6 An Uprising in Teaching Arabic Language

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Dramatic political and social changes involving geographic regions or religious and ethnic groups increase the academic interest in those places, their people and the languages they speak. Over the past 15 years, academics and practitioners focused on teaching Arabic as a foreign language (TAFL) have witnessed their field undergo considerable change, both in the form of quantitative growth and a qualitative shift, with the increase in the number of learners accompanied by a widespread interest in learning Arabic across different fields of specialization. In the same period, the Arab world has become an increasingly popular destination for study-abroad programs aimed at teaching language and culture in their natural settings. This demand for Arabic instruction from within a wider and naturally more diverse student body has led to the development of new teaching techniques.

This article discusses how the daily political and social experiences in the Arab world inspired some of the teaching philosophies and practices at the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies (CAMES) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in Lebanon. The CAMES Arabic language summer program offers intensive courses at eight different levels: introductory, high introductory, low intermediate, intermediate, high intermediate, advanced, high advanced and superior. The program emphasizes the instruction of Modern Standard Arabic, or MSA (*fuṣḥā*). CAMES also runs an intensive summer program in colloquial Lebanese Arabic. The MSA program runs for seven weeks and offers highly intensive coursework in Arabic. Each day, students receive six hours of classroom instruction in MSA, with additional exposure to colloquial Lebanese Arabic. Classes are held daily from Monday to Friday, for a total of 30 hours of classroom instruction each week. The total of 186 hours of MSA and colloquial instruction is the equivalent of nine credit hours at the AUB, which are transferable to other universities (CAMES 2016). While the program attracts students from many countries, the majority of students come from the United States.

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This article highlights the specific nature of studying Arabic in Beirut, where students can experience and witness transformations in the Arab world first-hand. Furthermore, the article describes how the abundance of authentic material accessible to instructors at the AUB has inevitably been accompanied by many challenges at the curricular, co-curricular and administrative levels. Finally, this article departs from the discussion of the CAMES Summer Arabic Program to understand the impact of the Arab uprisings on TAFL as a field more generally.

9/11 versus the Arab uprisings

The 9/11 events in the United States in 2001 led to a major turning point in TAFL. Policymakers and students in the United States and across the Western world felt the need to learn more about the emerging "enemy" who had attacked them at home. This development was the precursor of a second wave of innovation in the field that would take place a decade later in 2011, parallel to the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions. The increase in financial governmental support for Arabic language programs following 9/11 was mirrored by the nearly instantaneous increase in student interest. Arabic is now the eighth most studied foreign language in the United States (Modern Language Association 2010). In his study on the teaching of Arabic in the United States after 9/11, Chris Stone (2014) discusses the motives of studying "critical" languages, building on Mary Louise Pratt's notion of using the language itself as a "weapon", rather than regarding a greater interest in language learning as a mere side effect of an act of war. Arabic became relevant not only because it provides direct access to several cultures and heritages, but also because it is the language of a direct threat. Studying it became a "national" necessity. This left its mark on the way Arabic is taught; communicative approaches quickly came to dominate the language curricula, replacing traditional methods that focused on the grammar and philology necessary to access the classical written heritage.

The Arab uprisings prompted interest in the Arab region and its language despite the budget cuts that humanities programs in the United States have faced as a result of the world economic recession. The massive scale of the uprisings and their multifaceted consequences captured the world's attention, particularly as they constituted a threat to the interests of major powers. The changes that the 9/11 events prompted within Arabic

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language curricula became even more relevant and necessary.[1] Arabic in this context constituted a language of change, protest and revolution (see Mehrez 2012). Traveling to the region became increasingly necessary to follow the rapid changes taking place, yet increasingly more difficult for students of the language. Uncensored, slang-inflected and colloquial Arabic was ubiquitous on the streets and on social media, while making little appearance in language textbooks. The traditional methods of approaching the language were being challenged once again.

