

## **Teaching Modern Standard Arabic L2: New perspectives**

**Abstract.** Teaching Modern Standard Arabic has been undertaken primarily using traditional approaches for a number of reasons that relate to teacher preparation and to perceptions about the language. This article presents a brief overview of modern standard Arabic second language (L2) didactics in its two dimensions: methodological orientation and teachers training. It defines some perspectives that aim to contribute to modernising this domain.

**Key words:** modern standard Arabic L2 teaching methodology, pedagogic grammar, interlanguage grammar, integrated didactics, comparative didactics, teachers training.

### **1. Introduction**

Numerous factors (diglossia and the limited communicative functions of modern standard Arabic, the fact that until recently this language was not frequently taught/learned as L2, the fact that most of studies on descriptive grammar apply a traditional point of view which focalises exclusively on the morphologic complexity, etc.) explain the predominance of a traditional approach to didactics. Teacher preparation reflects this tendency; most of teachers are trained in linguistics or in translation, and less frequently in L2 methodology and pedagogy.

Another factor that determines modern standard Arabic L2 didactics is the consideration of Arabic as difficult for speakers of other languages, and the consequent simplification of pedagogic grammars elaborated in teaching it as L2. From an acquisitional point of

view, this simplification, which takes different forms, can be the origin of persistent idiosyncratic means that appear in the discursive organisation of learners.

The case of modern standard Arabic is particularly significant as it allows exploring:

1. The impact of language specificities on the way pedagogic grammar is elaborated in L2 teaching methods.
2. The influence of pedagogic grammar on the construction and the progression of the interlanguage.

New perspectives should apply to both teaching methodology and teachers preparation.

More precisely, new perspectives can involve three orientations:

1. Innovating studies in linguistics (specially in discourse analysis, pragmatics and enunciation), and in Arabic L2 acquisition, both conducted in the objective of enriching descriptive grammar and supplying didactic projects.
2. Comparative studies which address Arabic L2 teaching to French or English L2 teaching, conducted in the perspective of *integrated* didactics, or more generally in the multilingualism perspective.
3. The revision of the programs used in teachers training.

## **2. Second language teaching methodology and second language acquisition**

### **2.1 Second language teaching methodology: from monolingual to**

#### **multilingual/multicultural competence**

During the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, L2 teaching methodology has considerably evolved thanks to developments in linguistics and psycholinguistics. Successive methodologies have embodied theories which deal with two major questions: what language is, and how languages are learned.

New methodological orientations (specially communicative) have become the reference in classroom pedagogy. However, the two old and opposite approaches, the

traditional approach and direct approach, have always kept an important place in L2 teaching practice. The principles of the traditional approach are usually applied to homogeneous classes in which learners and teachers share the same first language (L1). As for the influence of the direct approach, it is obvious in structural exercises (repetition, substitution, combination, transformation, etc.) that some methods and some teaching contexts favour it. Thus, despite the predominance of the communicative approach, classroom practice remains in reality eclectic.

Since the 2000s, language teaching in Europe is influenced by the *Common European Framework of Reference for languages* (CEFR). This guideline, that unifies objectives and evaluation modalities in teaching European languages, represents a new linguistic politics in Europe. The CEFR completes and confirms some pre-existing and concomitant approaches called *plural* which can be divided into four orientations:

1. Integrated didactics (cf. Roulet, 1980; Bourguignon & Dabène, 1982; Hufeisen & Neuner, 2003).
2. An intercultural approach (Porcher, 1978).
3. Intercomprehension between related languages (Dabène, 1996; Doyé, 2005).
4. Language awareness (Hawkins, 1984; De Pietro, 1995; Candelier, 2006).

Pedagogic practice of these approaches is defined as implying multiple linguistic/cultural varieties, and as opposite to a *singular* approach (cf. Candelier, 2008). The CEFR also promotes a *plurilingual/pluricultural* competence which has to be developed in parallel to communicative competence in its three components: linguistic, socio-cultural and pragmatic.

