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A NEW PARADIGM FOR LESS COMMONLY TAUGHT LANGUAGES: THE ARABIC LANGUAGE AND MIDDLE EAST/NORTH AFRICAN CULTURAL STUDIES PROGRAM

Providing instruction in less-commonly-taught languages is an enormous challenge to most U.S. colleges and universities. Although many institutions recognize the growing importance of languages such as Arabic, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Russian, and Swahili, the costs of adding these languages to the curriculum through traditional instructional approaches built around permanent faculty positions are overwhelming. As a result, students attending most U.S. institutions are limited to a small set of traditional European languages in choosing a language to study. There is no reason to believe that this situation will improve, at least in the short-term. In fact, it is more likely that faculty positions in foreign languages will decrease rather than increase. The reality is that unless new approaches are developed, these less-commonly-taught languages will never be available to students at most institutions.

Because of this, the choices facing students intent on learning a less-commonly-taught language are far from optimal. They can choose among a relatively few U.S. universities offering the language of their interest. They can attempt to put together some type of self-instructional program. Or they can elect to study abroad in a country in which the language is spoken, hopefully finding a program in which they can continue their studies in English while beginning an intensive language program.

If students attending institutions “across the fabric” of U.S. higher education are going to have access to important world languages, entirely new approaches need to be developed which can offer effective language instruction on a more affordable basis. This is the goal of the Arabic Language and Middle East/North African Cultural Studies Program (hereafter referenced as the “Arabic Project”). The project has been developed by Montana State University-Bozeman, working closely with the University of Washington in Seattle, Al Akhawayn University in Morocco, and a consortium of participating institutions. Critical funding support to develop the program has been provided by the National Security Education Program.

CONFIGURING AVAILABLE LANGUAGE RESOURCES

The starting point for the project is this: If it is not realistic for our institutions (or most others) to afford the basic resource needed to offer Arabic or other less-commonly-taught languages (namely, a permanent faculty position), what alternative resources are available which can be put together to provide an alternative instructional approach? In other words, are there other, more affordable resources for language education that can be configured into an effective program so that less-commonly-taught languages can become more-frequently-taught?

The institutions involved in the Arabic Project believe that the answer to this question is “yes” and that a solution lies in combining four alternative and readily available resources to create a new approach to university language instruction. These four resources are a) distance education technologies, b) faculty expertise located in regional foreign language centers, c) international students who are native speakers of the language, and d) study abroad opportunities in the countries in which the language is spoken. Many U.S. universities now have quality distance education facilities, including both synchronous interactive video classrooms and asynchronous computer access to the Internet and the World Wide Web. While most campuses lack faculty expertise in less-commonly-taught languages, there are a few universities throughout the US with national resource centers that have this expertise. Over half a million international students enroll in U.S. universities, many of whom are native speakers of these languages. Finally, many institutions have or can develop study abroad or exchange programs with institutions in the nations in which these languages are spoken. The Arabic Project combines these four ingredients into a new approach to offer Arabic language and cultural studies that over the last three years has proven to be highly successful.

In addition to the use of these alternative resources to provide the basis for teaching Arabic, the project design is based on three principals. An underlying assumption of the Arabic Project is that exclusive reliance on one alternative resource (such as a course taught completely online or only through foreign student TAs or only through study abroad) will not be highly successful. That is to say, none of the alternative resources identified is able to effectively stand on its own. The design of the Arabic Project is based on providing several mutually supportive instructional approaches. Another characteristic of the Arabic Project is integration of technology (including both synchronous and asynchronous elements) with more traditional elements (such as study abroad or use of TA's) to create a strong and effective program. Unfortunately, all too often those who administer traditional international programs shun new technologies as antithetical to the direct human interactions involved in exchange programs, while those enraptured with technology as frequently shun traditional program elements as old fashioned. A third feature of the program is the “seamless” integration between the language curriculum students follow on the home campus and the language program studied while abroad. Presently, in most cases there is little or no integration between the language programs students pursue on their home campuses and at their study sites abroad.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Through a design based on these principals that carefully integrates the four resources cited above, the Arabic Project offers the opportunity for students at participating institutions to take three or more years of Arabic language and culture.