Lebanon and the Arab uprisings

Syria and Egypt were attractive destinations for learners of Arabic due to the reasonable cost of living there and the unpopularity of foreign languages among their natives, which enabled students of Arabic to practice the language with native speakers. However, the growing degree of insecurity in the countries that participated in the uprisings, especially Egypt and Syria, triggered a shift in viable study-abroad locations. Since 2011, this has led to the diversion of a large number of students from Egypt and Syria to Morocco, Lebanon or Jordan. Lebanon itself was not host to an uprising that demanded the fall of the country's governing regime, but the effect of the Arab uprisings more generally cannot be underestimated in a country where refugees constitute a considerable portion of the population (see UNHCR country profile 2016). The Syrian uprising in particular left its mark on Lebanon on many levels — social, political, economic and humanitarian. The uprising also triggered numerous debates within the country within different sectarian, social and political circles, especially given Hezbollah's substantial military involvement in support of the Syrian regime. Hezbollah and the Syrian regime are widely accused of perpetrating the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri, Lebanon's former prime minister and an influential political figure in the country as it emerged from a long civil war and remained under Syrian military control for years. Moreover, since 2011 a large number of Syrian refugees have sought shelter from the emergent civil war in their home country, with their presence increasing pressure on Lebanon's already weak economy. At times Lebanon

1 See the contribution by Barbara Winckler and Christian Junge in this volume for a more detailed account on the implications for Arab literature studies in general.

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itself has experienced serious security threats, for example when clashes occurred in northern Lebanon, where a significant Alawite community resides in an area with a predominantly Sunni population. Despite this, Lebanon has continued to be relatively attractive for tourists and foreign students, especially safe havens such as the AUB. These students have been able to experience closely the Arab uprisings — its agents and consequences — in a relatively safe setting.

Remapping the destinations for studying Arabic abroad

The Arab uprisings clearly rerouted learners of Arabic to safer study-abroad destinations. Jordan, Morocco and Oman quickly became the top destinations for students from Europe and North America. An abundance of advertisements on email lists and at conferences promoted new and long-established programs in these countries. As noted in Mitch Smith's (2012) article, "many American universities will not support study-abroad programs in countries with travel warnings, and sometimes refuse to accept transfer credits from institutions in those nations or withhold financial aid for students traveling there against the advice of the government and college". Universities with strict policies regarding travel warnings have moved some of their programs and students from Egypt and Syria to Jordan, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates (Smith 2012). While almost all colleges take such warnings seriously, some pursue a lenient policy if they trust the academic standing of the host institution and its seriousness in dealing with security issues. Beirut, for example, was certainly caught up in the consequences of both travel warnings and a lack of funding, but also became a viable alternative for students who were not discouraged by the unrest in the Middle East, who needed to do research in Lebanon, or who wanted to experience the Arab uprisings and their repercussions up close (see Faddoul 2013).

The period following the Arab uprisings in late 2010 and early 2011 witnessed two waves of change with regard to enrollment in the Summer Arabic Program (SAP) at CAMES.[2] From 2008 to 2010, an average of 72 students enrolled in the SAP each year. The summer of 2008 marked a

2 For a review of some of the summer programs in Lebanon, see Samaha & Houbeish 2014. See also http://www.studyabroad.com/programs/middle+east,lebanon/summer+program/default.aspx.

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year of relative stability in Lebanon, and for the SAP as well, following the disturbances related to the 2006 war with Israel (when 60 students enrolled). The summer of 2010 (during which 76 students enrolled) was the last summer before any repercussions related to the Arab uprisings took effect in Lebanon. Starting in January 2011, and in the following few months as most applicants were choosing their study-abroad destinations, the probability of the uprisings reaching Lebanon in a kind of domino effect was still appreciable. This explains the slight decrease in SAP student enrollment during the summer of 2011 (65 students). In contrast, the enrollment rate in the summer of 2012 gained momentum, reaching 86 students. This was one of the positive effects of the Arab uprisings, as felt in the TAFL field in Lebanon. The growing interest in Lebanon was boosted by the difficulty of pursuing studying abroad in Syria or Egypt. Even though the political situation in Lebanon was not wholly stable, students who enrolled in the SAP were willing to take on the associated level of risk. It is worth noting that the American University in Beirut campus and the surrounding Ras Beirut area are particularly attractive to students from abroad, as they have been safe havens in the midst of many past conflicts. Smith (2012) quotes AUB Director of International Programs Katherine Nugent Yngve as saying: "The benefits of studying in Lebanon outweigh the risks. (...) Many US students tell us that they feel the State Department's travel warning is an unfair impediment to studying abroad at the AUB, as do their parents, and sometimes their study-abroad advisers."

Starting in 2013, a general sense of disillusion regarding the prospects for improvements in political and security conditions resulting from the Arab uprisings began spreading in Lebanon and other countries in the Arab world. As a result, SAP enrollment decreased (63 students). At this point, Lebanon was struggling to deal with the repercussions of the Syrian crisis.[3] The tension felt across Lebanon diverted many students away from CAMES. However, this relative decrease stabilized in the following two years as Syria fell into civil war (60 students in 2014, 62 students in 2015).

