Arabic Language: Modern Methods for Mastery
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It is vitally important that any Islamic worker knows Arabic. For the non-Arabic speaking Islamic activist, one of the easiest ways to gauge his/her dedication to Islamic work is to see how much effort he/she puts into the study of Arabic. This is true even for Arab Muslims, many of whom speak the dialect of their native country but have trouble understanding the classical Arabic. Without knowing Arabic, one does not have a direct connection with the Qur’an. Without Arabic, one’s Salah will be more ritual than an intimate interaction.

The vast majority of students of Arabic in the United States and Canada are non-Muslims. My own Arabic classes at the University of Chicago have each had at most four Muslims out of twenty to thirty students. Many missionary groups have begun teaching Arabic to their students, or have begun funding their students to learn Arabic from the top programs.

This essay will provide an overview of some of the options available to Islamic activists for learning Arabic. Your target is to be able to read Arabic text written without diacritics, with some help from a dictionary. It is urged that every Muslim consider his/her study of Arabic to be a top priority, primarily to connect directly with the majestic text of the Qur’an and secondarily to open one’s access to the study of Islamic tradition.

No Shortcuts to Learning a Language

Language is one of the most human of all the different fields of study. Everyone uses language. The brain contains specific regions (just above the left ear) for the use of language.

But there is no shortcut to learning a language. In other fields, one student may find him/herself spending much less time than the classmates depending on one’s aptitude. For example, in fields that place emphasis on concepts, like calculus, physics, philosophy, etc. one person may understand the concepts much more quickly than the next. In other fields that place emphasis on memorization, like medicine, a student’s investment of time depends on his or her memorization skills.

Language is somewhat different. Even though a language is an organic whole, within any language we must know grammar, vocabulary, idiom, and dialect. Further, we must know reading, writing, and conversation. Last, we hope to get to the level where we think (and dream) in the target language.

The mistake that too many students of language commit is to place most or all of their efforts on only a few of these skills. In the case of Arabic, most students spend their time mastering grammar, and spend little time on vocabulary. Or they may memorize the vocabulary of the Qur’an, but are unable to translate much of anything outside of the Qur’an, including Hadith.

Arabic poses an additional challenge of dialect. The type of Arabic known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is not spoken on the streets of any Arab nation. It is indeed the Arabic we encounter at Al-Jazirah or BBC Arabic, but it is very different from the Arabic spoken on the streets of Damascus or Cairo.

Further, because Arabic is itself such an ancient language, spanning all fields of study, the vocabulary is itself colossal. The Qur’an has its own vocabulary. Hadith have a similar, but larger vocabulary. Islamic law, Sufism, and philosophy have their own unique vocabularies. In addition, many words are used in multiple academic disciplines, yet have very different meanings in each of these different disciplines. The long history of Arabic language explains its richness, particularly the fact that Arabic has been the primary language in which the classical Islamic tradition was developed and expressed.
As we can imagine, language depends wholly on detail, and the subtleties of meaning change with small changes in syntax or vocabulary. Consider the following examples:

“I ran to the train station.”

“I alone ran to the train station.”

“I ran alone to the train station.”

“I ran to the train station alone.”

The difference in the above examples may or may not seem significant. But we know that each example gives a slightly different meaning than the others. Now consider the following examples of Arabic:

“na’buduka” (we are slaves to you)

“iyyaka na’budu” (to you alone are we slaves)

We will all recognize the second example, and it is only slightly different than the first. For any Muslim, the difference in meaning between the two is very significant, resulting from a slight rearrangement of words.

The next challenge is the biggest of all the challenges for an adult or young adult to learn a language. The brain works like a muscle. If you use it, it will strengthen. If you stop using a part of your brain, it will become weak. As children, we learned our language almost in an effortless manner. Most of us have little experience in learning languages in our adult life. Most Islamic activists know one language, and maybe up to three (depending on what they were taught as children). It is safe to say that the regions of our brains that are used in learning a language have weakened since childhood, so if we try to learn a language in our adult life, it won’t be very easy. In fact, when we try to learn a language in our adult life, it is probable that our brain will compensate by using other regions. Learning a new language in adulthood requires commitment, planning, and consistent effort.

