Teaching Arabic in Context: Language as a Means to Sample the Culture beyond the Official Curriculum

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PGCertHE Dissertation: A Critical Commentary on an Example of Curriculum Development or Teaching and Learning Innovation

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Abstract:

In this piece, I reflect on my teaching practice and provide an example of curriculum development and teaching and learning innovation in my field. As an interdisciplinary tutor, who is also in charge of delivering the Arabic Electives Pathway programme (Arabic as a minor in certain degree options), I have been implementing extracurricular activities that help advance my Arabic students’ grasp of the language through using what they have learnt to access various cultural inputs in Arabic beyond the official curriculum. In what follows, I reflect on the practice, which has proven very popular with the students; I also suggest expanding it through creating a new interdisciplinary elective module about the Middle East, which would be open to final-year interested students in the Humanities and would be taught in English. There would, however, be an extra option to access some of the materials in Arabic for the Advanced (final-year) Arabic Pathway students, who opt to take the module.

The Challenge within the Current Structure:

The teaching and learning of languages has seen a considerable rise in UK Higher Education in general and at the University of Sussex in particular since the introduction of Language Electives Pathway by the Sussex Centre for Language Studies (SCLS).¹ The programme offers flexibility for those who may want to supplement their non-language specific discipline (e.g. History, International Relations, Psychology, etc.) with learning a language with the added option of making that language part of the degree in two pathway options for 2 (60 credits) or 3 years (90 credits). The latter amounts to having the language as a minor (25% of the entire degree).

¹ Please see the SCLS website for more details: http://www.sussex.ac.uk/languages/ml/electives/pathway
While this programme has proven very popular with Sussex students with year-on-year increase in recruitment numbers and those who continue until their final year, there remains a cultural content-related pedagogical gap between the teaching of European languages (French, Italian, Spanish and German) and non-European languages (Arabic, Chinese and Japanese). The European languages on offer share the same alphabet as English, which gives learners a considerable head start and saves valuable time that could be spent on understanding the culture.

The fact that the European languages on offer share the same alphabet and the higher likelihood that some students may have already studied these languages at school (in which case they are offered to join the pathway at a different level with more options to go into ‘Language for Special Purposes’ in the case of French and Spanish) has created a pedagogical divide in the structure between teaching European and non-European languages despite our common aim to comply with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Although non-European language pathway students are allocated 4 hours a week (as opposed to the 3 hours dedicated to their European language counterparts), they spend much of this time learning the new script (alphabet), mastering the new sounds and generally adjusting to learning a new foreign language that is distinctly different from anything European they may have seen or experienced before. This has resulted in a discrepancy in emphasis between European and non-European language pathway programmes that is also reflected in the assessment modes: European-language students are exposed to more real-life scenarios (such as listening and interpreting the news); non-European language students, on the other hand, are assessed under controlled environments (e.g. they are not expected to interpret news or audio-visual materials in the target language; instead, many of their assessments include seen texts and/or relatively more familiar scenarios), which takes away from the spontaneity of living and experiencing a language in its natural forms.

Furthermore, European language students are exposed to a considerably higher dose of cultural content in the form of literature, cinema, music, public affairs, etc. much of which takes place in the target language, especially at higher levels, with the option to specialise in a ‘Language for Special Purposes’. The teaching of non-European languages, on the other hand, tends to focus more on the pure linguistic elements of language teaching – that is, learning and mastering the grammar (phonology, morphology, syntax, etc.) of the target language with the cultural input taking a secondary position, largely due to time restrictions and to the fact that non-European language

2 This year we have a record number of finalists doing Arabic – 8 students in the Arabic Advanced group.
3 Please see the Council of Europe website for more details on the CEFR: https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions
students tend to take more time adjusting to the new script and linguistic structure, as explained above. As Dema and Moeller (2012) argue, there is no doubt about the ‘vital role of culture in language classrooms’ and it being a ‘fundamental part of the second language (L2) learning process’ (p. 75). While most language tutors acknowledge the central part of ‘culture’ in language learning and acquisition, ‘the question lingers as to how such cultural teaching should and could most effectively at the classroom level’ (p. 75). This question is even more pressing in the case of non-European languages (Arabic, Chinese and Japanese) in the language electives pathway at Sussex. Addressing it would help us better meet the CEFR as well as some of the dimensions of the UKPSF (A1, A4, A5, K2, K3, K5, K6, V4) as I will explain in my reflection on my personal teaching practice of Arabic in the section below.

