

Roads Not Taken

An Alternative Way of Teaching Arabic as a Second Language

By Tina Jaber Rafidi



There are many fairy tales about how to be a good teacher, such as the traditional chalk-talk scenario, where teachers give a one-way talk to their students. Some teachers even follow the protocol of “Don’t smile at your students until Christmas.” But there are teachers who choose a different philosophy in teaching: they choose to travel each and every highway to do things their way, just like Frank Sinatra! Just to satisfy your curiosity, in case you assume that this article will give you a road map or an innovation spawned in the excitement of writing about a teaching experience: it will not!

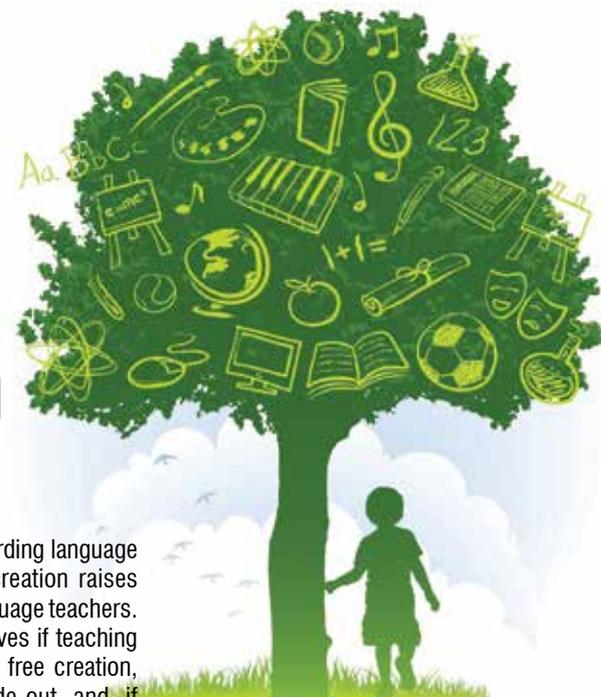
John Giardi once said: “The classroom should be an entrance into the world, not an escape from it.” Teaching means creating a culture of knowing the answers to “But, why?” and “But, how?” that will enable students to open their hearts and minds to reveal the riches within. More than 2,000 years ago Socrates knew that “genuine education” is the way to elicit the spark of truth inspired by a rich environment that is conducive to reciprocal learning and teaching. Imagine, then, a teaching context where you teach Arabic to non-native speakers! You have a diverse student body, with people from various cultures who possess different values, learning in a dynamic environment inside and outside the classroom. What a challenge! This is the challenge and opportunity faced at the PAS (Palestine and Arabic Studies) programme, Birzeit’s Arabic language programme for foreigners.

In “Language and Freedom,” Noam Chomsky declares: “Language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied. Even the interpretation and use of words involves a process of free creation.” (*Resonance* 4.3, 1999, pp. 86–104) From personal experience as a teacher, I know that it takes a long time to understand the dichotomy of fixed laws vs. free creation since this dichotomy changed every time I taught a class in a different way.

Chomsky’s stance regarding language as a process of free creation raises many questions for language teachers. They must ask themselves if teaching really can be an act of free creation, if learning can be inside-out, and, if so, will it be possible for teachers to break the boundaries of the classroom environment? If language is a process of free creation then its beholders cannot be free!

And then, in addition to these questions, there are the challenges posed by teaching in Palestine. Teachers here must work within a fixed educational system. How can teachers transfer the process of second-language learning into real communicative situations to teach learners how to acquire language in a place that is under siege? Can language be taught using culture in motion when there is no movement? Palestinian teachers must listen to their students’ thinking and help them adapt or integrate while they are learning a foreign language with their peers in a land whose people are denied their basic right to education!

Language and culture are two concepts that give the impression that they are separate entities. Nothing is further from the truth. Language and culture are interrelated and inseparable because language is an integral part of culture. Within the PAS environment, souls from different cultures have the chance



to mingle. Such a philosophy gives profundity, intensity, and meaning to the concept of language and cultural immersion.

This may sound like poetry instead of one more fascinating article that documents how traditional our Palestinian educational system is. Once more, it’s not! Change can be fostered in students if we listen to the whispers of nature because nature creates art, and teaching is an art. Then we become like Mahmoud Darwish:

Who am I? This is a question that others ask, but has no answer.

I am my language, I am an ode, two odes, ten. This is my language. I am my language.

I am words’ writ: Be! Be my body! And I become an embodiment of their timbre.

I am what I have spoken to the words:

Be the place where my body joins the eternity of the desert.

Be, so that I may become my words.



Birzeit to Jeebya. Photo by Emile Ashrawi.

There is a global upsurge among internationals who want to visit Palestine and learn how to read Standard Arabic and/or speak colloquial Arabic, understand Palestinian cultural patterns and norms, and learn about the Palestinian question. Arabic courses should be designed to teach the language as an integral part of the culture, and combined with social science courses to shift experiences from textbooks to life, providing analyses of Arab and Palestinian issues in the disciplines of politics, sociology, literature, and history.

Language immersion takes place through “experiential learning,” which is a process by which students develop knowledge, skills, and values from direct experiences. As one teacher said, “We give students a chance to see the door in a camp instead of merely listening to teachers describe it in a classroom. We allow them to be active witnesses instead of passively having to rely on the teacher as their local informer! When a Palestinian living in a camp invites students inside for a cup of tea, as second-language

speakers they need to search there and then for the word tea, and it will be hard to find it if their culture does not offer them a cup of tea every five-metres when they’re out for a walk.” So let the students be challenged culturally as well as linguistically to see whether their linguistic ability can meet the challenge. This method of teaching Arabic is driven by invoking the students’ curiosity and motivation to learn. The process of making language by direct experience is cultivated and enriched by touching on cultural projects that operate under the principle that language learning occurs when instruction emphasises full immersion.

