agreed that the lack of importance attached by their institutions to their learning of a dialect did affect their choice of what to study while abroad. They reported feeling that if they were going to be assessed on MSA then they felt they should focus their efforts on mastering that variety, and worry about learning a dialect later on. One learner (U2) even reported choosing Morocco as he felt the institution there offered a better MSA course than those in other countries, so his choice of Morocco as his host country did not have anything to do with wanting to go to that particular country or learning the country's dialect. When asked if he could have simply learned what he learned in Morocco in the UK, he said he probably would have. It seems that the learners who do chose to learn the dialect of their host country have an overall more rewarding experience in terms of interacting with locals and experiencing the cultural experiences of their host countries than learners of MSA only do.

5.Conclusions

The top two reasons for learning Arabic can be described as follows: learners of Arabic want to speak (interact) with people and read modern Arabic press. In order for learners to achieve these two aims, they require proficiency in MSA as well as a spoken dialect. Learners who only learn MSA do not feel they can communicate effectively with native speakers of Arabic after their course of study, although they do achieve proficiency in reading. Learners who do learn spoken Arabic are seen to be spending more time and effort than is required by their course of study and often this is discouraging to learners who may chose not to learn spoken Arabic despite their aim of speaking with other Arabic speakers. However, learners who do learn spoken Arabic as well as MSA do feel they have achieved both aims of reading and speaking. They are also most likely to choose Egypt as their study abroad option as it is seen to have the most accessible language variety and it is seen to be one of the few countries to attach an importance to learning its local variety of Arabic. In fact, recent Arabic language teaching materials incorporating the communicative teaching approach have included sections of colloquial language in their lessons. Materials such as *Al-Kitab*

and *Mastering Arabic* include sections of colloquial Arabic in each chapter, indicating a shift towards teaching more spoken Arabic alongside MSA.

6.Recommendations

A set of recommendations for UK universities that do not already have the following measures in place can be extracted from the above study:

1. Universities should provide some form of dialect training for learners before they go abroad, since learners reported feeling surprised and unprepared for the fact that they were unable to communicate with locals using MSA
2. Universities should actively encourage their learners to learn spoken Arabic while they are abroad and make the most of their time abroad. This can be achieved by adding extra bonus or merit points in their assessments for learning spoken Arabic, rather than focusing solely on MSA in proficiency assessments.
3. Learners reported a lack of opportunities for interacting with locals while abroad – trips or social events were organised with other foreign language learners and only a few learners took the initiative to speak to locals and learn the dialect of the country. Perhaps more opportunities to speak and interact with locals in an informal setting would encourage learners to pick up the dialect.
4. Teaching dialects should focus on the similarities between MSA and the spoken varieties of Arabic, and treat them as one language as they are viewed in the Arab world, rather than treating them as separate languages. Learners who perceive learning a dialect as an additional burden should be encouraged to view it as a complimentary course of study instead.

References

Abdel-Jawad. 1981. *Lexical and Phonological Variation in Spoken Arabic in Amman*. PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

Aboelezz, M. 2009. Latinised Arabic and Connections to Bilingual Ability. *Papers from the Lancaster University Postgraduate Conference in Linguistics and Language Teaching (LAEL PG)* [online]. 3. [Last accessed 20 June 2011]. Available from: http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/pgconference/v03.htm

Abu-Melhim, Abdel-Rahman Husni. 1992. *Communication across Arabic Dialects: Code-Switching and Linguistic Accommodation in Informal Conversational Interactions*. PhD thesis submitted to Texas A&M University.

Al-Husari, Abu Khaldun Sati. 1985. Qadiyat al-Fus-ha wa-al'Amiyyah (an extract from *Fi al-Adab wa-al-Lughah wa-Ilaqat-huma bil-Qawmiyah*). In Brustad, K., Al-Batal, M., Al-Tonsi, A. *Al-Kitaab fii ta'allum al-Arabiyya: A textbook for Arabic*. 2nd ed. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004. pp. 282-283.

Amin, H. 2001. Mass Media in the Arab States between Diversification and Stagnation: an Overview. In Kai Hafez (ed) *Mass media, politics, and society in the Middle East.*. Cresskill. N.J.: Hampton. Pp.22-44.

Amin, H. and D. Boyd. 1993. The Impact of Home Video Cassette Recorders on the Egyptian Film and Television Consumption Patterns. *The European Journal of Communication*, **18,** 2–7.

Ayish, M. I. 2001. The Changing Face of Arab Communications: Media Survival in the Information Age. In Kai Hafez (ed) *Mass media, politics, and society in the Middle East.* Cresskill. N.J.: Hampton. Pp.111-136.

Badawi, El-Said. 2006. Foreword, Arabic for Non-native Speakers in the 21st Century: A Shopping List. In Kassem M, Wahba, Zeinab A. Taha and Liz England (eds) *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers. pp. ix-xiv.

Badawi, El-Said. 1973. *Mustawayât al-'arabiyya al-mu'âsira fi Misr*. Cairo, Dar al-Ma'ârif.

Belnap, R. K. 2006. A profile of Students of Arabic in U.S. Universities. In Kassem M, Wahba, Zeinab A. Taha and Liz England (eds) *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. pp. ix-xiv.

Bianchi, R. 2006. Revolution or Fad? Latinised Arabic Vernacular. In Davidson P., Al Hamly, M., Aydelott, J.,Coombe, C. & Troudi, S. (eds.) *Proceedings of the11th TESOL Arabia Conference: Teaching, Learning, Leading*,10. Dubai: TESOL Arabia. pp. 329-344.

