

# **DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILL IN ARABIC LEARNERS: A PROPOSAL FOR INTEGRATION OF PRODUCT AND PROCESS APPROACHES**

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## **Abstract**

This work examines the issues that concern Arabic language learning as a second language in Nigeria Universities. It looks at ways of encouraging and motivating Arabic learners and explores issue relating to Arabic speaking skill, course design and materials/task development among others. The paper proposes an integrative approach to Arabic speaking pedagogy. It provides a sample Arabic speaking lesson that is designed to illustrate some of the main points discussed while the practical ways of using the principles in the designing of teaching materials for speaking are presented. The work concludes that product and process oriented approaches are complimentary. Suggestions are made on ways in which the teachers can go about the task of helping the Arabic learners in Nigeria universities to develop the speaking skill through the application of a functional-discourse based approach which is an integration of the two approaches.

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**Keywords:** Arabic, Learning, Speaking, Integrative approach, Functional-discourse

## **Introduction**

In recent years, much of the discussion relating to proficiency oriented instruction and testing focused on the development of oral skill. The emphasis on speaking proficiency can be attributed to a variety of factors, many of which are traceable to the widespread popularity of audio-lingual methodologies in the 1960s and the communicative competence movement that began in the 1970s. The interest in oral communicative competence continues till today, as contemporary communicative language teaching approaches are emphasizing the importance of having the learners engage in “task” that encourage meaningful interaction. Recent research in second language acquisition has also considered oral interaction as

important factor in the shaping of the learner's developing language ability. Studies have investigated the role of interaction in second language development, particularly in conversation between native and non-native speakers and among non-native speakers working in pairs or small groups, (Gass 1997). Swan (1995), also highlighted the role of output in language learning and describes a variety of communication activities that can help learners develop accuracy as well as fluency through consciously reflecting on their language production. Fundamentally, language is speech. However, writing is an effort in exemplification of speech. Man knew speech before he knows writing for a long time, whereas, writing emerges in the latter period of man's history.

The infant learns speaking before he begins to learn writing, which he starts when entering the school. All human being are equally speaking their mother tongue with fluency while many do not know the orthography of their languages. Hence , there is no gain saying that speaking skill is one of the most important goals of Arabic language learning.

The emphasis on oral proficiency does not and should not mean that other skill areas ought to be neglected in the language communication. However, as part of the goals of teaching Arabic in Nigerian universities is to function adequate in Arabic speaking skill, it is incumbent upon Arabic teachers to identify effective strategies for teaching this skill in order to attain the required levels of proficiency.

In the age of computer - mediated communication, the line between spoken and written language seem somewhat less distinct especially in the interpersonal mode. Our recent pilot study that used computer – mediated communication in some Nigerian universities,(Lagos, Ibadan, Zaria and Maiduguri) where Arabic is being studied, found that there is a possibility of transferring skill from written production to oral expression in the language. Also in our study with fourth-semester Arabic students at the Lagos State University and Bayero University Kano those who had engaged only in (written) electronic discussion of course material performed significantly better in oral examination than students who had discussion orally in class.

Our discussion of strategies for teaching the speaking skill begins with an exploration of the nature of speaking Arabic, Arabic Speaker, task difficulty and Arabic course design issues. The work concludes on how the Arabic teacher can go about the task of helping the Arabic learners in Nigerian universities to develop the speaking skill through the application of a functional discourse based approach.

### **The Nature of Arabic Speaking as a Second Language**

What is it that one needs to and be able to do in order to speak Arabic? Of course one needs to know how to articulate Arabic sounds in a comprehensible manner, one needs an adequate Arabic vocabulary, and one needs to have a mastery of Arabic syntax. All these are referred to as linguistic competence. However, while this is necessary, it is not sufficient for someone who wants to communicate competently in another language. Communicative competence includes linguistic competency and also a range of other socio- linguistic and conversational skills that enable the speaker to know how to say what ,to whom and when (Hyme 1974). Communicative competence is not restricted to spoken language alone, but involves writing as well. It is also contest specific, which means that a competent communicator in Arabic language knows how to make choices specific to the situation. This is different from performance, which is what one does.