Reflection on the Practice:

As an interdisciplinary tutor with a wide teaching experience in the Humanities (English, HAHP, Global Studies and SCLS), I have designed and taught content modules on linguistic, cultural, historical and political aspects of the Arab world such as ‘Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism’ (Global Studies), ‘Historical Controversy’ (HAHP) and ‘Language, Identity and Nation’ (SCLS); I have included original texts in Arabic (with English translation) as well as Arabic audio-visual materials (with English subtitles) in the delivery of these modules (e.g. film screenings, documentaries, etc) and organised special screening events for some of these materials as well as special film screenings for other events (e.g. The One World Week at Sussex) (A1, A2, A5, K4, V2, V4). I have made a point of inviting as many students as possible to these events, especially the ones learning Arabic (V1, V4). I would usually provide a contextual framework (synopsis, cultural significance, regional particularities such as dialect and accent variations, etc) beforehand and ask the Arabic pathway students to look out for particular grammatical structures and/or any vocabularies they recognise and variants specific to the cultural context of the film (e.g. the region). Core module students would, of course, be concentrating on the key themes/topics depicted in the film (e.g. ethnicity and feminism in Lebanon in Nadine Labaki’s Where Do We Go Now?) (K3). Arabic pathway students would then bring their observations with them to the following Arabic class and discuss these along with the film in Arabic. They are also given the opportunity to write a summary/review as an extracurricular activity (K3).

The practice has been tremendously successful and popular among students. First of all, they are given an in-depth cultural experience through sampling an artistic work (film) that portrays a particular issue relevant to the region in which the language is spoken (A2, K1, V4). More importantly, the students are subconsciously learning about it through the medium of the Arabic
language (with the aid of English subtitles when need be); in other words, they are using the language as a medium to experience and understand the culture with fellow core module students who may be concentrating on other (content-related) aspects/themes in the film in an enjoyable and ‘fun’ cinema-like setting (A1, A2, A4, K3, V1, V2). The practice has worked with various levels of Arabic language learners; even beginners have been able to grasp something relevant to their level (K3, K6, V1). Most of all, it helps get the students used to hearing language in action in its natural and spontaneous environment (i.e. how people really talk in particular region in the Arab world as opposed to how they should talk when they use the language formally). This is particularly important in the case of Arabic, where learners soon discover the diglossic nature of the language and the challenge arising from striking a balance between mastering the standard form on the one hand and the multiplicity of region-specific vernaculars, on the other. As Peter Abboud argues: ‘there exists a standard language used all over the Arab World in the press, on the radio, in the literature, and on formal occasions, commonly called Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). This dichotomy between colloquial and literary raises fundamental questions for an Arabic language program. Which form of the language is to be taught?’ (1971, p. 4). Furthermore, learning one dialect would generally only be useful in that particular region in which that dialect is spoken; many dialects are not mutually intelligible – let alone the fact that most ‘native Arabic speakers’ would generally be able to speak their own dialect in addition to MSA if they have been educated. Very rare are those who can speak multiple dialects flawlessly – let alone being able to teach more than one.

Hussein Elkhafaifi (2005) also points out the class-related issues surrounding diglossia among Arabic speakers and the potential issues facing those who opt to focus on either MSA or one of the regional dialects: ‘Students who work hard to become proficient in MSA may be discouraged to find that they still cannot communicate effectively because native speakers of Arabic do not use MSA for interpersonal communication, and students who study a dialect may feel inadequate in more formal situations where colloquial Arabic is inappropriate’ (p. 207). These complex issues further add to the difficulty of integrating more cultural input into Arabic classes as discussed in the opening of this essay. The issue lies with the various, multiple forms of Arabic that could be broadly narrowed down to the distinction between MSA, a standardised official form of the language that is taught at schools and universities across the Arab world and used in formal contexts on the one hand, and a multitude of regional dialects and vernaculars with even more accents to accompany them, on the other. This particular issue was the main subject of a recent international conference, *Mastering Arabic Variations* (MAV), which was held at the University of Genoa on 5-7
September 2018. I participated in the conference and benefited from the rich and informative rounds of discussions and debates by leading Arabists and prominent Arabic teaching experts from around the world. The general consensus by the end of the conference was to try and include at least one form of regional dialects in our academic teaching of MSA at HE level (A5, K6, V3). As a native speaker of Levantine (Eastern Mediterranean) Arabic, I have been including the Levantine dialect as a supplementary add-on (optional for those who want to learn it; I would explain the differences between grammatical and phonetic differences between MSA and Levantine Arabic and provide examples for the students. I would also use my film screenings (of Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian films) to revisit these differences and ask the students to look out for them in context (A4). I was pleased and reassured to have my personal approach certified and verified by major academics in the field (A5, K2, K5, V3), which also ties in directly with the importance of including cultural input in the classroom. The vast majority of popular culture in the Arab world is in dialectic forms; only literature and certain types of films and classical singing (high culture) are in either classical or Modern Standard Arabic (MSA).

