

STUDI E TESTI DI PALAZZO SERRA

COLLANA  
DEL DIPARTIMENTO DI LINGUE E CULTURE MODERNE  
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI GENOVA

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Manuela E.B. Giolfo  
Federico Salvaggio

# **Mastering Arabic Variation**

A Common European Framework of Reference Integrated Model

*Foreword by*  
Kassem M. Wahba





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Although the ideas expressed in this book come from a joint research project of both authors, Manuela E.B. Giolfo is to be held responsible for chapters 2, 3, and for the Introduction, and Federico Salvaggio for chapters 1, 4, and for the Conclusions.





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## Foreword

It is not easy to write a foreword for the book of two of my Italian colleagues, who have significant contributions in Arabic linguistics, sociolinguistics and applied linguistics. I have known them through their contribution on Arabic sociolinguistics when they wrote a chapter on “Contemporary Arabic Variation and Conditionals” in *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century* (2017). They also collaborated on the chapter “A Digitally Assisted Model of Integration of Standard and Colloquial Arabic Based on the Common European Framework” in *Arabic as One Language* (2018). The present volume is a detailed study in the field of Arabic language teaching and learning, and represents a major contribution on *Mastering Arabic variation*. In the present study, they explore how proficiency of Arabic as a multiglossic language can be acquired following the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). To emulate the ability of educated native speakers to cope with various registers of Arabic, the authors propose in this book a proficiency-based curricular model, through a task-based approach, where integration and interaction between Standard Arabic (SA) and Colloquial Arabic (CA) are illustrated via the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), within a cognitive framework.

Their contribution takes me back to remember the Italian scholars who contributed to Arabic language and culture. Among them, the great Arabist Carlo Alfonso Nallino (Turin 1872–Rome 1938) who published many works, including one on Egyptian dialect (*L'arabo parlato in Egitto*, 1900), and one on *‘Ilm al-falak: Tārīḫuhu ‘inda al-‘Arab fī al-qurūn al-wusṭā* [The History of Astronomy among the Arabs in the Middle Ages] (Cairo, 1911). Nallino was one of the professors who taught Taha Hussein, one of the great intellectuals within Egyptian and Arab culture during the twentieth century, in the Egyptian University. In 1933, Nallino was named a member of the Royal Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo (see D. M. Reid, “Cairo University and the Orientalists”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1987, vol. 19, pp. 51–75, for more discussion).

There is no question that the publication of the present volume provides evidence that Arabic can be taught for literary purposes as well as for communication purposes. Recently, the tremendous increase in the number of learners of Arabic in the United States, Europe and other parts in the world (see Goldberg and Looney 2013 for enrollments in the United States higher institutions) has been accompanied by changes in the goals and needs of learners of Arabic as a foreign language. According to Ryding (2013: 59), the change of the goals of Arabic language teaching from developing grammatical competence to a full communicative competence, putting into perspective the learner's goals and needs whether they are academic or pragmatic, has made it urgent for many Arabic programs to restructure their curricula and prioritize their goals (see also Belnap 2006; Wilmsen 2006). Consequently, communicative curriculum design that is proficiency-based became a priority and a challenge for many Arabic programs.

The concept of proficiency has been a problematic issue in Arabic language education. While in many non-Western Universities proficiency was known as mastering the written variety of Arabic in reading, writing and grammar, in many Arabic programs in the United States, Europe and elsewhere, it is commonly known as mastering both varieties of Arabic: the written variety (*fushā*) and the regional spoken variety. In the Arab world, proficiency in Arabic means mastering the modern written variety known in the West as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). In the West, many foreign language programs follow one of the proficiency frames guidelines, either The American Council on The Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) or The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). (See Peter Heath 1990 for more discussion on the concept of proficiency in Arabic).

Whilst the communicative-proficiency approach has been used in foreign language education, implementing it with a diglossic language like Arabic has been problematic. According to Ryding (2013: 5), the lack of an explicit spoken target model that deals with the native speaker use of Arabic in formal and informal contexts has been a challenging issue. As it is known, Arabic has two varieties: *a*) the spoken regional one which is usually used in personal and daily life communication, *b*) the literary (written) variety which is the one used in education (see Ferguson 1959 for more discussion of diglossia).

Not long ago, Arabic used to be taught within Classical and Semitic studies as one of the classical languages, with a focus on

grammar, reading and translation. An illustrative example is *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*, translated from the German of Caspari and edited with numerous additions and corrections by W. Wright (Cambridge, 1933). The purpose of studying the classical variety of Arabic is to read classical texts.

