REVIEW OF *MASTERING ARABIC WITH TWO AUDIO CDS*
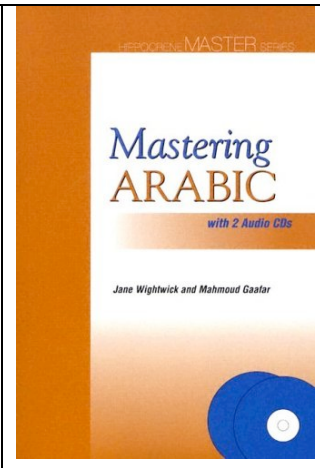
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In recent years, there have been numerous developments in materials production for teaching Arabic as a foreign language. Many institutions and authors have responded to increasing demand with several textbooks. The newly designed materials have been characterized by a tendency to get away from the traditional structural approach and to adopt a more functional, communicative approach (e.g. Al-Batal, Brustad, & Al-Tonsi, 1995). The book under review, *Mastering Arabic,* represents this functional communicative approach.

Mastering Arabic is one of Hippocrene Books' "mastering" series and aims at providing the novice learner with a general understanding of the overall structure of Arabic as well as the means for basic communication. According to the authors, it is a comprehensive course in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) that focuses on teaching the script as well as the spoken language. The book presents the basic grammatical structures of Arabic couched within a communicative functional approach. A variety of functional and more traditional exercises (around 200) are used to reinforce the use of grammar structures and new vocabulary. The book focuses mainly on MSA but introduces one of the major Arabic dialects (the Egyptian dialect) in some of the dialogues and practice situations. The book uses a variety of simple and semi-authentic dialogues (e.g., Chapter 17: exercises 2 and 3), newspaper extracts (e.g., Chapter 13: exercise 5), drawings, and photographs to reflect aspects of Arab culture (e.g., Chapter 10: exercise 4, and Chapter 20: exercise 4). The textbook is intended for classroom use as well as individual self-study.

Mastering Arabic comprises one volume (370 pages, including glossaries and appendices). The book is organized into twenty chapters. These chapters are preceded by an index of the audio files that accompany the book, a list of contents, acknowledgements, a preface, and an introduction for students which includes directions for how the CDs are to be used with the book. The four appendices are "The Arabic Script," "The Arabic Verb," "Months of the Year," and "Plural Patterns." Answer keys to exercises and an English-Arabic glossary are also included. Among the twenty chapters, three are to be used by learners for revision (Chapters 8, 15, and 20).

The Arabic alphabet, which is presented in the first six chapters, is not presented in the traditional alphabetical order but is presented in groups. Each group of letters (consonants and vowels) contains letters of similar basic shapes. For example, the letters in Chapter 5 are similar in shape but vary slightly in the number of dots above or below each. Each of the first six chapters covers 5 letters, diacritical symbols, a list of vocabulary, and grammatical concepts, such as nominal sentences in Chapter 2, and Idaafa (possession) in Chapter 3. In addition, each chapter contains exercises for the visual and aural

recognition of letters, handwriting exercises in which learners practice writing the shape of the letters and how to join them within a word, and pronunciation exercises and activities. In addition, the first chapter has suggested techniques for vocabulary learning.

All other chapters of the book are topic-based. Each chapter is organized around a topic, which provides the backdrop for grammar structures, vocabulary, and practice activities. The topics comprise themes, notions, and communicative functions: family, jobs, describing things and places, location, countries and people, counting things, shapes and colors, past events, wishes, all the president's men, every day, eating and drinking, comparing things, and future plans. The book contains visual materials, such as authentic photographs of stamps (e.g., Chapter 10: exercise 4), charts and diagrams (e.g., Chapter 13: a weather chart in exercise 5, and a TV schedule in Chapter 16: exercise 3). In general, the presentation of the exercises is transparent. The two CDs, which have clear recordings of words, dialogues, and other activities, consist of nineteen segments: nine on the first CD, and ten on the second one. *Mastering Arabic* introduces about 500 basic vocabulary words across the twenty chapters.

The way in which grammatical structures are introduced depends on the topic. For example, nominal sentences (sentences that begin with a noun as opposed to verbal sentences that begin with a verb and are followed by a subject) and the pronouns for first and second person are presented when students learn how to introduce themselves (Chapter 2). Past tense is introduced when learners narrate events that happened in the past (Chapter 12). *Mastering Arabic* focuses on the four language skills in the following order: reading, listening, writing, and speaking, within each chapter.

As noted in on the book's cover pages and in its introduction, the main objective of *Mastering Arabic* is to teach the basics of Arabic in terms of structures and means of communication. The grammatical structures are distributed across the 20 chapters according to the thematic functions intended. For example, forming adjectives, collective nouns, and the singular and plurals of words were introduced in the context of describing places in Chapter 7. Forming comparative patterns from adjectives and forming nouns from the various verb forms are introduced in the context of comparing things in Chapter 18. The range of grammatical structures that confront the learner in each chapter vary from three to six, depending on the topic to be dealt with. This reflects the authors' philosophy towards learning Arabic grammar related to function and theme and not as a pre-designed sequence of grammatical rules. The simplicity with which grammatical rules are presented and sequenced (i.e., the same grammatical rule is presented more than once, and the second time, the learner is presented with more explanation) makes the Arabic language accessible to novice learners. The presentation and recycling of the *idaafa* (possession) illustrates this concept as it is introduced in Chapter 3 and then recycled in Chapters 6 and 14.