In sum, plural approaches and the CEFR are representative of what is called now *didactics of plurilingualism*. The major evolution that this new orientation concretises can be summarised in two points:

1. The objective of teaching/learning L2 is not (any more) the monolingual native competence, rather a *partial* competence that makes part of the total acquisitional repertoire (L1, L2, L3, ...).
2. A plurilingual/pluricultural competence is specifically individual, since learners do not have the same repertoire nor the same acquisitional experiences.

Such pedagogic principles valorise the interaction between the new language to be taught/learned and the repertoire of the learner (L1 and all the languages which have been acquired). They in this way mark a frank rupture with the direct approach in which transfer or interference with L1 have to be prevented.

The implication of these pedagogic principles at classroom-level takes different forms as foreexample (cf. Cali, 2006):

1. the integration of meta-linguistic (and cross-linguistic) activities,
2. the development of meta-discursive and meta-pragmatic activities by comparing different types of texts and of linguistic interactions,
3. and the analysis of learners representations of multiple acquisitional experiences.

Plurilingualism didactics requires also innovating programs in the domain of teachers training. Several devices are proposed in order to reinforce professional competence of teachers in function of the new orientations and objectives (cf. Cavalli & Matthey, 2009; Cachet, 2009).

## **2.2 Second language acquisition: from interlanguage systematicity to multiple models**

Research on L2 acquisition has evolved thanks to the concepts of *interlanguage* (Selinker, 1972) and *transitory competence* (Corder, 1967). Empirical studies, which have applied this approach, have come to the following conclusions:

1. Interlanguage is systematic in its organisation and evolution.

2. Three developmental sequences are identified: *pre-basic*, *basic* and *post-basic* (cf. Klein and Perdue, 1997). In each acquisitional level, utterance structure and discourse cohesion are governed by semantic and pragmatic constraints.
3. The evolution across different sequences involves three types of principles: communicational, individual and cross-linguistic.

Thus, contrary to the *contrastive hypothesis* of Lado (1957), interlanguage approach defines L1 as one of the organising principles that intervenes in the structuration of the learner variety. It also introduces the term of *idiosyncratic* productions (cf. Corder, 1967) to replace the term of learner *errors*.

Recent research in L2 acquisition adopts the model of multilingualism (cf. Williams & Hammarberg, 1998; Meissner & al. 2004; Herdina & Jessner, 2002). This model considers the interlanguage not only as a system in its own right relatively to L1 and to the target language, but also as a system which interacts with other systems (interlanguages) that a learner elaborates in acquiring several languages.

Jessner (2008) analyses the interaction between successive acquisitional experiences. He argues that the acquisition of L3 and of L2 differ quantitatively and qualitatively, and underlines the role of meta-linguistic awareness in language acquisition.

#### **4. Modern standard Arabic L2 didactics: different constraints and underlying consensus**

Globally, teaching modern standard Arabic to non native speakers is governed by two consensuses:

1. The traditional approach is the most suitable, as this language has limited communicative functions and as it has always interested linguists more than learners.
2. Arabic is a difficult language, and should be simplified when it is taught as L2.

Modern standard Arabic is actually the language employed in press and media, in written tasks and in formal contexts. In their everyday communication, native speakers use a dialectal

variety which differs from one country or region to another. This diglossia represents a problem for learners who have to choose what Arabic they need to acquire.

Traditionally, modern standard Arabic was studied in linguistics and contrastive linguistics, and was not frequently learned as L2 contrary to, for example, English or French. Moreover, the fact that most Arabic citizens speak a foreign language, specially English or French, did not motivate non native speakers to learn Arabic. This weak 'demand' was not beneficial since it did not encourage linguists, or more precisely applied linguists, to apply new methodological principles to Arabic L2 didactics.