3 See also the contribution by Ammar Abdulrahman in this volume on the implications of the geographical closeness of Syria and Lebanon for the field of archaeology.

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A shift in learners' motives

The decrease in the number of learners applying to study Arabic in Lebanon since 2010 has been outweighed by the increased levels of motivation within the student body. The students who joined the SAP after the Arab uprisings were those who were willing to take the risk of traveling to the Middle East. They were interested both in the events surrounding them as well as in the ongoing transformations, not only of political regimes but also of the surrounding culture and values. Many expressed the fact that they appreciated the opportunity to be in the Middle East, and felt better equipped to understand the nature and events of the Arab uprisings than peers who had shied away from the region. Students were thus eager to learn about the instrumental, social, cultural and intellectual dynamics that had led to the uprisings.

Additions to the curriculum

The wide scope of the teaching materials used at CAMES includes textbooks that are supplemented with readings and materials adapted from current events. Although the program has adopted the *Al-Kitaab fii Taʿallum Al-ʿArabiya* series by Al-Batal, Brustad and Al-Tonsi, the resources added to the curriculum by instructors and coordinators expose learners to real-life events in the comfort of their classrooms, while encouraging them to find out more about various issues that emerge during their stay in Lebanon outside class time. For example, one of the classes taught a unit on prominent women in the Arab world, and connected that theme to the Arab women's rights movement that was actively establishing a presence in social media and organizing demonstrations in Beirut. The final class discussion helped students connect the dots between the movement they were witnessing in Beirut and the issue of sexual harassment, which was a major concern at that time in Tunisia and Egypt.

Lectures in the program also shifted in focus to help students gain a better sense of the changing face of Beirut and Lebanon. One of the general lectures in the summer of 2013 contrasted Lebanese folk music with rising forms of alternative music then gaining ground in Beirut as a result of new realities in the Middle East. For example, Mazen El Sayyed, known as El Rass, is an Arab hip-hop rapper who sings in support of political and social change, thereby rebelling against the status quo (Marrouch 2013). The

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Arab uprisings inspired his song *Min thaa'er* (From a rebel), which was used as an example in the general lecture that showed how the fusion of Modern Standard and colloquial Arabic in his lyrics spoke equally to the Arab masses and to the educated elites.

In addition to lectures, the SAP offers a set of clubs for students to learn about Arab culture. The Arabic calligraphy club, for example, sheds light on an important traditional art form that was used during the Arab uprisings as a means of expression and as an element of an emerging form of graffiti (Nippard 2011; https://beirutwalls.wordpress.com/). A well-known Lebanese graffiti artist, Yazan Halwani, was invited to address the club and its participating students. Halwani gave an overview of how graffiti is helping young Arab artists to creatively voice their discontent with the political and social situations in their countries using words and imagery in different forms and colors. Students learned to decipher the graffiti inscriptions in class and went on a field trip with the artist to inspect walls in Beirut that had become an important platform for this art both regionally and internationally. Students also had the chance to see Halwani at work and produce their own graffiti-style writings.

Learning about graffiti and expressing oneself in Arabic in this creative art form was approached not only from a cultural perspective, but also from a linguistic one. Different graffiti walls were analyzed to identify different grammatical forms, such as imperative verbs in the famous *kun maʿ al-thawra* phrase, or the active participle (*ism fāʿil*) in *malik al-ghāba rākib dabbāba* (The king of the forest is driving a tank). Eventually students learned about specific stylistic forms in Arabic such as parallelism and rhymed prose (*sajʿ*), and practiced producing similar slogans and phrases. The graffiti and music lectures and other activities and material used in CAMES highlighted the importance of colloquial variations of Arabic, a topic we discuss further in the next section.

Increasing interest in colloquial Arabic

The Arab uprisings brought to the fore a closer connection between colloquial dialects and Modern Standard Arabic, and encouraged learners of Arabic as a foreign language to make additional efforts to acquire at least one form of colloquial Arabic. Academics and practitioners in the TAFL field had already been shifting toward more structured integration of both colloquial Arabic and MSA as complementary forms of the same lan-

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guage. The third edition of the *Al-Kitaab* series presents learners with a number of Arabic dialects to choose from to complement the MSA portion of the series. Other series, such as Munther Younes' *ʿArabiyyat Al-Naas*, have also been published, solidly integrating colloquial and Modern Standard Arabic into everyday lessons.