After the Second World War, many language programs started to teach Arabic as a modern language. By following the audio–lingual approach, new materials have been published by Peter Abboud et al. (1968, 1983), where learners study modern Arabic with more focus on reading, writing, and grammar than on speaking and listening. The textbook used was *Elementary Modern Standard Arabic* (Cambridge, 1983). This textbook has been the standard curriculum for Arabic language education for many Arabic language programs for several years.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the proficiency movement started, within the communicative approach that attempts to emulate the four language skills of the native speaker, by giving an equal emphasis on: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In order to implement the communicative–proficiency approach in teaching Arabic, two issues were problematic for Arabic: a) interpreting the concept of proficiency, b) defining the Arabic native speaker. With an attempt to use authentic materials, generic descriptions of the four skills across various levels of proficiency in ACTFL were offered by Roger Allen (1985 and 1989). However, the main language focus was only on one variety: *fushḥā*, since the regional variety was stigmatized in education. An example of this approach is M. Alish and A. Clark, *Ahlan wa saḥlan: Functional Modern Standard Arabic for Beginners* (2nd ed., Yale University Press, 2010).

The new proficiency movement, based on the communicative approach in language education, has put the written variety of Arabic into question. In fact, a main issue faced in many Arabic language programs which attempted to adopt the communicative–proficiency approach is: What forms of Arabic (written or spoken) to teach in order to meet the goals of a communicative–proficiency approach in teaching foreign languages? And: How should the two forms of Arabic be integrated? As the communicative–proficiency approach requires using the four language skills, using one variety rather than the other does not meet the above requirements to build an effective communicative–proficiency–based curriculum. The main question faced by Arabic language instruction is how the two varieties should be blended (integrated) in one unified curriculum (Ryding, 2013: 4–5).

In answering the above questions, the authors of the present book, Manuela E.B. Giolfo and Federico Salvaggio, face the challenge to set up a road-map, using the proficiency guidelines of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), where technology plays an integral role in building a task-based Arabic curriculum. Towards building the present curriculum, many theoretical, methodological, ideological, and even practical issues are addressed. Their goal is that the learner of Arabic should be able to use Arabic to cope with various socio-communicative tasks in real life, in ways that emulate educated native speakers' linguistic behavior, where multiple registers are used. The proposed proficiency curricular model is different from other variation-driven models as they were practiced earlier (e.g., Younes 2007). It is in fact a variation-driven model for proficiency enhancement.

In Chapter I, the authors address the concept of proficiency in Arabic and the way it relates to second language acquisition theory. In Chapter II, they give an analysis of current practices in teaching Arabic as a foreign language, and the way the sociolinguistic reality of Arabic is conceived in Arabic language programs. The inadequacy in addressing linguistic variation — related to the rapid changes in the sociolinguistic situation of Arabic as it is used, and the way it is reflected in language practices — has required an alternative model to address the new proficiency learners' goals and needs. In comparing the sociolinguistic situation of Arabic in Egypt, as examined by Badawi in 1973, with its counterpart in 2011, Badawi observed considerable sociolinguistic variation in the use of Arabic. This is in support of Giolfo and Salvaggio's curricular model. For example, Badawi noted the increasing spread of the regional variety in many aspects of writing that were originally designated for *fushā* specifically; the means of social media and the advertisements in *al-Ahram* is a good example. *Al-Ahram* is the formal and the most famous national newspaper in Egypt (see Badawi, 2011:23–38 for more discussion).

In response to the above recent sociolinguistic changes and the inadequate practices in teaching Arabic, the authors attempt an alternative task-based approach (Chapter III), where communicative technology plays a main role in providing a Virtual Learning Environment to enable both teachers and learners to overcome issues of traditional learning environment. In attempt to emulate the tasks performed by the educated native speaker in real life situations, the authors conduct an analysis of the distribution of those tasks in relation to the two varieties CA/SA, the degree of mixing between them, and the four language

skills across the various proficiency levels as offered in CEFR. Based on the above analysis, appropriate digital language materials are included, as, for example, written messages via SMS, Twitter, etc.

In Chapter IV, the authors illustrate how the proposed curricular model can be applied at the syllabus level, in class and at various levels of CEFR proficiency. They also illustrate how the various digital activities at various levels of proficiency and language skills operate through enabling integration, separation, and reproducing the mixing between the two varieties. The authors present a summary and an account of their model in the Conclusions.

Every chapter in this book contains useful information. The book is of relevant interest for all teachers of Arabic, particularly those teachers of Arabic who would like to understand the process of integration within the designing of a syllabus across the various proficiency levels of CEFR. I am impressed by Chapter IV, where many tasks are offered for the four language skills across the various proficiency levels to meet the teachers' goals and the learners' needs. An example is constituted by digital activities integrating oral and written skills, presenting SA in combination with various registers of CA.