Therefore, descriptive grammar could until recently play the role of didactic project destined to non native learners, with modernising teaching methodology be limited to the direct approach. Some new teaching methods adopt however a more communicative orientation, and include interactive tasks in their programs. But in the majority of cases, the types of exercises evoke the direct approach, and the place and the role of meta-linguistic explanations point out the influence of the traditional approach (cf. Hirzalla and Odeh, 2011).

On the other hand, the morphologic complexity of Arabic has always represented the exclusive subject of most of descriptive studies. Few researches on Arabic specificities are devoted to discourse analysis, and since L2 teaching methods are elaborated on the basis of this traditional descriptive grammar which explores word construction and utterance-level, the constraints which intervene at discourse-level remain almost often unexplored in teaching programs, and remain obscure for non native learners.

The second consensus (Arabic is difficult) determines different methodological orientations that tend to simplify pedagogic grammar. This simplification takes three forms that sometimes coexist in one method:

1. Bilingual methods.
2. Progression by division of language levels (phonetic, morpho-syntactic, etc.).

### 3. Adapting Arabic discursive model to other languages.

Bilingual methods are frequent. They are elaborated in function of the L1 of learners. However, the presence of the two languages (L2 and L1) does not serve the objective of developing cross-linguistic perceptual competence. It has only a meta-linguistic function and serves in explaining Arabic specificities.

As for the second form, it represents the fact that Arabic is an agglutinate language, and that teaching it to non natives should focalise on word construction before introducing discourses and texts. Methods which adopt this form are usually divided in parts: graphic (since the Arabic alphabet differs from the Latin alphabet) and phonetic, morphologic and morpho-syntactic, discourses and texts.

The third form consists in adapting Arabic discursive particularities to other languages, specially English or French. This tendency is obvious in the following examples:

- (1) Jack fi alqitar. (copula is omitted in this type of construction)  
 Jack in the train  
 (2) huwa yajlis qorb alnafida.  
 He sits near the window  
 (3) huwa yaqra' aljarida.  
 He reads the newspaper

In (2) and (3), the personal pronoun *huwa* (*he*) can not be used as anaphoric since the subject, which is referentially maintained, is encoded in the verbal morphology (in general, this type of utterances is associated to images that illustrate different actions). The division into three independent but referentially related sentences does not respond to discursive constraints.

Arabic is in fact a language of strong discursive cohesion in which referential maintenance involves the production of multi-propositional utterances and the use of non specific items as *wa* (and):

- (4) Jack fi alqitar, yajlis qorb alnafida wa yaqra' aljarida  
 Jack on the train sits near the window and reads the newspaper

In comparison with the three utterances (1-3), this latest example is judged particularly difficult, specially for beginners, as it does not establish clear boundaries between the three propositions.

This form of simplification emphasizes the persistent general question of how to simplify pedagogic grammar destined for beginners without masking language specificities. In the case of Arabic, it seems that the objective of facilitating the learners' task induce the presentation of idiosyncratic discursive construction as a model.

In some teaching methods, simplifying pedagogic grammar involves also the two constructions SV(O) and VS(O) that exist in Arabic. These two distributions are sometimes presented out of context and consequently as equivalent, whereas they are governed by discursive and interactional constraints.

### **5. pedagogic grammar and interlanguage grammar**

The way pedagogic grammar is selected and organised has an important impact on how learners construct their grammar. Using descriptive grammar as pedagogic grammar in Arabic L2 teaching (and in general) emphasises two types of problems:

1. The misunderstanding of the objectives of L2 teaching/learning.
2. The role and function of metalanguage.

Descriptive grammar interests linguists or students in linguistics; it does not represent a major priority for L2 learners for whom the first objective is to communicate in L2. This does not mean that communication does not imply the comprehension of grammatical rules.

Understanding L2 specificities is certainly a determinant, but it can be an objective which is inserted in activities and tasks that develop communicative and interactive competence.