So, when we talk about Arabic Communicative Competence, this includes knowledge of Arabic grammar and vocabulary, the knowledge of Arabic rules of speaking (knowing how to begin and end Arabic conversation, knowing what topic can be talked about in different types of speech arts, knowing which address should be used with different persons one speaks to and in different situations. A person with Arabic communicative competence must also know how to use and respond to different types of speech acts such as request, apologies, thanks and invitation. This indicates that he must know how to use language appropriately. For example, below is a typical conversation in Arabic which illustrates the concept of communication competence. A student of one of the northern universities investigated, Abdur-rahman, pretends to be in Saudi Arabia for the first time. He plans to eat in a restaurant, visit the university in Madinah, go to the post office, etc. On arriving at the Jeddah airport, he asks a passerby for the following information:

a) To an Arab found on a street.

AR: Taba yaomuk Ya akh,ayna jamiat islamiyyah?

A: Ala tul,ya sayyid

AR: Wal maktabah?

A: Al maktabah fil haramil jami/?ah

AR: Halil mat?am qarib minal jami?ah

A: Na?am ya sayyid, tujad hunak mat?am murih bijanib al jami?ah

AR: Shukran jaziilan

**Note: AR stands for Abdur-rahman and A stands for an Arab passerby**

From the above conversation, it is observed that the questioner does not familiar with the culture of the area he pretends to dramatize. The most common form of greeting among the Arabs in Saudi Arabia is "assalamu alaik" this will be discovered in the nature of response of the Arab to the questioner. No greeting from him (The Arab), he only goes straight to give him the information he asked for. In short the information seeker does not follow the rule of speech arts of that particular environment he is representing, that is he is devoid of adequate Arabic communicative competence

Another aspect of speaking that is particularly relevant for second language speaker, concerns whether or not the speaking is planned or spontaneous. In the case of Arabic language learners (as a second language), the provision of planning time can significantly increase levels of both fluency and accuracy in Arabic speaking. If the Arabic instructors are teaching the students who have to make oral presentations in Arabic, it is important to provide opportunities for them to give prepared presentations in class.

**Problems Facing Teaching of Arabic Speaking Skill in Nigerian Universities**

In recent informal survey that was carried out by the writer, reluctance to speak Arabic on the part of students learning Arabic as a second language was seen as the biggest challenge. Yaqub (2008) identifies three set of factors that may cause reluctance on the part of some Nigerian Arabic students to take part in class tasks involving Arabic speaking. These, he classified as cultural factors, linguistic factors, and psychological affective factors. Cultural factors derive from learner's prior experience and his expectations. If learners come into Arabic class believing that learning Arabic language involves listening to the teacher or the tape, and doing written exercises, then, they may be reluctant to become actively involved in Arabic speaking. It will be necessary to engage in a certain amount of Arabic learner training to encourage them to participate in speaking.

A good number of students in Nigerian Universities that study Arabic are reluctant speakers. This reluctance is partly due to prior learning experience. Many of them were trained at their junior and senior secondary school situated in noisy neighborhood where opportunities to speak the language are severely limited. Others were taught in school where speaking the language was simply not encouraged. However, a period of learner training can go a long way toward overcoming this reluctance. Simple dynamics, and the management of classroom interactions, can also help. It is also discovered that some students (especially from

the south-west) are not exposed to Arabic speaking at the junior and secondary schools before being admitted to the university to read Arabic.

Other factors that inhibit the use of Arabic language in Nigerian universities include difficulties in transferring the students first language (e.g. Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo etc) to the sounds rhymes and stress patterns of Arabic, difficulties with the native speaker pronunciation of the teacher, a lack of understanding of common grammatical pattern in Arabic e.g. Arabic tenses and how these may be different from their own language and lack of familiarity with the cultural or social knowledge required to process meaning. Psychological and effective factors include cultural shock, previous negative social or political experiences, lack of motivation, anxiety or shyness in class, especially if their previous learning experiences were negative.

Motivation is a key consideration in determining the preparedness of learners to communicate. Motivation refers to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning Arabic language plus favorable attitudes towards learning the language.