As Monika Chavez (2002) shows in her emphasis on including various types of ‘culture’ with a small and a capital ‘c’ in the language classroom:

A plurality of students agreed that culture can be taught in a foreign language classroom . . . Such learners wrote, for example: ‘movies, food, cooking, history’ or ‘food, literature and music can easily be integrated.’ Others highlighted particularly useful teaching materials, in particular, the media: ‘video-clips of daily life or TV shows, reading popular magazines, books, listening to popular music can give insight into a culture.’ Still others stressed personal mediation, often emphasizing the teacher's own first-hand experiences with the culture: ‘Yes, my high school teacher, a native German, always was able to relate customary German practices.’ (p. 134)

I have included all of the above in my Arabic language teaching practice despite the multiple challenges at hand (V3): time-restrictions and having to align the delivery of Arabic with the CEFR in line with other languages (which further restricts the cultural input in favour of focusing on the linguistic elements of MSA) as well as the language-specific issue of diglossia in the Arabic-speaking world. My solution has been rather creative: I have had to think outside of the existing structure of timetables and modules and come up with an interesting, exciting way to get students to supplement their linguistic input of MSA with some cinematic, cultural experience mainly from the Levant and Egypt – the film screenings scheduled for other modules on the Middle East (A1, A2, A4, A4).

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4 Please see the conference’s official website for more details: http://www.lingue.unige.it/?page_id=17407
The particularity of ‘culture’ (with a small ‘c’) in the context of the Arab world is intrinsically linked to the diglossic nature of the Arabic language—each region produces its dialect-specific popular culture (film, music, TV shows, dramas and soap operas). Ross Steele (1989) emphasises the importance of including small ‘c’ culture in any foreign language programme:

Access to 'small c' culture is through the language spoken by the society because language has developed in response to the society's view of the world and its adaptation to the world. Language and culture are so tightly interwoven that they can never be separated—despite the conscientious efforts of generations of dedicated language instructors to focus principally on teaching grammar rules and exceptions to the rules! The word 'linguaculture' has been invented to stress the inseparability of language and culture (pp. 154-155).

In the case of the Arabic language, this link is multi-layered and arguably far more complex than many other languages for the reasons stated above (K1).

The students’ feedback on this approach—the inclusion of relevant, cultural-and-dialect-specific extracurricular activities to supplement their formal linguistic learning of MSA—has been tremendously positive (A2, K4, K5), with many stressing the ‘fun’ element of the practice; indeed, the general collective message was: attending and auditing these film screenings did not feel like ‘studying’; it was ‘fun’, yet ‘very useful’ and ‘enjoyable’ (A4, K3, V1). The feedback tallies with Graham Gibbs’s observation in Learning by Doing: A guide to Teaching and Learning Methods (1988) in which he discusses the importance of learning through personal commitment and taking part in the process: ‘The experience must matter to the learner. Learner must be committed to the process of exploring and learning’ (p. 18) (A4, K3, V1). The practice also allows the student a level of independence as they become more involved personally in the process of comparing and finding out the linguistic differences between MSA, which they study formally and thoroughly, and Levantine Arabic as they look out for these discrepancies while watching films and listening to music (K3, V1, V4). Many students have even asked for more sources and audio-visual materials and started discovering and exploring these online by themselves (e.g. YouTube Arabic music channels and other music streaming services such as Apple Music and Spotify) indicating a growing interest in Arabic popular culture (A4, K3, K4, V1), which tallies with Gibb’s recommendation: ‘There must be scope for the learner to exercise some independence from the teacher’ (p. 19) (V3). Not only has this practice enabled the students to bridge the gap between MSA and the regional dialects and thus enabling them to be more flexible in their use of the different registers of the language, but it has also broadened their cultural horizon and provided them with a practical and fun methodology to engage more meaningfully in the culture (K2, K5, V4). Culture, after all, is an essential part of learning a
language as Claire Kramsch points out: ‘Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.’ (1993, p. 1).