Furthermore, this methodological orientation neglects adult learners' needs. In some methods actually, even the most basic communicative skills (introducing oneself, introducing others, describing one's environment, talking about time and space, etc.) do not make part of



the program. Learners come to the end of their first year with considerable phonetic, morphologic and morpho-syntactic knowledge, but remain unable to enter in real communicative/interactive situations.

From an acquisitional point of view, systematic and ‘free’ explanations of L2 specificities is sometimes useless since they do not give the time and the ‘right’ for perceptual and inductive process. This orientation can be schematised by: explanation of rules → application; it does not take into consideration the principle of the systematicity of learner variety nor communicative approaches which favour a logic of inductive activities that imply the perception of L2 regularities: perception of L2 specificities → construction of interlanguage.

Some didactic studies have argued that meta-linguistic activities are to be proposed in parallel to linguistic activities, and that *conceptualisation exercises* have their place in the classroom when it is necessary, and in the function of learners’ productions (Besse & Porquier, 1984/1991).

This type of practice contributes to developing the capacity of perception of L2 regularities and constraints. It represents an alternative to constant meta-linguistic explanations, and can be more efficient since it intervenes when the learner is in the phase of formulating hypothesis on L2 specificities.

The difference between a pedagogy of systematic meta-linguistic explanations and a pedagogy of punctual conceptualisation exercises underlines the distinction between *input* and *intake* (Corder, 1967). The first evokes linguistic data that the learner receives whereas the second is the effective treatment of this data.

Klein (1989) defines the conditions of intake in L2 acquisition in terms of *critical rule*. This notion refers to the moment when a learner is able to classify his own production as

critical. Thus, intake involves conscious awareness of the learner about his own hypothesis, and is not determined by the abundance of explanations.

The 'predominance' of interlanguage grammar relative to pedagogic grammar and the complex relation between input and intake are the subject of several studies. Pienemann (1984, 1985) claims that intake takes place in the function of developmental sequences, and that explaining the rule R+1, for example, requires the comprehension and the assimilation of the rule R.

Becker (1997) defends that the factors which ensure the real treatment of the input, and consequently the intake, are related to the constraints of language treatment (form/function organisation, conceptual complexity of L2 forms in comparison with L1 forms) and also to the accumulation of knowledge in the learner's repertoire.

As for methods which adopt a direct approach in teaching Arabic L2, they present exclusively structural exercises and favour images as illustrative support. Contrary to the traditional approach, this orientation is universal and does not take into consideration the L1 of learners.

The main problem of these methods is that they favour fabricated pedagogic documents that do not represent a major interest for adult learners. Some of them adopt drawn images that are engaging only for children. Others introduce discursive units that can be boring, and do not ensure real interactive activities in the classroom.

In order to explore the correlation between pedagogic grammar and interlanguage grammar, we have observed two classrooms of French native speakers, learners of modern standard Arabic L2. In the first context, the program makes part of the direct approach, and organises progressions on the basis of the division of content into graphic and phonetic specificities, morphologic specificities, phrase, discourse and text (presented at the end). In

the second context, a bilingual method (Arabic/French) is used, and Arabic discursive specificities are adapted to French.

We have proposed different tasks to learners: ‘spontaneous’ dialogue, film retelling, picture description. The first group seems to have difficulty in constructing a discourse. The second produces an idiosyncratic discourse in which referential maintenance is built according to idiosyncratic principles (systematic use of anaphoric personal pronouns to refer to a NP, non distinction between the means used in referential maintenance to animate/inanimate entity, implicit maintenance when explicit maintenance is obligatory, etc.).

This result can certainly be explained by the interlanguage systematicity or by the interference between L2 and L1, but we can not attribute idiosyncratic means to this systematicity, nor to L2/L1 interaction, when teaching methods themselves present idiosyncratic discourse.

### **Conclusions and some perspectives**

This brief analysis shows that modern standard Arabic specificities influence the way pedagogic grammar destined to teaching this language as L2 is elaborated, and that pedagogic grammar has an important impact on interlanguage. On the one hand, limited communicative functions and the fact that this language has traditionally interested linguists more than non native learners explain the predominance of the traditional approach.