One of the catalysts which increases students' motivation to acquire and even master *ʿāmmiyya* (colloquial) Arabic is that most of the popular chants and slogans of the Arab uprisings found on social media and elsewhere online were colloquial.[4] In the case of CAMES students, the Levantine dialect that students learned in class allowed them to read political slogans relating to the Syrian uprising and communicate with the increasing number of Syrian refugees arriving in Lebanon. At times, CAMES instructors found themselves teaching Damascene and Beiruti colloquial forms in the same class, delving into the peculiarities of each as well as the differences between them. One of the most popular Syrian soap operas, *Bāb al-Ḥāra* (Gate of the Neighborhood), came to be used in the classrooms as support material in *ʿāmmiyya* lessons. The series depicts Middle Eastern society and the popular upheavals that took place during the period of Western-power colonialization, when Syria was under French control and Palestine was occupied by the British forces. In the different episodes shown in class, the vocabulary and themes raised provided students with numerous insights; although the events in the televised series dated back to the 1930 s, much of what was portrayed echoed the events and situations happening in the context of the Syrian uprising. Students benefited tremendously from the overlap between the language used in the series, that heard in Beirut among refugees, and that reported in the news and on social media as used in Syria.

In response to the aforementioned need and demand for *ʿāmmiyya*, CAMES launched an *ʿāmmiyya* track in the summer of 2013, allowing students aiming to acquire the Lebanese dialect a chance to focus more specifically on this goal. The material and resources used for students in this track are based on Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA), a mixture of MSA and colloquial Arabic. In 2014 and 2015, two different levels of the track were offered to accommodate students.

4 On the importance of intercultural exchanges for stimulating students' motivation see also the contribution of Sarhan Dhouib in this volume.

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Social and community service

Many of the CAMES students wanted to help in the refugee crisis that has resulted from the civil war in Syria. This prompted CAMES to increase students' involvement in social service and community work. The students' interest stemmed both from their commitment to humanitarian causes and from the opportunity to interact in Arabic with socially disadvantaged Lebanese and Arab groups, including Syrians and Palestinians who knew few or no foreign languages. Students needed to practice their colloquial Arabic in a setting that would allow them to interact meaningfully with locals and refugees from different age levels and backgrounds. CAMES organized weekly trips to orphanages, retirement homes and refugee camps, and designed various activities for participants to engage in. These activities included reading Arabic and English books aloud to small groups of children, creating and performing sketches and short plays which addressed the problems faced by the participating groups, interviewing elderly people, and reporting on their experiences in articles published in the CAMES SAP newsletter.

In 2014, CAMES worked with NASMA, a grassroots non-governmental organization located in the Hamra neighborhood close to the AUB that supports families living in different parts of Beirut, including the refugee camps. At its resource center, NASMA receives underprivileged children between the ages of seven and 14 from the surrounding neighborhoods and offers them after-school support, in addition to other social and artistic activities organized at its summer camps.[5] In 2013, NASMA started accommodating an increasing number of Syrian refugee children. Throughout that summer, CAMES and NASMA developed a series of activities that were carried out during the students' several visits to the NASMA resource center. In preparation for their visits, representatives from NASMA introduced the organization and its beneficiaries to the students. Following this introduction, students brainstormed in small groups regarding possible ice-breaking activities that would help them interact with the kids. They also focused on the importance of doing fun and enjoyable activities. The language level of each group of students determined the information and topics they would share with the children. The activities implemented in-

5 For information about NASMA, see http://daleel-madani.org/profile/nasma-learning-and-resource-centre.

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cluded educational tasks, such as setting up a map of Arab countries and providing facts about them. This activity in particular sparked some very interesting conversations between the kids and the students, specifically on the countries most involved in the Arab uprisings, namely Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Libya. Students later said they had benefited from hearing another view of the events, and that it had been rewarding for them to see how young children understood what was going on around them. In another activity, each person (both the children and the students) drew his or her home or dream house, and wrote down a small paragraph describing it. This revealed some insights into the children's (and students') social conditions and their needs or dreams. In many cases, the children would take the lead in teaching the CAMES students how to say certain words, correcting them and helping them express their ideas — an experience of great value from a language-learning perspective.

In addition to weekly group visits with NASMA, CAMES established an optional language exchange partnership with the Syrian Jusoor NGO and the Civic Engagement Office at the AUB. Most of the participants were Syrian university students with a weak command of English who were teaching Syrian students in special schools for refugees. These students formed tandems with CAMES students learning Arabic, and met on a weekly basis to discuss various topics in English and Arabic. The experience was very successful and rewarding to students on both sides, and in many cases the partnership continued via Skype after the summer program.