There are identified factors responsible for the unmotivation of Arabic students in Nigerian universities. These include: (a) lack of success over time / or lack of perception of projects. (b) Uninspired teaching. (c) Boredom (d) lack of perceived relevance of Arabic instructional materials. (e) Lack of knowledge about the goals of the Arabic instructional programme (f) Lack of appropriate feedback.

What needs to be done to motivate students are: (a) To make Arabic instructional goals to be explicit to the learners. (b) Break learning down into sequences of achievable steps (c) Link Arabic learning to the needs and interest of the learners (d) Allow Arabic learners to bring their own knowledge and perspectives into the learning process (e) To encourage creative Arabic language use (f) To help Arabic learners identify the strategies underlying the learning tasks, they are engaged in. (see the appendix for detail)

Reasons for reticence in the Arabic language classes are also investigated. Some of the reasons include:

- Students perceived low proficiency in Arabic. The investigation reveals that although students did not have the competence to respond to teachers' question in Arabic, their lack of confidence, unwillingness to take risk, and a perception that their Arabic was poor resulted in a marked reluctance to respond.
- Students' fear of committing mistakes and derision. The students were also afraid of making fools of themselves in front of their peers.

- Lecturers' intolerance of silence. Many of the Arabic lecturers teaching these students gave them little or no wait time.
- Uneven allocation of turns. Naturally, lecturers favored the better students when soliciting responses; this is probably related to the intolerance of silence in the class. By targeting the better students the teachers could be sure that there would not be periods of silence or confusion in their class.

This paper proposes six strategies to deal with anxiety and reluctance to speak. One of the strategies proposed is the lengthening the amount of time between asking a question and nominating someone to respond. However, this strategy has limits. The extended wait time, in fact, may embarrass the student who had been asked to respond. This may discourage the student from volunteering in the future.

The second strategy is to improve the questioning techniques. This would help some teachers but not others. The other strategies is to adopt variety of answers, to give learners an opportunity to rehearse their responses in small groups or pairs before being asked to speak up in front of the whole class. Another strategy proposed in this paper is to focus on content rather than form. This lowers anxiety, among the students; of committing mistakes the final strategy is to establish good relationship with the students. The key to encouraging students to communicate was to create a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere. Strategies that contribute to a lowering of anxiety are the key ones in encouraging the students to speak out.

### **Arabic Course Design Issues**

In traditional approaches to Arabic curriculum development, having established the overall purposes for the course, the first step in the Arabic course design procedure is to specify what the learners are to do. In other words, one has to set out the goals and objectives of the program. The broad communicative goal and attendant specific goals set in Table 1 (in Appendix) is designed for Arabic teachers developing courses for Arabic language proficiency. While the value of goals and objectives are still recognized, in recent years, with the emergence of task and text as important curricular building blocks, Arabic curriculum developers have begun to explore alternatives to the "objectives first" approach. (David Nuner, 1989).

Having presented the parameters for designing Arabic course, the next thing is to suggest some of the issues that need to be considered in sequencing the classroom task into a unit of work.

### **Pedagogical Task**

Most of the Arabic teaching materials in the market consist of what one would call reproduction language tasks. In completing such tasks, Arabic learners are required to do little more than reproduce, with degrees of variation, models provided by the teacher, the textbooks, or the tape. The following list of tasks represents some of the task types in a popular Arabic textbook series, whose aims is to “help Arabic learners use the language essential to real – life situations”.

- Listener listens to and read two-line Arabic dialogue and practices with a partner.
- Listen and repeat.
- Read question cue and make-up question.
- Read a model dialogue and have a similar conversation using cues provided.
- Look at a picture and study model sentence. Make up similar sentences about a similar picture.
- Listen to numbers and dates. Read numbers and dates and say them.
- Listen to an interview. Ask and answer question with a partner.
- Look at diagram of clocks. With a partner ask and answer questions about the time.
- Listen to a model, study a map, and describe the route from one specified point to another.