Table 1. Outline of Arabic academic program by year

year 1	year 2	year 3-4
Students enroll in Modern Standard Arabic course on their home campus (4-5 credits/semester)	Students on exchange at Al Akhawayn University in Morocco	TAs on site offer 1 credit/semester conversation classes
Interactive video class with Univ. of Washington instructor 2 hours/week	“Seamless” continuation of Modern Standard Arabic	New online courses being developed by Al Akhawayn University
Instruction by native speaker TA on site 2-3 hours/week	Additional courses taught in English to continue progress toward degree requirements at home institution	

During year 1, students enroll in Introduction to Modern Standard Arabic, a course delivered through to their home campuses via a combination of interactive video classes originating at the University of Washington in Seattle and TA instruction from a native Arabic speaking student in residence. In year 2 students who remain in the program study at Al Akhawayn University in Morocco where they continue their study of Modern Standard Arabic while they take other courses toward their degrees taught in English. In years 3 and 4, the students can participate in conversation courses led by the TA’s and will soon be able to take upper division online Arabic courses taught by Al Akhawayn faculty.

This instructional program is built around a consortium of universities developed specifically for the Arabic Project with a unique division of responsibilities (see Figure 1).

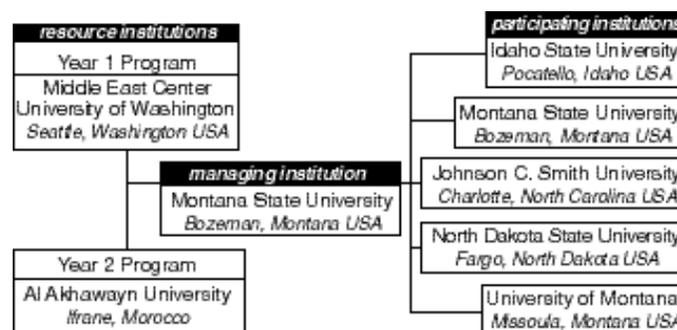


Figure 1. Arabic Project institutional organization chart

Two institutions (the University of Washington in Seattle and Al Akhawayn University in Morocco) are “resource institutions,” providing the academic expertise for the program. Montana State University-Bozeman serves as the “managing institution,” coordinating all activity. A set of “participating institutions” (listed above) offer the academic program provided by the resource institutions to their students.

With this overview of the program in mind, it may be useful to return to the four alternative resources that underlie it, looking at each one in somewhat greater detail.

USING EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGIES

Distance education technologies are a critical component of the Arabic Project. Interactive video classrooms, coupled with Internet connections and Web resources, make it possible to link language learners on the campuses of participating institutions with faculty expertise at our U.S. resource institution at the University of Washington. The Arabic Project uses these technologies to create a single virtual classroom with the instructor at the University of Washington in Seattle and students at the participating institutions stretching from Idaho to North Carolina. Each semester the instructor holds two one-hour classes per week, simultaneously teaching students at all five locations. The classes are held in special interactive video classrooms, and all students can see, hear, and interact with the instructor. Figure 2 shows how this network is structured.

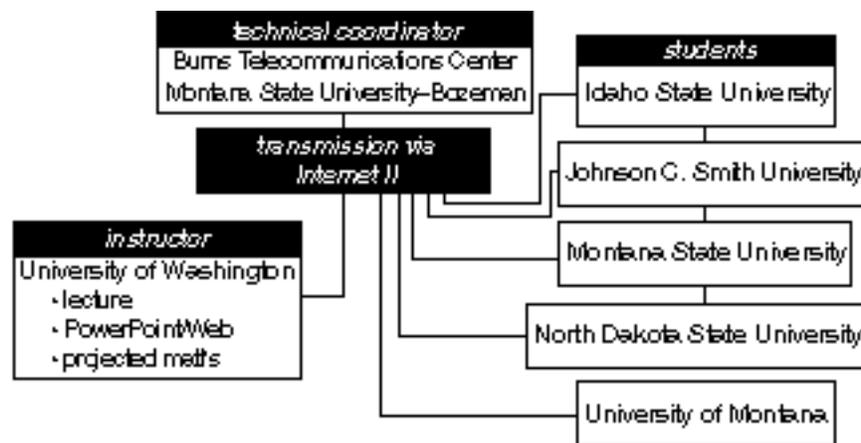


Figure 2. Arabic Project interactive video connections

The Arabic Project’s virtual classroom spans three time zones. At the beginning of each academic year, it can include as many as 70 students although the usual number is closer to 50. While the virtual classroom is the foundation for the instructional program, the size of the class limits the amount of time and attention