As much as language is a reflection of culture, it also reflects geography. Field trips are indispensable in revealing Arabic cultural geography. A student commented: “It was completely different to see and literally smell reality first-hand in Salfit... We finished our trip like true Palestinians, by eating homemade *musakhan* and dancing the *dabke*.” Field trips to Palestinian towns, villages, and refugee camps; hiking and climbing excursions; and theatrical and musical performances promote cultural integration for the



Farkha to 'Ein el Matweh. Photo by Emile Ashrawi.

students. Embedded within language and cultural experiences are hopes, emotions, desires, reflections, and an understanding of what it means to live in Palestine. A Japanese student told me, “The other day I went to Beit Liqya for a barbeque at my friend’s house. After a tea break, my friend’s uncle gave us a ride to the mountain of Beit Liqya. There were only rocks and thorns. There were no roads on the mountain. Actually my friend told me that we would climb the mountain, but I didn’t really understand what he meant. After 30 minutes of adventure, we had almost reached the top of the mountain, and then we stopped to eat. Afterwards we climbed higher. When I saw the apartheid wall that runs through the beautiful scenery, I felt sad. I hope to visit again during the olive harvest.”

This could also apply to Palestinians and not only to foreigners. The process of learning a language and integrating it as part of our culture is a revolutionary idea that gets students out of the boring conventional classroom settings and into the practical use of their own language as a means of communication that has been developed over centuries in Palestine. As one Palestinian volunteer who works with international students said, “It is pivotal to acknowledge that

courses and trips are better taught and coordinated by Palestinians who have both lived through and studied this dynamic culture, thus ensuring that the Palestinian narrative is heard rather than silenced.”

Personal experience has taught me that the benefits of teaching the Arabic language outside the confines of the classroom setting are multi-faceted as it shapes the way teaching takes place and becomes learner-centred. First, in this context, teaching is transformed into cultural tools that are adaptive, spontaneous, and diversified to match various learning needs with different learning styles. These cultural tools include clothes, tonality, body language, and gestures that infer a deep sense of values, beliefs, and dreams. Second, deep learning and productive interaction occur from the cooperative learning atmosphere that emerges when students work together outside the classroom in heterogeneous groups. Third, and most importantly, learning experiences outside the classroom are interdisciplinary, as learners are forced to engage in elaboration, interpretation, explanation, and argumentation from different perspectives as they become conscious of their own learning. Without a doubt, language, by definition, is a way to describe knowledge. Nevertheless, it is knowledge of language itself that encourages students to develop their initiative, motivation, and resourcefulness.

“Behind every door, there is a story.” Another major strand in the discourse about why teaching Arabic outside the classroom environment is important is defined by the setting or physical environment. The process of discovering time and space influences the style of language that piques the curiosity of learners and invites them to listen to and affirm the story of a refugee whose history has yet to be discovered by the learner. “I came to Palestine to study Arabic. Why Palestine? Back home I was asked this

question more than often. My usual answer is: Why not? In the West people are afraid to come because of the news and the headlines. They don't dare to come to get their own impression of this magnificent country and its wonderful people. If they did they would stop asking questions like Why Palestine?"

Another stimulating component in the teaching of Arabic appears evident in the sociolinguistics or scientific study of language variations that precipitate more questions among learners and encourage them to continue to explore meanings, observe, record, describe, and ultimately be involved. A funny incident highlights the regional differences witnessed during visits to Palestinian families. Waiting in line beside a shop, a huge old *Haj* uttered in a husky voice: "*Ma tifadalou*," which has a negative meaning in some areas ("You are not welcome at all"), but a positive one in other areas ("Please come in!"). Mesmerised, our students tried to analyse his facial expression to see whether he was content or annoyed and thereby decide whether to run or to stay! These interludes provide powerful inferences about retaining a sense of recognition and not giving up.

Let the child of Palestine, Handala, return home! Celebrating an agonised past, teaching Arabic as a second language in the land of olives is considered a homecoming. This act reveals the importance of preserving the Arabic language as a means of safeguarding our cultural, national, and social identity, and resisting the occupation. Reciting anecdotes, exploring Palestinian folklore through colloquial language, and teaching Standard Arabic as part of the intellectual identity only depicts realms

yet to be explored and documented here in Palestine. Teaching Arabic is above all an act of resistance, a means of explaining oneself to others, to the world, and mostly to oneself. A direct learning outcome of such interactions that occur outside the classroom environment is the creation of an effective *community of learners* that takes its cues from local Palestinian and international youth who are thinking for themselves. It is therefore important to continue to help learners to take charge of their own learning and thinking through cultural exposure. It is our mother tongue, and God knows how precious a mother can be!

We don't only teach Arabic, we live it! If this adventure has "a final and all-embracing motive, it is surely this: we go out because it is in our nature to go out, to climb mountains" (Wilfrid Noyce), to pick olives, and to sing *mijana*. It is only natural to wake up every Friday to the sound of "*Kaek! Kaek!*" from a young schoolboy selling bread in the old city of Jerusalem as he searches for a better future in Palestine. By teaching "our way" we engage with something beyond the linguistic dimension, we live the language.

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