Doubtless the past few years have witnessed a change in the goals of learning Arabic, curriculum design, methods of teaching and assessment. As a result, language programs particularly at the university level vary in their goals and language policy. New curricula are designed in which technology is implemented. The present study suggests that Arabic programs renew their curriculum and provide professional development for their teachers. The present book offers to language programs, teachers and researchers in Arabic language and foreign language education a wealth of information. It also provides insights on the complicated nature of the sociolinguistic situation of Arabic, and on how an applied linguist can examine the situation and provide a communicative–proficiency model for the Arabic language curriculum. This study is a major contribution to the field of Arabic language teaching and learning and a major tribute to devoted scholars of Arabic language pedagogy and linguistics.

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## Introduction

Contemporary proficiency frameworks, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines, conceive *language proficiency* as the ability to use language to cope with several socio–communicative tasks referring to various real–life situations in ways that emulate native speakers’ behavior. Although originally elaborated for the learning, teaching, and assessment of most common European languages, one witnesses nowadays, within Western institutions, a growing tendency to apply proficiency guidelines to the teaching and assessment of non–Western languages such as Chinese and Arabic.

When the concept of language proficiency, as conceived by proficiency guidelines, is applied to the Teaching of Arabic as a Foreign Language (TAFLL) we are immediately confronted with a series of delicate theoretical, methodological, ideological, and even practical problems. Unlike what we see in the case of most commonly taught European languages, Arabic native speakers, in carrying out the various socio–communicative tasks, envisaged by contemporary proficiency guidelines, do not resort to just a single variety of their language. Native speakers of Arabic use different varieties of their language when dealing with different socio–communicative tasks. For instance, if they want to ask the price of an item in the marketplace they will use a colloquial variety whereas when they write an academic essay or give an official speech they will resort to the so-called standard variety (on the use of the term ‘standard’ cfr. Giolfo and Sinatorra 2016). Colloquial Arabic (CA) and Standard Arabic (SA) exhibit differences on the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical level and their respective usage in association with different situational contexts bears distinct rhetorical, ideological, and socio–pragmatic connotations.

As a consequence of this complex varieties interaction both colloquial and standard Arabic varieties are essential to cope, in a way that reflects native speakers’ behavior in real life, with the

socio-communicative tasks envisaged by proficiency frameworks. Therefore if we decide to conform to proficiency frameworks we will have to adopt a theoretical and methodological approach to TAFL that incorporates in our learning, teaching, and assessment practices both standard and colloquial varieties.

The inclusion of the latter (CA) in the teaching of Arabic is particularly problematic as it represents a serious challenge to the way Arabic is currently taught in most schools, language centers, and universities, inside and outside the Arab world, where most students only learn SA and the teaching of CA remains an exception. This exclusion of CA from most Arabic curricula can be related to several factors. Among these, the main crucial elements that account for the predominance of the SA-based approach in TAFL are the idea of language prestige associated with SA (in its ideological, political, and religious dimensions) and a number of practical difficulties encountered in the teaching of CA (such as the lack of standardization of CA, the great number of existing colloquial varieties, and the scarcity of adequate instructional materials).

If on the one hand CA is systematically excluded from most contemporary Arabic programs, or relegated to an ancillary position, on the other, in order to conform to the standards endorsed by other foreign language programs, SA-based Arabic curricula, instructional materials, and assessment procedures are increasingly presented within the framework of contemporary proficiency guidelines. Proficiency guidelines' levels are thus adopted as "labels" to identify the different stages (elementary, intermediate, or advanced) associated with the various courses, learning resources, and assessment tools considered. Such a nominal adoption of proficiency guidelines as "labels" to be applied to current SA-based TAFL practices appears in clear discordance with proficiency guidelines. A similar use of proficiency guidelines implies an overextension of SA to cover socio-communicative tasks that in real-life are normally associated with CA. Therefore such use is not only in opposition to proficiency guidelines' principles but, more importantly, is in clear dissonance with the Arabic linguistic reality itself. This approach reveals the endorsement of a mono-variety-driven conception of proficiency that can be described as *proficiency in a specific language variety*, i.e. as the ability to use the linguistic means provided by a particular language variety to express oneself and to understand others when they use that same particular language variety. The problem with the