As adults, we have forgotten how to learn a language. This process of relearning how to learn a language may be the most frustrating. It is similar to the plight of someone who is trying to lose weight. He/she knows that he must eat right and exercise, just like the language student knows that he/she must memorize vocabulary and grammar, but we may also need to be taught how.

A mistake that many Muslims make is to seek Arabic learning only from other Muslims. As a general principle, if something is available in writing, it is possible that the best source is not a Muslim. We will see that some of the best Arabic books and dictionaries are not necessarily from Muslim authors. Further, many Muslim authors of Arabic textbooks have themselves learned Arabic from non-Muslims, and many non-Muslim authors learned Arabic from Muslims.

Thus we see that many Muslims try and retry to learn Arabic, but they never learn the language. We see that in many mosques and Islamic organizations, Arabic teachers walk in and walk out almost through a revolving door. The teachers are available, the students are interested, but after the first few weeks of class, most trickle away.

**What Needs to be Done: The Bare Minimum**

If you cannot provide the following steps, you will not learn Arabic. If you cannot do the following, your time spent in Arabic classes will be invested better in other activities.

First, every student must be able to dedicate a certain block of time to Arabic study every day. The student must invest this time solely on Arabic study. For some people, fifteen minutes is all that they can dedicate. Generally, it is harder to dedicate time on the weekends. So target 20 minutes, four to six days per week. This amount is an absolute minimum. When learning a new language, persistence and continuity are more important than the exact amount of time one spends each day.

Second, I will be giving a list of textbooks. Whichever textbooks you use, make sure that you go through every line in detail. Some of us may be able to skim philosophy books, but we cannot skim language textbooks. Each line in a language textbook is important. Again, language relies on details, and if we skip this important step, we will be skipping over important details.

Third, remember that every hour invested in consistent study of Arabic will bring you closer and closer to your target of learning enough of the language so that you can sit with a book and a dictionary. This means that you get out of it what
you put into it. If you dedicate yourself, the rewards will come quickly. If you take an inconsistent and haphazard approach, you will frustrate yourself.

Fourth, dedicate your efforts as service to Allah (SWT). In doing so, you will find rewards both in the hereafter and in this world, Insha Allah. This will also keep you motivated through the difficulties of learning. Many Muslims try to learn Arabic, but a mere wish or desire is not enough to keep you going; true commitment is needed. Without a strong inner motivation it is all too easy to drop out when the going gets tough.

Methods or Approaches

The dialect we are seeking is Standard Arabic or Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). It is also known as High Arabic. The Arabs call it “fus-ha.”

There are three methods or approaches for learning Arabic. These are individual study, classes, and immersion programs. Though most readers of this essay will only be able to engage in Individual Study, at least in the beginning, we will start with a discussion of the Immersion Programs.

Immersion Programs: The most effective way to learn any language is to immerse yourself in an environment in which the only way to communicate is through that particular language. That is how children learn their mother tongue. As adults, this approach will most quickly provide you with the ability to think in that particular language. As you can imagine, it would be advantageous to spend time in an Arabic speaking country (while making sure to stay away from all of the American businesses and television shows). Some universities in North America offer Immersion Programs, which place you in such an environments. The three most respected of these programs are: Middlebury College, Georgetown University, and CASA.

Middlebury provides semester-long courses in many different languages, in which you spend your entire day speaking, and listening to, nothing but Modern Standard Arabic. The Middlebury Arabic program is challenging, but is worth investing time and effort. It offers multiple levels. Completion of the Middlebury program will give you sufficient Arabic conversational skills to teach introductory Arabic classes at the university level.

Georgetown University has the top Arabic Studies program in the country. They have recently added a one year Arabic Immersion program.

The Center for Arabic Study Abroad (CASA) at Emory University is a program the sends students to Cairo for year long or semester long study. Generally, the year program is recommended. Students from almost any university are eligible, and are given tremendous freedom to explore independently and interact. Here, the students will learn Egyptian dialect, and must be diligent in learning MSA.