Distributing food to elderly people was another initiative executed via FoodBlessed, a local hunger-relief initiative founded in 2012 and run by a group of volunteers in Lebanon.[6] Here too, the focus was on learning the language via social work activities. Students learned the names of dishes and their ingredients, as well as recipe instructions and related vocabulary. Moreover, they were able to converse with the elderly in *ʿāmmiyya* and report on their experiences in class or in essays.

6 For information on these programs, see http://daleel-madani.org/profile/foodblessed and http://www.foodblessed.org.

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Daunting challenges and solutions

While all the changes previously mentioned brought new materials and dynamics to the TAFL classroom, they also posed certain challenges. The *ʿāmmiyya* material in the textbook was not sufficient to accommodate the students' needs. Coordinators responded by organizing workshops and weekly meetings with instructors to devise a convincing pedagogical curriculum able to incorporate *ʿāmmiyya* without jeopardizing the MSA curriculum that needed to be covered for the transfer of credits and to satisfy the requirements of each language level.

One of the biggest challenges for CAMES' Summer Arabic Program following the Arab uprisings was channeling students' interests while also teaching the language and culture objectively. Lebanon has a complex history of relations with Syria that has seen good days and bad days. Teaching challenges arose as some of the instructional content brought up sensitive topics discussed in the Lebanese context. Teachers in the program came from different segments of Lebanese society, and thus had different opinions about issues such as Hezbollah's military participation in Syria or the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Students also had conflicting opinions that often clashed with those of the teachers or their classmates, especially since some students were so-called heritage language students from a Lebanese, Syrian or Egyptian background (Kelleher 2010).

Some of the uprisings were easier to discuss in the classroom than others. For instance, the Egyptian uprising was always a "safer" topic than the Syrian uprising because of its geographical distance. Still, when the need arose to bring up the Syrian situation in class, CAMES instructors found ways to work with the material available. For instance, instructors selected scenes from the Syrian *Bāb al-Ḥāra* television series for a listening activity featuring dialogue that could well have been drawn from the post-uprising period in Syria. Instructors were able to maximize the benefit of watching these scenes and connect the listening to a speaking activity; students were asked to choose a current news article and a scene from *Bāb al-Ḥāra* and compare them. Students' linguistic gains were complemented by a critical thinking exercise, as they were asked to assess the accuracy of the news articles they were reading by cross-checking information from different sources in order to compare terminology, writing style and even rhetorical devices.

Another way CAMES managed to depoliticize the situation and still involve students in current events was to deal with the events from a social

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and humanitarian perspective. In this regard, instructors worked on developing the community service programs, which offered students an interactive opportunity to practice their language skills, especially colloquial Arabic. This was also partly in response to a growing interest, especially among US students, in them seeking out "short-term volunteering-abroad experiences that go beyond the traditional model," as observed by Christine Farrugia (2015), senior research officer at the Institute of International Education. According to this study, students seek out opportunities in which they can engage with community members in various contexts rather than just receiving knowledge in class by interacting with their professors and peers. Along these lines, the CAMES SAP had already been organizing visits to senior citizen centers and orphanages since 2007, in response to students having repeatedly expressed the wish to do so in their end-of-program evaluations. In light of the events of the Arab uprisings, CAMES was able to take its community service initiative in a new direction by facilitating student engagement with refugee children, especially Palestinians and Syrians. Through this community-based activity, students who chose to come to Lebanon with an interest in exploring a society in transition were given the opportunity to witness the direct effects of this change on some of its youth. The importance of this community service in linguistic terms is that students not only interacted with native speakers, but also contributed to designing the activities implemented in the program.

Conclusion

The Arab uprisings had a major impact on the curriculum used in teaching Arabic as a foreign language at the AUB. The changes came in response to demands by students, who asked for more exposure to colloquial Arabic and more interaction with native speakers. The change was gradual, and in addition to the curriculum changes, manifested itself in various social work activities and cultural clubs. These changes helped open up the gates of the AUB campus to the city of Beirut, and gave refugees and other underprivileged groups access to an academic institution from which they could benefit in various ways.

It will be interesting to continue to track the effect of the Arab uprisings on curricula in the Arab world, in Europe and in the United States in order to be able to generalize about the effect of the uprisings on the TAFL field

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as a whole. The methods devised in the CAMES Summer Arabic Program already provide some models that can be emulated and developed further when dealing with the refugee crisis in various Arab states and in Europe. These methods benefit from the participation of refugees and represent one way of helping them integrate into their new settings.

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