Furthermore, this growing interest in the culture of the language has had a particularly interesting impact on certain content (non-language) modules on the Middle East, where some students on these courses happen to be taking the Arabic electives pathway. This has been the case in *Language, Identity and Nation*, a second-year elective module offered to SCLS and Global Studies students; I teach and convene the module and I have had a couple of my Arabic pathway students enrolled on the course alongside other (non-language) students. The Arabic pathway students displayed remarkable awareness of certain aspects of the course due to their existing knowledge of the Arabic language. For example, one of the topics examines the rise of anti-Ottoman Arab nationalism and the role of the Arabic language in ‘creating’ and shaping the ‘Arab nation’ in its imagined modern form. The participation of one Arabic pathway student, Abigail Hobden, last year (2017-18) was particularly insightful; her seminar presentations delved into the particularities of the Arabic language the widespread of diglossia among Arabic speakers, which provided insightful critiques benefitting other (non-Arabic pathway) students on the course. The Arabic pathway student’s ability to draw on her specialised knowledge of the Arabic language and link it to the socio-political, anthropological and historical concepts discussed in the module was particularly impressive as it highlights the importance of interdisciplinarity in the classroom and the students’ capacity and willingness to learn from other and apply knowledge across disciplines (A5, K3, V1, V4). Furthermore, the practice of mixing interdisciplinary students has also attracted some to learn Arabic as an Open Course in the evening (K3, V4): Evie Davies, one of the International Development students who took the *Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism* modules back in 2016-17, enrolled on an Arabic Open Course in the evening mainly because of her newly discovered interest in the culture and history of the Middle East (which were taught on the course) and the interaction she had with another Arabic pathway student during a collective film screening (Nadine Labaki’s *Where Do We Go Now?*); Evie was

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5 Please see the module’s Library website for more details on the content: [https://rl.talis.com/3/sussex/lists/1F47E9E3-AFD1-172C-7A5F-48CC8B52A08F.html?lang=en-GB](https://rl.talis.com/3/sussex/lists/1F47E9E3-AFD1-172C-7A5F-48CC8B52A08F.html?lang=en-GB)

6 I taught and co-convened this module with Professor Vinita Damodaran between 2014-2017; please see the module webpage for more details: [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/global/internal/departments/development/modules/2018/68630](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/global/internal/departments/development/modules/2018/68630)
impressed with her colleague’s ability to grasp some of the narrative in the original Lebanese variant of Arabic and subsequently decided to give the language a go (K3, V4).

With the success and popularity of my experimental interdisciplinary teaching practice, which I have been able to implement despite logistic challenges, I am now going to propose a new module that would take advantage of the benefits discussed above while making their implementation easier at the University.

**The New Proposal for Further Academic and Professional Development:**

With the new proposed ‘Humanities Membrane’ scheme, which aims to bring closer collaboration between Schools and Departments whose disciplines are broadly in the Humanities (English, SCLS, HAHP MFM, Global Studies) and the recent restructuring within SCLS that saw the end of Language Degrees (French, Spanish and Italian), which may be replaced by a Liberal Arts Degree, I would like to propose a new interdisciplinary elective module that builds up on my Humanities-wide teaching practice and brings the teaching of Arabic and Middle Eastern studies more closely together (A1, K3, K5, V2, V4). The new module would focus on selective themes of Arab and Middle Eastern culture (literature, cinema, history and music) with the added option of using the content for Advanced Arabic teaching (for the Arabic pathway students who opt in) (V1). The proposed module would be open to interested final-year students from the Humanities and the language of instruction will be English as far as regular lectures and seminars are concerned; however, the module will also offer an extra weekly workshop for advanced Arabic pathway students, who will have the opportunity to sample parts of the content (text, film, music, news excerpts, etc.) in the original Arabic in the workshops (A1, A2, A5, K3, K6, V1, V4). Advanced Arabic pathway students completing the optional extra workshop will receive a recognition of this extra effort that will be reflected in the final title of their degree: rather than finishing their major ‘with Arabic’ (e.g. BA in History with Arabic), the final degree title may include something like ‘with Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies’, so a student majoring in History and completing the entire Arabic pathway + this module would receive a degree with the title of ‘BA in History with Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies’.