Classes: Most Muslims in North America have access to two types of Arabic classes. Some are available at their local university, while others are available at their local Islamic center. My personal recommendation is that you avoid the Islamic center classes. Generally, the instructors may be sufficiently qualified to teach the language, but the students are rarely dedicated. Usually, the classes progress only at the speed of the students, which means that if you invest even a small amount of time outside of class, then you will find the class’s progress to be frustratingly slow because the other students generally do not invest any time outside of class.

Instead, I recommend taking classes at your local university. You may find in some cases that the same teacher offers Arabic either for $25 at your local mosque or for the hundreds or thousands of tuition dollars at your local university. In the university class, however, the teacher follows a strict syllabus. Further, the pressure of the credit-oriented class, with mostly non-Muslims provides an added boost. Still, as a word of caution — you may get caught up in seeking the grade instead of the language. As a result, you may prepare yourself with doing the minimum required to get the appropriate grade you seek. Logically, this method is not going to help much in learning a language.

Graduate students studying Arabic through university programs can apply for government funding through FLAS (Foreign Language & Area Studies) scholarships. This government sponsored program provides tuition and stipends for graduate studies in Arabic and other languages of the Muslim world (e.g., Persian, Turkish, and Urdu).

Individual Study: All students must engage in Individual Study of Arabic. If you are in an Immersion Program, a university course, or a mosque class, you still need to dedicate time in individual study. There are five steps here.

First, every person must learn the alphabet, and must try to learn accurate pronunciations of each of the letters. Because of cultural traditions, most Muslims from immigrant backgrounds are able to read Arabic (without understanding), so the best method is to find someone to sit with you and correct your pronunciation. Otherwise, many books are available which
teach only the letters. One example is Volume 1 of Programmed Arabic Islamic Reader (listed below), but there are many which are simpler and more readily available.

Second, we need to learn the language. My advice is to obtain a number of textbooks, and study them all together. Perhaps, when you complete a lesson in one book, switch to the next book, and complete a lesson in that book. Then, switch to the next book, before returning to the next lesson in the first book.

For self-study, I recommend the following textbooks:

Elementary Modern Standard Arabic

(EMSA) – In Universities, this text is known as the “Orange Book.” It has been the standard Arabic text for decades. It is hard to read. Its examples are at times very confusing. But it is one of the best books available for learning grammar. Note that it does not follow the traditional method of memorizing verb forms; for those who have some experience in this approach, it may be a bit confusing. Two volumes, published by Cambridge University Press.

Standard Arabic: An Elementary-Intermediate Course – This textbook is relatively new. It has excellent explanations of Arabic grammar in precise language. However, lack of familiarity with grammar terms might discourage some readers. It provides an answer key, which makes it uniquely useful.

Its follow-up text, Standard Arabic: An Advanced Course focuses more on reading passages. Published by Cambridge University Press.

Madinah University Course by Dr. V. Abdur Rahim – It is available in different printings from various publishers with different names, but is generally recognizable as the Madinah University Course. Its reading passages are far more entertaining than those of any of the other books, and each lesson introduces only a few grammar rules. Many Muslims prefer to start with this set. Make sure to obtain all three volumes along with explanatory sections in English. The English sections are sometimes printed in separate volumes.

The above books are the best for the study of Arabic. The following books are more useful for advanced students in that they focus on details of Arabic grammar but are not as strong in developing other skills. They may be useful as supplements to the above books.

Arabic Language for English Speaking Students by Muhammad Abdul-Rauf – This book is very, very concise. You cannot skip any sentences. It is a good text, but unlike the other three above, it does not provide any reading passages to develop your skills. It has lots of very good charts. Published by Al-Saadawi Publications.

A Grammar of the Arabic Language by W. Wright – This book is a bit old-fashioned in its descriptions, and references to other languages (like Hebrew) may be distracting. Yet, this book provides the most concise layout of Arabic Grammar in the English language. It is available from Cambridge University Press, and in an identical, newly printed, and cheaper edition by Dover.

Qur’anic Language Made Easy, by Hafiza Iffath Hasan – For an overall study of the Arabic language, this book only provides the absolute basics. But its strength is in its charts. It provides excellent charts listing different verb forms.

