

Flying the Flag for Arabic



Why Learn Arabic?

Enrollment by college students in foreign language courses has increased substantially in recent years, and course enrollments for Arabic increased by 126.5 percent between 2002 and 2006, compared with increases of 10.3 percent and 2.2 percent for Spanish and French, respectively (Furman et al. 2007).

It is easy to see why students' interest in learning Arabic, the fifth most-spoken language in the world, is on the rise. Americans are becoming increasingly aware of the worldwide importance of Arabic and of the need to interact effectively with Arabic-speaking peoples. Arabic is spoken in 25 countries by approximately 300 million people of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

In addition to the obvious geopolitical significance of Arabic for the U.S., Dr. John Eisele, associate professor of Arabic at the College of William and Mary (Williamsburg, VA), points out, "Arabic is one of the official languages of the United Nations, it's spoken across a wide stretch of land from North Africa to the Persian Gulf, and it's the medium of Arabic culture and traditions and Islamic religious culture and traditions."

Strong foreign language skills are crucial for promoting understanding and sharing information among individuals and among nations. Dr. Mahmoud Al-Batal, associate professor of the Arabic Language Flagship

Program at the University of Texas-Austin (UT; Austin, TX), contends that "it's important for us, as citizens of the world, to enhance our understanding of other cultures and increase our ability to communicate with our neighbors in this global village."

Individuals possessing both linguistic proficiency and cultural competency are considered especially valuable to employers, whether for the purpose of conducting business or working in areas such as national or economic security, international development, law, or public health.

"Arabic literature reflects the cultural issues of particular importance to the Arab peoples," says Dr. Alaa Elgibali, professor of Arabic and linguistics and director of the Arabic Language Flagship Program at the University of Maryland (UM; College Park, MD), "so an understanding of Arabic literature... is an excellent window to understanding the concerns and dreams of Arab peoples today."

An understanding of Arabic is also important economically. Dr. Elgibali explains that "Many of the countries where Arabic is spoken natively, such as the Persian Gulf States, are growing economies, so the opportunities in the future for people who know Arabic to work for or do business with those countries will increase over time." Individuals with proficiency in Arabic are therefore increasingly sought by employers such as U.S. and international government agencies, non-govern-

mental organizations, and corporations.

Recent evidence of the importance of Arabic to businesses comes from The Language Flagship Metro Language Series, a new initiative focusing on the language skills needed by businesses and the business sector's role in advancing U.S. language education. In this series of think tank sessions held in major cities throughout 2008, participants representing small, medium, and large companies and business development organizations contributed insights regarding needs for language capabilities. In each session, the consensus of participants included a current need for staff fluent in Arabic.

The Language Flagship

Undergraduate Arabic language education is offered by more than 150 colleges and universities in the U.S. However, students who wish to conduct business, provide educational assistance, or engage in high-level negotiations in Arabic require language programs that integrate the language with the cultures of the Arabic-speaking world, and push students to professional-level proficiency. Such programs include those supported by The Language Flagship, an initiative established in 2002 by the National Security Education Program that aims to fundamentally change the way American students, from kindergarten through

Bette Stallman Brown and Yvette Neisser Moreno describe the innovations of the Language Flagship programs in Arabic language education

college, learn languages. Flagship programs focus on critical, but typically lower-enrollment languages, including African languages, Arabic, Central Asian Turkic Languages, Chinese, Hindi and Urdu, Korean, Persian, Russian, and Eurasian languages.

By enrolling students majoring in other fields of study — including the sciences, economics, business, and literature — Flagship programs integrate language skills into all disciplines, thereby ensuring that their graduates are capable of functioning in professional capacities that require global understanding. According to Ed McDermott, senior program manager of The Language Flagship (Arlington, VA), “The Language Flagship graduates students who will take their place among the next generation of global professionals through superior proficiency in languages critical to U.S. competitiveness and national security.”

For many of the careers that top college graduates are pursuing today, it’s not enough to study political science, for example, or to simply take two years of language instruction. “Today’s professionals,” Mr. McDermott emphasizes, “need to be able to function at a high level in their chosen fields as well as in their language of study.”

Thirteen Flagship Centers have been established at U.S. institutions and are coupled with intensive study abroad at nine Overseas Flagship Centers. The Language Flagship also actively seeks to partner existing

Flagship Centers with other U.S. colleges and universities. Through its Promoting the Diffusion of Innovation grants to establish Flagship Partner Programs, The Language Flagship helps to spread innovative teaching strategies and curricula to new institutions. In addition to college-level programs, three pilot K-12 Flagship programs operate with the goal of ensuring that students enter college with established skill in a second language.

The innovative pedagogical approaches that are key to the success of Flagship programs are exemplified by the Arabic program.

Arabic Flagship Programs

Arabic Flagship Centers have been established at University of Maryland, Michigan State University (MSU), and University of Texas, and Flagship Partner Programs have been initiated at the University of Oklahoma and the University of Michigan. MSU and UT offer undergraduate Arabic Flagship programs; UM offers an undergraduate Arabic Flagship program and the only graduate Arabic Flagship program.

Undergraduates admitted to Arabic Flagship programs represent an elite group of motivated Arabic learners deemed to have the potential to achieve excellence in Arabic language and cultural understanding. Students

include heritage learners (those who have some knowledge of Arabic, for example, by growing up in Arabic-speaking countries) and non-heritage learners majoring in a variety of fields, including journalism, engineering, political science, chemistry, and religion.