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7 The University has recently axed the Language Degrees provided by SCLS; the decision was communicated to SCLS staff on the first day of term, 24 September 2018. SCLS has already accepted a new cohort of Language Degree students this year (2018-19) and will see them through until they graduate in 3-4 years’ time. However, SCLS is currently putting together a new plan to replace these degrees; this may include the creation of a Liberal Arts Degree and/or the provision of more elective modules to other Schools and Departments within the proposed framework of the ‘Humanities Membrane’ initiative proposed earlier in the summer (June 2018).
At the moment, French and Spanish language electives pathway students, who join the programme in their first year at an ‘advanced level’ progress to have their main degree ‘with French/Spanish for Special Purposes’ to reflect the fact that they have done more in their minor (translation and simultaneous interpretation), as opposed to their colleagues who join at the Ab Initio (complete beginners’) level. This option has only been available to French and Spanish pathway students (due to the fact that many students do French at Spanish at A Levels and want to progress further when they include language in their degree); implementing the new module proposed above would bring a similar option to Arabic pathway students and potentially to other non-European language pathway students (Chinese and Japanese) if the course convenors of these languages may be willing to create a similar scheme. This would help bridge the gap in linguistic and cultural exposure between European and non-European language pathways highlighted at the beginning of this essay. The aim is enable the students of non-European languages to ultimately use the language as an immersive tool to experience the culture – not merely as a communicative device for basic everyday tasks, for language is the most immediate and direct way to sample and experience culture and vice versa; these are important points that need to be taken into consideration when we reflect on what we would like the students to learn and be able to do with that knowledge – apart from understanding how a language works (A5, K2, K5). As Ross Steele argues, a good indicator of effective language teaching is the ability to enable students to communicate and think differently (A5, K5, V3): ‘A new balance needs to be found between experiential and cognitive learning so that our students become not only fluent travellers but also enjoy the intellectual stimulation that comes from exposure to other ways of interpreting society and the world’ (1989, pp. 161-162).

Moreover, the proposed module would be particularly attractive and relevant to students interested in Middle Eastern studies in general beyond the Arabic language pathway. The recent establishment of the Middle East and North Africa Centre at Sussex (MENACS) came as a result of the University’s increasing interest in Middle Eastern Studies as is evident in the proliferation of specialised undergraduate and postgraduate modules that cover the region in History, Global Studies and IDS among others. Nonetheless, there remains a pedagogical gap between those interested in studying various aspect of the Middle East (culture, history, politics, economics, etc.) and those who are studying the language. The proposed module aims to bridge the gap by offering an initiative towards incorporating the two into a fuller programme in the future. This practice has already been implemented in many reputable UK universities and HE establishments such as Oxford, Cambridge, St Andrews, Edinburgh, Leeds, SOAS, KCL, Durham and Exeter, where Comparative Literature Departments and Schools of Modern Languages offer degree-level programmes that
incorporate Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies (language and culture) in a pathway courses or degrees offering the students a wide range of options and a closer integration of text and context.

Furthermore, this provisional scheme could easily be adapted to fit in with the suggested Liberal Arts Degree (mentioned above), which could be combined with a language as is currently the case with the Liberal Arts Degree offered by the University of Bristol (A5, V3, V4).\(^8\) The proposed module could also be adopted and adapted to all other language options at SCLS, which would help streamline what we offer and emphasise the importance of interdisciplinarity while providing students with even more study options with language and culture as an integrated part of what they do and study (K5, V3). As Jack Richards and Jack Lockhart (1994) argue, ‘Teaching is essentially a thinking process. Teachers are constantly confronted with a range of different options and are required to select from among these options the ones they think are best suited to a particular goal’ (p. 78). As the goal should be a better teaching practice that is both reflective and research-driven, it is evident that we should constantly assess and reassess what we do, how we do it and how it is done comparatively: nationally and internationally; it is also essential to listen to learners’ feedback as much as we require them to listen to ours. Reflecting on my interdisciplinary teaching practice as well as academic and research expertise has enabled me to better understand and re-evaluate what I do and why and how I should do it (A3, A4, A5, K5, K6, V3).

I am including (as an appendix) the provisional outline of a sample module that I have created as part of this research, which would hopefully better demonstrate the wider applicability of what I am trying to achieve in relation to ensuring a better, more inclusive and more interdisciplinary teaching and learning experience for the students, who should always be provided with as many options and possible combinations as possible in order to address and include their various learning needs and styles (A1, A5, V3, V4). In conclusion, I would like to say how much I have enjoyed doing this task and the research that has gone into it; it has helped me reflect on my own teaching practice properly and thoroughly and feed forward my ideas turning them into something useful and potentially implementable at SCLS and the wider university. Many thanks to all the tutors, covenrors, supervisors, speakers, coordinators and everyone who has made the PGCertHE programme enjoyable and very useful indeed.

With best wishes,

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\(^8\) Please see the link for more details: [http://www.bristol.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/2019/liberal-arts/ba-liberal-arts/](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/2019/liberal-arts/ba-liberal-arts/)
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