The following textbooks may be of use, but they are not as strong as those introduced above.

Learn the Language of the Holy Qur’an, by Abdullah Abbas Nadwi – This text provides grammar rules with examples from the Qur’an. The drills are too short, and need an answer key. Published by Iqra Foundation.

Programmed Arabic-Islamic Reader, by Raji M. Rammuny – Rammuny is one of the authors of the Orange book. This very simplistic book provides very short lessons, and places focus more on reading very simple Islamic passages. It is a good book perhaps to help build confidence before moving to any of the other books mentioned above. Two Volumes (and the first volume focuses on the alphabet). Published by IBC. Hard to find.

Third, as you work on the above textbooks, memorize the vocabulary of the Qur’an. The simplest dictionary, available online (as pdf files) and in book form is called the Easy Dictionary of the Qur’an by Abdul Karim Parekh. The other option, equally effective, is to sit with a Qur’an text that also has an English translation, and determine the meanings of each word. Neither the dictionary, nor the translation will provide you with precision, but they will help in quickly developing general knowledge of the meanings of each of the roots.

Fourth, obtain a general dictionary. I recommend the following. These dictionaries are readily available. When translating,
make a mark by each word you look up. When you look up the same word a few times (meaning, you have marked it a few times), then you know it is a word you need to know.

Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic – This is the standard Arabic-to-English dictionary used in universities. It is a phenomenal dictionary, and you must keep it by your side. Words are listed by Arabic root.

Vocabulary of the Holy Qur’an by Abdullah Abbas Nadwi – Words are listed by Arabic root.

The following dictionaries are also good resources.

Al-Mawrid by Rohi Balbaaki – This dictionary is not nearly as precise as Hans Wehr, but it lists words by spelling rather than root letters; this makes it more user-friendly, particularly for beginners. It is available in Arabic-to-English and English-to-Arabic editions. These editions are also available in shorter and pocket versions. Make sure to check prices, for they vary greatly, as well which edition and version you are getting.

A Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran by John Penrice – It is very thin, and is recently published by Dover. Inexpensive.

A Dictionary of the Holy Qur’an by Abdul Mannan Omar – This work is based on classical Arabic dictionaries. It covers the vocabulary of the Qur’an according to root words and derivatives. It also provides useful information on etymology and grammar. Recommended for intermediate and advanced students of Arabic.

Fifth, as you advance in your Arabic study, perhaps having completed half or two-thirds of any of the above textbooks, begin practice in translation. I recommend the following approaches:

1. Obtain a basic Hadith book that includes the Tarakat (diacritics) and translations. Then, try to translate on your own. Compare your translations with those of the book.
2. Go to an Arabic news website and pick short articles or paragraphs to translate. Most of these sites do not have Tarakat, so you may have some initial difficulty in recognizing word forms.
3. If you have sufficiently fast Internet access, listen to BBC Arabic or Al-Jazirah or another online news site. More and more are beginning to provide streaming video. Try to pick up words as you listen.
4. Begin to attend Jumu’a khutbas delivered entirely, or in part, in Arabic. Perhaps most Arabic khutbas in North America are delivered in Modern Standard, but some may (depending on the demographics of the attendees) be given in particular dialects.
5. Go through the Pimsleur Arabic set of tapes/CD’s. This series provides conversational training in either Egyptian or Syrian dialect. It is a very expensive set of 30 lessons, so check your local library.
6. There are many kinds of language software in the market. You might find them beneficial, particularly if you enjoy working with computers. Some of them are very expensive, so choose carefully. For Arabic, perhaps the best software is produced by a company called Auralog; the software series is known as Tell Me More, and is available in the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels.

Conclusion

Once again, we cannot overestimate the importance of learning Arabic. It will be difficult at first, but with consistent efforts (even if small), it will get easier and easier. Estimate that if you start today in self-study at 20 minutes per day, within a few months you will begin to recognize words and loosely translate Qur’an as you listen to its recitation. Within a few years, you will be able to translate accurately and effectively, Insha Allah.