The contextualized activities that focus on communication in each chapter make this book attractive to learners of Arabic. Also, since Arabic is a diglossic language, consisting of MSA and a regional "Colloquial" variety, selecting only one variety of Arabic for instruction will hinder the ability of non-native speakers to communicate effectively in the Arab world. The integration of MSA with Egyptian Arabic as a regional dialect is another point that makes this book successful. Due to the spread of Egyptian mass media, such as movies, soap operas, and songs all over the Arab world, Egyptian Arabic has become the most common Arab dialect in terms of comprehension and use. The use of Egyptian Arabic as a regional dialect together with MSA reflects the authors' view that these are two levels of one language and not two separate languages. This is in stark contrast to other textbooks in which the language materials are limited to MSA.

Also, the hints that the authors suggest for vocabulary learning make this book helpful to beginning learners. For example, they recommend using flash cards so that each day learners have a way to practice reading Arabic words and remember their meanings (although such a flash card approach is certainly not a novel idea).

The drawings and authentic pictures used throughout the book make the Arabic language accessible to novice learners and convey cultural aspects. Another strong point is the availability of the two CDs, which makes the learning of Arabic much easier and effective for the learner. Using the CD for listening to vocabulary, as well as listening exercises help learners assimilate structures and vocabulary more effectively than depending only on reading.

However, the book does have a few drawbacks. First, the authors assume their target learners start "with no previous knowledge of the language" (Wightwick & Gaafar, ix), but they do not indicate the proficiency level that learners are expected to reach after covering the twenty chapters. This is necessary information for decisions on textbook adoption and assessment of learner language ability and achievement, especially if learners want to continue studying Arabic later, either by joining a language program or on their own.

A second issue is that while the authors have assigned a section on how the book is to be used by learners, they do not give any guidelines of how the materials should be used by a teacher within a language program. In other words, there is no indication as to how much class time the authors think the classroom teacher should devote to cover a particular chapter, how to plan lessons around the content, how to deliver instruction, or how to assess learning (see England, in press, on the critical need for materials for untrained or semi-trained teachers of Arabic as a second/foreign language). Some chapters have more exercises and vocabulary (e.g., Chapters 17 and 14) than others (e.g., Chapters 4 and 11), and it would be useful for teachers to know if some exercises are merely optional.

Third, most of the activities are devoted to reading, listening, repetition, and writing. Except for repetition, there are in fact few activities designed to develop speaking skill. For example, in Chapter 3, which is designed to teach part of the alphabet, three out of seven exercises require students to engage in repetition and pronunciation. In Chapter 12, only one out of nine exercises requires students to work on language development beyond the sentence level. Some possibilities would be to add more questions and answers in model dialogues, to include role playing exercises, and to provide participatory listening activities in which learners, for example, listen to an interview recorded on the CD and attempt to ask and answer questions about the interview with a partner. In a classroom situation, exercises can be designed where learners practice introducing themselves to classmates, ask questions, and write down as much information as they can based on the topic of the chapter studied. Another suggestion would be to add more practice activities to push the learner beyond the sentence level. Adding more activities that require students to use connectors, such as the ones used in Chapter 12, may help students expand their sentences not only in speaking but in writing as well.

Fourth, in presenting the Arabic alphabet, the pronunciation of the word is illustrated by using transliteration; for example, the emphatic counterpart of the letter (t) is represented as (t,) (Chapter 6). In my view, this is a strong point. However, there is no section [or, illustration] for the transliteration system used in the book. I would suggest that a list of the phonetic symbols used in the book be added. Also, while the identification drills (e.g., Chapter 5: exercise 1) are useful, I suggest that the authors add dictation drills, especially with the sounds that are specific to Arabic, such as the emphatic and the pharyngeal sounds. Dictation would have the advantage of developing and reinforcing the ability to relate sounds, symbols, and writing. The authors need to review the phonetic description of the Arabic sounds, however. Their descriptions of a few sounds, such as the ᶜ*ayn*, are not pedagogically sound. This particular phoneme is a pharyngeal fricative (Mitchell, 1991). It is not particularly motivating for learners to hear that the language they are learning is a difficult one, or that a particular letter is difficult to pronounce (e.g., Chapter 5, p.49). Since many people have learned Arabic successfully, there is no reason not to expect the book's readers to do so as well.

Fifth, while the CDs are well recorded and while the pronunciation of sounds is clear and authentic when it comes to individual words, the dialogue recordings sound artificial. They lack the spontaneity and

interaction found in genuine communicative exchange. In addition, it is difficult to either go through the lessons recorded on the CD or to listen to a particular lesson without using the index given at the beginning of the textbook. It would be useful if the CDs themselves had an index of all the lessons recorded so that learners would not have to search for intended lessons.

Finally, the book could address the cultural dimension of Arabic more explicitly. Language learners need to be aware of ways in which expressions that have cultural connotations are used, such as the word for "God" – *allaah*. Learners of Arabic need to understand how to use these expressions to have successful communication with native speakers of Arabic.

Overall, the materials in this textbook are satisfactorily designed to motivate both teacher and students alike. With the addition of a concise and well-prepared Teacher's Manual, as well as ideas for more communicative activities, the textbook would seem to answer the needs of an introductory course for Modern Standard Arabic.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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