While such task might well be necessary for establishing mastery over basic phonological elements and syntactic patterns, they do not go far enough. In addition to the use of this audio-lingual’s approach, Arabic learners still need opportunities for creative language use. By creativity, it does not means the opportunity to write Arabic poem or plays (although they could well benefit from such opportunities), but, the opportunity to reconcile familiar Arabic language elements in new and unfamiliar ways.

### **Conclusion**

This work has considered the nature of speaking and in respect of Arabic learning in Nigerian universities. It has also explored ways to help students develop their proficiency in speaking skill. As we have seen in this paper, an integrative-based approach to speaking skill development should provide not only a wide variety of instructional techniques and activity formats, but also a balanced approach to feedback and correction strategies geared to the purposes of activities chosen for practice. Communicative activities should be encouraged from the beginning of instructions, but such activities should be carefully planned so that they are within the range of the students’ competence. Attention to accuracy does not imply a

classroom environment where grammar rules reign supreme, and correction is rigidly imposed, rather, the discourse-based-approach classroom is one in which students have ample opportunities to use language creatively and to obtain appropriate feedback with which they can progressively build and refine their inter-language to approximate the actual norm. The ongoing debate over the product and process oriented approach is also examined. The proponents of the two approaches portray them as mutually incompatible, while this work sees no reason why the two approaches cannot be integrated to incorporate element of both. This integration is termed here as functional-discourse-based-approach.

## Appendix

**Table 1**

<b>Broad Goal</b>	<b>Specific Goals:</b>
<p>Communication:</p> <p>By participating in activities organized around use of Arabic language, the students will acquire communication skills in the language, in order to widen their networks of interpersonal relations, have direct access to information in the language, and use their language skill for study, vocational and leisure based purpose.</p>	<p>To be able to use Arabic Language to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish and maintain relationships and discuss Topic of interest, e.g. through the exchange of information, ideas, opinions, attitudes, feelings experiences, plans.</li> <li>• Participate in social interactions related to solving a problem, making arrangements making decision with others and transacting to obtain goods, services and public information.</li> <li>• Obtain information by listening to or reading an Arabic spoken or written text as a whole and then process and use the information obtained.</li> <li>• Give information in spoken or written form, e.g. give a talk, write an essay, or a set of instructions.</li> <li>• Listen to, read or view and respond personally to stimulus, e.g. a story, play, film, song, poem picture.</li> </ul>
<b>Step</b>	<b>Discussions and Examples:</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify the overall context.</li> <li>2. Develop an Aim</li> <li>3. Note the Arabic language event sequence within the context.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The focus of a university is preparing students to study at the university.</li> <li>• To develop the spoken and written Arabic language skills required to undertake university study.</li> </ul> <p>These could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enrolling at university</li> <li>• Discussing course selection</li> </ul>

<p>4. List the text arising from the sequence.</p> <p>5. Outline the socio-cultural knowledge students need.</p> <p>6. Record or gather samples of Arabic texts.</p> <p>7. Develop units of work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attending lectures</li> <li>• Using the library</li> <li>• Reading reference books</li> <li>• Writing essays</li> <li>• Writing reports</li> <li>• Undertaking examinations</li> <li>• Participating in casual Arabic conversation.</li> </ul> <p>These could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enrollment forms</li> <li>• Service encounter/selecting courses</li> <li>• Lectures</li> <li>• Tutorial discussions</li> <li>• Literary service encounter</li> <li>• range of possible written texts, for example: discipline – specific essays. Discipline – specific reports.</li> <li>• Range of possible Arabic reading texts e.g. discipline – specific personal articles discipline – specific books, Literary note. Lecture notes.</li> <li>• Examination papers</li> <li>• Genres within casual conversation (e.g. the anecdote).</li> <li>• Students need knowledge about:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic institution</li> <li>• Academic procedures and expectations</li> <li>• The role of the students in the university.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Written Arabic texts:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gather samples of essays, catalogues, journals, etc.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Spoken texts:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Arabic instructor may need to:                 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find available recordings; prepare semi-scripted dialogues, record authentic interactions.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Classroom tasks should be sequential within units of work to provide student with:</p> <p>Explicit input</p> <p>Guided practice</p> <p>An opportunity to perform independently.</p>
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