On the other hand, the fact that Arabic is reputed to be difficult induces its simplification as L2. This simplification takes three forms which can coexist in one method: bilingual methods, focalisation on phonetic, graphic and morphologic specificities before presenting discourses and texts, and adapting discursive constraints to other languages. The three forms have different types of impact on the construction and the evolution of the interlanguage.

Exclusive focalising on meta-linguistic activities and considering phonetic, graphic and morphologic specificities as having priority could develop other types of competence to the detriment of communicative competence. As for adapting Arabic discursive constraints to other languages, it masks the real particularities of this language and orients learners towards an idiosyncratic discursive construction.

In sum, we think that modernising modern standard Arabic L2 didactics implies three orientations:

1. Studies in linguistics and L2 acquisition.
2. Comparative didactics.
3. Teacher training.

It seems important that Arabic linguistics conducts innovating studies in pragmatics, enunciation and discourse analysis. Such studies should give the priority to explore, among others, the following points:

1. Referential introduction and maintenance, or more generally, utterance structure as a result of discursive and interactional constraints and not as a choice.
2. Anaphoric/deictic function of some personal pronouns (in general, referential expressions can be employed in anaphoric and deictic contexts (cf. Kleiber, 1994), but in Arabic, *huwa/hiya* equivalent to *he/she* are not used in all the processes of anaphoric maintenance).
3. The major role of non specific items (as *wa* equivalent to *and*) in discourse cohesion, and as highly related to Arabic constraints (cf. example 1-4 above).

Furthermore, studies in Arabic L2 acquisition have a particular interest, especially if their results are interpreted as a source that enriches descriptive grammar and as a source that supplies the elaboration of pedagogic grammar.

Comparative didactics is also beneficial, especially in an integrated didactics objective. This concept represents the concrete application of multilingualism perspectives in bilingual or

multilingual structures. Several researches explore the constraints that determine what language is to be adopted in teaching/learning each discipline (cf. Cajo, 2005). Some disciplines such as history, religion or civic education are in general proposed in L1 whereas others like maths, physics, chemistry, etc. can be taught in L2 or in both L2 and L1; in this latest case, contents should be harmonised and presented as complementary. The necessary harmonisation requires comparative research that takes into consideration similarities and divergences between two languages; it establishes, in fact, proximity on the basis of the perception of divergences (cf. Chiss, 2003).

Comparative studies can address modern standard Arabic L2 teaching methodology in relation to French or English L2 methodology. The objective of the comparison is not transposing methodological principles from one language to another, but underscoring the interaction between

1. general methodological principles,
2. constraints imposed by a language (specificities, social status, culture, etc.).

Finally, modernising Arabic L2 didactics involves teacher training. In the majority of cases, teachers are trained in linguistics, or in contrastive linguistics or translation. This may be explained by the fact that modern standard Arabic is the L1 of nobody; it is the language that Arabic native speakers learn at school after having acquired a dialectal variety. Therefore, programs destined for future teachers are principally based on the description of the language. On the contrary, the programs of, for example, a department of *French foreign language* are principally oriented towards methodology and pedagogy.

This latest choice can be justified by the fact that teachers of French teach their real L1 as L2, therefore they need pedagogy and methodology as a priority. Some researchers insist, however, that the department of French foreign language should integrate linguistic courses in addition to pedagogic courses in its programs.

The difference between the two orientations in Arabic and in French can be summarised by ‘mastering the linguistic content destined to L2 classroom’ vs. ‘mastering how to teach the linguistic content in L2 classroom’.

The development of Arabic teachers training can take place at two levels:

1. In initial training, pedagogic and methodological courses should be multiplied and reinforced.
2. In continuous training, different types of contact and discussion can be organised between Arabic L2 teachers and French L2 or English L2 teachers in bilingual and multilingual structures. This type of contact can also bring together L2 teachers and researchers in L2 didactics and acquisition.

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