the instructor can give individual students. Similarly, the number of different locations linked limits the ability of the instructor to interact with students. It is our experience that five locations is probably the maximum number of sites that can work with a single instructor at one time. While the overall audio and video quality is quite good, the demands of Arabic language education are very high, particularly regarding audio quality, and these demands push the limits of interactive video. All of these factors combine to make the TAs' role at each participating institution particularly important to the success of the program.

During the first 3 years of the project, the virtual classroom has been linked together by means of telephonic connections using a commercial "bridging" company. While certainly workable, this approach is fairly expensive, costing about \$32,000 per year, and the overall quality is only marginally good enough to carry the course content. To overcome these cost and quality issues, the project has been seeking a better solution and starting fall semester 2001 the interactive video classroom sessions have been transmitted through broad band Internet connections rather than through traditional compressed video telephone line transmissions. With the advent of broadband Internet capabilities such as Internet II, it has become possible to route interactive video sessions through the Internet using devices known as "polycomm boxes," achieving tremendous cost savings while increasing audio and video quality. While this may seem to be a small technical issue, it is critical to both the quality of the instructional program and achieving the project's goal of an affordable approach to language instruction.

In addition to the virtual classroom, the Arabic Project also makes extensive use of the Internet and its Arabic studies Web site (www.arabicstudies.edu), fulfilling vital communication roles in keeping the instructor, the TAs, and the students linked together. The project's Web site also provides an important learning resource for the students, including information on Middle Eastern and North African culture and links to other information, as well as information on the project to others interested in the instructional model.

NATIVE SPEAKER INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

As emphasized above, the native Arabic speaking TAs in residence at each participating institution are a critical component of the program. While the virtual classroom is cool and high-tech, because of the limitations discussed above (audio/video quality and constraints in dealing with a large number of students at several different locations), students come to rely heavily on the TAs. In fact, in student evaluations, the TAs are consistently ranked as the most important part of the program.

For decades, international educators in the United States have felt that foreign students on our campuses, which now exceed half a million, are an underutilized resource. The Arabic Project has identified an important role they can play in language education during their period of study in the US. In the case of Arabic,

there are a lot of possible TAs on our campuses. According to the latest data published by the Institute of International Education, there are almost 34,000 students from the countries of the Middle East now studying in the United States, and there are many additional Arabic speakers on our campuses from North Africa and other nations.

The participating institutions in the Arabic Project offer a small honorarium to the TAs on their campus to compensate them for their services. While the amount is modest, it is a welcome piece of income for these students and is more desirable than typical on-campus jobs to which foreign students are limited under the terms of their student visas.

While these students can play a great role in enhancing U.S. skills in Arabic and other less-commonly-taught languages, they must be trained carefully and they must work under the supervision of faculty who are experts in language teaching. As is well known in the foreign language teaching world, being a native speaker of a language does not mean at all that one is able to teach it. For this reason, the Arabic Project has put particular attention on training the TAs. Each year prior to the start of the fall semester, all the TAs are brought together with faculty from the University of Washington for a week-long TA training program.

Although the TAs principal responsibilities focus on teaching the students in the first-year class, they also play an important role in helping students returning from the second-year program in Morocco. Arabic Project students returning from Morocco are typically highly motivated to maintain and improve their Arabic. This is a major challenge for the project, but having the TAs teach a special one credit hour conversation class for the Morocco returnees has proven to be a useful solution to this problem. To offer additional options to students returning from the second year program, Al Akhawayn University faculty are now working on developing several Internet-based courses which students will be able to take in the future, enabling students to continue their Arabic at more advanced levels working online with the faculty they know from their time in Morocco.