Undergraduates enter the programs at various levels of Arabic proficiency — some at Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) level 0, and others at higher levels of proficiency — and the duration of the program therefore varies from three to five years. Graduates earn a Flagship Scholar Certificate in addition to a baccalaureate degree in their chosen field; they may also choose to double major in their selected field and in Arabic.

Following the overall Flagship model, these programs take a unique approach to Arabic language education. “The traditional approach to language learning and teaching in academic settings primarily focuses on learning grammar and covering a specific textbook,” Dr. Elgibali says. But institutions using such an approach are often not as effective at helping students achieve professional-level proficiency. “They don’t take that extra step to... take students beyond the boundaries of the textbook and into the real world where the language is actually used,” Dr. Elgibali adds. Flagship programs, in contrast, “create a simulated immersion environment where students need to use the little knowledge they have of the language to learn more language and

more culture for meaningful situations and meaningful tasks.”

As part of the Flagship curriculum, students must master not only Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), but also one of the five major Arabic dialects, which can differ considerably from each other and from MSA. Arabic Flagship students learn MSA, which is used for formal (especially written) communication, as well as Egyptian Arabic or Levantine Arabic, variations of which are spoken in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Palestinian areas. Because colloquial forms are the primary language of conversation, proficiency in colloquial Arabic is crucial to one's ability to function in a professional capacity in the Arab world.

The Arabic Flagship programs fully integrate language studies with the study of other relevant topics. As William and Mary's Dr. Eisele explains, “It's meant to bring students up to an advanced [ILR] level 3 in a compressed period of time and to do that by teaching Arabic intensively across the curriculum.” In other words, “Rather than simply reading a few short stories, they can take a course on media [for example] in Arabic. I think students learn best that way.”

With support from The Language Flagship, Dr. Al-Batal notes that UT — which has historically had one of the country's largest Arabic programs — has increased the number of sections offered and reduced the number of students in each section. “It's enabled us to provide a rich program of cultural activities and to offer upper-level, content-based courses on, for example, Arab cinema, political thought, and social issues in the Arab world — conducted completely in Arabic.” These changes benefit all Arabic students, including those outside of the Flagship program. Each of UT's Flagship students is assigned a student mentor — a graduate student or an advanced undergraduate student who has lived in the Arab world — with whom students discuss social, economic, and political issues as well as the experience of living in the Arab world. “I think this individualized attention to the learner is one of the strongest aspects of the program,” Dr. Al-Batal says.

Dr. Mahmoud Abdalla, co-director of the Arabic Language Flagship Program at MSU (East Lansing, MI), created two advanced, four-credit content courses — one on “Arab Culture and Identity” and the other on “the

Middle East and the World” — taught entirely in Arabic. As part of these courses, students are exposed to contemporary Arabic literature; films (which help expose students to dialects); and history. MSU's Flagship Center also organizes a guest speaker series, covering topics such as Arab literary movements, ethnicity and minorities in the Middle East. Among MSU's other innovations, Dr. Abdalla adds that Flagship students “participate in an ‘Arabic table,’ at which students from all levels meet weekly or more often to chat in Arabic, with the supervision of graduate interns.”

MSU's Flagship Center additionally supports K-12 Arabic education by collaborating with the nearby Dearborn School District to provide teacher training, assist in the development of the curriculum and materials, and promote the exchange of ideas and information among K-12 Arabic instructors in Michigan and nationwide.

Nothing beats learning in situ for mastery of a language, and overseas education is perhaps the most crucial component of Flagship programs. All undergraduate Arabic Flagship students must spend their final year studying at the Overseas Flagship Center at the University of Alexandria in Egypt, administered by the American Councils for International Education. This program combines intensive classroom instruction, in both MSA and Egyptian Arabic, with cultural excursions and language practice with peer tutors. Some students also spend a summer abroad prior to their final year to facilitate their mastery of the language.

Graduates of Flagship Arabic programs face a world of career opportunities uniting their knowledge of Arabic and the cultures of Arabic speakers with their major field of study. Mel Hall, who recently graduated from the UM Flagship Arabic graduate program, describes the Flagship approach as organic: “It springs from the interest of the student and helps you put language into action.” During his final year of the program (at the University of Damascus), Mr. Hall, who is now employed at the U.S. Department of State and is working on his dissertation, researched Syrian environmental policy. Of his overseas experience he says, “It gives you something tangible so you can use your language skills to become part of conversations that are timely and important to you and... to the Arab world. Career-wise, this program was exactly what I needed.”

The Influence of Arabic

Arabic can capture the interest

of students purely because of its linguistic history and its past and current influences on other languages. A number of languages have been strongly influenced by Arabic, including Spanish, French, Maltese, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and Hindi. Arabic has left its mark on English too, and continues to do so. “The nature of that influence,” says Dr. Elgibali, “reflects the nature of the contact between the two cultures. For example, [during] the peak of Arab civilization, English was importing words like zero, alcohol, almanac, and admiral; this reflects the areas in which Arabs were doing well at the time — science, technology, and the military.” Other Arabic words have been adopted by English via a more circuitous path; for example, the English word sugar (sukkar in Arabic) reached English speakers in Europe via Arabs from southern Spain.

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For more information about The Language Flagship, visit www.thelanguageflagship.org.

Resources

Furman, N., Goldberg, D., and Lusin, N. 2007. Enrollments in languages other than English in United States institutions of higher education, fall 2006. New York, NY: Modern Language Association of America. Available at: http://www.mla.org/pdf/06enrollmentsurvey_final.pdf (last accessed 10 December 2008). **X**