Boyd, D. A. 2001. Saudi Arabia's International Media Strategy: Influence through Multinational Ownership. In Kai Hafez (ed) *Mass media, politics, and society in the Middle East.*., Cresskill. N.J.: Hampton.

Boyd, D. A. 1993. *Broadcasting in the Arab World: A Survey of the Electronic Media in the Middle East.* Ames: Iowa State University Press.

Brustad, K., Al-Batal, M., Al-Tonsi, A. 2004. *Al-Kitaab fii ta'allum al-Arabiyya: a textbook for Arabic*. 2nd ed. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Brustad, K., Al-Batal, M., Al-Tonsi, A. 1995. *Al-Kitaab fii ta'allum al-Arabiyya: a textbook for Arabic. 1st ed*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Byram, M. 1992. The future of Arabic studies in Britain: problems and prospects for student recruitment in higher education. Durham: School of Education, University of Durham.

Canale, M., and Swain, M. 1980. Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing. *Applied Linguistics*. **1**, 1.

Dickins, J. 2003. Thinking Arabic Translation: Supplement. pp. 84-89.

Dickins, J, and Watson, J. 2006. Arabic Teaching in Britain and Ireland. In Kassem M, Wahba, Zeinab A. *Taha* and Liz England (eds) *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. pp. 107-114.

Etling , B. [et al.]. 2009. Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere: Politics, Culture, and Dissent. *Berkman Center Research Publication* [online]. **2009**(6). [Last accessed 7 October 2011]. Available from: http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Mapping_the_Arabic_Blogosphere_0.pdf.

Feldman, R. 2009. What is unique in the brain of an Arabic speaker? *Journal of Psychology Research and Behavior Management* [online]. [Last accessed 14 October 2011]. Available from: http://www.dovepress.com/the-cognitive-basis-of-diglossia-in-arabic-evidence-from-a-repetition--peer-reviewed-article-PRBM.

Ferguson, C. 1959. Diglossia. *Word*. New York. **15**, 325-340.

Guaqybess T. 2001. Restructuring Television in Egypt: The Position of the State Between Regional Supply and Local Demand. In Kai Hafez (ed) *Mass media, politics, and society in the Middle East..*, Cresskill. N.J.: Hampton.

Haeri, N. 2003. *Sacred Language, Ordinary People: Dilemmas of Culture and Politics in Egypt*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York.

Haeri, N. 1996. Conceptualizing Heterogeneity in Arabic, *Égypte/Monde arabe*, Première série, 27-28, [online]. [Last accessed 14 October 2011]. Available from: http://ema.revues.org/index1947.html.

Harvey, David (1979) *Spoken Arabic*.Hodder & Stoughton..

Husseinali Ghassan. Who is Studying Arabic and Why? A Survey of Arabic Students' Orientations at a Major University. *Foreign Language Annals*. **39**(3), 397-414.

Imbabi, F. 1994. *Maraa'i al-Qatl*. [*The Killimg Fields*]. Giza: al-Nahr lil-Nashr wal-Tawzi'.

Mitchell, T. F. 1986. What is educated spoken Arabic?. B. H.Jernudd & M, H. Ibrahim (eds.), Issues in Arabic Sociolinguistics, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. **61**, 7-32.

Mitchell, T. F. 1990. *Pronouncing Arabic I*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Mitchell, T. F. and El-Hassan S. 1994. *Modality, Mood and Aspect in Spoken Arabic (with special attention to Egypt and the Levant).* London; New York: Kegan Paul International.

Palmer, J. 2007. Arabic Diglossia: Teaching Only the Standard Variety is a Disservice to Students. *Arizona Working Papers in SLA & Teaching*. **14**, 111-122.

Richards, J.C. 2006. *Communicative language teaching today*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rickford J. 1987. *Dimensions of a Creole Continuum: History, Texts and Linguistic Analysis of Guyanese Creole*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Ryding, K. 2006. Teaching Arabic in the United States. . In Kassem M, Wahba, Zeinab A. Taha and Liz England (eds) *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. pp. 13-20

Schmidt, R. 1974. *Sociolinguistic Variation in Spoken Arabic in Egypt. A Reexamination of the Concept of Diglossia*. PhD dissertation, Brown University.

Schultz, E. 1981. *Diglossia and Variation in Formal Spoken Arabic in Egypt*. PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Spolsky, B, (Ed.). 1978. Approaches to Language Testing. Arlington, VA: Centre for Applied Linguistics.

Spot On Public Relations. 2010. Facebook Reach Beats Newspapers in Middle East & North Africa (Press release, English) [online]. [Last accessed 14 October 2011. Available from: http://www.spotonpr.com/mena-facebook-demographics/.

Wilmsen, D. 2006. What is Communicative Arabic? In Kassem M, Wahba, Zeinab A. Taha and Liz England (eds). *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century*. (pp. 125-138) Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers

Wahba, Kassem M. 2006. Arabic Language Use and the Educated Language User. In Kassem M, Wahba, Zeinab A. Taha and Liz England (eds) *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers. pp. 139-156.

Wahba, Kassem M., Zeinab A. Taha and Liz England (eds). 2006. *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century.* Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Younes, M. 2006. Integrating the Colloquial with Fuṣḥā in the Arabic-as-a-Foreign-Language Classroom. In Kassem M, Wahba, Zeinab A. Taha and Liz England (eds) *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers. pp. 157-166.

Saussan Khalil
Department of Arabic & Middle Eastern Studies
School of Modern Languages and Cultures
University of Leeds
LS2 9JT

s.khalil@leeds.ac.uk