FACULTY BASED IN TITLE VI AND OTHER REGIONAL CENTERS

The third main resource around which the Arabic Project is built is faculty expertise located in centers devoted to foreign language and area studies around the United States. The Arabic Project has been extremely fortunate to have the enthusiastic commitment of the faculty of the Near Eastern Languages and Civilization Department and the Middle East Center at the University of Washington. The project would not have been possible without them. Ultimately it is their expertise in the Arabic language and how to teach it, as well as their knowledge of the cultures of the Arab world, that is the fundamental knowledge base of the program. For the Arabic Project, there are two University of Washington faculty members who play fundamental roles. First, there is an instructor, who teaches the virtual classroom, works with the students and TAs on a daily basis, and administers tests,

assigns grades, and so forth. For the last two years Mr. Ahmed Souaiaia has ably filled this position. Second, Associate Professor Terri Deyoung serves as a senior faculty supervisor. Professor Deyoung has been involved in the project from its launch and she has made extraordinary contributions in developing the curriculum, and instructional strategies, and in supervising the instructor.

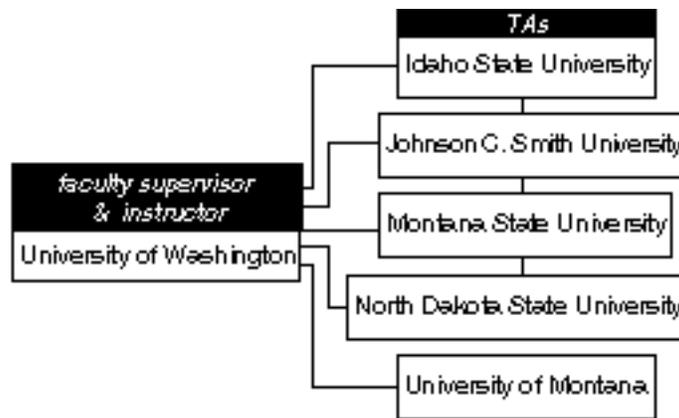


Figure 3. Structure of year 1 academic program

These key faculty resources fit into the overall instructional structure for the year 1 portion of the project as illustrated in Figure 3.

In addition, on most campuses a member of the foreign language faculty also supervises and provides support for the TA.

Many of the foreign language centers around the United States that have faculty with this kind of expertise are recipients of Department of Education Title VI support. The Arabic Project model offers a particular advantage to such centers because they have obligations to conduct outreach activities within their regions as a condition of their federal funding. The Arabic Project's design offers Title VI centers particularly attractive and effective outreach opportunities.

STUDY ABROAD

The fourth of the basic resources around which the Arabic Project is built is study abroad. Of course, there is nothing new in language students going abroad to further their language studies. What is different about study abroad in the Arabic Project is that it is tightly integrated into the design of the program. For most language students, there is little or no articulation between their language studies on the home campus and abroad. In general, students select a study abroad program that is entirely independent of the language program on campus. Even when the study

abroad program is sponsored by the student's home institution, it is typically not the case that the language program offered abroad is coordinated closely with the program on the home campus. In the language-learning model developed by the Arabic Project, the study abroad component is tightly integrated into the overall program. To the greatest extent possible, the project attempts to create a "seamless" transition between the year 1 home campus course and the year 2 Morocco experience. The same text is used for both years and students will begin in Morocco on the page they left off at their home university.

The choice of the study site is particularly important for a program such as the Arabic Project. Al Akhawayn's characteristics make it an ideal location for Arabic Project students. The University is an English language institution, enabling Arabic Project students to take courses toward their majors while continuing their Arabic studies. Since the students in the program are not Arabic majors, this is an extremely important feature. Certainly few students would elect the study abroad option if they could not continue to make study progress toward their degrees while pursuing further studies in Arabic. In addition, health and safety issues must be taken very seriously in planning the study abroad program for students wanting to pursue Arabic. Morocco is an ideal location for the students in this regard, offering one of the most stable and safe environments in the Arab world.

Actually, the study abroad program is organized as a student exchange between Al Akhawayn University and the participating institutions in order to make study abroad more accessible for students from both the US and Morocco. Since Al Akhawayn is a private university with fairly high tuition, an exchange makes the study abroad program more affordable for U.S. students in the program. On the other hand, by including room and board benefits in the exchange, the program makes study in the US more affordable for Moroccan students, since high living costs in the US, coupled with the current strong U.S. dollar, are a major barrier to studying on a U.S. campus.

Montana State, acting as the project's managing partner, administers an exchange clearinghouse for this purpose, conducting selection, orientation, and other services for outgoing students and placing Al Akhawayn students at the participating institutions based on students' preferences together with the need to maintain exchange balances.