application of this mono-variety approach to a context that exhibits complex varieties interaction is that it reflects only a limited part of the linguistic reality. Thus it deprives learners of the possibility of understanding what is written or said in the other language varieties and of fully benefiting from the engagement in real-life communication where different varieties are employed. If proficiency frameworks relate the notion of proficiency to native-like language use in real-life situations this is because the theoretical and methodological pedagogic perspective that they share emphasizes the importance of presenting learners with meaningful and authentic language inputs as a means to enhance the language acquisition process. Thus, besides the growing demand for standardization of teaching and assessment of non-European languages, rethinking the teaching of Arabic in the light of proficiency frameworks constitutes a great opportunity to reflect on the peculiarities of the Arabic sociolinguistic situation. Moreover it represents an incentive to develop theoretical and methodological approaches in TAFL that are more consistent with the findings of contemporary research in language acquisition and consequently to elaborate more efficient pedagogic strategies to enhance authentic proficiency in Arabic. Applying proficiency frameworks implies the necessity for TAFL-based research of elaborating an approach that integrates the learning, teaching, and assessment of both CA and SA and takes into account the complex varieties interactions at play in authentic linguistic contexts. Since proficiency frameworks were not originally conceived for languages that like Arabic show a great variability, in order to develop such an approach, it will be necessary to rephrase the concept of language proficiency proposed by the frameworks in a way that fits more explicitly the contemporary sociolinguistic reality of the Arabic language.

In the present study, in order to elaborate our proposed model for proficiency enhancement in TAFL, we will conceive proficiency not as a *variety-driven* concept but as a *variation-driven* concept. Consequently proficiency will be conceptualized as the ability to use language to cope with various socio-communicative tasks in real life in ways that emulate educated native speakers' linguistic behavior in authentic contexts where multiple varieties are involved. With this notion in mind, we will go through the different socio-communicative tasks presented at each level of proficiency guidelines and relate them to the language varieties involved in those tasks in authentic contexts that present complex varieties interaction. This way, proficiency

frameworks will serve us as a comprehensive guideline suggesting the modality of interaction and integration of CA and SA at different stages of the language acquisition process.

We will then consider the role of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the development and implementation of our proposed model for proficiency enhancement in TAFL. We will illustrate how ICT constitutes an integral part and a constituent element of the proposed model and represents «the condition of possibility» without which the model itself and its implementation would not be conceivable.

In response to the objections to the feasibility of an approach that aims at reproducing the complexity of the contemporary Arabic sociolinguistic reality within the classroom, we will illustrate how ICT can be used to create a Virtual Learning Environment where learners can operate in ways that emulate native speakers' linguistic behavior in real-life situations. In particular, we will explain how ICT allows the integration of digital activities that entail multiple skills, engage multiple senses, and involve multiple language varieties within a unified cognitive framework that supports effective language acquisition.

In our proposed model of proficiency enhancement the contribution of ICT vis-à-vis contemporary TAFL challenges will not be limited to that. As a consequence of the diffusion of new channels of communication (internet sites, blogs, forums, social media, instant messaging applications, etc.) we witness the emergence of new language practices. We will try to illustrate how this generates an extremely interesting circularity between language uses and technologies. ICT thus represents at the same time the means through which some significant contemporary uses of the language can be observed and the medium through which such linguistic practices are generated. On the basis of this, the role of ICT within our model for proficiency enhancement in TAFL can hardly be overestimated.

As illustrated so far the present study touches many of the critical issues in contemporary Arabic language pedagogy such as the enhancement of authentic proficiency, the integration of standard and colloquial Arabic, the compliance of current Arabic programs to the standards of current proficiency frameworks, the development of proficiency guidelines tailored to the peculiarities of the Arabic sociolinguistic situation, the emergence of new language practices in association with the use of new channels of communication, and

last but not least the role of ICT and new media in TAFL. All these topics are at the center of an ongoing debate in the field TAFL-based research that is far from having reached unanimously agreed conclusions.

The present work does not have the ambition to produce any definitive results. Rather its main purpose and aspiration is to provide Arabic teachers, pedagogues, and linguists with an original, coherent, and theoretically consistent model for proficiency enhancement in TAFL. As we will try to illustrate in the following pages, our variation-driven proposed model, based on proficiency frameworks and role of ICT, will hopefully benefit TAFL research by suggesting alternative strategies to tackle the multiple present challenges faced by the discipline.

In chapter 1 we will illustrate how the concept of language proficiency is conceived by contemporary frameworks in language pedagogy and how this concept relates to other key concepts in contemporary second language teaching and acquisition theories.

In chapter 2 we will analyze current TAFL practices in the light of the concept of language proficiency, as conceived by proficiency frameworks, and *vis-à-vis* the complex sociolinguistic reality of the Arabic language and its extreme variability.

In chapter 3 we will propose, as an alternative approach to most common current TAFL practices, our own model for proficiency enhancement that takes into account the complex sociolinguistic reality of the Arabic language and that is based on proficiency guidelines and CEFR in particular. Paragraphs 3.2 and 3.3 will respectively deal with the critical role of both ICT and the teacher within our proposed model.

In chapter 4 we will show how the model illustrated in chapter 3 can be applied to syllabus design and how digital activities become, at various stages of the learning process, an integral and essential part of the syllabus itself.

In the conclusions we will summarize the results achieved in our study and give a synthetic account of the proposed model.