Future plans call for Al Akhawayn University to initiate a Certificate Program for students involved in the Arabic Project, providing formal recognition of the Arabic skills of students completing the year 2 program. This is a useful role for Al Akhawayn University in the project's consortial structure, obviating the need for the individual participating institutions to establish separate minors or certificate programs.

INITIAL OUTCOMES

Over the last three academic years, the Arabic Project has been offering students the opportunity to study Modern Standard Arabic and to learn about the cultures of the Middle East and North Africa using this innovative new approach. Results are very encouraging. Although energetic recruiting and outreach is needed with students to reach enrollment targets, participating institutions have been able to find the critical mass of students (between 5 and 20) interested in taking the first year course. Attrition rates during the first year have been within the range expected for Arabic programs taught through traditional methods. Students in year 1 do as well or better on mid-term and final examinations as their counterparts taking Arabic in a traditional classroom. Those completing year 1 have done well on the ACTFL Arabic proficiency examination, normally scoring from Novice High to Intermediate Mid. A substantial proportion of students completing year 1 elect to continue into the year 2 program in Morocco. Those returning from Morocco are highly motivated to continue to develop their Arabic and to find other opportunities to pursue their interests in the Arab World. Thus, those involved in the Arabic Project are increasingly confident in the instructional model. Everything we know so far leads us to believe that the model provides a highly effective method to teach Arabic and, we believe, other languages that are not typically taught on U.S. campuses as well.

MOVING TOWARD SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The next critical step for the Arabic Project concerns the financial side of the program. Since its inception, the program has been able to rely on substantial funding from the National Security Education Program's institutional grant program. This funding has been critical to the development of the program. However, the Arabic Project will only be able to prove its importance as an alternative model for offering less-commonly-taught languages if and when it is able to operate without such external resources. The underlying concept of the program is that the resources upon which the project is based are affordable and can together form a self-sustaining program. Making this a reality is perhaps the Arabic Project's greatest challenge.

It is a challenge that is attainable, and here is how. As the project moves toward self-sufficiency, it is requiring participating campuses to begin to assume responsibility for the program's costs, drawing upon the tuition paid by students enrolled in the Arabic program. The first step toward this goal has already been completed. All participating campuses are paying the salaries for their TA from local resources. Participating campuses are also already paying the local costs associated with the interactive video classes.

There are four other costs that must be transferred from NSEP support over the coming two years. The most significant of these is the costs associated with the virtual interactive video classroom. As mentioned in the technology discussion

above, the effort here is not primarily to transfer these costs to the participating institutions, but to dramatically decrease the costs by changing the technology. As mentioned above, starting in the fall semester 2001, the interactive video classroom sessions have been transmitted through Internet II rather than through costly telephone lines. Although the mid- to long-term cost structure of Internet II use remains to be worked out, this change will reduce transmission costs dramatically. Although specialized electronic equipment (generally referred to as "polycomm" boxes) is needed, there are no costs currently assessed for transmitting the interactive audio/video through Internet II. The other costs which need to be brought into a self-sufficient funding scheme are the costs for the instructor and faculty supervisor at the University of Washington, the administrative costs incurred by Montana State as the managing partner, and some smaller scale costs for items such as the TA training program and small travel scholarships currently offered to students to help meet costs for the year 2 program in Morocco. Plans call for these costs to be absorbed in several ways, including tapping tuition dollars from participating institutions, using support available from Title VI funds for outreach activities, and some modest fundraising efforts from companies interested in promoting positive business relations with the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

The Arabic Project represents an exciting new way to make less commonly taught languages available to students across the fabric of U.S. higher education, not just to students who happen to be attending a relatively small number of elite, specialized institutions. By combining several resources which either are already available on our campuses (such as international students who are native speakers of the languages and quality interactive video classrooms) or those which are easily attainable (such as exchange partnerships with institutions in the nations in which these languages are spoken), the Arabic Project hopes to point the way to a new paradigm for language instruction. This new paradigm hopes to offer a way that languages such as Arabic can be offered in an effective but affordable program by institutions across the country, institutions that realistically will never have the resources for permanent faculty positions focused on Arabic or other critical world languages not typically taught on U.S. campuses.